

The San Juan Islands

Wing Around Washington's Marvelous Archipelago



Of the 700 islands scattered between Vancouver Island and the Washington mainland in the northern reaches of Puget Sound, 172 have names. Of the 172 there are four – Orcas, Shaw, Lopez and San Juan – large enough to transform this archipelago into something that might come as a shock to some of its early settlers – these, the dispirited Americans who in the 1850s shuffled back – bust – from searching for gold in Canada's caribou country.

That would be paradise, fortune-seekers. An incredible wonderland of placid and reef-studded bays, harbors of both shallows and depth, and splendid forests of pine and fir that, forsaking the freezing weather systems on the roar south from the Yukon (thanks to the blocking power of the Cascade and Olympic mountains), bask in 247 days a year of sun.

The San Juan Islands are a treasure indeed to today's wealth-seekers. Here, riches of adventure and beauty abound. With an abundance of fun and a lavish array of entertainments, airborne explorers can have a Pacific Northwest escape that is simply fly-in fabulous. Islands of small hamlets and villages founded by farmers, fishermen and seafarers, the San Juans have been home to a colorful lot, from the native Lummi Nation, to Spanish explorers, British shepherds, artists, writers, rum-runners, wool-smugglers, "mainlanders" looking for a problem-free life, and, lately, the working elite who telecommute to cities like Seattle (50 miles to the southeast) from their undeniable island paradise, sometimes private.

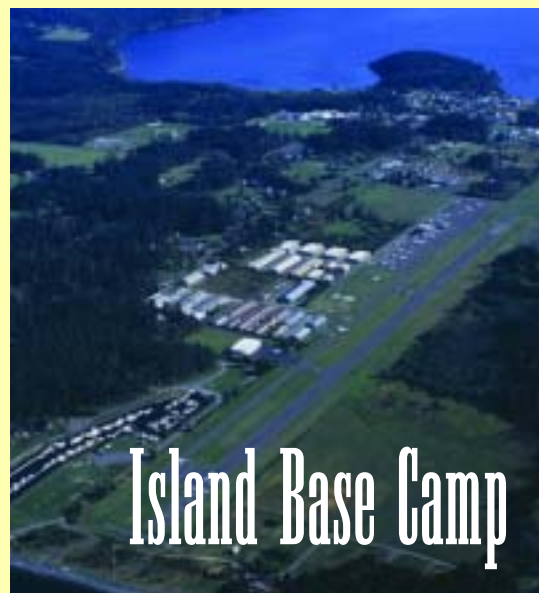
For the flying adventurer, the San Juans offer a seaplane or landplane odyssey of outsize thrill. From home base at Smuggler's

From the air (opposite) the islands' allure is irresistible in a Roche Harbor approach; a seaplane island-hops into Friday Harbor (above)

United States San Juan Islands



Seductive Sucia Island



The Smuggler's Villa Resort on the north shore of Orcas is a great base camp for San Juan Island explorers. Whether you fly in and out of Eastsound on quick island hops, or you take-off on a longer fly with more leisurely stops along San Juan's dazzling archipelago, manager Mike Stolmeier is excited to welcome you "home." Though it's a mere 5-10 minute walk from Eastsound airport, a simple call will find pilot-loving Mike at your tie-down site, private car at the ready to shuttle you and yours to the charming villa on the water where your large, comfy condo, sir, awaits. Equipped with laundry, kitchen, and sunset views that are reason enough to wing into the Pacific Northwest, the Smuggler's comforts soon will have you slowed to island time and yet more than revved to go. A private pebble beach, sauna, Jacuzzi, pool, tennis/basketball courts, kayaks and – these, too – fishing and whale-watching charters are available; indeed, Mike's delightful island villa is simply San Juan super. Be sure to call-up his website "smugcam" anytime. Its 360-degree views provided by the camera mounted atop the resort building (a little Mike gift to his pilot friends) offers enough scenic wonders to get you running to the cockpit *now* so as not to miss the real deal. Yes, it is that beautiful in the San Juans. www.smuggler.com (800) 488-2097

Villa Resort (see accompany story), the Orcas Airport in Eastsound, WA (ORS) is portal to travel delights unlike any outside this wild and wonderful world of marine amazement – whales, seals, otter, terns, gulls – and nature in all its awe. For if it isn't the eagles and deer, the foxes and rabbit that thrive on these islands where pebbly beaches and parks are a way of life – and locals breed everything from sheep to llamas – it is the Great Outdoors that is the archipelago's most glorious story.

Come now; no more dawdling. Time to fly the San Juan Islands so that whether it is a whale-watching excursion you choose, an inter-island sail, or a spectacular sunset admired from the deck of a luxury harbor resort, you can get it all in and still come back for more. You will want to.

Up, up and away from fully-paved ORS, heading north; in 2.5 miles there appears the

island of Sucia (Spanish for "foul" due to the rocks and reefs early explorers found daunting to their vessels). Though there is no runway here the nearby Strait of Georgia is an Orca "killer" whale playground: keep your eyes peeled for the breaching beauties. On the way to San Juan Island, the sound below is likely to be ablaze with sailboats, kayaks and motorcraft – beside planes *the* recreation vehicle of choice in this wondrous island waterworld. Arriving at upscale Roche Harbor via its private field (WAO9) or seaplane base (W39), you are sure to find San Juan Island an ever grander spectacle of pleasure boating. Here, the Roche Harbor Resort and Village full of shops, waterfront restaurants, and a beautiful Victorian garden, is home to the grand old Hotel de Haro (www.rocheharbor.com). This 1886 historically registered retreat whose breakfasts are

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Flying Adventures



Yachts at home in Roche Harbor (left); the view from Mt. Constitution (right)

utterly decadent, with donuts that are a legend, overlooks the harbor where yachts and seaplanes frolic. Rent a cozy cottage or overnight in a swanky hillside suite: a timeout in Roche Harbor for some tennis, kayaking or diving will be simply San Juan wonderful.

Then again, it's only a five-minute Aircar flight to Griffin Bay and Friday Harbor (FHR or seaplane base W33). This quaint seaport is activity-happy, with open-air bistros, ice cream parlors and shops of local artists' wares offering lots to see and do. Put yourself on "island time" (i.e., slow) and learn all about the Salish Sea ecosystem at The Whale Museum; shoot 18 holes at the San Juan Golf Course; or visit the Pelindaba Lavender Farms. You can troll for oysters at Wescott Bay Sea Farms, make friends with alpacas at Krystal Acres, tantalize your appetite with "angels on horseback" (scallops wrapped in bacon and broiled) at Downrigger's restaurant (360.378.2700), or romance your sweetie over dessert of wild huckleberry tart at the elegant Duck Soup Inn (360.378.4878). Friday Harbor is like that: it's fly-in fun, fun, fun.

Should the throttle soon call, however, a little zip across Griffin Bay to Lopez Island could be a plan. The airport here (S31) like all San Juan Island fields, is FBO-free, but is

at no loss at all to provide entrée to hours (or days!) of entertainment. At 15 miles long by 8 miles wide and relatively flat, petite Lopez is a cyclist's paradise. There are also several art galleries, the Lopez Island Vineyards for tasting of Yakima Valley wines and, of course, the magnificent sunning sea lions sprawling on Shark Reef Beach. For \$2 a hole, there's even some fly-in golf adjacent to the airport. Still, if a pilot's gotta fly, a pilot's gotta fly, and farther north lie the islands of Shaw (home to a Benedictine monastery and ferry dock operated by brown-habited nuns), Decatur (population: 57), and Blakeley (site of a fabulous residential airpark). Buzz over all three for some guaranteed in-air delight.

Circling back toward Orcas Island and home base, the east side's 2,256-foot Mt. Constitution will orient your flight. With its commanding view of the San Juans and the Cascade and Olympic mountains from Mt. Baker in the north to Mt. Ranier 120 nautical miles south, Mt. Constitution is the marker for the "eclectic" Orcas, home to both unknown artists in tiny island bungalows and well-known billionaires building even bigger showplace retreats. (You'll catch their jets, turboprops and amphibious Beavers at ORS.)

Here, the grand old Rosario Resort

(www.rosario.rockresorts.com), built as the 19th century summer home of Robert Moran, a wealthy shipbuilder whose glorious namesake park surrounds Mt. Constitution, offers San Juan Island luxury in its Cascade Bay-side gradeur of Tiffany chandeliers and fireside suites. As well, there are the spellbinding charms of the artists' wares in Olga, a small enclave of glassmakers, painters, potters and other talents who sell their works at the Olga Café; the best cinnamon rolls on Orcas are found at this restaurant/craft store.

Now you're famished, for sure. Ask for fresh crab enchiladas (not on the menu) and homemade sangria at Bilbo's Festivo, where out-of-this-world Mexican cuisine with northwest spices is an island treat. Order the locally-caught salmon and a bottle of delicious Washington wine at the intimate Christina's. Or taste the sea at the Ship Bay Oyster House. All are found in or around Eastsound, which is the village adjacent to the Orcas airport, and part of a great San Juan experience.

And this, fellow flyers, is precisely the point of a fly around this magical archipelago where the island life is one of a kind. There is no way it can fail to be this: amazing.

Happy flying!

