

San Juan Island's *Friday Harbor*

Pastoral Sophistication In The Salish Sea

By Lyndon Conrad Bell



Making landfall on San Juan Island, in much the same fashion as the Spanish explorer Gonzalo López de Haro did in 1791, we too “discovered” Friday Harbor; the largest village in the islands comprising the San Juan archipelago in Washington State’s Salish Sea. Accessible only by floatplane from Seattle or ferry from Anacortes, Washington (some two hours north of the Emerald City), unlike the 16th century adventurer, we’d arrived on the M/V Yakima, a 382-foot 2000-passenger ferry capable of transporting 144 vehicles.

In our view, this is the ideal means of transport into the San Juan Islands. The leisurely pace at which the ferry travels resets your internal clock to island time, while affording you breathtaking views of the ancient islands rising from the cerulean waters of the Salish Sea. Communal jigsaw puzzles offer relaxing diversions for ferry regulars; while the scenic beauty of the islands irretrievably captivates first-time visitors.

Located in the northwest corner of Washington, just below the Canadian border, the San Juans consist of 172 named islands, though only four are served by ferry service. These are Lopez, Orcas, San Juan and Shaw. While each of the four hosts lodging, dining, and tourism opportunities, San Juan Island offers the most frequent ferry service. Señor de Haro’s expedition leader, Francisco de Eliza, named the islands on behalf of his benefactor Juan Vicente de Güemes Padilla Horcasitas y Aguayo; then Viceroy of Mexico.

Friday Harbor, in turn, was named for a native Hawaiian; Joseph Poalie Friday, who established a sheep ranch around the harbor on San Juan Island in the late 1800s. This ultimately blossomed into a village, which became the center of government in the islands in 1873. Incorporated in 1909, Friday Harbor is the only municipality with this status in the San Juan Islands.



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When the ferry docked, we found ourselves right in the heart of the town. Built, as it was, quite literally around the inlet, Friday Harbor seemingly opens its arms to embrace disembarking ferry passengers. Driving off the boat is like driving back in time. While it sounds cliché, Friday Harbor really is a place where the calendar appears to have stood still. Spring Street, the town's primary thoroughfare, is lined with well-tended shops, galleries and restaurants housed in lovingly maintained early 1900's architecture. The overall vibe is one of supreme serenity. Locals are friendly and more than happy to provide directions, as well as advice. It's like finding Mayberry on an island in the Pacific Northwest.



Having spent the day traveling, we made a beeline for our accommodations at Lakedale Resort, which is situated in a bucolic grove of evergreens 10 minutes from the ferry's moorings. Set on 82 private acres, with three spring-fed lakes, Lakedale offers a broad array of lodging experiences ranging from a 10-room luxury hotel, to rustic—but comfortable log cabins, to canvas cabin “glamping”, to bring your tent—choose your campsite—camping. Whether you prefer plush accommodations, total self-sufficiency or something in-between; Lakedale has you covered.

We opted for one of the cabins where we enjoyed two bedrooms (one with an en suite bath), a full kitchen, a dining nook, a sumptuously furnished sitting area with a gas fireplace, a large cedar deck with rocking chairs and our own campfire ring. Stocked with games, DVDs and outdoor recreational equipment, it was as if we'd had FedEx deliver our vacation home and set it up just in time for our arrival.

The next morning, after breaking our fasts with delicious complimentary made-to-order omelettes at the hotel, we headed back into Friday Harbor. This time, joined San Juan Island Whale and Wildlife Tours for an afternoon aboard Natsilane (not-sa-law-nee), a 28-foot Albin Fast Express Cruiser, to visit the pods of Orcas making their home in the waters off the western shore of San Juan Island.



Exceptionally stable, Natsilane accommodates six passengers and her captain. Her small size and outstanding agility make her an ideal platform from which to enjoy a whale watching experience. Because the group she carries is so small, it's highly intimate. Everyone can get a spot on the rail, and the captain's encyclopedic knowledge of Orcas and their behaviors is immediately accessible to everyone.

Because she sits just above water level, you also get exceptionally close views of the marine mammals in their natural habitat. This was brought home quite succinctly when one of the Orcas breached right next to Natsilane, giving us a once in lifetime view of its extraordinary size and grace. Our collective gasp of astonishment was likely heard in Seattle.

Back in Friday Harbor, we spent some time meandering in and out of the shops lining Spring Street, before settling in for dinner at The Bluff. As its name implies, the setting for the chic bistro-style restaurant is indeed on a bluff overlooking the San Juan Channel. Arriving just before sunset, we were treated to a magnificent spectacle as the sky put its best face forward, treating us to a masterful display of color, beautifully complemented by the harbor's glass-like waters, boats and surrounding hills.

The promise of an especially enjoyable evening, the service and cuisine at The Bluff solidly lived up to this masterful prelude. Famished from our day's adventures, we dove right in, ordering Dungeness crab cake appetizers, a kale salad, salmon entrees and a soft baked chocolate chip cookie for dessert.

Tantalizingly accompanied by a bacon-onion-tomato jam and aioli, the crab cakes were blessedly more crab than cake, and utterly delicious. Meanwhile, the kale salad featured a supporting cast of carrots, blueberries, edamame, almonds, sunflower seeds and apricot—all delicately laced with a citrus vinaigrette. Upon the arrival of our salmon entrées, accompanied by white wine risotto along with delicately seared miniature zucchini and baby carrots, we were awed once again by a gift from the sea on San Juan Island. Proportions sized perfectly, each dish beautifully harmonized with the one preceding it, leaving just enough room for dessert.

Our eyes widened in amazement when the soft baked chocolate chip cookie arrived in its own little skillet; fresh, warm and gooey from the oven. While at first glance this might seem out of character to cap such a sophisticated meal, it actually perfectly reflected the character of Friday Harbor and San Juan Island. Quaint and charming on the surface, there's an undercurrent of tasteful sophistication there, making this destination in Washington's Salish Sea a singularly distinctive place.