

Residents on these more remote islands rely on their own boats and hired floatplane pilots to access amenities: an idyllic, but often rather complicated existence.

Sailing the San Juan Islands presents a maze of channels and passages leading into deep bays around stunning promontories. You can begin your voyage near Seattle, south of the San Juans, or alternatively, in the northern towns of Bellingham or Port Townsend, which provide easy access to the archipelago. Route planning is as much about the tidal currents as anything else; with speeds upwards of eight knots in some passes, it is possible to be completely barred from making any headway at all and to be carried backward, even if you run the motor at full throttle. For this reason, your passage is limited to those times when the tide is in your favor and the welcome lull

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of slack tides. You may well have just a few daylight hours to make headway in certain passages. Navigating these waters at night is not advised because of floating trees, known as “deadheads,” from local logging, which can puncture your hull if you do not keep a careful watch. The necessity of using favorable tides to get anywhere gives the sailing here a pace all its own that is in sync with the natural world around you.

During the short cruising season, from May to August, boat owners are out in force. With such a small window to enjoy this wonderland, there is no time to waste. Orcas in the water, seals on the shoreline, humpback whales on the horizon, eagles in the sky, sea anemones under your fingertips, deer in the forest, and you at the helm of a sailboat.

FRIDAY HARBOR

Located on San Juan Island, this harbor town is a popular destination for sailors and is probably the busiest port of the archipelago. It is also the main hub for most visitors. Several times a day, the Washington State Ferries arrive from Anacortes, full of fresh-faced explorers using the boats to broaden their horizons.

Taxis, shuttles, bicycles, and mopeds are available for rent should you want to get out of town and explore the island, but there is plenty to keep you entertained as you walk around near the docks. While your boat is at anchor or docked at the San Juan Island Yacht Club, make sure to take a walk to the floating seafood market and check out the fresh local prawns and shellfish kept in saltwater tanks, as well as the salmon and other fresh fish in

their coolers. The market is in a houseboat located on the docks and the people running it are knowledgeable about the local seafood, so this is a great provisioning stop. Visit the grocer nearby for regional produce as well as lavender products from an organic lavender farm on the island and be sure to browse the bottles from some of the many local vineyards and breweries.

A vibrant local art scene, featuring work that could be described as earthy and spiritual, is represented in the many galleries and shops around town. Enjoying a delicious blackened salmon sandwich on the waterfront, you can take your time to sit and watch an eagle circle the harbor, and, by the end of the afternoon, you will possibly be also feeling quite earthy and spiritual.

