



Historic STEHEKIN

*Enjoying the scenic North
Cascades community*

Story and photos by Leslie Forsberg

Stunted pine trees sprout from crevices in the towering rock wall like tufts of fur on a lynx's ears. Patches of dry moss and lichen, limned by early morning sun, dapple the sandstone cliff, which cleaves the smooth waters of the lake. All is silent save the steady, swishing stroke of our canoe paddles and the rivulets of water that run down the shafts, splashing back into the azure lake.

The morning has dawned with a sapphire sky, air as warm as an embrace, and a sense of adventure at hand. Situated at the edge of 500,000-plus-acre North Cascades National Park, Stehekin—a tiny, self-sufficient community of fewer than 100 permanent residents at the northern end of 50.5-mile-long Lake Chelan—is known for adventure. Well, actually, adventure and its perfect counterpoint: relaxation.

My excitement rises as we pull our paddles through the glacial meltwater, drawing closer to a bulwark of rock stained white by mineral seeps. We're searching for ancient treasure. Then, just below an overhanging cliff face, there it is: About 9 feet above the surface of the lake, a red ochre prehistoric hunter pursues a stylized bear, goat, elk and deer. Below the figure are tally marks whose meaning is lost to time. A few feet away, another pictograph depicts—to our untrained eyes—either a vertical slug with tripod legs or an antennaed, three-legged alien, standing casually next to a group of people.

The sight of this venerable art—gauged to be at least 600 years old—strikes my husband, Eric, and me speechless as we ponder

◀ The North Cascade mountains are a scenic backdrop to the Silver Bay Inn, on the north end of Lake Chelan.

the mystery of its creators. Then a zephyr stipples the lake's surface and the water's reflection dances on the rocks like flames licking at the ages-old hunting scene.

History pervades the air of Stehekin, a remote hamlet reached only by boat, seaplane, horseback or foot. Vintage vehicles, seemingly held together by a wing nut and a dare, tootle along the nine miles of road between Stehekin Landing and the road's end—but not so often that an old dog can't get in a good nap between cars. The town's 1921 one-room schoolhouse settles comfortably into the woods beside the road, and an apple plucked from a gnarled tree at the heritage orchard tastes nothing like its modern-day counterpart.

Even the 1950s de Havilland Beaver floatplane that brought us here was an antique. We flew over one of the deepest gorges in North America. Since water obscures the depth of the chasm, it was hard to take in the full extent. Lake Chelan is 1,486 feet



▲ A floatplane parks at the dock at Stehekin Landing.

deep, and the adjacent Pyramid Mountain stands 8,245 feet above the surface of the water. Our Chelan Airways pilot, a white-haired adventurer in a red flannel shirt, noted that the lake descends to its amazing depths in just the space of a mile's width.

Far below were golden hills with scattered pine trees. As we winged north following the twists and turns of the lake, ridgelines rose more steeply, and the rumpled golden hills gave way to a solid blanket of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir. Farther north, mountains rose from the lake, jagged and dusty blue. Then we descended to the lake's surface and glided up to the dock at Stehekin Landing, the unofficial center of the community, with its lodging complex, convenience store, restaurant, bike-rental stand and National Park Service visitors center.

In the space of 30 minutes, it seemed we had traveled back in time to a town without cell-phone service, where most residents use wood-burning stoves for heat, and where grocery orders are sent to stores 55 miles downlake. Most who arrive at Stehekin travel on the 100-foot *Lady of the Lake II*, which leaves Chelan at 8:30 in the morning and cruises into Stehekin at 12:30 in the afternoon.

A shuttle car from the Silver Bay Inn picked us up at the landing and took us to our timbered waterfront cabin, which had knotty-pine walls and an inviting deck with a gorgeous view of the lake.

"Whoool!" Eric shouts as he bobs to the surface of the water, spray flying. "Come on! It feels great!" The lake is fed by the



glacial water of Stehekin River, which empties into the lake a mere 100 feet from this bathing spot. I may be hot, but I'm not *that* hot. I kneel on the dock and dip my hand into the water:

It's frigid. While the water at the shallow southern end of the lake can heat up to 75 degrees, the water at the northern end is a chilly 55 to 60 degrees—in summer. "Maybe later, dear," I say with a smile.

"Yeah, right," his face says as he hastily splashes to shore. I resolve to show him I can take it, too—once I get my courage up. Really. First things first, though. And for me, that means a visit to the local bakery.

"You'll have to be careful, the brakes aren't where you think," Eric warns as we push off on the one-gear Electra bikes that the inn loaned to us and that are designed for middle-agers, with extra-wide, comfy seats. Not that we need them, of course. My mental gears turn back to childhood as I try pedaling backward. It works! Just like the last time I rode a bike with coaster brakes, some 40 years ago.

We pedal a quarter-mile up the road to the Stehekin Pastry Company, set in the woods with a flower-filled yard. It's lunch-

▲ Canoe trips on Lake Chelan are popular during the summer months.

▲ Passengers from Chelan approach Stehekin on the *Lady of the Lake II*.

time, and we join some townsfolk, clad in dusty jeans and worn hiking boots. We enjoy sandwiches on homemade hoagie rolls, then peruse the glass case stacked high with trays of pumpkin-ginger muffins, lemon squares and fruit pies. We choose cinnamonony caramel-pecan rolls "for the road."

Back on our bikes, we pedal through a tunnel of maples and alders as the road parallels the Stehekin River, flowing a milky, opal blue-green, with lush maple trees lining its gravel banks.

A short distance farther, we dismount at the valley's 1921 one-room log-cabin schoolhouse, which was in use until 1988. On a whim, I turn the knob of the time-weathered door—and it opens to reveal a classroom that looks as if the students just stepped out for recess and never returned. The room is anchored by a big old brown bear of a stove. A class photo from the early 1900s hangs on the wall next to a red lantern on a peg. A chalkboard notes the day's lesson, and local children's poems, illustrated with colored pencils, are taped to the walls. While this schoolhouse is no longer used—it's now a museum—the new school is still a one-room structure just a quarter-mile away, teaching kids from kindergarten through eighth grade.

Just up the road is the valley's pride, Rainbow Falls. We're hot, dusty and sweaty by the time we get there, and as we walk the short path through pinewoods, the sound of falling water makes us speed up. The 312-foot waterfall whips up a welcome breeze as it spills over a high lip onto a shelf, then tumbles down a long, narrow chute before bursting over a final shelf. We hop across the stream on rounded rocks, then wade in the bracing water, scooping up handfuls to douse our faces and necks. Suddenly, as if on cue, there it is: a rainbow! Small, but a full prismatic range, nonetheless.

Refreshed, we turn our bikes down a dirt road and find ourselves at Buckner Orchard, a heritage farm maintained by the National Park Service where tidy rows of apple trees heavily laden with fruit stretch across a field with bubbling rills of irrigation water coursing through. Piles of bear scat show that this is a

DETAILS

► **Chelan is the gateway to Stehekin;** by car it's about a one-hour drive north from Wenatchee, a three-hour drive east from Seattle (I like to take Interstate 90 to U.S. 97), and about a two-and-a-half-hour drive west from Spokane. From Chelan, your options for traveling north to Stehekin are slow boat, fast boat and even-faster floatplane.

► **The *Lady of the Lake II* reaches Stehekin in four hours;** a round-trip is \$39. The *Lady Express* covers the same route in a little more than two hours; a round-trip is \$59. 888-682-4584, www.ladyofthelake.com.

► **Chelan Airways offers charter floatplane service to Stehekin;** this is a wonderfully scenic option that takes only 30 minutes. A round-trip flight is \$190. 509-682-5555, www.chelanairways.com.

popular gourmet spot for local wildlife.

A woman in a plaid shirt is bending wire fencing around a tree. Seeing us, she turns and laughs. “You might wonder why I’m putting up a fence that the bears and deer can get through!” I notice a gaping hole at the bottom of the well-used fencing. “I don’t care about the bears and the deer; I’m trying to keep the elk out. Look at the damage they’ve caused,” she says, pointing to long scrape marks on a tree trunk.

Laurie Thompson, the orchard’s caretaker, invites us to sample the apples as she tells us about the orchard, which has two kinds of apples: Common Delicious (the ancestor of the grocery-store staples, Red and Yellow Delicious apples) and Rome Beauty. I bite into a Common Delicious. It’s tart-sweet and crisp.

LODGING & DINING

► **Silver Bay Inn** has several lakeshore cottages, as well as a riverfront house and adjoining guest room, ranging from \$145 to \$395, depending on the season. 800-555-7781, www.silverbayinn.com.

► **Stehekin Landing Resort** has 28 units and a house, ranging from \$119 to \$379, depending on the season. The resort’s restaurant is one of the few dining spots in the valley. 509-682-4494, www.stehekin-landing.com.

► **Stehekin Valley Ranch** features wood cabins and tent structures set in forestland at the edge of horse-filled pastures, ranging from \$75 to \$115 (including meals), depending on the season. The ranch’s cookhouse is open to outside guests for dinner, which is well worth the trip. 800-536-0745, www.stehekinvalleyranch.com.

► **The Stehekin Pastry Company** is generally open daily in the summer, and Wednesdays through Sundays in late spring and early fall. It features a range of delicious pastries such as cinnamon rolls and pumpkin-ginger muffins, as well as homemade soups and sandwiches. www.stehekinpastry.com.

There is no grocery store—only a small convenience store with a selection of staples and gift items at the Stehekin Landing—so be sure to pack food to take with you before you head uplake. —L.F.

That’s part of what we’re starting to understand about Stehekin: It’s more flavorful, more intense with less pretense. At dinnertime, a yellow school bus picks us and others up at a designated time at stops along the main road, and we bump along through woods next to the river before the valley opens out into grassy fields filled with Norwegian fjord horses. Stehekin Valley Ranch is known for down-home fare, and plenty of it. Slabs of flank steak, homemade breads and a plethora of pies are mainstays at this rustic establishment, where tin coffeepots cuddle next to a blazing woodstove, and long pine-plank picnic tables encourage a sense of community.

During the summer, Stehekin (a Native American word for “the way through”) burgeons with hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail, which dips into the valley. There are also numerous trails for day-hikers, including the scenic 17-mile Lakeshore Trail. Other summer activities include horseback riding, biking, fishing, river rafting, kayaking and canoeing. During the winter, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing are popular.

Sunshine and relaxation are our focus on this trip, though, and at dusk we retreat to a hot tub at our inn that overlooks the lake, where the bubbling water soothes our muscles, sore from bike riding. I pledge to jump right into the lake tomorrow. Really.

The stars join us, one by one. The Big Dipper appears, then Orion, then the pulsing red-gold of the evening star. The Stehekin River whispers like leaves. And an owl calls in the still air as we make our way back to our cabin. ▲

Leslie Forsberg makes her home in Seattle’s Ballard neighborhood.

GETTING THERE

Alaska Airlines (800-ALASKAAIR) serves Wenatchee, gateway to the Chelan area, daily through its sister airline Horizon Air (800-547-9308). Daily flights are also available to Seattle and Spokane, which are additional gateway cities. To book a flight, go to the Web at alaskaair.com.