

# Best Travel Stories From Our Readers

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Each Monday, the Napa Valley Register features travel stories in the Connections section.

Share your travel adventures with Napa Valley Register readers. Stories should be 800-1,000 words with three to five photos.

Submit stories and photos separately to Features Editor Sasha Paulsen at [spaulsen@napanews.com](mailto:spaulsen@napanews.com). For more information, call 707-256-2262.

Islands of Quirk

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Sharon McDonnell photo

At Krystal Acres alpaca farm, Kris Olson feeds her babies.

SAN JUAN ISLANDS, Wash. — “Some are bold, like Brown Sugar. Some are shy, like Lotus. Others are calm, or cranky. All have differing personalities. But most like to be squirted with the hose, on their legs and belly on a hot summer day, pushing each other out of the way to get to the water.”

Kris Olson was speaking about her herd of 60 alpacas on Krystal Acres farm on San Juan Island, the most populated island (a whopping 7,500) in this archipelago in the Salish Sea. The ponytailed blonde and her husband, Albert, raise the gentle, endearing animals, who resemble short, stubby llamas, but far cuter, for their prized soft fleece.

Alpacas upended the lives of the retired couple, who moved here after frequent visits on their boat when they lived in mainland Washington — after their winning bid in 2000 on a pair, Curious George and Durango Dan, at a local charity auction.

“We instantly fell in love with them,” said Kris, who hails from Denmark. The ex-auto parts store owners sold everything to buy the 60-acre farm that’s a 15-minute drive from Friday Harbor, the only incorporated town in the islands, transitioning from full-time retirees to full-time alpaca rearers (and avid readers of *Alpacas Magazine*, whose glossy photos make it akin to a *Town & Country* for alpacas and *Camelid Quarterly*) overnight.

Their store manager hand-paints the alpaca yarn, spun by a mill after 400 to 500 pounds of fleece are shorn from the herd each year, and knits it into scarves, hats and mitts. Jackets, sweaters and other clothing in the shop are from Peru, where 80 percent of alpacas live.

Though alpaca girls and boys are kept in separate dorms — er, fields — as breeding is supervised, visitors regularly inform the Olsons their alpacas are “doing it,” just like the fauna in the Cole Porter song.

One year, such goings-on resulted in 11 babies, all named after cars, including Mercedes, Bentley and Royce.

These beautiful forested islands, full of quirks, animals and farms, like the lovely Pelindaba Lavender Farm on San Juan, are a ferry ride away from Anacortes, 75 miles north of Seattle (or flight by tiny plane or seaplane from Bellingham or Seattle on Kenmore Air or San Juan Air).

Mona the camel, a man’s pet, lives in a field directly across from San Juan Vineyards, where a red and white wine are named in her honor (plus a cocktail at The Bluff at Friday Harbor House). In the patio of the tasting room in an 1895 one-room schoolhouse, you can sip obscure cool-climate varietals like Madeleine Angevine and Siegerrebe with a camel view.

There’s the strawberry and pineapple on a roadside, metal structures furnished with stoves, books and a journal that a welder built so motorists could relax.

Then there’s the red cedar sculpture of a Native American woman touching a cougar in Friday Harbor, depicting humans coexisting with nature (the scratches on her leg show trouble if that balance is lost). It’s by a Coast Salish artist, whose tribe fished for salmon, shellfish and halibut and hunted deer for centuries on this island.

In a bookstore crammed with over 50,000 used books in a clapboard house a block from the ferries in Friday Harbor, it was eerie finding a copy of "Mahina Tiare," a 1993 book about sailing to Australia on a 31-foot sailboat from Washington via Easter Island, Fiji, Tonga and Pitcairn Island. Eerie because its author, Barbara Marrett of the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau, who sailed with then-husband John Neal, was standing next to me at the time.

"When I came to San Juan Island in 1978, it was whale nothing," said Marrett, originally from the Bronx and Westchester suburbs. Today, there are many whale-watching tours. In fact, the world's only park devoted to whale-watching is Lime Kiln Point State Park, 9 miles west of Friday Harbor, where a lighthouse crowns a point. On my September tour on a Puget Sound Express boat, we spotted several orcas breaching and spouting.

That night, the owner of my B&B, Farhad Ghatan, gave us guests a classical music concert on his grand piano (hence the name of his inn, Friday Harbor Grand) as his adoring mini-Australian shepherd sat next to him. The shakshuka, an Israeli ratatouille of squash, kale, tomatoes and spinach from his garden, topped by a poached egg that he cooked for breakfast, was a perfect example of the islands' cook-local ethos.

A slow pace of living is a hallmark here, and nowhere is it slower than on Lopez Island, fondly nicknamed "Slopez," an island of 2,400 people, many farms (including Horse-Drawn Farm and Sunnyfield, a goat dairy).

"It's shaped like a triangle — if you walk around it slow, it'll take 15 minutes," said Lia Noreen. "Lopez has a reputation for doing things the old-fashioned way and for quality," said Stephen Atkins, a local chef and investor in Lia's husband's nascent Lopez Island Brewing Co.

Before long, I met the most famous Lopezian, as islanders call themselves: Mr. Hot Sauce Man, aka Randall Waugh. (Not Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, whose vacation home is the only home on a peninsula; sightings are rare.)

A concoction of chipotle chilies, cacao nibs, goji berries, agave nectar and apple cider vinegar, Chicaoji (get it?) came after a peripatetic existence hitchhiking the U.S. and Europe ("Know a surefire way to make money in dusty Western towns? Wash storefront windows"), house-sitting in Liechtenstein ("I went for a wedding"), and construction. Disarmingly, Waugh noted how a local healer friend's snack of goji berries, known as a superfood, and cacao nibs, cried out for some chilies ("I'm from San Antonio, Texas").

After months of mad-scientist creation at Vortex, a cafe selling smoothies, wraps and salads across the road from my Edenwild B&B: success. Today, you can find Chicaoji in 135 West Coast stores and restaurants, even San Francisco (Other Avenues), Sacramento and Santa Monica.

"That's the difference between clever and smart," Waugh noted modestly. "If I were smart, I'd think of a name people could actually remember."

For information, see [visitsanjuans.com/savor](http://visitsanjuans.com/savor).