



North

TERRY HUSEBYE/CORBIS



Midwest Passages

Experience the perfect calm and natural beauty
of Washington's San Juan Islands. By Sam Polcer

“Look around,”

says Peter Hardy, captain on one of Orcas Island Eclipse Charter’s popular whale-watching tours, which launch daily from the shores of Orcas Island, when asked what makes the shores of the Pacific Northwest such a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts. “It’s beautiful, like this, from the lower Puget Sound south of Seattle, all the way up through southeast Alaska. It gets a little bit more remote, more rugged, but it’s absolutely beautiful the whole way.”

Hardy has a rugged appearance himself, with the white mutton-chop-moustache combo all voyagers hope to find on their boat captains, skin marked by a life lived in the great outdoors. He’s spent summers in the San Juan Islands—an archipelago nestled north of Puget Sound in the Salish Sea between Washington and Vancouver Island, B.C.—with his wife for the last 12 years, and his enthusiasm for the area shows no signs of waning.

“It’s an adventure every day,” he says, one hand on the steering wheel, the other gripping a pair of binoculars, scanning the water for orca, minke and humpback whales, seals, porpoises and bald eagles. “Today, it’s going to be a good one; we’re surrounded by beautiful islands and we have a fantastic boat.”

A multitude of operators offers tours that bring visitors within sighting distance of the impressive orca whales, which arguably rank at the top of a long list of attractions for travelers to the region. These cetaceans fall into two distinct groups: transients and residents. Transients travel in small groups, hunting large animals, like seals, so their locations are harder to pinpoint. Residents, however, arrive in the summer months in large groups to feed off the area’s abundance of salmon, which have returned from the Pacific to spawn in the area’s rivers and streams. The locations of the orcas that are found are broadcast to the network of tour companies, which then make a quiet and heart-quicken trip out for a glimpse of the iconic creatures. “The bottom line is, we’re just out there searching,” Hardy says. “Mother Nature is the one who lines up what we’re going to see.”

If Mother Nature is indeed in charge, she is a benevolent leader, having blessed the region with 247 days of sunshine a year and about half the rainfall of Seattle, less than 100 miles away. Lush cedar forests, pristine seas and a wide variety of terrain all provide a breathtaking backdrop for an array of “soft adventure” options. Kayakers, hikers, campers, bikers, boaters, fisherman and the like flock to the area like, well, orcas in search of salmon all year long. Their adventure begins with the ferry, which is technically public transportation, but serves as an attraction in its own right.

Depending on the level of the tide, the number of islands that make up the San Juan archipelago varies by the hundreds, though there are 172 that are named. Only four—San Juan, Orcas, Lopez and Shaw (a smaller island that only offers campsite accommodations)—are accessible via the Washington Ferry Service, which makes its mainland stop at the dock in Anacortes, an hour and a half north of Seattle by car. Some of the other islands can be explored on day trips, while many are privately owned. The ferry only charges on westbound trips and is free for inter-island walk- and bike-on-passage. This is further proof,

you think—as the boat passes Blakely Island to the right and Decatur Island to the left, through mists that keep much of the landscape an unbelievably deep shade of green—that a multi-island trip is a good idea.

The three main islands—San Juan to the west, across the Haro Strait from Canada’s Vancouver Island; Orcas Island to the northeast; and Lopez to the southeast—possess characteristics that suit them to different types of exploration. Where you should go depends on what you have in mind.

SAN JUAN ISLAND

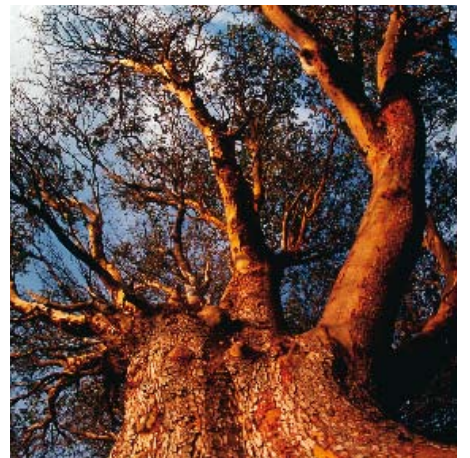
Friday Harbor welcomes visitors in quiet style with its art galleries, boutiques, hotels, and water-view bars and restaurants; it’s as much of a “tourist village” as you are likely to find on the islands, so you might as well get your fill here. The Whale Museum is a worthy stop to learn about the magnificent creatures, which can then be seen best from the west side of the island at Lime Kiln Point State Park, South Beach or San Juan County





Island Life

(clockwise from top) orca breaching offshore; madrone tree at Lime Kiln Point; boats moored at Roche Harbor



ORCA: TOM BRAKEFIELD/CORBIS; TREE: WOLFGANG KAHLER/CORBIS; ROCHE HARBOR: KEVIN SCHAFER/CORBIS

YOUR GUIDE TO THE SAN JUAN ISLANDS

LODGING

Accommodations on the San Juan Islands are as varied as the landscape; from charming bed-and-breakfasts nestled in the woods to waterfront resorts, there is something for everyone.



MacKaye Harbor Inn



Harrison House

San Juan Island

Harrison House Suites

A bed and (delicious) breakfast offering full private suites and a convenient location very near the ferry landing in Friday Harbor. 360-378-3587; harrisonhousesuites.com

Hotel de Haro

On the National Register of Historic Places, overlooking Roche Harbor on the northeast side of the island. A stately and romantic setting. 800-451-8910; rocheharbor.com

Orcas Island

Spring Bay Inn

An absolutely stunning B&B nestled on a quiet bit of waterfront property. Hosts Carl and Sandy alternate cooking and kayak tour guide duties. 360-376-5531; springbayinn.com

Smuggler's Villa Resort

Duplexes perfect for families, north of Eastsound. A pool and nightly campfires complete the package. 360-376-2231; smuggler.com

Lopez Island

MacKaye Harbor Inn

Restored farmhouse B&B on the south side of the island with waterfront views from most rooms. Bikes free to guests. Opens for summer on April 16. 888-314-6140; mackayeharborinn.com

Lopez Islander Bay Resort

Sunset views from every room, overlooking Fisherman Bay on the west side. Something for everyone: sports bar, kids' playroom, Jacuzzi. 360-468-2233; lopezislander.com

Park (not counting a trip out on a tour, which should also be experienced).

Elsewhere on the island, history buffs can do no better than to check out the San Juan Island National Historical Park, where armies from the U.S. and England simultaneously resided—with the American camp on the southeast side of the island, the English camp on the northwest—for 12 years, beginning in 1859, largely as a result of what was originally a quarrel over the shooting of a pig. In true San Juan style, the sections of the park contain hiking trails, grassy knolls, forested hillsides, beaches and rugged shorelines.

A leisurely drive—make sure to fill up in Friday Harbor, it's the only place you'll find fuel—through the island's rolling countryside on the way to a park for hiking, or to the San Juan Vineyards, is definitely in order.



View from the top of Mount Constitution

ORCAS ISLAND

This horseshoe-shaped island is the largest and most geographically diverse of the three. Beginning in tiny Orcas Village, where Eclipse Charters sets out to sea, passing farm valleys dotted with animals lazily grazing, it's easy to see why some call Orcas Island the "Gem of the San Juans."

At the bend of the horseshoe lies the town center of the island, Eastsound, a walkable village where local artisans sell their wares in shops that are surrounded by restaurants, cafés and hotels. Past Eastsound and into the east half of the horseshoe, Moran State Park is home to sprawling hiking trails around quiet mountain lakes, camping spots and the best place (short of a plane ride) for getting an overview of the archipelago: the top of Mount Constitution. A trip to this 2,409-foot-high overlook can range from easy (you can drive up to within 100 steps of the top) to grueling (there are various hiking trails that go all the way up, some steeper than others), though no route suffers for

DINING



The Bay Café

Locally produced ingredients and fresh seafood characterize much of the islands' cuisine. From hearty diner breakfasts to sophisticated, romantic dinners to waterfront ale houses, you'll need an appetite for more than just adventure when you come to the San Juans.

San Juan Island

Harbor View Dining Room at Friday Harbor House

Try a glass of one of the Washington State wines with a regional dish, like wild coho salmon when it's in season. Impeccable and romantic. 360-378-8455; fridayharborhouse.com

Front Street Ale House

This waterfront pub has great food, and it's the sole seller of San Juan Brewing Company products. 360-378-2337; sanjuanbrewing.com

Orcas Island

Inn at Ship Bay

Seasonal, gourmet cuisine is served at what is perhaps the best restaurant on all of the San Juans. Simply outstanding. 360-376-5886; innatshipbay.com

Vern's Bayside Restaurant and Lounge

Those in search of an omelet the size of their head to get the day going (and, perhaps, slow it down) need look no further than this Eastsound classic. 360-376-2231

Lopez Island

The Bay Café

The sunset view out the window or on the deck, along with dishes that highlight local ingredients, draw residents from other islands to this Lopez Village eatery. 360-468-3700; bay-cafe.com

Vortex

The healthy juice drinks and organic salads at this funky place are just what your body needs if you're going to last all day biking around the island. 360-468-4740

AD



Exploring Lopez (top) Biking along one of Lopez' roads; (below) view from the shore of Lopez Island

IF YOU GO

Washington State Ferries
888-808-7977
wsdot.wa.gov/ferries

San Juan Island

The Whale Museum
360-378-4710
whalemuseum.org

San Juan Island National Historical Park
360-378-2902
nps.gov/sajh/home_new.htm

San Juan County Park
360-378-8420
co.san-juan.wa.us/parks/sanjuan.html

San Juan Vineyards
360-378-9463
sanjuanvineyards.com

Orcas Island

Eclipse Charters
360-376-6566
orcasislandwhales.com

Moran State Park
360-902-8844
moranstatepark.org

Lopez Island

Lopez Bicycle Works
360-468-2847

Spencer Spit State Park
888-226-7688
parks.wa.gov

Odlin County Park
360-378-8420
co.san-juan.wa.us/parks/lopez.html

lack of beautiful scenery. It is in the woods on the way up (or down) that you'll find the San Juans at their most hushed, and at the top is a view that will take your breath away.

LOPEZ ISLAND

Pastoral farmland that gently slopes down to the sea defines much of this sparsely populated, curious island's landscape. You're as likely to spot herds of cattle as you are the eclectic mix of artists, farmers and nature lovers that call Lopez home and give it



an added charm. The pace is slow; when driving, an island custom is to always wave at folks in cars going the opposite direction, and you'll notice quickly that everybody follows this rule.

It's flatter than the other islands, making it, if you live there, well suited for farm-

ing and, if you're visiting, perfect for renting a bike from Lopez Bicycle Works (unless you've brought your own—many do) and taking a slow ride through picturesque countryside. Just make sure to call ahead. Add to this gorgeous waterfront areas like the Shark Reef Sanctuary, Spencer Spit State Park and Odlin County Park, and you've got a landscape that's nothing short of spectacular.

As one might imagine, the history of an area with a land mass that changes with the tides is complex. Native Americans, explorers, trappers, smugglers, territorial conflicts between the U.S. and Britain and, most recently, tourism, have all played major roles but have not affected the overwhelming sense of calm that seems to permeate every inch of the islands. Perhaps it's their age: The San Juans are actually what remains of a receding continent much older than the American mainland. Whatever the reason, the trees perched on these islands' hillsides seem to speak of a history much older than the concerns of their co-inhabitants, who are all too grateful to listen, though it may take a slight taste for adventure—and serenity—to understand. ■

MIDWEST AIRLINES offers daily flights to and from Seattle/Tacoma. Details can be found at midwestairlines.com.