

## Loo of the Larches

*Tucked among jagged peaks and stunning alpine lakes, this minimalist lavatory takes nothing from the view.*

BY TAYLOR MCKENZIE GERLACH



▲ Looming peaks of the Stuart Range rise above early October's flaming larch needles.

Larch madness is a bona fide season in the PNW, even if the otherworldly flashes of gold last only a couple fleeting weeks between September and October. The conifers and their flaming fall needles grow primarily in open, rocky, fire-prone areas at several thousand feet in elevation where they're annual showstoppers—for those willing to climb up to see them.

Strolling through emerald lakes flanked by these elusive larches and purple-hazed peaks along Washington's most coveted backpacking trail, I almost skip right by a toilet sign. After all, nobody is hiking the epic 19-mile Enchantment Loop for glamorous memories of backcountry bathroom breaks.

Turns out maybe they should be: A short spur trail deposits me atop a bluff with nothing but a primitive toilet and expansive views. Flanked by golden trees

to my left, jagged mountain ranges in front, and crystalline lakes below, sensory overload sets in before I can even pull down my pants.

Leavenworth Climbing Rangers and the Forest Service map a network with over 40 of these vault toilets throughout the stunning Enchantment Basin. Some might even boast the area's best views, not to mention the ability to divert 230 pounds of human waste each away from rocky environments uncondusive to cat holes.

Calling them toilets might be a stretch. What I stumbled upon resembled something more akin to a wooden seat atop a large Igloo cooler of yesteryear's road trip, and privacy was clearly an afterthought. But in a space this beautiful and difficult to explore, the real relief is never needing to take your eyes off your surroundings.



**FLIES: 4/5**

Thanks to the wind and early October temps, we didn't have to fend off any bugs. But during the summer, early mornings are the best time to get comfortable on the throne before the sun awakens any pesky neighbors.



**SMELL: 4/5**

Maybe it was the open-air breeze or maybe it was luck, but there was no foul stench—even late in the permit season when vaults would presumably be at their fullest before rangers helicopter the tanks to a pumping station.



**VIEW: 5/5**

In a word: unmatched. No need to rush or even bring reading material, as the jagged Prusik Peak forms a view better than any social scrolling could produce. Look close and you might even spot climbing parties on their way up the mountain's classic pitches.



**SAFETY: 4/5**

Mountain goats seeking hikers' salty deposits can make for unwelcome visitors. Some have become habituated to humans and consequently aggressive, so the Forest Service warns to be prepared to move away slowly, yell, or throw rocks to discourage these horned climbers should they get too close. We had several join us on the trail, mainly to mock our labored steps and breaths up Aasgard Pass, but we found toilet areas to be blissfully goat-free.



▲ No walls necessary; if you're lucky enough to be backpacking in the Enchantments' core zone, forsaking privacy for unending views is an easy yes.

**RED TAPE** THE ENCHANTMENTS

**BEST MAP:** For planning at home, pick up Green Trails Maps number 209S, which specifically covers the Enchantments in high detail. On route, the rocky, bouldery sections don't lend themselves to retaining footprints for easy wayfinding, so any downloaded GPS map also comes in handy.

**BEST GUIDEBOOK:** *Alpine Lakes Wilderness: The Complete Hiking Guide* by Nathan and Jeremy Barnes

**WHEN TO VISIT:** Late May to Early October, once avalanche danger has passed but before wildfire smoke or the next season's snowfall complicates travel.

**NEED TO KNOW:** Even day hikers will need a Northwest Forest Pass to park at the trailhead. A separate permit is required for overnight stays, so unless you plan to trail run, mark your calendars for the mid-February lottery. A few walk-up permits are available at Leavenworth Ranger Station each morning.

**TRAIL TOWN:** Nearby Leavenworth, WA comes with all the Bavarian kitsch and plenty of beer, bratwurst, and sauerkraut for post-hike nosh. October not only brings larch season, but also the town's Oktoberfest celebration.