The definitive guide to experiencing the John Day Fossil Beds/Painted Hills in Eastern Oregon.

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This itinerary will help you see all there is to see with *realistic time lines* and helpful hints and tips to get the most of your weekend at John Day Fossil beds.

Oregon is an amazing place, where else can you start your day at the ocean, drive over a snow capped mountain and be in the desert by lunch time? This guide will focus on the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument and give you realistic time lines, helpful hints and perhaps even a few secret spots.

But first…A few things to know before you go.

1. There are three units on the John Day Fossil beds each offering different experiences and while it is possible to see all three in one day, allow one to two hours of drive time between each unit.
2. Gas and other commodities can be scarce in this part of Oregon so be sure to fuel up and get necessities while you can,
3. There is no cell service in most places so don't plan on using cellular dependent GPS or making phone calls outside of a town, even in smaller towns not all providers get service. There is no cell service in any of the 3 units.
4. You will encounter gravel roads and plentiful deer crossing highways especially at dawn and dusk. Make sure you have a fully inflated spare tire, a can of fix a flat often comes in handy and again, plenty of fuel. An extra key held by one of your fellow travelers might come in handy also. The two most common problems out here are flat tires and lock outs. The nearest tow trucks, lock smiths or roadside assistance is often 2-6 hours away and it frequently costs between $350-$600. To get towed to a place that can fix your automobile.
5. There is no camping or overnight parking within any of the 3 units, if you want a hotel room plan ahead as most small towns have limited rooms especially in the busy summer months. Dispersed BLM camping can be plentiful in many areas but these are seldom suitable for RV's and are often primitive with no toilets or water. Plan accordingly.
6. No drones are allowed within the monument, dogs are allowed on leash and while you can ride your bicycle from trail to trail you are asked not to ride them on trails within the monument. Visitors are also asked to stay on trails and not to walk on exposed hills. It can take years for foot prints to fully wash away and hastens the erosion of this natural wonder.

Now with the caveats out of the way, here is the best way to experience the John Day Fossil Beds.

From the Portland area (this is the most common destination for many travelers so this guide starts here but I will address alternate routes at the end.)

Leaving Portland via I-84 and heading east it will take you about 3 hours to get to your first stop the Clarno unit. so if you plan to do this all in one day start early, You can get a jump on your day

if find lodging or camping in between. The Dalles will be your last major stop for supplies. A night's staying here will knock an hour off of your trip. If you skip the Dalles, be sure to stop in Biggs Junction and fuel up. This will be your last chance to top off the tank outside of sporadic and sometimes seasonal small town business hours.

The Calrno unit is the smallest unit of JODA but is the only place you will see actual fossils in the rocks. Bear in mind that you will not see any Dinosaur fossils and JODA is known for its mammal and flora fossils so there is no big T rex skeleton here to impress the kids. Park at the picnic area, here you will find restrooms and garbage receptacles. Allow yourself at least 45-60 minutes to walk the trail of fossils and stop to read the interpretive signs and investigate the many hidden leaf fossils in the rocks.

There is the option of a short but strenuous climb up to the palisades it's worth the walk but might be difficult for some, this path is rocky and narrow in places with steep steps. if you take this detour add 30-45 minutes to your time. It should be about lunch time so pack a picnic lunch and enjoy the nicely laid out picnic area at the foot of the Palisades or take the 20 minute drive to the Town of Fossil where you have a few dining options.

Hours and days open can vary at different times of the year so check web sites or call ahead to be sure places are open when you plan to visit. Many area restaurants close on Mondays and Tuesdays as visitation tends be slower and supplies need to be procured from distant locations.

If you want to collect some fossils to take home, be sure not to pass by the town of fossil. This is the only place where you can collect fossils and actually have a high likeyhood of finding some. Again, these are plant fossils primarily but they are fun and easy to find. Just drive through town past the gas station and top the hill to the high school. Behind the school there is hill full of fossils waiting to be uncovered. There is a suggested donation with funds going toward the school and a few tools to help you dig. Plan to spend 20-60 minutes.

When you leave fossil take a left turn onto Hwy 19 toward the town of Spray. Drive 19.5 miles to the Hwy 207 junction at Service creek here at this junction is the Service creek stop which includes a restaurant, a convenience store and raft rentals. If it's a hot day and you want to stop for a swim in the river, turn onto HWY 207 and in about ¼ mile is a day use spot on the river with restrooms and river access. Camping is permitted here as well. Continue your trek along HWY 207. This stretch runs 24 miles over to HWY 26 and the town of Mitchell.

Mitchell has several lodging and dining options as well as a general store and a gas station. Most business close at around 7 or 8 pm even in the summer so plan accordingly. At the Hwy 26 junction head west (right) onto the highway, in 3 miles you will come to the Painted Hills turn off. Follow that another 6 miles. You will pass some red hills just off the road. You are not at the park yet but you are at public lands so this is a popular photo op stop. Be aware that cattle graze this road for several months of the year and it's not uncommon to round a corner and encounter a herd of cattle. Use caution.

The John Day Fossil Beds web site (https://www.nps.gov/joda/index.htm) will be updated with a warning when this is happening as well as alert you to closures due to fire or other events. When

you enter the monument if you take your first left you will end up at the ranger station. Here you will also find the only restrooms in the park and the only picnic area. You can also get your trail guides here. Drinking water is available between May and September but there is no food or drink available to purchase at the park itself.

The ranger station is manned year round but does not keep regular hours as rangers may be roving the park or assisting visitors elsewhere. Inside the ranger station is a small annex of the larger bookstore located at Sheep Rock where you can purchase books and souvenirs as well as stamp your passport. JODA is a no fee park so no entry or parking fee is required to enjoy any of the units.

If you choose not to stop at this time, make your way up the gravel road to the Overlook. It's about 1 mile from the entrance to the overlook trail head, however you will drive right past a great view of the hills on your way up. If you wish to stop and take a photograph here, please use the turnouts as the roads are narrow. Once you reach the trail head, take a few minutes to read the interruptive signs to get a better idea what you are looking at.

You May be tempted to get back in the car and head on out from here but you will be missing some remarkable views if you do.

Before I continue, I would like to address the changing colors of the hills, photographers please take note. The main view of the painted hills faces east and the sun is behind the hills for most of the first part of the day so they will be in shadow until afternoon. For the most vibrant colors you want to plan to be at the hills in the later part of the day, an hour or two before sunset will be bring out the most vibrant colors. They will also look completely different depending on the time of year, time of day and weather conditions. Rain will turn the hills a more pastel color and the black manganese deposits will streak across the hills but as soon as they dry out and the wind blows those streaks will disappear. If you really want to see those deep yellows and reds, visit later in the day. The spring brings not only widely varied colors but the brief wild flower display from April to May fills the crevices with bright yellow bee flowers and It's a truly magnificent time of year to visit. Crowds and temperatures tend to be much lower.

While at the overlook the trail is only ¼ mile to the end and does have a gradual incline and is a gravel trail but Strollers and wheel chairs usually have little trouble. Be sure to follow the trail out to at least the 2nd bench there is a different world over there and the best immersive view of the hills. Give yourself about 30 minutes to make the trek out and back. If you feel like a more rigorous hike, the Carrol Rim trail across the road is your best bet. Carrol Rim is 1.5 miles round trip with 400ft elevation gain but the views on a clear day are spectacular. You can see the whole valley and will notice little patches of red poking out for miles around. It's a good way to grasp the expanse of the Painted Hills, looking east, you will see a deep blue reservoir on the ranch that borders the park. Since the reservoir is on private property, This is the best place to see it from. Allow yourself 1 hour to take the Carrol rim trail.

Once back at the parking lot drive to the Painted Cove (follow the signs) just one more mile up. And if you are driving an RV or pulling a trailer there are turn arounds at each trail head, though on very busy days those may be more difficult to turn around in, with the exception of the

Overlook which makes a true loop. The Painted Cove trail will give you a chance to get up close and personal with the painted hills as the trail starts with a stroller/wheel chair friendly and photogenic boardwalk. Reminder: Please resist the urge to walk on the hills. But do walk the trail as it has one of the best interruptive guides and the backside walks you past ancient lavender lava flows that you won't see anywhere else in the unit. Allow about 20-30 minutes to make this 1/4mile loop so you can take in all the sights.

If you are pressed for time, this is an acceptable turn around point. Simply head back the way you came. If you want to see more there are two more trails to be discovered. When you get back to the road make right and head 1 mile to the Leaf Hill trail, along the way you will pass "Brown Grotto" a colorful cliff side off to your right. The leaf hill trail is the only true fossil bed in the Painted Hills unit. A brief loop around the hill should take about 15 minutes.

Last will be the Red Scar Knoll also called Red Hill in some literature. This is a towering red cone and wild flower hunters will find some flora that is unique to this area of the park throughout most of the summer. Allow about 15-20 minutes to hike this ¼ mile trail. This trail marks the park boundary, past this point there are no more RV turn arounds and all traffic must exit the way they came in.

Upon returning to Hwy 26, the Town of Mitchell is just 3 miles east (left turn) the town of Prineville is 51 miles West.

The area around the Painted Hills has camping options in the area. Several popular camping spots along the john Day river are just a few miles down a gravel road, other BLM spots abound, if you need RV hook ups, the city of Mitchell has a few parking areas at the city park, there are also 2 hotels, 1 hostel and several vacation rentals and air B&B options, not to mention 3 restaurants and a brewpub to get you rested up for the next day's adventure.
Day 2. You will be departing for Sheep rock, there are no services between the two units so make sure you have fuel, water and food before leaving Mitchell. There is a picnic area at the Sheep Rock unit but no concessions and the nearest restaurant is 9 miles past sheep rock in the town of Dayville. From Mitchell head east on HWY 26 for 32 miles to the Sheep Rock unit, here there is a lot to see and you have a few options.

If you want to do some hiking before it gets too hot, save the Paleontology center for mid-day and drive a couple past to the Blue Basin trailhead. This is the longest trail in all the units. At 3.25 miles and with an elevation gain of 760 feet this is a challenging but rewarding hike through some blue and green hills. You may opt for the shorter "Island in time" trail. This 1.3 mile trail follows the canyon floor with a moderate 200 foot elevation gain and features replica fossils along the trail that illustrates the significance of the fossils found here. Allow about 2 hours for this trail. when you leave the parking area for blue basin you can either drive a few more miles west (right) past cathedral rock to the Foree trail head where more blue green hills await along a couple short 0.5 mile and 0.3 mile respectively trails. Or turn left and head back to the Paleontology center. If you like, stop at the historic cant ranch on the left hand side of the road and tour the grounds including the barn and orchard, help yourself to some fruit if it's in season.

Then visit the historic cant ranch if its open (whether it's open or not depends on available staffing and can change at different times of the year) this is a great place to enjoy a picnic lunch then head across the street to the Paleontology center. There is no admission charge and the fossil gallery is world class. Allow yourself at least an hour to tour the gallery, stop at the viewing window and watch as paleontologists excavate and prepare fossils. There is also a gift shop here and don't forget to stamp you passport in the lobby. A 15 minute film shows about once an hour. Listen for the info over the speaker or ask someone at the desk when it runs. If you have kids give yourself and extra 30 minutes for them to explore the activity center.

By now you have undoubtedly experienced the bulk of what JODA has to offer. If you're heading back to Portland from here, you can head west on HWY 26 and follow that over MT Hood, about 4.5 hours to Portland, for other parts of the Willamette valley stay on 26 through Sisters and use the Santiam pass. Headed East? It's one more hour to the town of John Day where you will find lots of lodging and dining options and if you do spend some time here visit the Cam Wah Chung Museum in John Day.

If you are arriving from the East, see Sheep Rock in the morning and Painted Hills in the afternoon.

Some local events to consider when making travel plans

Spray Rodeo – Late May

Tiger Town Music Festival 3rd Saturday in June. Bands from across Oregon come to Tiger Town Brewing Company for their annual music festival. More info available at www.tigertownbrewing.com
Wheeler County Bluegrass Festival (June 30-July 2, 2017)
Wheeler County Fair and Rodeo (August 9-13, 2017)
Tiger Town Okteberfest last weekend of September
Painted Hills Festival, Mitchell Oregon, Saturday of Labor Day Weekend. Parade, events, marathon races, music, family entertainment.
Mitchell Halloween Celebration. Come see the small town transform into a Halloween village! The streets are filled with activities for young and old alike. Coffin Races, pumpkin bowling, hay rides, trick or treating, costume contests and more! Halloween night

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