





# Slumbering Volcano: Lassen Volcanic National Park

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Perhaps the least visited national park in America, Lassen Volcanic National Park is a treasure trove of nature, California's own Yellowstone Park. Bubbling mudpots and boiling lakes contrast with forest-cloaked mountains and gem-like wildflowers. There are activities for everyone, whether you're a car-tourist or an avid hiker. And over it all looms Mt. Lassen volcano, which last erupted in 1915.

## Lassen Peak

Lassen Peak is the southernmost of the fifteen Cascade Range volcanoes, a chain that runs from Northern California to British Columbia.

Geologists estimate that there has been volcanic activity in this region for over 2.5 million years – Lassen Peak itself is 11,000 years old, and is the world's largest lava dome volcano.

It was always seen as a peaceful mountain. Then on May 14, 1914 steam explosions began. On May 19, 1915 a lava-eruption triggered a massive mudflow which swept 18 miles down the mountain, cutting a quarter mile wide swath through the forest, creating what is now known as the Devastated Area. Three days later an even more violent eruption – The Great Hot Blast – blasted volcanic debris over five miles

into the air, dumping ash as far as Reno. Minor eruptions continued through 1921, and until the early 1940s steam was visible from the vents. Today, the volcano slumbers, and fascinated hikers brave the 2000 foot climb to the 10,500 foot summit to peer into its quietly steaming cauldron.

Yet symptoms of its presence are evident in the many geo-thermal features of the park. Bumpass Hell and the Sulphur Works fume and belch sulphurous steam, lacing the air with a rotten eggs stink. Hissing, gargling vents range from finger-sized to large gashes in the ivory earth. Syrupy



*Boiling Lake*

mudpots thump and burble, the gray liquid pulsing with oily bubbles. The barren ground is patched with dark yellows, scarlet, rust, and pale grays, a sharp contrast to the surrounding green pine forests.

Both sites feature educational walking trails that bring visitors close to the action; you experience them with your ears and nose as well as your eyes.

The Sulphur Works is short, easily enjoyed in 15-20 minutes. Bumpass Hell is a three mile round trip, taking between two to three hours. Staying on the trails is mandatory – careless hikers have discovered that safe-looking earth is often a thin crust that

drops them into boiling steam and mud.

In the southeastern corner of the park, accessible by driving through Chester up to Drakesbad, are two other less visited geothermal sites: Boiling Springs Lake and Devil's Kitchen. Hikers pass through one of the last virgin stands of old growth forest in the state, experiencing wind-swept silence and flower-strewn meadows. The telltale whiff of sulfur signals both areas.

Steam vents under Boiling Lake keep it at 125°F, turning the water a milky bluish-gray. Wreathed in vivid

patches of color, the perimeter is punctuated by gurgling vents and smaller chalky white pools. Hike around to the top, and you can see Lassen Peak.

Devil's Kitchen is aptly named. A deep gray-lipped gash in the forest, it is a riotous multi-colored landscape of scorched earth, filled with burping mudpots and hissing steam vents. A portion of the trail has been closed off for safety reasons, but the existing trail crawls in between all the features, giving you up close and personal views (and smells) of everything.

## A Study in Variety

Lassen Peak isn't the only volcano in the neighborhood. In fact, the park is home to four types of volcanoes, a few as young as 1,100 years old.

Mt. Harkness is a shield volcano. It's a low broad cone that looks like a shield laying upside down, a result of more fluid lava spreading over a wide area.

Cinder Cone, in the northeast corner of the park, is characterized by lava that shattered in mid-air (cinders) and built up over many years.

The remnants of Mt. Maidu and Mt. Tehama, ancient composite volcanoes, can be seen in Brokeoff Peak and Diamond Peak as well as in Warner Valley, which is actually the remains of the crater of Mt. Dittmar. All were worn down by erosion and glaciers over the millennia. Composite volcanoes build up in layers of eruptions. Mt. Shasta, just to the north, is an active example.

Chaos Crags, like Lassen Peak, are thick lava domes and arose 1,100 years ago. When one of the domes collapsed around the 1700s, a huge avalanche of rocks raced across the western landscape, creating the Chaos Jumbles and picturesque Manzanita Lake, a popular camping, hiking and fishing area.

***Right: Vulcan's Eye on Lassen Peak***

## Vulcan's Eye

Etched deeply into red-brown stone near Lassen's peak, a huge eye gazes over the southern side of the Park, across sapphire blue Lake Helen and brilliant green Emerald Lake, both still framed in deep snowdrifts in early July. Vulcan's Eye is just one of the many dramatic elements characterizing a visit.

Wildflowers bloom everywhere during the Park's short season – it is only open from June through October, when snows return to close it. Steep sculpted terrain surges from rolling pine forests and lush meadows to alpine slopes cloaked in red-streaked snow. Streams

flow throughout the season as the higher elevation snowdrifts gradually melt.

There are over 150 miles of park trails including 17 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail. Trails range from easy to strenuous, short to all day, and hikers can select from woodland trips to alpine climbs. Excellent trail guides are available at the Park's two information stations at either end of the main road.

## For a Weekend Trip of Splendor

Like Yosemite National Park, Lassen Park takes more than a weekend to see



and do. But if you want to see several highlights, the self-guided Auto Tour is an excellent way to sample the park. It follows along the Park's scenic 30-mile road, which has been designed for frequent stops at numerous points and trailheads; it easily fills a whole day, depending on your curiosity. We recommend the Road Guide to Lassen Volcanic National Park, available at the Park's information stations.

Start at the southeast entrance and be prepared for breathtaking scenery. This is the steep side of the park and the road climbs quickly, hugging the steep slopes. In less than a mile you will reach the Sulphur Works, followed by Bumpass Hell, Emerald Lake and Lake Helen and the trailhead for Lassen Peak.

***Below:  
July on Lake Helen***

As the road wraps around Lassen Peak, you come to the Devastated Area, which provides superb views of the volcano and puts you in the midst of the 1915 mudflow. A short interpretative trail meanders past the Hot Rock, a 300-ton charcoal gray boulder ejected from the volcano early in the eruptions. The area is reforesting and by 2015, rangers say that the "devastation" will be a historic memory.



Passing Chaos Crags, the road clambers through Chaos Jumbles, acres of reddish stone pierced by scraggly pine trees. Shortly thereafter, you will reach the north end of the road. There are two lovely hikes around Manzanita Lake and Reflection Lake. The Loomis Museum provides an in-depth pictorial and video history, and interactive displays, including photos of the 1915 eruption. Rangers offer periodic talks under tall Ponderosa pines (also known as puzzle-bark pines) just outside – the one we attended was an eye-opening education on volcanic geology.

There are numerous campgrounds inside and around the park, as well as guest lodgings in the towns surrounding the region, perfect for overnight stays. With temperatures often 20° to 30° below those of the Central Valley, the area is a popular vacation spot; we recommend reservations.

Lassen National Park is a "must-see" treasure of California, a chance to experience a lesser-known place for those who enjoy the outdoors in all its splendor and diversity. **STANMAG**

**For more information, visit the National Park Service site on Lassen at <http://www.nps.gov/lavo/>. For places to stay Lassen Mineral Lodge, Minetral CA. (530) 595-4422; Volcano Country Campground (530) 595-3347. [www.minerallodge.com](http://www.minerallodge.com).**

***Right: The Sulphur Works***

