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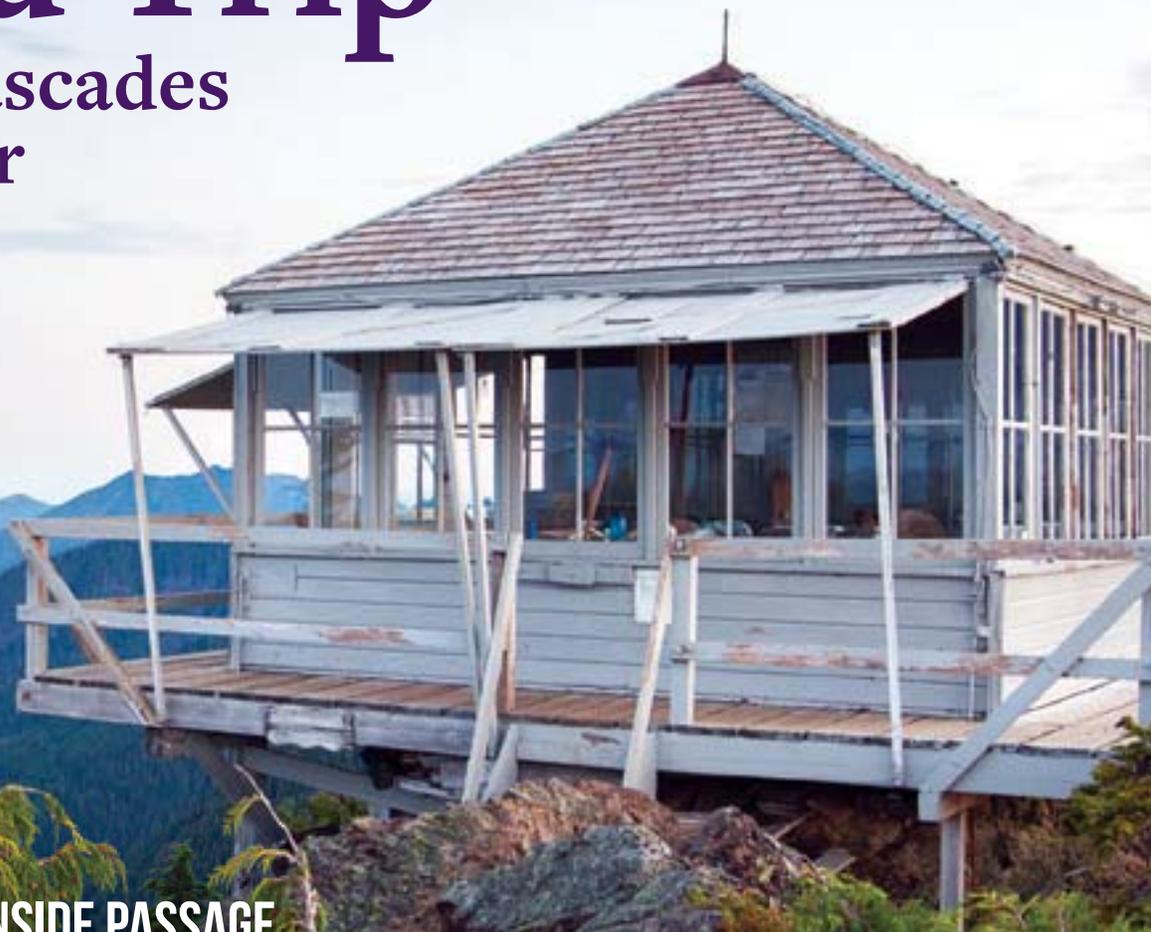
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TRAVEL & LIFE

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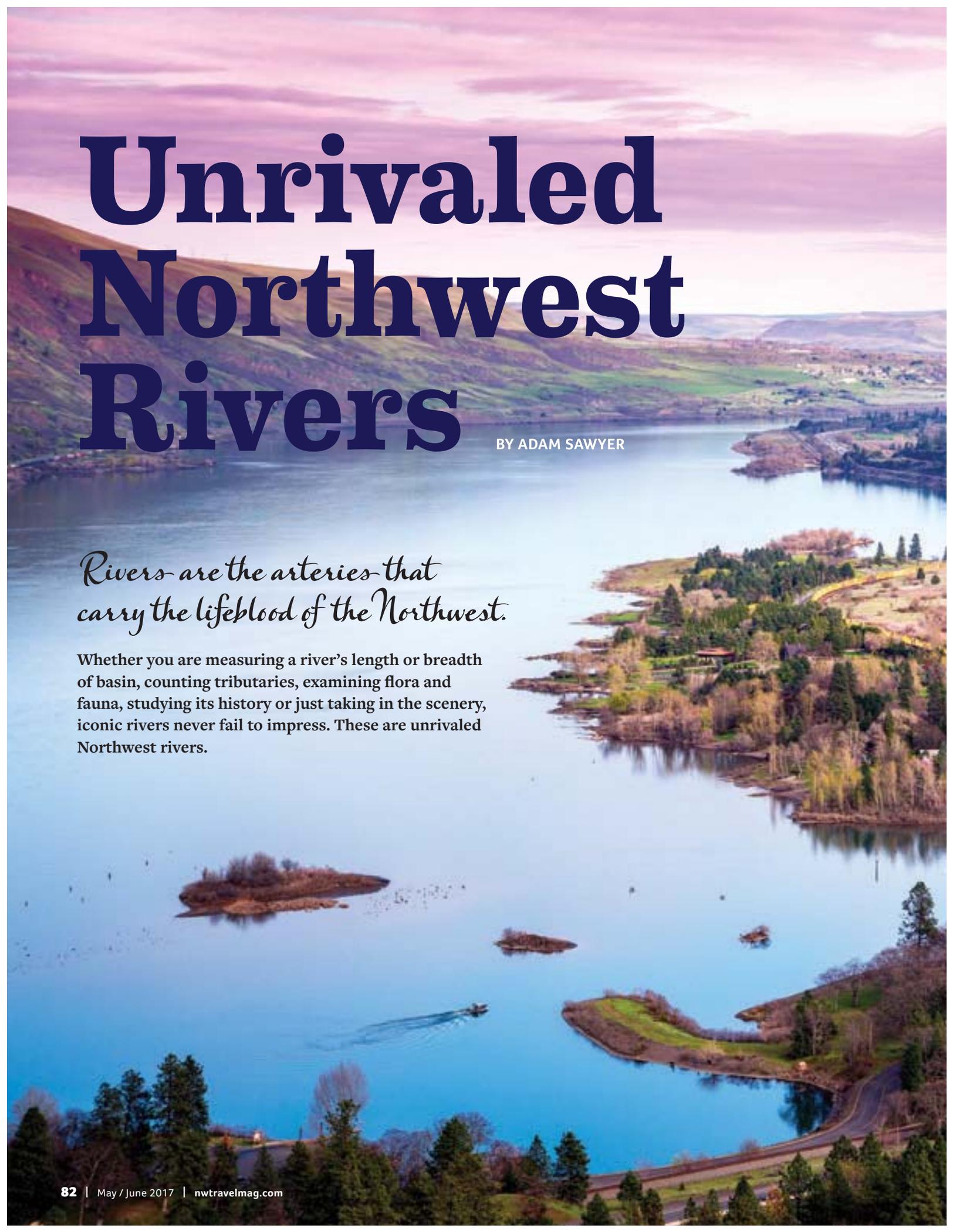
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fire lookout in Washington's North Cascades  
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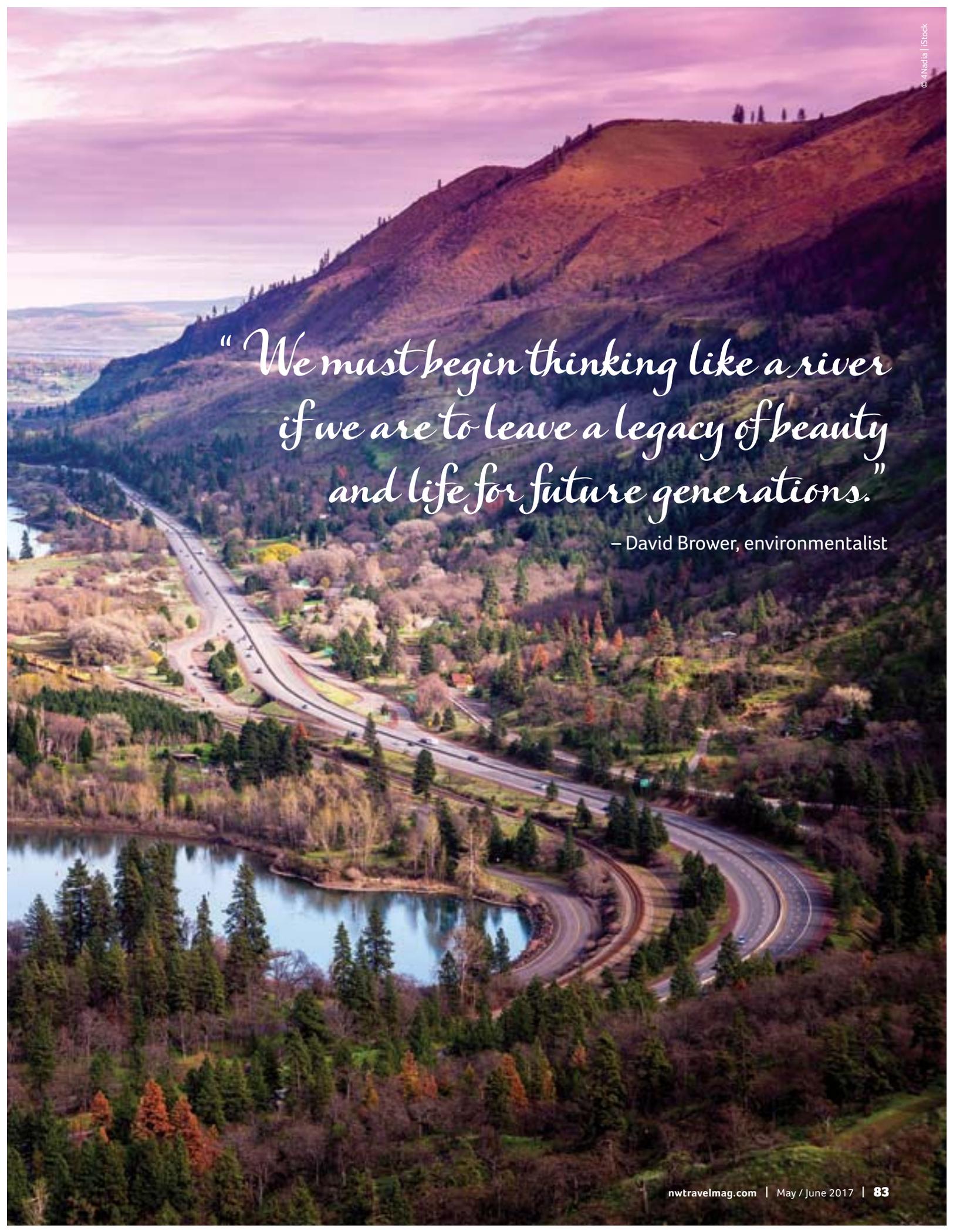


# Unrivaled Northwest Rivers

BY ADAM SAWYER

*Rivers are the arteries that carry the lifeblood of the Northwest.*

Whether you are measuring a river's length or breadth of basin, counting tributaries, examining flora and fauna, studying its history or just taking in the scenery, iconic rivers never fail to impress. These are unrivaled Northwest rivers.

An aerial photograph of a scenic valley. A multi-lane road winds through the landscape, curving around a large, calm lake. The surrounding hills are covered in dense forests, with some trees showing autumn colors. The sky is a mix of soft pinks and purples, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

*“We must begin thinking like a river  
if we are to leave a legacy of beauty  
and life for future generations.”*

– David Brower, environmentalist



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## The Snake

Depending on how you gauge such things, Hells Canyon is the deepest gorge in the United States and the nation's deepest canyon. The Snake River and the canyon it flows through create one of the most dramatic landscapes in the Northwest. Once the home of the Shoshone and Nez Perce, Hells Canyon's steep walls are steeped in human history. Petroglyphs and pictographs can still be found in the area, along with the more recent addition of adventurous hikers and rafters.

Though it's believed the modern-day moniker of "Snake" is the result of a misinterpreted hand sign (the Shoshone were

trying to mimic the action of a swimming fish), the waters coincidentally follow a rather serpentine course. And a stunning one at that. The Snake River visits some of the wildest and most alluring landscapes that Mother Nature is willing to share. Fittingly, the Snake is born just inside the boundary of Yellowstone National Park. Flowing south, it skirts the Tetons and the Continental Divide. The circuitous route continues through the Snake River Plain, drops over Shoshone Falls, flows into Hells Canyon, expands on the edge of the Palouse region, and eventually meets the mighty Columbia. It is the dictionary definition of a Wild and Scenic River.



## The Columbia

The Great River of the West. It is where native tribes fished and traded for 15,000 years at Celilo Falls, and how Lewis and Clark found their way to the Pacific. It has provided food, passage and even hydroelectricity for millions. It has inspired travel, music and life changes. The Columbia is as inextricably tied to the land, people and history of the region as a river can be, like the Nile, the Amazon or the Mississippi.

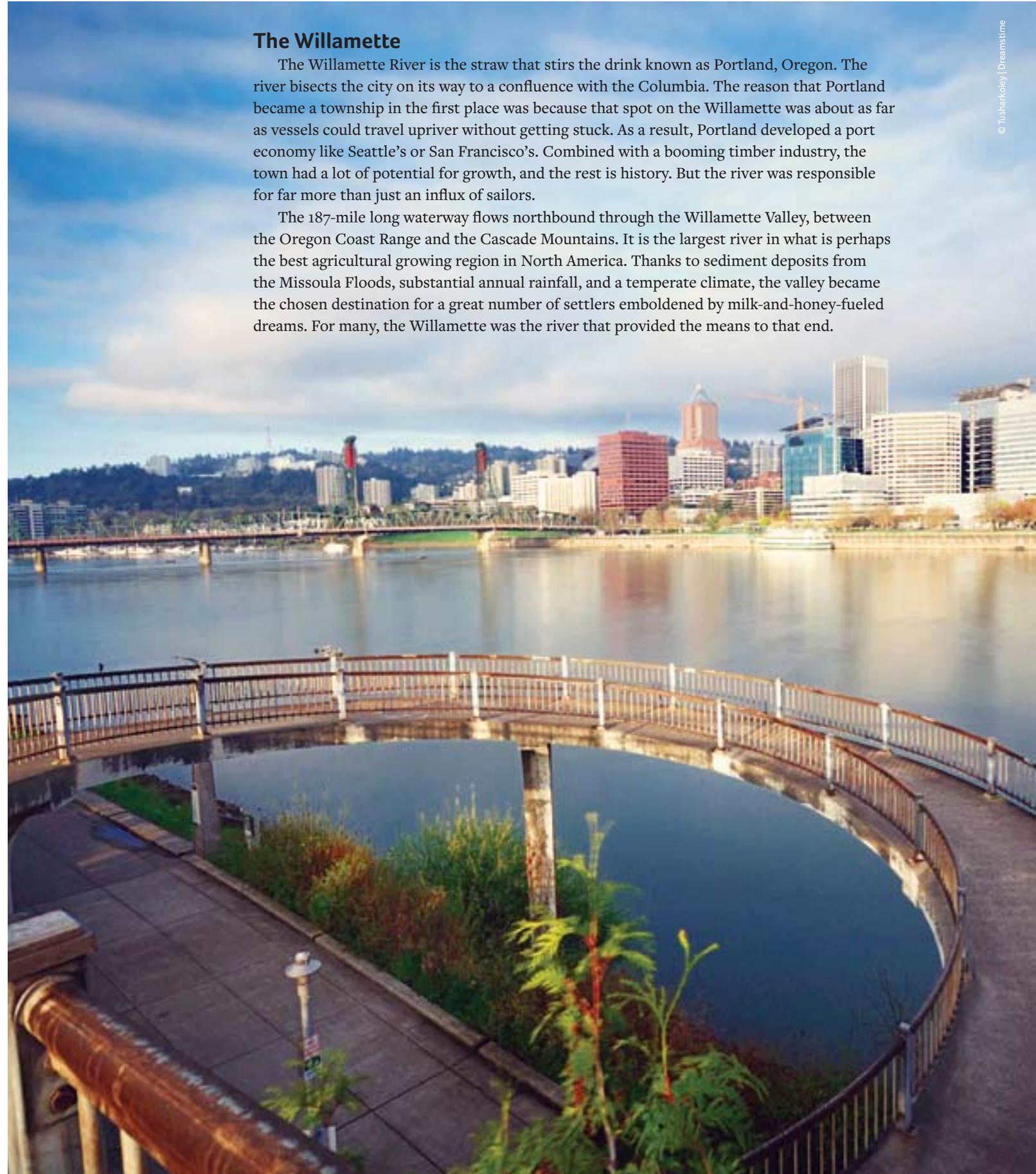
Born in British Columbia, the river's watershed extends through two Canadian Provinces as well as parts of Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Oregon and Washington. After leaving Canada, the Columbia meanders down through Eastern Washington before banking westward and pulling

double duty, serving as the border with the state of Oregon. The Columbia cuts through the Cascade mountains, leaving the arid lands of the east for the temperate rainforests of the west and passing through the Columbia River Gorge along the way. According to geologists, the Columbia River Gorge was formed by the longest, largest lava flows in earth's history, followed by landscape-carving floods equal in stature. The Missoula Floods thundered down the Columbia River in walls of water as high as 700 feet, traveling as fast as 80 mph, before releasing into the Willamette Valley. The river itself continues to Astoria where it is the largest in North America to empty into the Pacific Ocean.

## The Willamette

The Willamette River is the straw that stirs the drink known as Portland, Oregon. The river bisects the city on its way to a confluence with the Columbia. The reason that Portland became a township in the first place was because that spot on the Willamette was about as far as vessels could travel upriver without getting stuck. As a result, Portland developed a port economy like Seattle's or San Francisco's. Combined with a booming timber industry, the town had a lot of potential for growth, and the rest is history. But the river was responsible for far more than just an influx of sailors.

The 187-mile long waterway flows northbound through the Willamette Valley, between the Oregon Coast Range and the Cascade Mountains. It is the largest river in what is perhaps the best agricultural growing region in North America. Thanks to sediment deposits from the Missoula Floods, substantial annual rainfall, and a temperate climate, the valley became the chosen destination for a great number of settlers emboldened by milk-and-honey-fueled dreams. For many, the Willamette was the river that provided the means to that end.



## The Fraser

The landscape is bigger and bolder in British Columbia. The rivers of the westernmost Canadian province are not immune to this truism. The Fraser is the longest river in British Columbia and the longest Canadian Heritage River in the country. As you might expect, a river that earns a heritage designation has some consequential chapters of local history tied to it.

Simon Fraser, the namesake explorer that led an early expedition on the river, proclaimed it to be, “A place where no human should venture, for surely these are the gates of hell.” That narrow spot on the river now bears the name Hells Gate. And despite Mr. Fraser’s ominous warning, visitors to the river today would vehemently disagree with his assessment.

The Fraser runs more than 850 miles from Blackrock Mountain in the Rockies to the Strait of Georgia in Vancouver. Despite Simon Fraser’s previous warnings, the waterway eventually became an essential route from the interior to the lower mainland coast. Drove of prospectors made their way down the river during the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush. And for eons prior, aboriginal tribes had settlements along the length of the waterway, taking advantage of its legendary salmon, steelhead and white sturgeon runs—something that still draws anglers today.



© Murray Foubister

## The Yukon

Derived from a native word meaning “white water river,” a reference to the heavy concentration of glacial silt, the Yukon leaves the northwest corner of British Columbia before making its way across a substantial piece of the Yukon Territory and the entire state of Alaska. Some anthropologists suggest the Yukon Valley was the primary immigration route for North America’s first inhabitants. Later, the river would serve as the principal means of navigating the region, a journey made easier by the river’s width and lack of major rapids. Today the Yukon is home to some of the longest and most vital salmon runs on earth.

Alaska’s longest river travels roughly 2,000 miles from the Llewellyn Glacier in British Columbia to the Bering Sea on the west coast of Alaska. Because of the region’s rugged landscape, the Yukon played a key role in transportation for a relatively long time. In fact, steamboats were essentially the way to access the interior until the 1950s saw the completion of the Klondike Highway. These days the Yukon is a draw for the more intrepid recreationist. There are many epic floating and tour options, and the fishing on both the Alaskan and Canadian segments is renowned.

## Fun on the River

**Snake:** The best way to experience the Snake is with a multi-day rafting trip through Hells Canyon. The family-run Winding Waters River Expeditions ([windingwatersrafting.com](http://windingwatersrafting.com)) does it better than anybody, offering bucket-list-worthy options. (Pro tip: Be advised that Hells Canyon gets as hot as the name would imply by mid-summer. If you have an aversion to high heat, plan on going in the spring or fall.) To find out more, go to [visitlcvalley.com](http://visitlcvalley.com).

**Willamette:** The largest waterfall in Oregon is located just south of Portland, in Oregon City. View the falls up close with a guided kayak trip with eNRG ([enrgkayaking.com](http://enrgkayaking.com)) for an exhilarating and safe trip close to the base of the falls. For more about travel in Oregon, visit [traveloregon.com](http://traveloregon.com).

**Columbia:** Many spots offer recreational access to the mighty Columbia. Hood River, located in the heart of the Columbia River Gorge, is the windsurfing capital of the world. If you'd like to try your hand at windsurfing or kiteboarding, contact Cascade Kiteboarding ([cascadekiteboarding.com](http://cascadekiteboarding.com)) or Hood River Waterplay ([hoodriverwaterplay.com](http://hoodriverwaterplay.com)). If you'd rather enjoy the river at a slower place with adult beverage in hand, consider

a trip on Portland Spirit's sternwheeler ([portlandspirit.com](http://portlandspirit.com)). If you're looking for a more immersive experience, head out with UnCruise Adventures ([uncruise.com](http://uncruise.com)). For more about travel in the Columbia River Gorge, visit [crgva.org](http://crgva.org). Besides the Portland-Vancouver metro area, Tri-Cities, Washington, is the second-largest metro area on the Columbia, at its confluence with the Snake. Columbia River Journeys ([columbiariverjourneys.com](http://columbiariverjourneys.com)) offers scenic jet boat tours to Hanford Reach, the last free-flowing section of the Columbia in the U.S. For more about visiting Tri-Cities, go to [visittricity.com](http://visittricity.com).

**Fraser:** If fishing or rafting aren't up your alley, consider a trip on the Hells Gate Airtram ([hellsgateairtram.com](http://hellsgateairtram.com)) for an inspiring, bird's-eye view of the powerful waters running through Fraser Canyon. For more about travel in British Columbia, visit [destinationbc.com](http://destinationbc.com).

**Yukon:** The interior of Alaska is as beautiful as it is rugged and remote. A great place to experience floating or fishing on the Yukon is at the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve ([nps.gov/yuch/index.htm](http://nps.gov/yuch/index.htm)). For tour information and everything else associated with a visit to Alaska, go to [travelalaska.com](http://travelalaska.com). 🇺🇸



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