

Oneonta Gorge

DISTANCE: 4.7 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 1200 feet

ROUTE TYPE: Out & Back

A Columbia Gorge classic—a tight slot canyon, three spectacular waterfalls, including one you hike behind, and the option to see three more falls bundled as one. Plus, you get a few Columbia River views, a few big old trees, and an old restored tunnel to walk through. Kids will love this hike, but keep 'em close around the many drops-offs along the way.

Just lacing up in the parking lot will grant you stunning scenery. Appropriately named Horsetail Falls plummets 176 feet right next to the trailhead. After shuttering away, head left on a wide and well-trodden trail, making a couple of switchbacks and coming to a junction with the Gorge Trail (elev. 200 ft) after 0.2 mile. Left leads to Ainsworth State Park (an alternative start if you're camping in the park). Continue right, up two more switchbacks, passing the Rock of Ages Trail, and at 0.4 mile duck into the cool amphitheater cradling Upper Horsetail Falls (elev. 300 ft), more widely referred to as Ponytail Falls.

The 80-foot cascade is yet another stunning Columbia Gorge waterfall. But kids (and maybe you too) will probably move this one to the top of your favorites once discovering that the trail skirts behind the falls, traveling beneath an overhanging basalt ledge. Stand behind the streaming water and feel the pulse of the waterfall!

The way then wraps around steep basalt walls, traversing a bench where two unmarked side trails lead right to excellent viewpoints over the Columbia out to Washington landmarks. Be extremely careful here (a memorial attests), especially watching children, as the edge is abrupt and the drop precipitous.

Follow the main trail over rocky tread beneath more basalt cliffs that drip with runoff and dazzle with maidenhair ferns, larkspur, and other botanical beauties. After climbing to about 375 feet, begin dropping to reach a metal bridge (elev. 275 ft) that spans the whirling waters of Oneonta Creek. Gaze left, upstream to Upper Oneonta Falls plunging into an emerald punchbowl. Then look downstream toward Lower Oneonta Falls, which is hidden below within a 20-foot-wide, 200-foot-deep slot canyon. Forty-niner Carleton Emmons Watkins named the falls for his hometown in upstate New York—Oneonta is an Iroquois word meaning “place of open rocks.” In this case, a name for narrow and mossy rocks would be more apropos.

After staring at the mesmerizing waters, steeply climb and reach a junction (elev. 325 ft) with the Oneonta Trail at 1.3 miles. For an excellent side trip, consider hiking left 0.9 mile to thrice delightful Triple Falls (see Hike 74). To close the loop head right instead, passing (or taking if you prefer) a short side loop to a viewpoint and coming to a junction (elev. 150 ft) at 1.9 miles with the Gorge Trail (which leads 2 miles west to Multnomah Falls). Continue right, and after 0.3 mile reach the Historic Columbia River Highway.

Walk to the right along the highway, passing through the Oneonta Tunnel, which served motorists from 1914 until 1948, when the highway bypassed it. Now beautifully renovated, it was reopened for pedestrians and bicycles in 2009. Next, pass the mouth of the Oneonta Gorge. An Oregon version of a Utah slot canyon, the basalt gorge is about a half-mile long, 200 feet deep, and only 15 to 20 feet wide. Horsetail Falls comes back into view shortly afterward, indicating the completion of your loop.