

Rx: Peace, Quiet, Beauty, Nature

Our anniversary—25 years—what to do, where to go? It's mid-September and the end of a frenetic summer of work for both of us. "No long plane rides," I specified. "A good bed," my husband, Kevin, required. At last we settled on Seattle, scene of a successful long weekend several years before, but we knew we couldn't spend the whole time there. Urban relief would be required; peace, quiet, beauty, nature. Years ago a former boss spoke of the San Juan Islands—"you'll never want to leave," he said, and I remembered. We Googled; hiking, lodging, dining, reviews. Orcas Island is the most remote; an hour ferry ride is required. Sold, we reserved a place right on the water.

Prologue: Seattle

Space Needle hovers, embraced by mountains, sky, and sea,
streetwise Zen masters preach tranquility.

The Underground Tour tells the story of the infant city;
Its white tower the pinnacle of early prosperity.

Flying fish, flowers, and fruit fill the famous market;
fragrant coffees invite us to linger and sit.

Soon the bustle, hustlers uproot our peace of mind;
we flee north to the islands to unwind!



We pull away from the ferry, pass a short clatter of gift shops clinging to the hillside and leave the gentle waters behind. At once we are plunged down a tree-lined hill before the wide Crow Valley opens up before us and we forget that moments ago we were sailing. The rolling grassy hills and farms remind me of our native Midwest. The smell of freshly cut hay permeates the car on this warm afternoon. Sheep and a few black horses graze off to our left and a homemade sign advertises wool, yarn, lavender, fresh eggs. Signs for pottery works appear on the right and again on the left. A great broad barn painted blue and adorned with peace signs and the names of the artists marks the gateway to the Indralaya theosophical retreat. The name Indralaya is derived from Sanskrit and means "a home for the spiritual forces in nature." I'm about to find out the entire island is just such a home.

The road curves sharply to the right and we are in the trees again; the smell of fir takes over. We head into Eastsound, the main town. Here the water is once again king, the view to the right is a panorama of the sound and beyond to the other islands in this archipelago. We get out of the car and admire a small white frame church and its memorial gardens. Dahlias, roses, and lavender are blooming profusely. In Fishing Bay behind the church, a small island covered with driftwood sits in the middle like a tattered ship. We make our way down a small cliff to walk the shore here; driftwood is everywhere on the gray pebbled beach. "Hi!" a young boy calls out. "Hi!" we answer back. "There's crabs here, under the rocks," he reports. "Wanna see?" We do! When he turns the rock over a thumb-sized black crab scurries away in a heartbeat. We follow as he overturns some rocks and the crabs scramble for cover. He catches the next one in a Styrofoam cup. We all look and then he sets it free. We say goodbye and continue on, our spirits somehow lifted because of this observant child who talked to us strangers.

The home base for our stay is perched right on the water on the north side of the island. We check in and our hostess shows us how to climb down through the tree roots to reach the shore. I notice the tree has peeling orange-red bark and think it must be dying; the whole island is incredibly dry. Later I learn this tree is a madrona, and the peeling bark is normal. We lower ourselves through its roots and guardian spiderwebs and the rocky shore is ours.

Submerged rocks abound in the quiet water which is quite shallow even 50 yards from shore. For a half-hour, I sit and watch a Great Blue Heron stand still. He flies to another rock and repeats the process. The slate-colored rocks are layered and stick out from the shore at an angle, like a sandwich jammed into the Earth by a giant. The tide laps against the rocks and I take my chances and scramble over some wet



ones to a tiny island. A group of Harlequin ducks push off their perch nearby, not trusting me for an instant. I stop in my tracks, but the few who remain don't trust me either, as if some telepathic connection has sent them paddling away from me.

Fifty miles to the east, Mt. Baker provides a stately backdrop to our already rich ocean views. I can't stop looking at it as it changes in the light. Sunset is best as the sun's peach glow seems absorbed by the mountain's snow. In the mornings we are treated to flawless sunrises

over Mt. Baker. It's actually the moments before sunrise that are the most striking, the mountain backlit by the sun. The mists rolling down to the sea or rising from the water provide ever-changing views of dawn. We snap photo after photo—flatlanders enthralled by topography.

Evenings bring new delight. A stroke of luck; our nights on Orcas are moonless. To us city-dwellers the stars are white neon. We find the Big Dipper and North Star but have trouble finding Orion--there are so many bright stars! The Milky Way is a broad brush-stroke from north to south. We hope to see an aurora but "settle" for shooting stars. In this starry cathedral we hear nothing but the gentle lap of the waves. To the north, behind Sucia Island, Vancouver lights beckon; we ignore them in pursuit of the celestial.

Our trail to Mt. Constitution (2409 ft.) begins at Cold Springs on the shady windward side of the mountain. A break in the trees reveals a grassy marshy area bathed in sun. It's dry but we can easily follow one of the springs as it trickles to the marsh, an oasis for the native black-tailed deer and many birds. The deer are small (about 36 inches at the shoulder) and are known to swim long distances in the ocean. One looks vaguely looks our way but the rest graze on, unconcerned.

We move on, plodding upward into the forest. Velvety chartreuse moss covers fallen logs and the smell of moist earth and conifers calms us. Bracken fern and holly-like Oregon grape cover the forest floor, which is littered with fallen trees and the occasional boulder. Huge granddaddy Douglas Firs with their deeply-



furrowed russet bark contrast their grandmotherly companions, Western hemlock and Western red cedar. We aren't sure what rustles under the leaves as we pass, but feel safe knowing these islands have no bears or mountain lions. We pass the spur trail to tiny Summit Lake but then a hundred yards later curiosity gets the best of us and we backtrack to the water's edge. In a still pool, I observe a flock of Rough-skinned newts. They paddle about in the water, curious eyes reflecting the blue sky as they gape at us.

We round the bend into the bright sunlight on the mountain's south face. In just a few steps, the trees become shorter and scrubby, the soil dry and rocky. Salal takes over for the ferns as ground cover, its leathery leaves conserving precious moisture. The view is extraordinary; within the park Mountain Lake meanders southward, while the deep island channels embrace Shaw and Lopez Islands. On the horizon the regal outline of Mt. Rainier competes with the haze.

A hundred yards later we turn east and a stunning view of Mt. Baker unfolds. I crouch in the scrub for a photo and see a flash of brilliant blue. A startled Stellar's Jay scolds me before flitting away. We reach the summit and rest on the dry grass; ham sandwiches never tasted so good. Below us, sailboats cruise in the soft breezes. We've passed no one as we reach the summit;



In these few days we realize we've lost ourselves in the peacefulness of this island. Exploration is our new purpose--every day a new trail, another find, another stunning view. Thoughts of our real lives are fleeting; scarce. In 25 years, rarely have our choices been so simple. The island limits us to peace, quiet, beauty, nature—a prescription that allows clear thoughts, reflection, and real awareness.

Friday comes and we must return to Seattle. One more walk before we meet the ferry--this time along the shores of Mountain Lake. A giant Sitka spruce dwarfs us, clear water reflects the cool aquamarine sky, mossy logs...

At last the ferry pulls away from our haven. Kevin and I separate, each handling the trip back in our own way. Another step closer to our real lives. I head outside for some final views. Time seems suspended as the boat dawdles at stops along the way—Shaw Island, Lopez Island. We head across open water to the mainland. As always, Mt. Baker provides the backdrop. It's perfectly sunny but in the distance a great



shroud of fog emerges across our route and the boat slows. Small islands to the right gradually disappear and the thickness envelops us. We're encased in gray and we crawl forward. It's misting as the captain sounds the deep foghorn. After some long moments we emerge to the other side, perfectly sunny as before. We meet up again on the deck for a final look back and vow to return.