

Family-Friendly Adventures in Washington's San Juan Islands

Looking for a unique, family-friendly way to explore the Pacific Northwest? Contributing family travel writer Margot Black visited the San Juan Islands and Orcas Island in Washington state with her family, which have some great opportunities to explore local art, spend time outdoors, and see wildlife up close.



The saying goes that simply getting to the San Juan Islands is “half the fun” and with a family in tow, I’d say the extra effort you need to make only doubles the adventure. While I don’t like to make our family travel too complicated, sometimes it pays to mix it up a little, and this collection of 172 islands and reefs in the Pacific Northwest are a total delight.

Part of the U.S. state of Washington and located between Seattle and Vancouver, four ferries serve the unspoiled destination which comprises San Juan Island, the most populated, where we spent two nights, and Orcas Island where we spent our last two nights.

Getting There

We made a fun detour en route to the Anacortes ferry via the [Skagit Valley Tulip Festival](#). My entire life I have wanted to tiptoe through the tulips – and I didn’t even have to visit Holland. Timewise, because we planned our trip during the spring, we were able to visit this seasonal festival, which happens from April 1 through 30 and is designed as a driving tour. The tulips are found in a 15-mile triangle bordered by Highway 20, the Skagit River, and the Swinomish River Channel, so you’ll need maps to help you navigate as the fields but it was a very worthwhile added attraction.

There are many ways to approach the San Juan Islands. You can fly from Seattle or SeaTac International airport on a seaplane or regional flight, take an airport shuttle from SeaTac, or hop on the seasonal San Juan Clipper from Seattle.

We took a Washington State Ferry from Anacortes and loved this leisurely start to our stay. Arriving by sea means you get to enjoy the beauty of the area before you unpack your suitcase. My son and husband loved driving the car on and off the ferry and we stood on deck as we approached Friday Harbor.



Room With a View

We stayed at [123 West](#), which was just two blocks from the ferry. We were booked into Penthouse number one, which had great views of the harbor. The hotel's motto is 'Ready, Set, Slow' and it's so beautiful you won't want to rush through this experience. Another of their sayings is, 'the right pace at the right time,' and I loved that their cups were emblazoned with the slogan 'half full.'

Our stylish penthouse was a sprawling 1400 feet of space on two levels and had a full bath, kitchen, dining space, cozy fireplace, and comfy sofa bed. Looking across the bay I felt as if we had front row seats to Friday Harbor. We loved our private king bedroom, which had access to a sprawling outdoor deck. Downstairs our son loved his privacy – as we loved ours. This is a great accommodation for families, and I enjoyed waking up in bed with a coffee in the morning.

The hotel offers rooms that fit all price ranges, which is great when you have a family to consider. Another interesting option are their share rooms. You can't stay there if you're under 16, but this is essentially a shared living space set off their smaller Euro rooms. Here, you can hang out with other guests and it's perfect for small, social gatherings such as weddings, anniversaries, and family reunions.

Whale of a Time

On our first morning, we had a whale trip scheduled and started our day at [The Whale Museum](#). We listened intently to whale sounds and learned all about these majestic creatures before we saw them in real life.



Our trip with [San Juan Safaris Whale Watching & Wildlife Tour](#) took us along [the Whale Trail](#) all around the harbor and beyond. We were lucky enough to see four killer whales doing what they do best, killing. Yes, it's sad but it's also Mother Nature at work and was a breathtaking spectacle. We were also thrilled to see a Humpback Whale glide past. Watching these animals in their environment was thrilling. We've done many whale watching tours and they always amaze and show us something new.

Before we boarded the boat, we bought our lunch at Market Chef, a nearby artisan deli, and ate on the deck in our yellow rain jackets, which they handed out to us on arrival. They also had snug blankets available, which was very helpful for anybody going out on the water. I appreciated their thoughtfulness. I also packed lots of snacks and sunscreen for the trip, and suggest you do the same.



Back on land, we ran out of time to visit all of the local shops and galleries, but I recommend you head to A Place to Play children's play space which is great for kids, the Griffin Bay Bookstore, Island Studios gallery and the Waterworks Gallery, which carry the work of local artists.

Dinner Time

We enjoyed a meal at [Cask & Schooner](#), which sits directly on the harbor and serves local, sustainable food.

I had the house special mushroom soup, which was a taste sensation, and I shared a flat iron steak and mashed potatoes with my son, Jett. My husband Rob enjoyed a whole roasted chicken, which was served with mushroom risotto.

Our son loved this location even more after we told him that the owner Gary D. Gero was an animal trainer who had worked on the Harry Potter series – he’s a huge fan – as well as 102 Dalmatians and Dr Doolittle. It was difficult to ‘expelliarmus’ my son from the restaurant that night!

Park Life



The next day, after breakfast at the hotel, we visited [Lime Kiln Point State Park](#), which is also known as Whale Watch Park because you can see the whales from the shore. Located nine miles west of Friday Harbor on the west side of the island, this 36-acre park is home to a historic 1919 lighthouse and a restored lime kiln.

I’ll always remember it as the place I took the most amazing photo of my son. Toward the end of the day, after he had been playing around the rocks near the water, he lay in a tree and looked out over towards the lighthouse and I took a candid photo. The photo is indicative of everything I love about the rustic beauty of the San Juan Islands, and it’s now a treasured memory.

We stayed in the park all day until sunset, going for long walks and spotting whales from the shoreline. Lime Kiln Park has everything you look for from a family travel day out. It’s a splendid place to go hiking and immerse in extraordinary nature. I loved watching Jett breath deep into nature with no technology to distract him.

We also made time to briefly visit [the San Juan Island National Historical Park at American Camp](#). It was here in 1859 that the United States and Great Britain nearly went to war over a pig shot by an American farmer.

Big Breakfast

Our final breakfast on San Juan Island was at [the Restaurant at Friday Harbor House](#). If you’re going to propose to anybody or have a big life moment, have it here. The views are stunning and their breakfast is hearty. My husband had a chipotle beer braised brisket burrito, which came with a fried egg on top, and I enjoyed the San Juan classic, of scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage and buttered toast.



Soul Cycle

To burn off the calories, we went for a six mile family biking tour around the harbor. It was a lovely way to enjoy the fresh air together and say goodbye to the island.

We rented bikes and hired a guide for the morning from [Discovery Sea Kayaks](#). Honestly, I never thought I'd cycle so far but it was great fun and a big accomplishment for us all. One of the things we all noticed on our ride was the abundant artistry on the island – paintings, pottery, and sculpture are everywhere. A morning bike ride was a glorious, active way to explore this beautiful island.

I was glad we had a guide with us, it made the time more efficient and enjoyable as we got to see lots of scenic vistas and inlets and never had to worry about getting lost. Our son enjoyed the bike exploration so much ([we got his bike here](#)) he raced around every corner and never seemed to tire of the adventure.

We passed the 20-acre [San Juan Islands Sculpture Park](#), which is Located at Roche Harbor. We didn't see them all, but there are over 125 sculptures here, and it is also a family area where kids can create their own sculptures from driftwood.

Before leaving we ate at the lovely [Lime Kiln Cafe in pretty Roche Harbor](#) before walking down to [the Port of Friday Harbor](#) to see if we could spot their infamous one-eyed seal Popeye. We didn't, but it was fun looking!

Orcas Island

We took our second ferry to nearby Orcas Island, which is the largest island and a spectacular nature retreat. Here we checked into the [Rosario Resort & Spa](#), which is a historic Moran Mansion, and listed on the National Historic Register. It's located on the shores of Cascade Bay, and again the views across the water were killer.

The hotel houses a museum on the second floor, featuring original photographs from the late 1800s and early 1900s, and an extensive display of the ships built by the Moran Brothers Company in Seattle. They also have a historic Aeolian pipe organ and concerts are held at 4 p.m. every Saturday in winter and every day in summer (except Sundays). We loved having a nose around these old fashioned artifacts.



It's a truly rustic setting. Our hillside room was next to a waterfall, so no need for meditation music here. We enjoyed our cozy fireplace and deck area where we could watch the wildlife, boat, and floatplane activity.

We dined in the hotel's Moran Lounge for two nights for ease more than anything, but the food was great. My son loved his cheeseburgers, while my husband and I dined on their delicious sesame steak salad and blackened salmon salad.

The hotel has other eating options, including the Cascade Grill and the fine dining Mansion, but the fun part of being in the Moran Lounge was that my son got to meet other children. They had a bunch of games there and he learned to play chess. The hotel also has an indoor pool, but the hours are restrictive for children so do check beforehand.

The Artworks



The art is immersive. A 15 minute drive away is the walkable village of Eastsound. Nestled above Fishing Bay, it is an artists' haven and a visitor's dream. We wandered around [the Orcas Island Historical Museum](#) and Darvill's, an independent bookstore that I loved so much I wanted to live there forever. It had the best view from a bookstore I've ever seen in my life.

We also visited the Olga and [Orcas Island Artworks](#). About 20 minutes south of Eastsound, the hamlet of Olga is named after the wife of the island's first postmaster. The Artworks are a cooperative of more than 45 island artists and craftspeople housed in a historic strawberry packing plant. It's serious art immersion with paintings, prints, sculpture, pottery, jewelry, wood, fiber, and wearable art.

We had lunch at the cozy Catkin Cafe inside the artworks, and it was my idea of food heaven although it was maybe a little too fussy for children. But we thoroughly enjoyed our visit and got to meet that day's artist in residence.

On our final full day we drove to the Summit of [Moran State Park](#), which was magnificent. It's a hiker's dream with more 38 miles of winding trails. You can drive, bike, or hike up Mount Constitution, the island's' highest point, and I recommend you do for the spectacular view of snow-capped Mount Baker. Be sure to detour to see the Cascade waterfall. Note, you'll need to pay \$10 to park or have a Discover pass to visit.

Before we left Orcas Island we also drove to [the LEANTO glamping site in Moran State Park](#). There's no way I would ever go camping, but I would enjoy glamping in this stunning setting. What sold it for me was the fact there are no bears or poison oak due to the weather conditions.