

# Vista House at Crown Point

*From rest stop to iconic landmark*

Story and photos  
by Tracy Beard



For centuries people have traversed the Columbia River Gorge on boats, canoes and rafts. In 1913 Samuel Lancaster, the assistant highway engineer for Multnomah County, supervised the construction of the Columbia River Highway. During the planning stages, Samuel suggested the building of an observatory/rest stop at the summit of Crown Point, a basalt headland created by lava, floods and winds. He said that this was the perfect site to “serve as a comfort station for the tourists and the travelers of America’s greatest highway.”

The observatory/rest stop construction began in 1916 and finished on May 5, 1918. Lancaster recommended that the building be named “Vista House.”

No state funds were available, and the financial burden to construct the observatory fell on Multnomah County. The original budget was around \$17,000, and private donors contributed close to \$4,000. However,



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*The Vista House at Crown Point: 40700 E Historic Columbia River Hwy, Corbett, OR 97019. Travel east on I-84 from Portland, exit at Corbett onto Historic Col. River Hwy. Hours: 9:30am–6:00pm but may vary due to the weather. Call 503-344-1368 with questions.*

when famous Portland architect Edgar Lazarus finally completed the building that he did name “Vista House” the final cost came in just under \$100,000.

The House stands 55 feet high and is 44 feet in diameter. The design is a German art nouveau style. The exterior sandstone walls are gray, and the roof fashioned from matte-glazed tiles is green. In 1971, Crown Point was designated as a National Natural Landmark and is protected as a state park property known as the Crown Point State Scenic Corridor. Vista House was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.

This April, my husband Steve and I drove to Vista House. I have spied the building numerous times while driving east or west on I-84, the highway that lies 733 feet below Crown Point, but I had never stopped and ventured inside the observatory. From inside and outside of the building, I saw some of Oregon’s most spectacular views of the gorge. It is no wonder that millions of sightseers, photographers, and commercial producers seek this spot.

Friends of Vista House, a group established in 1982, currently manages the facility. The house is managed by 120 volunteers working from 9:30am–to 6pm seven days a week, and they are always looking for ways to enhance their volunteer program.

“For many years, Vista House was known as the \$100,000 outhouse,” said Bob Woody, the executive director, “but today it is an Oregon icon.” People from all over the world fly to Portland, rent a car, and head up the Columbia Gorge, stopping first at Crown Point.

The Vista House has been used as the setting for several commercials, and numerous famous people have visited over the years. Vanna White of the long-running TV show “The Wheel of Fortune” came by at one point, and Walt Disney made a stop while traveling on his honeymoon. One and a half to two million people visit the building each year, and travelers from at least 63 different countries have left money in the donation box.

The ground level and upper deck of the observatory offer the best views of the gorge, but the underground lower level houses a gift shop, espresso bar and museum for visitors to peruse. Friends of Vista House volunteers



manage the gift shop and espresso bar. The museum features placards displaying photos dating back to the 1920s showcasing what life was like traveling through the gorge in the early years.

Camping in the gorge began with the Indians and early settlers and is still a favorite pastime of road trippers today. Eagle Creek became the first campground in a national forest in 1914. Albert Weisendanger used

Ad removed for archival purposes



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boards left over from the framing of bridges built over the creek to make picnic tables and platforms for tents.

Hotels and roadhouses peppered the Columbia River Highway, and many travelers stayed at the Columbia Gorge Hotel built in 1921. Bridal Veil Lodge, built in 1926, Latourell Villa, built in 1950, and Chanticleer Inn opened in 1912 and rented rooms to numerous



travelers over the years. Restaurants have come and gone over the years, but many motorists of the past and present carried a travel kit. The kit from the 1930s may have contained a canvas water bag, goggles, gloves, coats, repair tools and food for a picnic. Today's kit often contains comparable items, sans the goggles. The Vista House, originally built as an observatory/rest stop, continues to serve that purpose today. When putting together your traveling kit, remember to include a tasty picnic for your travels (see "Provisions along the Trail," this page).

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# PROVISIONS

By Tracy Beard

## ALONG THE TRAIL



### Tracy's Cheese Tortellini Soup with Garden Herbs

- 3 Tbl olive oil
- 2 cloves chopped garlic
- 3 chopped ripe tomatoes
- 1 cup tomato sauce
- 2 Tbl chopped fresh parsley
- 1 Tbl chopped fresh thyme
- 1 Tbl chopped fresh basil
- 1 Tbl chopped fresh oregano
- ¼ tsp chopped fresh rosemary
- 1/8 tsp dried sage
- 2 tsp sugar
- Pinch of salt
- 6 cups chicken broth
- ½ pound fresh or frozen cheese tortellinis
- 2 cups fresh spinach
- Fresh grated Parmesan cheese

Heat two tablespoons of oil with the garlic in a soup pot. Do not let the garlic brown. Add tomatoes, tomato sauce,



herbs, sugar and broth. In another pot bring 6 cups of water to a boil. Add the tortellinis and cook until al dente. Drain and set aside. Toss tortellinis with one tablespoon of olive oil.

After the soup has cooked for 30 minutes, add the tortellinis and spinach. Cook for 1 minute and serve sprinkled with Parmesan cheese.

If you are eating the soup another day, keep the tortellinis separate until you reheat the soup in your convenient on-the-road RoadPro RPSL-350 12 V 1.5 Quart Slow Cooker.

### Tracy's Artichoke Sandwich

- 3 x 4 inch piece of focaccia bread, homemade (see below) or store bought
- Prosciutto – 2 thin slices
- 1 large slice fresh mozzarella cheese
- 6 quartered marinated artichoke hearts

Slice the focaccia bread through the middle leaving you with a top and bottom piece. Place the marinated artichoke hearts on

the bottom, top with cheese and then prosciutto folded to fit. Replace the top slice. Wrap tightly in plastic wrap to flatten the sandwich a bit. Enjoy with the tortellini soup.

### Rosemary Focaccia Bread

- For the Bread
- 2 cups warm (100°) water
  - 1 heaping tsp active dry yeast
  - 4 to 4-½ cups bread flour
  - 2-½ tsp kosher salt or 1-½ tsp table salt
  - ½ Tbl chopped fresh rosemary
  - Extra virgin olive oil

Put warm water in a mixing bowl and sprinkle the yeast over the top. After 3–5 minutes stir in 2 cups flour. Stir approximately 100 strokes until smooth, cover with plastic wrap and leave in a warm place for 1 hour (this is the sponge).

Sprinkle salt over the sponge and stir in ¼ cup olive oil. Add 1-½ cups more flour. Stir. Turn dough out onto the floured surface. Add flour until you have a smooth, cohesive and slightly sticky ball. Rub a large bowl with oil and place dough ball inside. Turn the ball over to coat with oil. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise 1 hour.

Punch down dough. Press down into a 12 x 17" rectangular cookie sheet making the thickness as even as possible. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise 2 hours.

Preheat oven to 400°. Dimple all over the top of the bread with your fingertip making indentations. Brush or drizzle the surface with 3 tablespoons olive oil and top with rosemary. Dust with a light sprinkling of coarse kosher salt. Bake on the upper shelf for 20 minutes rotating the pan halfway through baking. Let cool and then cut into strips.

### VISITOR CENTERS

**FREE Maps • Brochures  
Directions • Information**

- **Kelso-Longview Chamber of Commerce Kelso Visitor Center** I-5 Exit 39  
105 Minor Road, Kelso • 360-577-8058
- **Woodland Tourist Center** I-5 Exit 21  
Park & Ride lot, 900 Goerig St., 360-225-9552
- **Wahkiakum Chamber** 102 Main St, Cathlamet • 360-795-9996
- **Castle Rock Visitor Center** Exit 49, west side of I-5, 890 Huntington Ave. N. Open M-F 11–3.
- **Naselle, WA Appelo Archives Center**  
1056 SR 4, Naselle, WA. 360-484-7103.
- **Pacific County Museum & Visitor Center**  
Hwy 101, South Bend, WA 360-875-5224
- **Long Beach Peninsula Visitors Bureau**  
3914 Pacific Way (corner Hwy 101/Hwy 103)  
Long Beach, WA. 360-642-2400 • 800-451-2542
- **South Columbia County Chamber** Columbia Blvd/Hwy 30, St. Helens, OR • 503-397-0685
- **Seaside, OR** 989 Broadway, 503-738-3097; 888-306-2326
- **Astoria-Warrenton Chamber/Ore Welcome Ctr**  
111 W. Marine Dr., Astoria 503-325-6311 or 800-875-6807

**Local information**  
Points of Interest  
Recreation  
Special Events  
Dining ~ Lodging  
Arts & Entertainment

Map suggests only approximate positions and relative distances. Consult a real map for more precise details. We are not cartographers.