



## WHIDBEY ISLAND

Outdoor adventures, seaside views and fantastic food make this drive dreamy.

**Leslie Forsberg**

**O**n a bluff-top path high above a vast sweep of sand beach, I was surrounded by drifts of purple vetch and fragrant wild roses. Far below, sun-bleached logs were piled like a giant's game of pick-up-sticks. Washington state's spectacular inland waterway, Puget Sound, was dressed this day in blues of many hues. Even from this high vantage point, I could hear the waves breathing in and exhaling.

This dream-inducing place, Ebey's Landing, is one of many compelling sights on laid-back Whidbey Island, beloved for its sand beaches, bucolic country roads, towns filled with pastel wood buildings and much more. It's only a half-hour drive and 20-minute ferry ride from Seattle, but Whidbey feels a world away. It takes just an hour to traverse this seahorse-shaped island on state Route 252 and then state Route 20, yet adventures ranging from hiking, biking and kayaking to beachcombing, shopping for local art or antiques and enjoying hyper-local foods are best savored over several days.

Just 15 minutes from the ferry, Langley is the perfect launch pad for adventure. Historical wooden buildings hugging the shoreline house art galleries, crafts shops, and cafes feature local seafood.

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So named because it was deceptively wide, Deception Pass separates Whidbey Island from Fidalgo Island.

CHRISTIAN PETRONE/GETTY IMAGES







The Star Store, a general store with a beachy vibe, is a longtime community treasure; Moonraker Books has a fantastic collection; and Sweet Mona's Chocolates makes tasty treats.

Not only tourists are attracted to Langley. Gray whales hang out and feed along the shoals just offshore every spring, and the first to person to spy whales is invited to ring the bell at Whale Bell Park. The Langley Whale Center offers helpful introductions to resident orcas, transient humpbacks and grays, and posts notices when they're sighted.

#### OUTDOORSY VIBE

After settling into my lovely room at Langley's charming Saratoga Inn, I took to the trails at Earth Sanctuary, a meditative woodland-and-marsh setting threaded with paths and New Age sculptures, including two stone circles.

Bigleaf maples, Douglas firs and sword ferns created a cloak of green on the Celestial Trail, where I was surrounded by birdsong. Opening my phone's Merlin Bird ID app for the first time, I was stunned to see birds identified in real time as they sang: Song sparrows, Swainson's thrushes, western wood-pewees, mourning doves and spotted towhees were part of the chorus.

Just minutes away, Double Bluff Beach was wave-lapped and pure sun-splashed happiness. This long shallow-water beach is a favorite playground for tots and dogs.

Families with picnic blankets and sand buckets were picking their way over the driftwood when I arrived, finding their spots. I found the driftwood fort of my dreams. Tall enough to stand in, with three log benches and a view of Mount Rainier through the doorway, it was my slice of heaven.

The Admiralty Head Lighthouse, located in Fort Casey Historical State Park, lighted the way home for sailors until 1922.

Up the road a few minutes, at Greenbank Farm, a barn and outbuildings house a collection of shops including cheese and wine sellers, a gallery and Old Spots Bistro, where I enjoyed a steaming bowl of seafood broth, brimming with the island's famous mussels.

#### HISTORY WAS MADE HERE

Well-fortified for the afternoon, I visited historic Fort Casey, atop Admiralty Head, midway up the island's west coast. The parade grounds were aflutter with kites fueled by the headland's gusty winds. The view of Puget Sound and the glaciated Olympic mountains is expansive, and it's the reason the fort was sited here. The fort was built in the late 19th

century to guard against the intrusion of hostile warships. Fortunately, the guns were never used, and today 10-inch guns are described by docents who lead impressed visitors through a maze of concrete bunkers. Nearby, at Admiralty Head Lighthouse, steps winding to the top yielded the grandest view of all.

You can feel the tug of history at Ebey's Landing, as well. A broad prairie here was once cultivated by Skagit Indians before settlers arrived in the 1850s. The Ebey family's original farmhouse and a blockhouse, built to guard against intruders, are still standing, mute sentinels to history. At the western edge of the prairie, miles of beach include a natural lagoon and a spectacular 3-mile loop trail that



The Maiden of Deception Pass, a story pole carved out of wood, honors the Samish Indian Nation. Below: Sail boats race across Penn Cove





ascends the bluff. It's here that I revealed in clouds of purple vetch while keeping my eyes peeled for the rare golden paintbrush plants that grow here.

#### SEAFOOD AND MORE

Directly east, on Penn Cove, Coupeville's historical wooden houses are painted in pastels. Shoppers search for treasures in antiques shops, Kapaw's Iskreme (ice cream) does brisk business, and the Little Red Hen Bakery turns out delicious breads and pastries. But Coupeville is best

known as the home of Penn Cove mussels, raised right here by the millions and shipped around the world. Walking out on the 500-foot-long historic wharf and looking north, I could see the commercial shellfish beds floating in the water. Rustic Toby's Tavern is a great place to sample these delicacies.

With so many highlights on Whidbey, you might think there's no way to top them in the final mile. You'd be wrong. Whidbey somehow saves the best for last.

At the northern tip of the island, Deception Pass State Park has

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Hikers: MICHAEL HANSON/GETTY IMAGES; BRIDGE: EDB8\_16/GETTY IMAGES; SARATOGA INN: CHUCK PEFFLEY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

jaw-dropping scenery and offers A-list experiences. The dramatic, 976-foot-long Deception Pass Bridge, which connects Whidbey Island to the mainland, grabs the spotlight. The graceful arch spans a maelstrom of churning waters that boil through a narrow chasm at more than eight times the flow rate of the mighty Columbia River. Intrepid visitors can walk out onto the span for the best views.

With tide pools, trails through ancient Douglas fir forests, sand beaches and a swimming lake, there's no end to the excitement found in this beloved park—which celebrates its 100th birthday this year. The same can be said for all the fantastic experiences to be found on Whidbey Island. ●

The view from this trail in Ebey State Park dazzles hikers; Above: the iconic Deception Pass Bridge

## EATS AND SLEEPS

Here are a few spots to rest your head and delight your palette.

#### COZY CABINS

A woodsy waterfront retreat with a historical log lodge, cabins and hotel-style rooms, Captain Whidbey Inn is iconic and the unofficial lodge of Ebey's Landing National Historic Reserve. [captainwhidbey.com](http://captainwhidbey.com)

#### WATER VIEWS

Saratoga Inn is a charming getaway at the edge of Langley; a healthy breakfast buffet is included.



#### SEAFOOD SENSATION

In Coupeville, the Oystercatcher crafts exceptional dishes using local seafood and seasonal fare. [oystercatcherwhidbey.com](http://oystercatcherwhidbey.com)

#### FOOD TRUCK

The Braeburn at the Barnyard, a food truck at Penn Cove Brewing, serves crispy fried chicken and biscuits with house-made jam in an orchard setting. [braeburnlangley.com](http://braeburnlangley.com)

#### DESTINATION EATERY

At the south end of the island, the new, uber-popular Seabiscuit Bakery uses island-grown fruits in Danishes, black currant-iced cookies and much more. [seabiscuitbakery.com](http://seabiscuitbakery.com)