

# SERENITY BY THE SEA

WRITER **LESLIE FORSBERG** BOARDS A FERRY AND SAVORS  
THE GOOD LIFE ON WASHINGTON'S SAN JUAN ISLANDS

LIGHTHOUSE: LOWESTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Waves crash upon the rocks beneath Lime Kiln Lighthouse, one of the best places in the world to see whales from land.

Standing at the windswept bow of the ferry as it motors west through the cobalt waters of the Salish Sea, we watch as forested islands, sepia tone in the late afternoon sun, slide into view and then recede in our frothy wake. Behind us, glacier-clad Mount Baker is fixed to the eastern horizon. Floating through the archipelago on our most recent foray to the San Juan Islands, my partner, Brian, and I find ourselves relaxing, lulled by the soothing vibration and the sense that we've pushed beyond the boundaries of our busy daily lives into a tranquil space.



**ISLAND ICONS** The Washington State Ferries take visitors on scenic cruises to the San Juan Islands. Opposite: A hiker explores San Juan County Park, which has gorgeous views of Haro Strait.



WOMAN: ATLANTIDE PHOTOTRAVEL/GETTY IMAGES; FERRY: ATLANTIDE PHOTOTRAVEL/GETTY IMAGES

Between Washington state and British Columbia, the 172 isles that make up the San Juan Islands offer many opportunities to soak in the beauty of nature, explore a vibrant arts scene, go on exciting outdoor adventures and indulge in a bounty of locally grown foods, from oysters and wild-harvested fish to fresh fruits and vegetables.

These days the islands are especially alluring for their natural isolation. Only a few of the islands are accessible via public transport, naturally limiting the number of visitors. The Washington State Ferries' route—from Anacortes on the mainland to Lopez, Orcas and San Juan islands—hopscoches through the islands on a spectacularly scenic byway.

#### **SAN JUAN ISLAND**

The largest and most-populated island, San Juan has fun diversions and some drop-dead gorgeous settings, including miles of beaches. The ferry docks at Friday Harbor, where shops, cafes and galleries jostle down to the water's edge.

The beauty of the islands inspires artists of all genres. At WaterWorks Gallery we admire vivid



Boats float beneath a canopy of fog and sunlight at Friday Harbor on San Juan Island.

**We stroll along docks filled with gleaming yachts and daydream about hitching a ride.**

contemporary paintings of the red-barked madrone trees that fringe the islands, and at Arctic Raven Gallery masterful Native American carvings lend the place a reverential air. Nearby, the contemporary San Juan Islands Museum of Art celebrates works from the Northwest and beyond.

We could easily linger for hours in town, but we're bound for a familiar touchstone, Roche Harbor Resort, where the historic 1886 Hotel de Haro holds timeless appeal. A guest book in the lobby bears the faded signature of a VIP guest: President Theodore Roosevelt, who visited in 1903.

Fortified by gourmet sandwiches from the resort's Lime Kiln Cafe, we stroll along docks filled with

gleaming yachts and daydream about hitching a ride.

Near the resort's entrance, we marvel at powerful works of art in the San Juan Islands Sculpture



HARBOR: KSCHULZE/GETTY IMAGES; BUTTERFLY: PURESTOCK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Park before heading out on the trail of yet more history.

In 1859 the Pig War, precipitated by an errant pig rooting through an American's potato patch, set off military escalations between England and the United States, both of which claimed the island. War ships rallied and fortifications were built—English Camp on the north end and American Camp on the south.

The laid-back feel of the islands clearly worked its charm since both occupying forces ended up dancing and celebrating the holidays together before reaching an accord (and peace) 12 years later. Today both camps are open as part of the San Juan Island National Historical Park.

English Camp, on a placid bay, has a British formality to it, with a tidy blockhouse and a classic English garden surrounded by a picket fence. In contrast, American Camp is a broad, open prairie sloping down to driftwood-tangled

beaches. An exceptionally rare butterfly, the island marble, is found only here. Brian and I search for pretty pebbles and skip rocks at 2-mile-long South Beach under the watchful gaze of deer grazing nearby.

At day's end, we toast to the islands at Duck Soup, one of the area's best restaurants, and savor plump, sweet oysters harvested that morning at Westcott Bay Shellfish, just down the road. The night is sweet, spent minutes away in a Lakedale Resort yurt with contemporary Scandinavian decor.



HOTEL: GREG VAUGHN/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; SEA LION: TOM APPELGADE/GETTY IMAGES

#### A DAY ON SAN JUAN

Scan the waters for harbor seals, sea lions (top) and whales, or look for island marble butterflies (opposite) in the open prairie at American Camp. Then rest at the historic Hotel de Haro, which began greeting guests in 1886.



## SET SAIL

From Anacortes, take the ferry to San Juan, Orcas and Lopez islands to check out these points of interest.

### A WHALE OF A TIME

San Juan Island is one of the best places on Earth for whale-watching. May through September, orcas, gray whales, humpbacks and minke whales swim past **Lime Kiln State Park** on the west side of the island. Do a deep dive into whales at the Lime Kiln Interpretive Center or at **The Whale Museum** in Friday Harbor.

### BUMPER CROP

Farming is a way of life for many on Lopez Island. Farm stands and rural settings across the island offer insights: Taste heritage wheat grown and milled on the island in sturdy, wood-fired loaves at **Barn Owl Bakery's farm stand**; watch draft horses plow the fields at **Horse Drawn Farm** (where a farm stand offers natural meats and veggies); and walk an herbal labyrinth at the **Whispers of Nature Herbs farm**.

### PRESERVING THE ISLAND'S HERITAGE

Orcas Island settlers in the late 1800s planted plum, pear and apple trees that formed the basis of a thriving orchard industry. **Girl Meets Dirt**, in Eastsound, uses fruit from these same trees to make single-varietal preserves the old-fashioned way, with copper pots, organic sugar and natural evaporation.

The result is silky, deeply intense preserves (plus shrubs and bitters) in flavors ranging from Pink Bartlett to Italian Plum.



### BIKES ON BOARD

Each year about 280,000 people bring bicycles on the ferry.

## THE SAN JUAN ISLANDS



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### BIRDING PARADISE

Look for cormorants on pilings at the ferry terminal, great blue herons (left) in muddy flats and grebes on the water.

FERRY: LESLIE FORSBERG; CYCLISTS: CHASE JARVIS/GETTY IMAGES; GREAT BLUE HERON: LARRY CLOUSE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



### LOPEZ ISLAND

Driving off the ferry dock on Lopez, we're greeted by a familiar sight: Locals in a car heading to the ferry nod and wave as we pass. "Slowpez," as it's known by locals, is also known as "the friendly isle."

Lopez is compact with a gentle terrain, making it perfect for cycling. Farm fields are dotted with sheep and bisected by idyllic country lanes, with several standout beaches for picnicking and relaxing. Renting bicycles in the island's commercial hub, Lopez Village, Brian and I stop by the legendary Holly B's Bakery for cinnamon rolls that I always crave once I've returned home.

Spencer Spit—a 200-acre state park known for hiking, wildlife-watching and clamming—is a longtime favorite of mine. Brian and I stroll a sand spit and then



**WILD AND WONDERFUL** Nature is everywhere on the islands, from orcas breaching the water to lavender growing in farm fields (left).

watch a great blue heron stalking minnows in a saltwater lagoon where birdsong echoes.

Later, we cycle around the curved arm of Fisherman's Bay

WHALE-WATCHING: AARON BAGGENSTOS; LAVENDER: GERALD CORSI/GETTY IMAGES



The breeze stills,  
and I breathe in the  
beauty and tranquility  
of this place apart.

and through a fragrant cedar forest to a heritage orchard and beach, part of a land trust. Farther south, at Shark Reef Sanctuary, a park reached by a short trail, we watch as harbor seals roll and play, glistening in the sun.

#### ORCAS ISLAND

In contrast to Lopez, horseshoe-shaped Orcas is heavily wooded and hilly. Eastsound, at the center of the horseshoe, has a vacation

vibe, with galleries and boutiques filled with art, souvenirs and fashionable clothing.

The island's charms have drawn the attention of Oprah Winfrey; in 2018 she bought several downtown buildings and a gated estate with a half-mile of waterfront. Darvill's Bookstore, located in one of Oprah's buildings on Main Street, features books for every interest and boasts an enviable view of the bay and islands.

#### INTO THE WOODS

After reaching the summit of Mount Constitution, hikers bask in the view of the archipelago. Top right: Cascade Falls in Moran State Park, Orcas Island.

LANDSCAPE: TMI/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

We're thrilled to find that same magnificent view when we check into our lodging, the new Water's Edge Suite at Outlook Inn in the heart of town. Lounging will have to wait for the evening—we're ready to explore.

At Cascade Falls, in Moran State Park, a trail through mossy woods leads to a series of cascades that are rimmed by massive old-growth trees. Wrapping my arms around one, they reach less than a third

WATERFALL: GREG VAUGHN/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

of the way. Farther south, at Obstruction Pass State Park, we hike through woods filled with sword ferns and glossy-leaved salad to a perfect perch atop a boulder on the beach.

Near sunset, we drive to the top of Orcas Island's 2,409-foot Mount Constitution and climb a stone observation tower for a truly breathtaking view of water and islands. On the southern horizon, nearly 200 miles away, Mount

Rainier gleams in the sun, and to the north, buildings in Vancouver, British Columbia, resemble tiny, beige Legos. Bald eagles soar on thermals below us, and cliff swallows whirl in a space so vast they resemble a cloud of butterflies.

The breeze stills, and I breathe in the beauty and tranquility of this place apart, located in an incomparable archipelago in the upper left-hand corner of the contiguous U.S. [📍](#)