

Olympic Legacy of Ancient Greece and Washington State

Series of articles by Dan Youra, travel writer

Dan Youra compares the first Olympic Games in ancient Greece with the Olympic legacy in Washington State, where Olympic Mountains cast a spell across Olympic National Park. Ancient Greek games in Olympia were dedicated to Zeus. Washington's Olympia is shadowed by Mount Olympus, "Home of the Gods". Greek cities welcomed pilgrims to Olympic festivals 2,800 years ago. Washington towns on the Olympic Peninsula host festivals in the spirit of the original Olympic Games.

Olympic Festivals in Ancient Greece and Olympic Peninsula

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The original Greek Olympic Festivals which grew into the Olympic Games were characterized by five defining elements. Variations of these five characteristics are reflected in the culture of the Olympic experience on Washington State's Olympic Peninsula located at the most northwest corner of the contiguous United States.

1. Tribute to the Gods and Nature
2. Sacred Places
3. Pilgrimage
4. Festivals
5. Athletic Games

1. Tribute to the Gods and Nature

First and foremost the original Greek Olympic Festivals of the 8th century B.C. were tributes to the gods. Pilgrims trekked to sacred sanctuaries to share a religious experience, witness cultural and athletic events, and glow in the pride in being part of a shared community.

In the early festivals the athletic events were only one small part of the Olympian gatherings, which were richly infused with music, singing and dancing, theater and even poetry reading.

The classical Grecian ideal of health, summarized in Juvenal's 2nd century plea for a "sound mind in a healthy body" (*L. mens sana in corpore sano*), was an integral part of the earliest Olympic festivals. They were set up to allow attendees and participants to relax and enjoy the five-day festivities. People came to the festivals to amuse themselves and share the festal joys, not to compete for medals.

The natural beauty of the U.S. Olympic Peninsula is the magnet that draws visitors to search out its wild, remote, majestic treasures. As a peninsula, washed on three sides by salt water, its *Call of the Wild* is heard in the heart's of people who trek from around the world to experience its spirit.

In the Pacific Northwest visitors sail across Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca to land on the pristine shores of Washington State's Olympic Peninsula, where they discover gems of nature that they thought only existed on the National Geographic channel. The peninsula is anchored by Olympic National Park, one of the most richly endowed parks in the United States national park system, with natural wonders from divinely named mountains to the Hoh, Queets and Quinault Rain Forests, the only three temperate rain forests in the United States. Olympic Park is a World Heritage Site with world record trees, some easily accessible to curious visitors. Wilderness forests deep in the park beckon to modern day pilgrims seeking similar sacred encounters as sought by Greek sojourners almost three millenia ago.

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