

valley of the pinots

Oregon may be one of those US states that's hard to place, but it's the place to go if you're a fan of Pinot Noir. **Tom Cannavan** takes the wheel of a Mercedes-Benz SL 350 for a tour of the Willamette Valley wine region

Before I eulogise about Oregon, its grandeur and its diversity, I think I'd better tell you where it is. A straw poll of friends brought forth several suggestions: a couple thought it was in America's mid-west, while another placed it somewhere close to Boston on the Atlantic seaboard. In fact, Oregon, the tenth-largest of the United States but with a population of only 3.7 million, lies on the Pacific coast immediately north of California.

Most visitors will arrive into Oregon's gateway city, Portland, whose 2.2 million inhabitants enjoy the only taste of city-slicker lifestyle that the state has to offer. The bristling skyscrapers of the financial district and the city's numerous theatres, galleries and museums are matched by a plentiful supply of quality hotels and destination restaurants, while city planners have ensured there is a thriving downtown that throngs with life late into the evening.

Outside Portland, Oregon is blessed with extraordinary natural beauty. The unspoiled coastline is peppered with lighthouses, sandy coves and sweeping roads that hug the water's edge. Inland, the spirit of the pioneers who opened up the west is evoked by the charming covered bridges and swaying fields of wheat. The Cascade mountain range frames every view, and on a clear day you can see the

permanently snow-capped Mount Hood volcano, which offers year-round skiing.

Oregon cuisine is influenced by its Pacific coast and the Columbia river. Fresh salmon, sturgeon and halibut, Dungeness crab, clams and oysters are found in abundance. The inland valleys are a patchwork of orchards and vegetable farms, and in late summer every hedgerow groans under the weight of blueberries, boysenberries and Marion berries – a local speciality akin to a particularly juicy blackberry.

Oregon is a significant wine state for the US, the third-biggest producer after

neighbouring California and Washington, and the Willamette Valley is the epicentre of wine country.

The drive south from Portland to the Willamette Valley is via the I-5 freeway, a journey that exposes you to the inevitable strip-malls, car lots and tacky fast-food chains that blight every North American city's suburbs. The transformation into pastoral beauty takes less than an hour, but those 60 minutes flashed past as I got to know my wheels for this road trip, the impressive Mercedes-Benz new generation SL.

TRIPS FROM THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY

PORTLAND There's much to see and do in the laid-back, attractive city of Portland, from Japanese gardens and a science museum, to world-class shopping. Oregon has no sales tax, so goods are around 8% cheaper than in neighbouring states. Stay at the quirky but deluxe Vintage Plaza hotel (www.vintageplaza.com) and eat in the wonderful Paley's Place, for stunning seasonal food sourced from local organic suppliers (www.paleysplace.net).

THE COAST Though often shrouded in a cooling fog, the miles of unspoiled coast are perfect beachcombing and surfing territory. The city of Lincoln, an hour's drive from the Willamette, offers the recently renovated Surftides, a large hotel that's been given a makeover (www.surftidesinn.com), and the Bay House, a fine dining restaurant with serious cuisine and a massive, impressive wine list (www.thebayhouse.org).

THE COLUMBIA GORGE One of the great drives, heading east from Portland and hugging the dramatic valley and river that creates the border between Oregon and Seattle, the journey takes in some spectacular close-up views of Mt Hood. The Dalles is a decent town in which to overnight on the eastern end of the trip, with numerous mid-market hotel options and some good Italian food in Romul's restaurant (www.romuls.com).



Oregon's miles of unspoiled coastline make for some great drives, while inland its swaying fields of wheat capture the frontier spirit



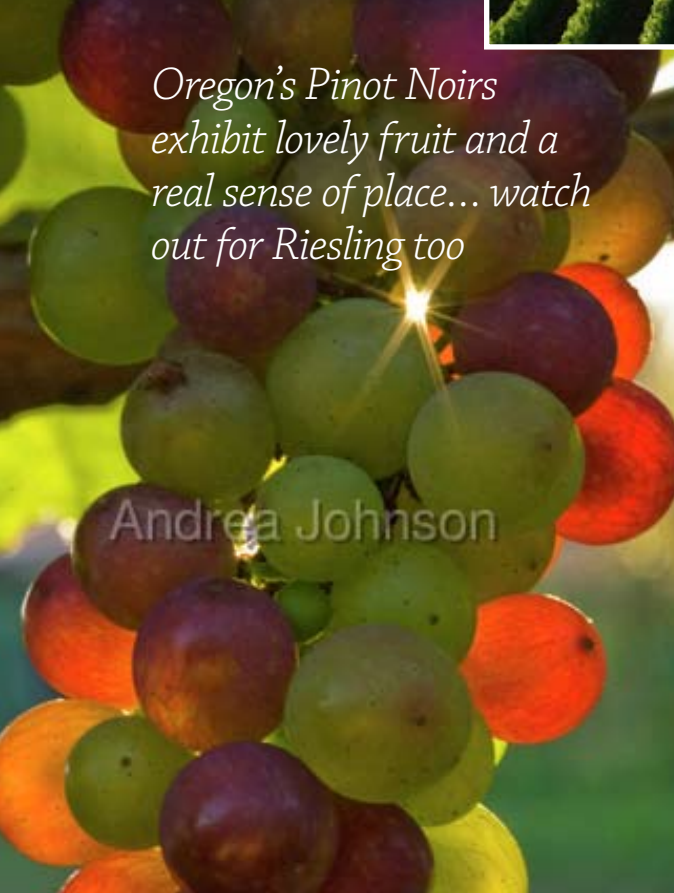
Andrea Johnson



Andrea Johnson



Andrea Johnson



Oregon's Pinot Noirs exhibit lovely fruit and a real sense of place... watch out for Riesling too

Andrea Johnson



Andrea Johnson

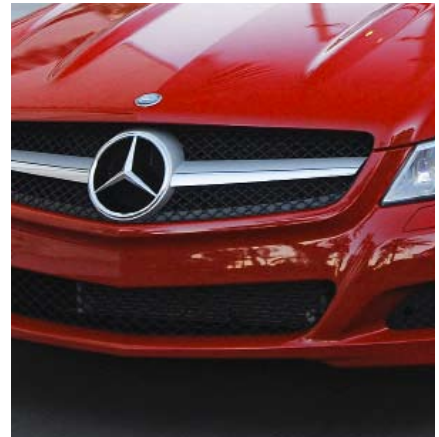
The SL 350 is the dream roadster, its impressively designed hard top folding roof keeping things cosy and quiet as you tear down the freeways. But with the temperature nearing the 100s, I hit the button to fold the roof away (in just 16 seconds) and enjoyed the thrill of some open-top cruising. The SL 350 with its V6 engine is a thoroughbred racing machine, but with American gas prices creeping up just like those back home, it was a pleasant surprise to find it still returning over 25 miles to the gallon.

Though Oregon's first settlers planted vines in the 1840s, serious winemaking was unknown until the 1960s. The growth in 40 years has been phenomenal. Today there are over 400 wineries, most of them small, family-owned concerns producing just a few thousand cases annually.

I had dinner one night with the 'founders', a group of the pioneers from the 1960s and 1970s. Now in their sixties, the group reminisced about the early days: 'Remember this was the 1960s,' said Susan Sokol Blosser of the Sokol Blosser winery. 'We just had a "try anything" attitude. Many of us wanted the back-to-the-land lifestyle.' A smile crossed her face as she recalled the wine industry's hippy origins: 'Vines weren't the only crop being planted out in the farms,' she added with a wink.

Indeed, something of that flower power spirit still pervades. It is obvious in the vineyards, with a huge focus on sustainability and 60% of all vineyards certified organic.

A few days driving around the Willamette makes a wonderful adjunct to a visit to Portland or Oregon's coast. Lush,



MERCEDES-BENZ SL 350 LUXURY TOURER

Tom Cannavan's verdict: 'There's nothing quite like cruising around America's coastline in a Mercedes-Benz sports car. But the SL in particular is perfect for such trips, being sleek and nimble, yet satisfyingly powerful, with a top speed of 155 MPH. The new bodyspace of the car, with its widened radiator grille and trapezoidal exhaust pipes cuts a dash wherever it goes, and the roof opens up in under 16 seconds – ideal for those sudden bursts of sun. The car feels smooth to drive, and the optional direct steering just goes to aid agility on-road.'

Square Meal motoring correspondent

Bill Thomas's verdict: 'The V6 engine fitted to this new SL 350 might just be the best engine in the SL range. It's developing more power than the SL 500 5.0-litre V8 of the last generation car (315bhp versus 302bhp) and it has V6 efficiency and light weight on its side. It sounds glorious, too, a high-pitched wail at high revs. The simple fact is that Mercedes' V6 is better than a lot of V8s fitted to other cars. There is no compromise here.'

SL 350 Available from £65,080. With optional extras as follows: optional 5-spoke design wheels. OTR price £65,910.

ENGINE 3,498CC
BHP 315
0-62MPH 6.2 SECS
TOP SPEED 155
ON-THE-ROAD PRICE £65,910

WHERE TO EAT AND SLEEP

HOTELS

Brookside Inn

8243 NW Abbey Road, Carlton
00 1 503 852 4433,
www.brooksideinn-oregon.com

Doubles from \$185

Nine-bedroom B&B in an idyllic setting, serving fabulous breakfasts. Charming and knowledgeable hosts.

The Dundee Manor

8380 NE Worden Hill Road, Dundee
00 1 503 554 1945,
www.dundeemanor.com

Doubles from \$175 (en suite from \$225)

Knick-knack-filled B&B in the heart of Pinot country, with sociable hosts and well-

appointed bedrooms.

Hotel Oregon

310 NE Evans Street, McMinnville
00 1 503 472 8427,
www.hoteloregon.com

Doubles from \$50

A slice of whimsical theatre in the middle of a pretty wine country town.

RESTAURANTS

The Painted Lady

201 S College, Newberg
00 1 503 538 3850,
www.thepaintedladyrestaurant.com

Undoubtedly the Willamette's most sophisticated food, served in a charming Victorian house, and spotlighting local, seasonal produce.

The Dundee Bistro

100-A SW Seventh Street, Dundee
00 1 503 554 1650,
www.dundeebistro.com

Bistro and adjoining wine bar, with healthy portions of high-quality comfort food. Local produce features extensively.

Nick's Italian Café

521 NE 3rd St, McMinnville
00 1 503 434 4471,
www.nicksitaliancafe.com

An institution in the town of McMinnville. Almost everyone opts for the five-course, fixed-priced menu, though à la carte is also available.



OREGON WINERIES

Domaine Drouhin

00 1 503 864 2700

Open for tasting Wednesday to Sunday; appointments are only necessary for the 90-minute tour, which costs \$20.

Sokol Blosser

00 1 503 864 2282

Visitor facilities open daily.

The Four Graces

00 1 800 245 2950

Open daily.

Beaux Frères

00 1 503 537 1137

Visits by appointment only.

Bergström

00 1 503 554 0468

Tastings four times per day, by appointment only, at a cost of \$25.

Lemelson

00 1 503 852 6619

Appointments to visit and taste are preferred.

fertile valleys are crammed with hazelnut groves, cherry orchards, hop farms and fields of barley and corn. And there are plenty of options for fine dining and hotels.



inclines and round hairpin bends without so much as rippling the surface of coffee.

The winery is in a low-set building, surrounded by flower-filled gardens and a broad terrace. Fourth-generation family winemaker Véronique Drouhin makes silky, seductive and Burgundian Pinot Noir, and classy Chardonnay. Look out for the Pinot Noir 'Laurène', which has a lightness of touch as cherry fruit and soft, elegant tannins marry with a fine core of acidity.

Next stop is Sokol Blosser, where second-generation Alex Sokol Blosser walked me through the vineyards, speaking about their iron-rich, red soils. The character of the Dundee Hills was formed by the catastrophic Missoula floods, which surged through the north-west states over a thousand years ago. When the flood waters receded, a layer of sediment was laid down

Mike Etzel co-owns the estate with his brother-in-law, American wine writer Robert Parker. Etzel farms biodynamically and has plenty of strong opinions. Luckily his wines also speak for themselves, with delicious single-vineyard Pinot Noir.

Not far away, one of the most impressive visits of my tour was to Bergström, where winemaker Josh Bergström conducted a tasting of beautiful Riesling and a range of gorgeous vineyard-designated Pinots.

From Newberg I headed for Carlton, and the architecturally impressive Lemelson winery. Winemaker Anthony King arrived in Oregon via California, and he has a winning way with both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The soon-to-be-released 2007 wines were particular favourites.

Overall I was impressed by Oregon's Pinot Noirs, which exhibit lovely fruit

Few places outside its Burgundy homeland have earned a global reputation for Pinot excellence. Oregon is one exception

There is one big wine story for everyone who makes wine in the Willamette, and that is Pinot Noir. The famously fickle Pinot is a grape variety with an almost mystical fascination for both winemakers and wine lovers, but few places outside its Burgundy homeland have earned a global reputation for Pinot excellence. Oregon is one exception, and arguably has become 'the New World's Burgundy'.

First stop on my tour was Domaine Drouhin, an outpost of Burgundy's Joseph Drouhin, sitting high on one of Willamette's prime terroirs, the Dundee Hills. The Mercedes cruised up steep

covering all elevations below 300ft, leaving the hills above covered in the red 'Jory' soils that define the Dundee Hills.

The 2005 Pinot Noir from Sokol Blosser was excellent, but don't miss its white wine 'Evolution', an aromatic blend that creates lovely tension between acidity and a hint of sweetness.

From Dundee I headed the few miles north to the city of Newberg, stopping on the way to look into The Four Graces, a winery that has a picnic area with an open fire in the winter months. As you approach Newberg, don't blink or you'll miss the low-key entrance to Beaux Frères. Winemaker

and a real sense of place. But watch out for Riesling too: there are some terrific examples from the off-dry German style to lime-streaked dry wines.

I adjourned to the pavement terrace of a bar for a cool beer. The SL350 parked a few feet away drew admiring glances from cowboys in pick-up trucks, eco-warriors driving low-emission Priuses and elegant ladies in Cadillacs. In some ways that blend sums up Oregon perfectly: the no-nonsense farmers, new-age liberal thinkers and upmarket sophisticates all find a natural home in this beautiful and welcoming state.