

The Land of the Devil

There is no hunting like the hunting of man and those who have hunted men long enough and liked it, never really care for anything else thereafter – Earnest Hemingway

Shouldn't I know when I cross the Diablo-dammed Skagit River, located, of course, in the town of Diablo, forever damning the already doomed Diablo Canyon? Traveling up the side of the steep canyon walls I come upon Diablo Overlook, which invites those careless with their souls a quick selfie-death.

When I travel the North Cascades Highway through the National Park and beyond, I stop at the visitor's center that features a panoramic view of the southern Picket Range, where I am further forewarned by the likes of Mt. Terror, Mt. Fury giving me the Fury Finger, the spooky ghouls of Ghost and Phantom Peaks and Poltergeist Pinnacle, and the ominous Chopping Block. Sinister Forbidden Peak, Big and Little Devil, Mounts Torment and Perdition, and the Fallen Angel are close by.

On I venture, oblivious to the foreboding, for my destination is innocuous Harts Pass. After climbing Rainy and Washington Passes, my route descends Early Winters Creek to winter Nordic ski heaven Mazama and the Methow River Valley. I head up to the high country east of the Cascade Crest. I like the grandeur and solitude of the mountains. The hordes on the Instagram Tour mob Washington's more famous National Parks, Rainier and Olympia, and the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument. Distant Harts pass summons.

As I see it, the only hazard is the road itself. But the 'road itself' keeps the riff-raff out.

From Mazama, the way is up the flat Methow Valley. Suddenly, the paved road breaks into a steep and narrow, two-track dirt and gravel road. This is the infamous 'Washington's Highest and Most Dangerous Road' that rounds frightful Deadhorse Point at the edge of a sudden, precipitous 2,000-foot-deep chasm. I do not look down, carefully avoid the occasional rock fall on the road, and pray I do not meet another vehicle.

However, Harts Pass does lie between the sharp tines of the Pasayten Wilderness, named by French-speaking fur trappers the *Pays du Satan*, The Land of the Devil. Awaiting me are Daemon and Devil's Peaks; the Devil's Dome, Pass, Ridge, Backbone, Tongue, Toothpick, Loop, Park and Creek; and even the Devil's Stairway. Not to mention Farewell Peak, Crazy Man's Pass, and the Joker Mountain. Climbers cry "Uncle" from the summit with that name. Devil's Club grows in profusion in the valleys.¹ A menacing warning comes when the route passes under Last Chance Point.

What me worry? I know the history. A few 19th-century French fur trappers were fair writers, and with an eye for supplementing their meager income from animal hide harvesting, they wrote and

¹ Every bit of the plant is toxic. *Oplopanax Horridus* (Horrid Weapons) has poisonous thorns on the trunks and branches, as well as on both sides of the venomous leaves, coursing down the midribs and veins of the leaf blade. Only when the Amerindian Indigenous stripped the bark off the plant were miraculous medicinal properties discovered in the cadmium and saps of the inner core. The Devil provides.

published lurid accounts of the people and places they encountered on their exploits. The more egregious the reports, the more the tales were circulated and sold. With the right publisher, some trappers made it rich. Some of the unscrupulous used erroneous descriptions of the indigenous tribes they met. Europeans had seen exotic specimens of far-flung peoples and the fur trappers lied about similarities. Witness the names they gave some of the tribes. Some sub-Saharan tribes placed a flat board or section of bark upon the top of their infants' malleable crania. So, we have the wholly invented Flathead Indians of Montana, who never did anything of the sort. Or the *Nez Percé*, so-named pierced-nose clans of the Pacific Northwest who were appalled by such a practice. Even the Pend Oreille (French *pend aux oreilles* - hanging or dangling from the ears) were imagined with weighty ornaments inserted in their earlobes. Although these Amerindians did wear earrings of bone or stone, they were never of the heavy, disfiguring kind worn by the indigenous of other continents.

Likewise, was the '*Pays du Satan*' depiction of the wilderness territory between the Skagit and the Okanagan Rivers. The Salish and Okanagan peoples were never particularly devilish, certainly not Satanic. Furthermore, the Devil of the milieu was not the evil, luciferous demon we think of today. We owe to Graham Robb, the author of "The Discovery of France," the following: In eighteenth and nineteenth-century France, "The Devil was almost as powerful as God and far more accommodating. Not all of the forty-nine 'Devil's Bridges' in France should provoke a feeling of dread. Any stroke of luck, coming into an inheritance, not losing livestock to an epidemic, or a rockfall that conveniently bridged a torrent – was probably the Devil's work. Despite his power, the Devil, who usually looked like a gentleman or wealthy farmer, was notoriously gullible and had sometimes been tricked into building churches and abbeys. He constructed most of his bridges with the understanding that he would be given the first soul to cross, only to be fobbed off with a cat." And "The best roads available...were known as the 'chemin de César' or the 'chemin du Diable,' since only Caesar or the Devil could have built a road that lasted so long."

In the 18th and 19th-century French fur trappers' pantheon, the Devil likely built the Devil's stairway to facilitate an easy ascent of Three Fools Peak. The creation of the Devil's Dome rounded the sharp mountain into a manageable hike. Devil's Pass, Ridge and Backbone eased the transition between significant peaks. Devil's Park was a delightful interlude. The Devil's Toothpick cleaned the debris from the deep fissures between the sharp towers, horns and pinnacles of the range. The Devil's Bridge spanned an impassable canyon. What better prominence from which the Devil might view his many beneficences than Devil's Peak? Imagine the sensual pleasures offered by the Devil's Tongue.

Nevertheless, come September, some real devils inhabit the Land of Satan.² More accurately, Beelzebubs, or better yet Beelze-bubbas. Into the wilderness venture the big game hunters. In camouflage, with orange caps and calf-high lug boots, they arrive before the legal season in their 'lifted,' rifle-racked four-wheel drive pickups to scout for scat and track, cache camps, and survey the habitat. Wild as it gets, the Pasayten harbors grey wolf, moose, bighorn sheep and mountain goat, cougar and the largest population of lynx in the Lower 48. The habitat is ideal for black bear (*Ursus Americanus*), the preferred target. Come to think of it, the Latin rather describes the hunter, too.

Ninety miles wide with hardly any roaded trailhead intrusions, the Pasayten is the 6th largest wilderness in the contiguous U.S. Abundant Pacific North West moisture makes for major stream and

² There is a gun and rifle shop in the quiet, leafy Seattle suburb of Woodinville named Devel Weaponcraft. (Devel is an Old English variant of Devil.)

river watercourses, verdant valleys, and vast grassy huckleberry-filled meadows that support the 90% herbivorous black bear. Offering ideal access for hunter-pursuers, the U.S. Forest Service maintains trails used by both prey and predator. Hiking paths cross and re-cross the largely untrammelled south-north Pacific Crest Trail and the transverse Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail it crosses.

Atavistic bear slayers reenact the ancestral hunter-gatherer kill. Somehow, they rationalize mayhem as benevolence. The sophism goes that hunters thin the ranks of exurban garbage-eating nuisances.

There is always much more going on when men hunt other apex predator species. The sizeable herbivorous game that flee - antelope, deer and the like, pose little or no threat. When threatened at close range, bears most often scamper away but sometimes do attack with overwhelming force in reaction to a perceived threat to their cubs. Bears do challenge, charge, maul and even kill. The Grizzly will sometimes, and Polar Bears always, eat men. Bear hunters cower, mostly hide, and walk with trepidation when in the bush and prefer the advantage of the long gun and stealth over confrontation. The contest is asymmetrical.

Pastoral bears graze the meadows. After a stealthy stalk with a high-power spotting glass, the hunter lays low to the ground with camouflage-disguised patience, waiting to visit death upon unaware quarry. The rifles are sophisticated and expensive, with refined, often carbon fiber barrels steadied on bipodal rests. Night-vision-equipped range-finding scopes have internal central processing units (CPUs) that detect not only the distance from the target but also adjust crosshairs based on a calculated trajectory of a particular projectile. Cartridge slugs travel up to 1,900 feet per second with 1,500 foot-pounds of energy and kill big game from 400 yards away. Where is the sport?

Hunters are generally shy of denunciation and, therefore, wary of strangers. But they are open to a discussion about their guns. To initiate conversation, I begin, "Tell me about your rifle." Partway into an exhaustive technical description, I ask, "Then, you are up here for deer?"

"We've got deer tags, but a deer is only a consolation prize."

"Bear, then?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever got one?"

"Of course, every year."

"And have you seen one skinned?"

Before I can finish, "Yes, I know, they look exactly like a human – mind you, a very muscular human being."

In a 1936 issue of Esquire's hunting magazine, Earnest Hemingway began an essay, *On the Blue Water*, "Certainly there is no hunting like the hunting of man and those who have hunted men long enough and liked it, never really care for anything else thereafter." Bear hunting may be "an attempt to approximate the old hunting of the armed man who is hunting you."

To ward off repugnance, kills are skinned carefully – quarter-butchered to avoid seeing the big picture. The particularly gruesome prize is the four severed paws of the bear. The hunters tell you that

they want trophies. They want to possess and own their quarry. To broadcast their prowess, the hunters wear special backpacks with neck-high pouches from which the dead bear's head protrudes. To eat the kill is the ultimate reward and form of domination.

I quizzed, "I understand the meat is fatty and greasy with a repulsive flavor and not very good eating?"

"We have special recipes.³ I particularly like leftover roast bear, sliced thin, with horseradish and a thick slice of onion on a sandwich" and, with a broad grin, "made with pita bread, get it?" (PETA is the acronym for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.) I did not ask if he ever felt like a cannibal. Jeffrey Dahmer never resorted to horseradish. He preferred the offerings of Canadian Bacon peak.

The first syllable of Beelzebub is from the Greek and Latin Baal, identical to the last syllable in Cannibal and used figuratively in English as any false God. Baal is "evil, especially considered in its active operation, as destroying, blasting, injuring, hurting, paining, tormenting"⁴ – an apt description of the bear hunt. Cannibal is from the conjunction Christopher Columbus's coined *Caniba*, what the Carib Indians he encountered called themselves, and Baal. (The Caribs were believed to be anthropophagic human flesh-consuming hominids.)

Devils who first blast away and then devour their human-like prey? Or just 'good ole' boys' out for a bit of adventure?

A couple of weeks later, I venture back up to the high country for more pictures for an impending photo essay when I happen upon the hunter to whom I had talked, coming out of the wilderness with his two hunting buddies. I ask him, "How was the hunt?"

"We got six this season. We each had a couple of tags."

"Wow, what are you going to do with all that meat?"

"We're going to have us a big ole' Halloween Party feast."

"What are you going to dress up as?"

The first one, "I'm wearing one of our bear skins."

The next, "I'm bringing my nasty German Shepherd, masquerading as Joe Biden."

The third, "I'm going as the Devil."

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3 In the generally meat-starved peasant communities of the French Pyrenees, "Bears ... sometimes eat humans but were not eaten themselves until tourists created a market for exotic meat." Graham Robb in *The Discovery of France*

4 From Etymonline