



## Early Spring Cruise: Chasing Blue Skies through Clark County

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(Below) Heinz sharing safety info.



**W**ednesday: rain. Thursday: rain. Friday: rain again. The forecast did not exactly inspire confidence in our “Early Spring Cruise.” But the Pacific Northwest had one more trick up its sleeve - Saturday morning arrived clear, calm, and gloriously dry. A few clouds drifted lazily overhead, patches of blue sky peeked through, with not a trace of fog. The

first cherry and plum blossoms were pushing out along the roadsides, daffodils blazed gold across the meadows, and the air carried that unmistakable scent of a season just waking up. Spring had arrived - right on cue.

The route was entirely within Washington, launching from Salmon Creek - convenient for our Vancouver and Camas members, though our Portland contingent had a little extra seat time just to reach the start. Demand turned out to be anything but modest: the drive filled almost immediately, and a waitlist of five quickly formed. Rather than leave anyone behind, I expanded from the planned two groups to three, a decision



that paid off handsomely, as the smaller groups proved far easier to keep together on the winding backroads ahead.

The opening leg of our 84-mile route swept north along the east bank of the Columbia river, treating us to sweeping water views and the misty green expanse of the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. We banked east just short of the Lewis river, crossed I-5 near the Ilani Casino, and soon rolled to our first photo stop, the wonderfully eccentric Zylstra Farm.

Zylstra is an active working farm — but it's also something else entirely: a sprawling open-air gallery that has to be seen to be believed, stretching along a quarter mile of NW 11th Avenue. David and Carol Zylstra - a retired nurse and a semi-retired property manager - own this 50-acre property near the Tri-Mountain Golf Course. It started modestly enough: a garden pond and a mound of earth Carol and David dubbed "Mount Ridgefield." But one sculpture led to another, and another, and another. Today the roadside frontage is lined with dozens of life-size woodcarvings of animals, whimsical metal sculptures, and found-art curiosities, while four





fully restored historic buildings have been relocated to the property, along with a hand-built artificial creek stretching more than 200 feet. The crown jewel is a genuine 1900-era Ridgefield schoolhouse that the Zylstras purchased and carefully moved, brick by brick, a third of a mile down the road to its new home. It's been lovingly restored, right down to a replica 45-star American flag and a group of fiberglass schoolchildren playing in the yard. Equally impressive is the towering four-story water tower rescued from the long-abandoned Kapus family farmstead, a property once named one of Washington's Most Endangered Historic Properties. And the art? It keeps evolving. When David acquired a set of carved bears playing in a band, he promptly commissioned dancing bears and pigs to



go with them. The collection now spans artists from Washington, Idaho, Tennessee, Montana, and Mexico.

We continued to La Center for a quick rest stop, then picked up the road alongside I-5 and the Lewis River. Gradually we left the interstate behind, the road narrowing as we followed the Lewis east before turning south into a glorious tangle of twisty backroads, exactly the kind of route these cars were built for. A stop at the Moulton Falls parking area gave everyone a chance to stretch their legs beside the basalt gorge before we pointed north again, threading through the charming hamlets of Yacolt and Amboy to reach our second photo destination: the legendary Cedar Creek Grist Mill.



(Below) Dave and Lisa Burke with Lisa Koch and Dan Kelly.



Tucked into a narrow rocky gorge where Cedar Creek rushes through a cathedral of cedar, maple, and fir, the Grist Mill is one of Clark County's most atmospheric landmarks - and one of its great survivor stories. In the late 1870s, a migrant miller named George Woodham settled north of Fort Vancouver and recognized the potential in Cedar Creek's year-round flow. In 1876 he and his sons raised the mill from timber cut at a nearby sawmill, originally naming it the Red Bird Mill. For decades, farm families from across north Clark County made the long haul - sometimes a two-day round trip by wagon - to have their grain ground into flour, cornmeal, and livestock feed. Over the years the mill changed hands, served as a blacksmith shop and machine shop, hosted dances, and slowly fell into decay. By the 1980s it was in serious jeopardy. A determined band of local volunteers formed "The Friends of the Cedar Creek Grist Mill" and took up broad axes and adzes to replace rotted posts and beams using traditional methods. Their crowning moment came on November 11, 1989 - Washington State's Centennial - when the mill ground wheat once again. Today it stands as the only grain mill in Washington still



operating with its original structural integrity, stone grinding wheels, and water power intact. A covered bridge built in 1994 completes the scene, making the whole tableau look like something painted on a calendar, except it's entirely real.

After soaking in the scenery at the mill, we rolled on for the final leg of the day — and what a finish it was. The Fargher Lake House Restaurant delivered exactly what a good drive deserves: a genuinely excellent burger and fries that had the whole group nodding in appreciation. The perfect punctuation to a perfect day.

A sincere thank-you to Bob Ellis, who scouted this route originally and generously allowed me to build on his work. And thank you to all who joined us — your enthusiasm is what makes these drives so memorable. ■