

# picture perfect

Story by Beth Hawkins  
Photos courtesy of Neil Rantoul

**S**teptoe Butte at moonrise. A combine harvesting wheat along a steep hillside at dawn. These are some of the unique photographic opportunities that draw amateur and professional photographers from across the United States—and the world—to the alluringly photogenic hills of the Palouse.

Touted as the “Tuscany of North America” by those who’ve visited—and been charmed by—the rolling wheatlands of our area, an influx of visitors are finding out about the area through word-of-mouth experiences, as well as signing up for tours specifically catering to photographic expeditions.

Jack Lien is the owner of Palouse Country Photo Tours out of Colfax, and offers five-day tours in the spring and fall for photo buffs who seek the area’s best photographic venues. “It’s a landscape photographer’s dream,” Jack says of the Palouse. A good percentage of his tour company’s clients hail from the East Coast and Canada, but he has also hosted visitors from as far away as Germany and Japan.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC ALLURE

“I ask my clients what attracted them to the Palouse,” Jack says. “They all have the same answer: They pick up a publication and see photos of the area. They decide they have to see it. As a photographic destination, it offers an ever-changing landscape of things to shoot. Every day, crops are

ripening or farmers are plowing. There’s always something going on.”

Jack estimates that 2,000 to 2,500 photographers visit the Palouse area each year for the specific intent of capturing its beauty through the lens of a camera. This includes amateurs on their own as well as guided tours and visits by professional photographers.

As for Jack’s mix of clientele: “About half of my clients are professional photographers—what they want from me is to get them into the locations where the lighting is ideal. About a quarter of my clients are advanced amateurs—the remainder are new folks who have recently picked up a camera.”

Each season has its own unique beauty in the region, and Jack explains that many who experience the Palouse’s photographic opportunities in one season often come back during a different time of year. “Fall offers harvest time with the combines in the fields, and then there’s springtime and its greens. It’s just a wonderful place.”

## VASTNESS, BEAUTY & SCALE

Neal Rantoul, a professional photographer and educator at both Harvard and Northeastern University, has been capturing images of the Palouse for 16 years. Rantoul published a book titled “Wheat: An

American Series” and is drawn to the region’s simplistic beauty.

“The area is remarkable on many levels but absolutely unique is the sheer vastness, beauty and scale of the Palouse,” Neal says. “As a career professional artist and educator, the region is about perfect for me in terms of a place to work.”

Neal has photographed the Palouse from the ground as well as from the air, and finds that beyond the obvious seasons of springtime and harvest, there’s rare beauty to be found during other times of the year as well. “I’ve found that May, October and November can be very beautiful as well,” he says. “The growth is either just planted or cut down to a stubble, and the forms of the hills are laid bare.”

Neal was brought up in southern Connecticut where, he says, “Trees confined the landscape and the horizon was never far away. This contrasts to the Palouse where the horizon seems infinite and the landscape is spread out before you. The area is remarkable on many levels.”

Neal has expanded his photographic work beyond the obvious hillside scenery. “One of my most important series is of the cemetery just outside of Oakesdale,” he says. “Perched on a hill surrounded by fields of wheat, the cemetery embodies for me something essentially American and containing our core values.”



To see more of Neal Rantoul images visit [www.nealrantoul.com](http://www.nealrantoul.com) | [www.panopticongallery.com](http://www.panopticongallery.com)

## AN ECONOMIC BOOM

The influx of photographers eager to expand their skills by coming to the Palouse hasn’t gone unnoticed by Vicki Leeper, Director of Tourism and Special Events for the Pullman Chamber of Commerce.

Vicki says photography is fast becoming a big draw for many visitors to the area. In fact, the chamber touts the Palouse’s photographic charm with advertisements of magazines such as *Sunset* and *Outdoor Photographer*. She adds that the advertising is a shout-out to readers, saying ‘Hey, this area’s here—come and see it.’

“We get groups on buses, or those who come in through a photographer,” Vicki says. “It’s definitely a popular attraction for this area because of our unique geography.”

And more photographers in the area is a definite plus for local businesses. “When they come in, they’re here for three or four days,” Vicki says. “They rent vans, eat out, rent airplanes—those are dollars in our economy.”

## HANDS ON EXPERIENCE

Tour owner Jack Lien, who’s been operating his business for 12 years, is noticing more and more articles and pictures about the Palouse. He’s happy with the fact that the area is garnering so much interest, but for him it’s all about letting his clients really experience the region from a local’s point of view.

“I try to get my clients to ride in a combine,” he says, having established a respectful rapport with many area farmers. “I try to emphasize for my clients to ‘tell a story’ with their photos. From the combines on the fields, to unloading grain on the trucks, to going to the barges—they’re leaving with a story.”

Jack especially appreciates the farmers’ generosity with this entire process. “The farmers, in particular, who allow me to pull up onto their land with a car full of people, let me stand amongst the combines, and it’s very special. It gets me into the locations that I couldn’t otherwise do.”

On Jack’s web site, [FourSeasonsPhotoTours.com](http://FourSeasonsPhotoTours.com), clients share their praise for the many aspects of the tour as well as the region’s hospitality and beauty. Many visitors are overwhelmed by the simplicity and the friendly nature of local residents. As Jack explains, “They’re not used to driving down the roads and having people wave to them.”

For Jack, the best feedback of all comes from experiences made after the photography sessions have ended. “I had one lady who came here to take photos, and when she went back home she took first place in her camera club,” he says with a laugh. “I also encourage clients to send me their very best photos when they get back, which can take a while since the average person takes about 4,000 images while they’re here.” Jack’s been known to take particularly good images from clients, make prints, and hand-deliver them to the farmers who hosted the photography group.

So in this vast expanse of rolling hills and wheatland beauty, what is Jack’s favorite place to take clients? Although he has a number of locations that he likes to return to again and again, he stays mum on choosing just one. “That’s like me trying to say which of my children is my favorite.” **END**