

More Than 100 Years of Road ‘Religion’

Maryhill Loops honors the past with races for cars, skateboards and more

By Drew Myron

Reving the engine of his Estoril Blue M3 convertible, Trayson Harmon surveys the road before him: a 3-mile stretch of tight curves and graceful ascension to a vista revealing hillside reaches of Washington and Oregon.

“There really isn’t anywhere else that has a private road like this,” he says. “It’s really a local treasure.”

He is driving on Washington’s first paved road, the historic Maryhill Loops Road—a steep route of blind corners, switchbacks, drop-offs and gates—built in 1913.

Sam Hill, a rich and eccentric visionary, created these roads in Maryhill, just east of U.S. Highway 97 off State Route 14. Sam sought a way to ease transportation for farmers, just as cars and trucks were becoming more affordable.

Agriculture had survived and struggled based on the fees and schedules of barge, rail and wagon operators. Sam envisioned changing the business of farming by moving product to market and putting farmers in control of their business.

Improved roads were the path to transformation.

With the help of engineer Samuel C. Lancaster, Sam built Loops Road to test road-building techniques and surfaces. The test roads became the model for both

Oregon and Washington departments of transportation, still in their infancy and literally stuck in the mud.

The paved loops served as a model of best techniques for the construction of the Columbia River Highway across the river in Oregon, hailed to this day as an engineering masterpiece.

Sam continued as the primary advocate for construction of Oregon’s Highways 97, 99 and 101 and access to Crater Lake.

“Good roads are more than my hobby,” he said. “They are my religion.”

Today, Sam’s words are a rally call for car clubs, skateboarders and road enthusiasts who enjoy the rare opportunity to experience the unique terrain of this historic, private road.

The road rises 850 feet in 3.6 miles up a canyon in a series of eight hairpin curves that keep the gradient low and the experience unique.

Owned and maintained by the Maryhill Museum of Art—another Sam Hill treasure—Loops Road is open for public auto-touring twice a year: October and May, for just two hours.

The road hosts private racing events, including the Maryhill Loops Hill Climb, featuring vintage cars; and the Maryhill Loops Rally, a two-day event hosted by the Oregon Chapter of the BMW Car Club of America.

The road also is rented for commercial

purposes. Mercedes and Subaru both have filmed commercials on Loops Road.

Sam’s foresight and investment—he spent \$100,000 of his own money to build the road—paved the way for today’s revved-up recreation.

The Maryhill Festival of Speed

In a modern-age twist, the Loops’ largest draw is not race cars but non-motorized gravity sports, otherwise known as street luge and skateboarding.

Nearing its 10th year, the Maryhill Festival of Speed is North America’s largest gravity sports festival. The five-day event that draws 250 of the world’s best skateboarders and street lugers, and more than 3,000 spectators. Racers ride in packs and travel at more than 45 miles per hour.

The competition combines the adrenaline of speed-skating with the skill of racing.

Maryhill is known throughout the world as one of the best race courses, according to event organizer John Ozman.

“The event is the most anticipated world cup event in the world each year,” he says.

Maryhill Ratz Freeride

For skateboarders who seek speed and experience without the pressure of racing, the Maryhill Ratz Freerides are a gathering of gravity sports enthusiasts



The Maryhill Loops, a 3-mile stretch of tight curves, is the state’s first paved road.

Photo by Alex Casey



The Maryhill Festival of Speed draws the world's best skateboarders and street lugers.

Photo by Jon Huey

from around the world.

Founded in 2008, the event is not a race. There are no prizes or spectators—just a closed hill with hay bales, safety workers, shuttles and friends.

“This is the closest thing to a ski area for skateboards, just the wonderful curves of Maryhill and lifts to take you to the top,” say event organizers.

Just as skaters are drawn to gravity, cars are drawn to speed. Each year, the Maryhill Loops are an open road for highly anticipated car races.

Maryhill Hill Climb

During the annual Car is King Weekend in October, the Maryhill Loops Hill Climb features vintage sports cars from the 1930s to 1960s in an 850-foot climb up Maryhill Loops Road. Spectators are welcome to view the race from the Highway 97

overlook and designated viewpoints along the route.

“The Hill Climb has everything a vintage racing enthusiast could want: tradition, excitement and a unique setting,” notes the Society of Vintage Racing Enthusiasts website. “It’s a unique experience, too, as very few hillclimb events are still available anywhere in the world. Driving it at speed is a dizzying ascension not for the faint of heart, with long drop-offs just a few feet away all the way to the top.”

Maryhill Loops Rally

Now in its sixth year, the Maryhill Loops Rally is hosted by the BMW Car Club of America—Oregon chapter. The two-day event is limited to 20 drivers.

“Anyone can go fast in a straight line, but it takes skill to drive fast on a

Check it Out

Maryhill Loops Road is just east of U.S. Highway 97. Access is near the top of the grade, and a spectator viewpoint is on the highway. The road is open to the public for nonmotorized use from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. most days. Admission is free.

- Maryhill Loops Hill Climb Society of Vintage Racing Enthusiasts
www.sovrenracing.org/maryhill-hill-climb
- Maryhill Loops Rally
BMW Car Club of America - Oregon chapter
www.bmworegoncca.com
- Maryhill Festival of Speed
www.maryhillfestivalofspeed.com
- Maryhill Ratz Freerides
www.maryhillratz.com
- Maryhill Museum of Art
www.maryhillmuseum.org

twisty road,” says Trayson, who lives in Vancouver and started the event in 2010. “There’s a lot more risk involved with trying to enjoy twisty public roads in a sports car. Speed limits, drivers going varied speeds, police, oncoming traffic, gravel on the road—these are all things that we’re able to control and eliminate when we’ve got the road rented.”

The pristine conditions appeal to drivers. The group runs races in one direction, staggering the cars, and limits access to members only.

“It’s a unique opportunity that’s not available anywhere else, outside of a racetrack,” Trayson says. ■

