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JOURNEYS; Salty Breezes. Great Views. This Is Mass Transit?

By KATHLEEN McCLEARY

AT noon, with the sun high over the San Juan Channel and a warm breeze coming off the water, it's hard to imagine a better place to be. Leaning over the green iron railing of the Illahee, a 600-passenger refurbished 1927 ferry, you can see blue-green water gliding by below, while just yards away the rocky beaches and fir-covered bluffs of Shaw Island bask in the sun. Giant driftwood logs, the bleached bones of some faraway forest, lie along the uppermost edges of the gravel shores. The water laps at the beaches, delves around rocks jutting from the surface, and splashes against the base of dun-colored cliffs. The sweet, sharp scent of Douglas fir floats on the breeze, and a lone bald eagle wheels in great sweeping circles above the boat.

It's somewhat startling, in the midst of this idyll, to realize that this is actually public transportation. Here in the San Juan Islands, a group of more than 150 islands stretching 24 miles in the lower end of the Georgia Strait in northwest Washington just below the Canadian border, from Lopez Island in the south to tiny Patos Island in the north, ferries like this are considered part of the state highway system.

Washington State Ferries is the largest ferry system in the United States, handling almost as many passengers in 2002 (25 million) as Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (26.7 million). Five vessels (four after the summer season ends Sept. 21) serve the San Juans, carrying 1.8 million passengers last year to islands that retain a rugged, rural charm. There's not a Gap, Starbucks or McDonald's in sight.

Like most public transportation, the San Juan ferries can involve crowds, long waits and hot tempers, especially in summer when the tourist season is at its peak. But it's also one of the few trips in North America in which the journey is as good as -- and perhaps even better than -- the destination. And the journey is especially rewarding in autumn when the crowds have ebbed and the weather is still fine.

No two rides are ever the same. "There's not a day that goes by that I don't spot something I never noticed before," said Capt. Steve Brickley, who has piloted ferries through the San Juans since 1982. "Sometimes it's just the way the sun is reflecting off a certain bluff."

Ferries in the San Juans travel three main routes. The first is from Anacortes, about 90 minutes north of Seattle, to Shaw, Lopez, Orcas and San Juan, the most populated of the islands. The second is the interisland route serving those four islands. The third is the almost three-hour journey from Anacortes through the San Juans to Sidney, British Columbia.

While the ferries themselves are clean but institutional -- the main cabins have formica-topped tables, blue and brown vinyl-covered chairs and scuffed linoleum flooring -- the journey is so spectacular that some passengers go along just for the ride. Becky Huffington, an ordinary seaman aboard the 1,200-passenger Sealth, estimated that at least eight passengers a day in the peak summer season ride the ferry from Anacortes to Friday Harbor, the county seat on San Juan Island, then get right back on for the return trip. The cost, \$10.60 for a walk-on passenger and slightly less from October to April, "is not bad for a day's entertainment," Seaman Huffington said.

Because the islands lie in a pocket between the mountains of the Olympic Peninsula and Vancouver Island, the weather tends to be dry, with an average of 247 sunny days a year, and just an inch or so of rain a month from July through September and 3.25 inches in October.

The route of the Illahee (ILL-uh-hee), the 45-minute interisland ride between San Juan Island and Orcas Island, may be the most beautiful trip in the entire Washington State ferry system. Traveling north into the San Juan Channel from Friday Harbor, making a sharp turn into Wasp Passage, the ship passes through the tiny Wasp Islands, which were used as hideouts by smugglers bringing opium, whiskey and Chinese workers into the United States from Canada in the early 1900's. Eagles, cormorants and river otters are common sights; on the shore grow giant Douglas fir and red-barked madrona trees, while bright orange California poppies and other wildflowers dot the clearings. The price for the chance to witness this beauty can be as low as nothing: interisland trips are free for walk-on passengers.

To get a better sense of the vastness of the San Juan ferry routes, take in the view from the top of 2,400-foot Mount Constitution on Orcas Island, the highest point in the San Juans. It provides a kind of three-dimensional map of the islands and waterways.

A 52-foot stone observation tower offers a 360-degree panorama with dozens of islands, ringed by the snow-capped Olympic Mountains to the south; Vancouver Island, Canada, to the west; Lummi Island to the east; Mount Rainier looming to the far southeast; and the small mound of Sucia Island and the Strait of Georgia to the north.

FERRIES have a long and colorful tradition in the San Juans. The Washington State Ferries all bear Indian names, a nod to the Samish and Lummi who once paddled dugout cedar canoes through the islands. In the early 1900's, a "mosquito fleet" ferried passengers from village to village throughout the San Juans. The fleet -- made up of hundreds of independently owned and operated vessels of all sizes -- "skittered around like gnats picking up farmers and merchandise," said David Black, manager of marine operations for Washington State Ferries.

Many of the smaller boats and companies were bought out by the Black Ball Line in the first half of the 20th century; Washington State Ferries took over in 1951.

But while the ferry system is an institution, what goes on outside the windows is anything but routine. Last November, a Montana couple aboard the Sealth on the way to San Juan Island for their honeymoon spotted something floating in the water near Peavine Pass, north of Blakely Island. What they at first took to be a "discarded Halloween prop," according to The Journal of the San Juans, turned out to be a dead

body. "I'll always look at the water differently now," the bride, Glenda Little, told The Journal. Captain Brickley said that while he had not "personally had the occasion to find a dead body," he had dealt with everything from putting out fires on nearby boats to near drownings.

In perhaps the most notorious ferry incident in the San Juans, the 2,500-passenger Elwha rammed a rock off the shore of Orcas Island in 1983. The ferry's captain claimed that he was showing a woman her home in Grindstone Harbor when the ship hit the rock at full speed, 17.5 knots. A song, "Elwha on the Rocks," was written by an island musician, local bars served a drink with the same name, and the woman became known as the Siren of the San Juans. The ferry captain was forced to turn in his pilot's license.

Still, Washington State Ferries has not had a ferry-related fatality in its 50-plus years of operation.

Ferry life is not without its drawbacks. Prices continue to rise; fares increased by 5 percent in May, with another 5 percent increase scheduled for 2004. Also, "it's not uncommon for people to wait ungodly hours" for the ferry in peak season, said Jim Lawrence, a San Juan Island farmer who uses it to leave his island about twice a month.

"The ferries have mechanical problems, or they have delays," said Lee Sturdivant, an owner, with her husband, Tal, of Ferry Tale Productions, which publishes maps and other ferry information.

Mr. Sturdivant added, "Some people don't like to deal with uncertainty of any kind." And while for some islanders riding the ferries can become routine, for others it never loses the magic.

"I've been riding the ferries for 35 years, and I'm always touched by it," Mr. Lawrence said. "It's unbelievably cool."