

A RIVER'S RENEWAL

THE FREE-AGAIN ELWHA ADDS
TO THE VITALITY OF THE
NORTH OLYMPIC PENINSULA
BY LESLIE FORSBERG

THE UNFETTERED
ELWHA RIVER,
IN OLYMPIC
NATIONAL PARK.



THE NEW BEACH AT THE MOUTH OF THE ELWHA IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING.

SEAGULLS SPIRAL,

their wings white flashes in the late-afternoon sun as they scan the river’s shallows for forage fish. Their cries punctuate the rhythmic sound of waves washing over a sand beach at the mouth of the river. On the Olympic Peninsula, the Elwha River is back at it after a century of slumber, carrying sediment downstream from the Olympic mountains and depositing it at the river’s mouth. Braided channels are lined with layered sandbanks, and bristling with logs and woody debris that shelter young salmon smolt.

Our state’s newest sand beach—more than 80 acres and growing daily—is the result of the removal of two nearly-100-year-old dams that constricted the Elwha and decimated legendary salmon runs, including chinook that were said to reach 100 pounds. Both the 108-foot Elwha Dam and the 210-foot Glines Canyon Dam were removed as the key elements of a \$325 million river restoration that started in 2011.

The benefits stretch far beyond the ecosystem. A sense of pride is palpable today on the streets of Port Angeles (PA, as locals call it) and Sequim, where outdoors shops, galleries and local-foods restaurants are reshaping the economy. Mere minutes from both towns, there are mountain trails for hiking, trails for biking and secluded coves for kayaking. And of course, there’s the siren call of the Elwha, as it flows 45 miles from the heart of the Olympic Range to the Strait of Juan de Fuca.



A NARROW GAP BENEATH THE GLINES CANYON OVERLOOK.

EXPERIENCING THE ELWHA

Visiting the newly minted beach at the mouth of the Elwha is a powerful experience, yet there are several other ways to experience the beauty of the river’s transformation. From downtown PA, the Olympic Discovery Trail is a paved path through forests and over bubbling Dry Creek, before a lovely flourish: The Elwha River Bridge has a suspended bike/pedestrian lane. It’s a great spot to linger and be mesmerized by the twining channels and river’s murmur.

Wild rivers roam, and the newly freed Elwha washed out Olympic Hot Springs Road, off Highway 101, in 2015 and again in late 2017. While the road is now closed, there is a silver lining: A short bypass trail just beyond Madison Falls (well worth a visit) now loops back to the abandoned road, where locals walk their dogs and enjoy nature all to themselves. It’s a 3.6-mile hike or bike ride to the Glines Canyon Overlook, where the former lakebed of Lake Mills is now being reclaimed by nature. Big-leaf maples turn brilliant colors in the fall along this quiet lane paralleling the Elwha.



THE BASICS Visit the Lower Dam Road (off Highway 112, just past the intersection of Highway 101), for informational signage about the dam-removal project and the immense challenges it took to remove the two dams. The Elwha Dam Overlook Trail here leads to a viewpoint (it’s about a 5-minute walk) high above where the Elwha Dam once stood. For bike rentals, visit Sound Bikes & Kayaks in downtown PA or Adventures Through Kayaking, several miles west of town, on Highway 101—in the same building as Harbinger Winery, a great spot to stop and relax after a day of touring. For scenic splendor and pampering, stay at Colette’s Bed & Breakfast, a AAA Four Diamond property surrounded by lushly landscaped gardens overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

WESTWARD HO

Full in any of the area’s river valleys is gorgeous, with deciduous trees contrasting with the deep green hues of fir, spruce and cedar. At Lake Crescent, west of the Elwha, you can rent a canoe, kayak or paddleboard, or take a guided kayak tour of the lake at the historic Lake Crescent Lodge, built in 1915. President Franklin Roosevelt, who visited the lodge in 1937, signed the authorization to create Olympic National Park just a year later. The lodge’s Roosevelt Room serves locally sourced Roosevelt elk and dishes featuring wild mushrooms in the fall. Just across the highway, it’s a .9-mile hike to Marymere Falls, which dashes 90 feet into a mossy ravine fringed with delicate maidenhair ferns.

At Sol Duc Hot Springs Resort, steam rises above three sublimely relaxing mineral-rich pools on cool fall days. The lodge has gone upscale this year, with stacked stone and granite finishes as part of a major renovation. Be sure to allot time to do a 1.6-mile round-trip hike through old-growth forest to Sol Duc Falls, which plunges 48 feet.

On the road in to the hot springs, stop by Salmon Cascades to watch spawning coho salmon (late October–early November) leaping upstream at a narrow, rocky channel that seems insurmountable. It’s impressive to see the power of these fish as they make their way up the river en route to their spawning grounds.

Watery wonders of a different sort await at Freshwater Bay, where the Elwha spills into the Strait of Juan de Fuca. On a tour with Adventures



HISTORIC LAKE CRESCENT LODGE IS A SERENE RETREAT.

Through Kayaking, I nudged my kayak close to a rock crevice to hear the deep-throated gurgle and *thwumph* of waves echoing off the back wall of a tiny cave. Rhinoceros auklets (a close relative of puffins), with their dramatic white “eyebrows,” rode the swells off a tiny islet with a single tree on top, and a river otter paddled through a kelp bed.

Seven miles west, Salt Creek Recreation Area boasts a sweeping sand beach with a picturesque islet just offshore. A rocky point is pocked by tide pools, and heavily colonized by mussels. Tide pooling, picnicking, camping and exploring bluff-top WWII bunkers are great ways to enjoy this beautiful place.

◀ A WORLD OF MOSS ENCHANTS AT SOL DUC FALLS.



OPENING SPREAD AND THIS PAGE: JOHN GUSSMAN; MAP BY SUE BOYLAN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOHN GUSSMAN; JUSTIN BAILIE; KIM PETERSEN / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



A HIKE TO THE LIGHTHOUSE ON DUNGENESS SPIT.

OUTDOOR ADVENTURES IN SEQUIM

The Dungeness Spit, part of the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge, 9 miles northwest of Sequim, offers one of the most-exciting beach walks on the peninsula. It's a 5-mile trek to the New Dungeness Lighthouse, and it is, indeed, a trek—walking on sand isn't easy. But even if you hike just the first mile, you can enjoy the sights of harbor seals and pelagic birds in the sheltered bay to the east. You can also reach the lighthouse via kayak; Salty Girls Charter Tour, Kayak & Boat Rentals, at nearby John Wayne Marina, offers a range of recreational options. The marina will be the setting for all kinds of water-based fun as it hosts Waterfront Day, on Sept. 15.

LOCAL EATS

Regional foods reign at a trio of newly renovated Sequim storefronts in the same building. Salty Girls—Sequim Seafood Co. (whose owners, Tracie Millett and Lavon Gomes, also own Salty Girls Charter Tour, Kayak & Boat Rentals) is a seafood market with a counter serving chowders, oysters grown in Sequim Bay and fish from local suppliers. This is an exciting development; there hasn't been a fresh seafood market on the North Olympic Peninsula in more than a decade. Next door, the Peninsula Taproom celebrates craft beer and ciders, and in the third storefront, Tedesco's Italian Fresh specializes in East Coast-style pizza and pasta. Kitty-corner from the threesome, Blondie's Plate, in a former church, dishes up beautifully crafted Northwest cuisine, such as pan-fried Hama Hama oysters with lemon aioli and crispy-skin salmon with ginger-miso sauce.

In Port Angeles, Next Door Gastropub offers tacos, burgers and creative sandwiches in a lively setting;



THE CRAB STACK AT NEXT DOOR GASTROPUB.



BLONDIE'S PLATE, IN A FORMER CHURCH.

Sabai Thai has a cultish following for its delicious ethnic entrees; and Bella Italia (noted in the *Twilight* book series) spotlights wild-caught local seafood, pasta and produce from local farms, in a cozy atmosphere. But some of the best eating in Port Angeles comes just once a year, during the Dungeness Crab & Seafood Festival, the first weekend in October (Oct. 5–7). The crab feed is a feast of fresh-caught crab; the Grab-A-Crab Tank Derby is a kid favorite; and a chowder cook-off and entertainment add to the festivities.



HURRICANE RIDGE ROAD LEADS TO DRAMATIC SUBALPINE SCENERY.

ON MY OWN INDIAN SUMMER visit to the Olympic Peninsula last fall, I saved the best for last. Driving up the winding Hurricane Ridge Road south of PA, I topped out at the 5,242-foot-high ridge-line, surrounded by dusky folds of mountains. A black-tail deer and her two nearly grown fawns were browsing in a meadow, filling up before descending to lower elevations for the winter. Walking hill-top trails through copses of fragrant alpine firs, I breathed deeply before settling onto a hillside bench with views across the Strait to Vancouver Island. With the steeply angled sun and the silence, time itself seemed to be holding its breath. Yet somewhere far below, bicyclists, kayakers and hikers were soaking up the beauty of this region, the Elwha was splashing its way, unfettered, to the ocean, and salmon were returning to ancestral spawning grounds encoded in their DNA, bringing new life to this entire region. **1**

Senior editor **LESLIE FORSBERG** grew up on the Elwha River.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WANDERLUSTER; COURTESY OF NEXT DOOR GASTROPUB; NANCY ZAFFARO; BRUCE BLOCK