

TRAVEL Escape

Whale watching at Friday Harbour on San Juan Island

SUSAN BREDOW ESCAPE APRIL 19, 2015 6:00AM



Orcas Island. Picture: Getty

THE seaplane grazes the calm waters of an early morning on Lake Union before nimbly lifting into the air. From the centre of downtown Seattle, we quickly climb past pretty houses built on the water, including the one in the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*.

After banking towards Puget Sound, it's a 35-minute flight at little more than 750 feet above the sea to Friday Harbor on San Juan Island.

But when the de Havilland Turbo Otter touches down in the sheltered harbour between two islands, we are a world away from any busy metropolis.

On the edge of the United States and its border with Canada, the San Juan group is made up of 172 islands, two of which – San Juan and Orcas – have an array of activities from agriculture to arts, from nature to nurture, and from sports to spas.

It is also a great place to watch whales with resident orca pods making frequent appearances mostly to feed on the salmon banks off the islands.



Whale watching, San Juan Islands.

As the only registered town in the San Juan Islands, Friday Harbor is unique in that most of the wooden buildings that went up when it was founded in the mid-1800s are still standing.

Because it has never had a major fire it remains today pretty much as when first built.

After settlement, San Juan Island was important for its limestone, salmon and agriculture and the British and the Americans decided to contest the island group's sovereignty.

The British set up camp on one end of San Juan Island and the Americans on the other and they stared each other down for 12 years until the border dispute was resolved peaceably in favour of the US in 1871.

By the 1970s the salmon was overfished, the limestone had been exhausted and agriculture suffered from competition on the mainland.

About the same time the islands became a popular place to retire or drop out and tourism grew as people discovered this was one of the best places in the world to whale watch.

At a leisurely pace in keeping with life on the island, the day begins with coffee and conversation at Cafe Demeter Bakery in Friday Harbor.

Today the 2000 permanent inhabitants have established a healthy farm-to-fork movement and restaurants to pay tribute to locally grown food and wines.



Kayaking in the San Juan Islands.

San Juan island farmers produce cheeses, fruit, Wagyu beef, clams and oysters. On the next island over from San Juan, Orcas, a farmer uses draft horses in place of agricultural engines.

An alpaca farm produces wool for all manner of garments and a lavender grower makes more than 250 products from the fragrant flower.

Distilleries are making gin and calvados and there are plenty of cider and beer brewers.

Wildlife is just as visible as the domestic animals. Driving the western coast along one of San Juan's few roads, it is easy to spot white-headed bald eagles sitting in trees.

There are numerous tame native deer, foxes and the Northern flying squirrel that is found only on San Juan. There is a lone camel too - not a native - which was given an alpaca to keep it company when it was deemed lonely.

A one-eyed seal called Popeye also lives in Friday Harbor, conning people into buying her expensive fish from the markets. In return she came to the recent opening of an extension to the wharf.

The harbourside park has a sculpture of Popeye alongside a lovely totem pole.

The islands are home to Madrona trees with stunning red or bright green bark depending on the season. There is plenty of trying and buying to do but watching whales and seals from deserted beaches, leisure fishing for salmon or trout and kayaking are more popular.



Hotel de Haro at Roche Harbour.

On the northern end of San Juan is Roche Harbor and the apparently haunted Hotel de Haro which dates to 1887. Room 2A is known as the presidential suite as Theodore Roosevelt is thought to have stayed there, but he did not sign the visitors book.

Lots of famous people do really come to Roche Harbor though, mostly staying aboard luxury cruisers.

San Juan Islands sculpture park at Roche Harbor is one of the largest permanent sculpture parks in the world.

There is a new art museum and a historical museum in Friday Harbor along with a museum dedicated to whales.

A few kilometres along Roche Harbor Road is the Duck Soup Inn where the chef uses foraged ingredients such as kelp to great effect.

Stay at Friday Harbor House or Island Inn at 123 West.

Snug Harbor Resort has newly built cedar cabins on the western side of San Juan Island.

A ferry connects San Juan to Orcas Island with its galleries and shops, and hiking, biking and swimming in Moran State Park. It is possible to hike to the top of Orcas's Mt Constitution for a view of the islands. Or you can just drive up the road.

The writer was a guest of Visit Seattle.

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SAN JUAN ISLANDS

GETTING THERE

Qantas operates 31 flights a week from Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney to Los Angeles. Alaska Airlines has several flights a day from LAX to Seattle. [Kenmore Air](#) has daily 35-minute flights to San Juan Islands from Seattle using both seaplanes and wheel planes.

Or take a ferry from Anacortes, about 130km north of Seattle; www.wsdot.wa.gov

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