

#3 WASHINGTON'S SCENIC DRIVING TRIPS-NORTHWEST by Roger Urbaniak

Today's scenic drive explores northwest Washington as we start in Seattle driving north on I-5 towards the Canadian border with some detours along the way. Consistent migration into Seattle has spurred development of the I-5 corridor with effects being noticed as far north as Mount Vernon. Shopping centers, Casinos, apartments, and industrial buildings now replace former empty fields and woodlands. Just before we reach Mount Vernon, is a choice of continuing north or turning east to drive across the North Cascades Highway. Consider your options here as this highway is quite scenic. Seattle City Light also offers worthwhile lunch tours of Ross Lake and Diablo Dam. If followed through the mountain pass, the drive would take you to a quaint western theme town of Winthrop and the Methow River which is full of trout that rise to a well-presented fly. Today though we elect to just continue north on I-5.

Shortly before reaching Mount Vernon an exit beacons you to head west to the tourist driven small town of La Conner. Many northwest artists display their work in one of the several galleries in town. Fruit stands and gift shops are plentiful along the way plus you may notice the nearby farming fields full of swans, snow geese and a variety of other migrating waterfowl during the spring and fall. Make sure you visit the famous tulip festival here in the spring as massive fields of them are grown on the fertile river bottom soil and visitors come from miles around to see them. Backroads from La Conner lead you to Anacortes which is where you could catch a ferry taking you into the San Juan Island chain. Both Friday Harbor and Orcas Island offer opportunities to depart from the ferry and to enjoy their shops, museums, other sites and accommodations. Friday Harbor was also the historic site of the Pig war.

If you decide to drive east from Mount Vernon, follow the Skagit river to admire the many eagles that frequent the area looking to feast on the once plentiful salmon run. Sometimes I take my canoe with me and fish Baker Lake for sockeye that travel up the Skagit River to Baker Lake to spawn. Baker lake area has campgrounds, trails that follow the Baker River, and natural hot springs offering a chance to relax after your drive. Tour boats offer Skagit River outings highlighting the local eagle population. Mount Baker offers the highest ski slope in our area while its glaciers help keep Baker Lake water cold.

From Mount Vernon, take the scenic byway named Chuckanut Drive north towards Bellingham fueling yourselves for the 19-mile drive with a large cinnamon raisin bun from a local bakery at Bow. The scenery is worthy of its scenic drive designation as you meander cliffs and gaze across Chuckanut Bay and Samish Bay towards the San Juan Islands. Oyster farming is fruitful here and a well-located restaurant prominently features local fare.

At Bellingham detour drive past Western University Campus, visit a sculpture garden Bellingham Falls, and a fascinating museum. During the summer vacationers wade the shallows Bellingham bay in shorts to capture plentiful Dungeness crab. When border restrictions permit, consider driving up through the border and visiting Point Roberts, which is part of the United States but that can only be reached by crossing the border. Because of COVID restrictions our trip is cut short at the border where people now greet each other to stay in touch but can't cross until the virus calms down. Normally we would travel to Vancouver BC to enjoy their fine dining, walk in Stanley Park, Visit the Farmers Market on Granville Island, walk across Capilano Suspension Bridge, or visit the 1986 World's Fair site. Another pleasant detour at the border is to catch the Tsawwassen Ferry to Vancouver Island. Once on the Island, head south to visit Victoria or go north to enjoy the many salmon fishing opportunities. You might consider staying in a hostel for a new adventure visit famous Painter's Lodge near Campbell River or dine at a Native Peoples restaurant near Courtenay. Today, with current travel restrictions in place, it might be a good time to plan, save up, and prepare for a great trip for when we can safely travel again.

On your return trip from the Canadian border consider this interesting scenic return: Take the SR 20 exit just north of Mount Vernon heading west towards Anacortes. During the spring, massive fields of tulips and daffodils will reward you with their color. Roughly 3 miles before Anacortes follow the SR 20 turnoff heading south towards Deception Pass and Whidbey Island. Enjoy driving by some of my favorite trout fishing lakes, including Pass Lake, a fly fishing only lake visible from the highway. Make sure that you park in the parking area near Deception Pass Bridge to take photos and stretch your legs. Take note while you are there of one of the stronger tidal locations in the state and watch smaller boats struggle to make progress against the current. Driving south through Whidbey Island is quite pleasant. You will pass several lavender farms, a rhododendron farm, wineries and even a chance to come back with some u-pick raspberries when they are in season. Frequent views of the salt water surrounding the island provide nice scenery too. You will have an opportunity to take a ferry to Port Townsend on your way if you take a little extra time to travel today. I usually catch the ferry at Clinton for the more direct way home. Either ferry will give the driver and passengers alike a pleasant scenic break and a relaxing way to finish your one day, scenic, fun filled, roughly 400-mile outing.