

# EXCURSIONS

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Seattle's location makes it ideal for getting out of the city and exploring the natural beauty of its surroundings. With very little effort, you can trade that caffeinated urban buzz for a tranquil island retreat, an orchard-strewn valley or a rugged mountain peak – even all three.

Puget Sound, the sparkling jewel that surrounds Seattle, is dotted with tiny islands once dismissed as agricultural backwaters but now among the most popular tourist destinations in the area. Visiting the islands does take some planning in the summer months, when everybody else wants to be there too, but you'll understand why as soon as you start paddling your rented kayak out on the water. The sparse population of many of the islands also makes them great places for bicycle fiends. Or, if you prefer, you can always sit at a dockside pub and sip a microbrew while you watch active people do their thing. Most of the hotels, B&Bs and restaurants in island towns are open all year, so if you'd like to avoid the crowds, plan on an off-season visit. For the purposes of ferry schedules and seasonal business hours, 'summer' refers to mid-June through September.

Those looking to take their minds off city life with a serious physical challenge also have a couple of options. The most tempting is Mt Rainier, mostly because its pointy peak beckons from the horizon almost everywhere you go in Seattle. Reaching the summit is no picnic, but the whole Mt Rainier National Park area has an abundance of hikes at all skill levels and distances. Climbing the summit of Mt St Helens is another alternative for serious hikers. Or, for peace and quiet, enjoy your lunch along the shores of Coldwater Lake at the base of the dramatically scarred mountain.

Drive a bit further and feel infinitely more distant from urban chaos by visiting the Olympic Peninsula. This remote area feels steeped in mystery – partly because of its thick, misty, moss-laden forests and partly because there is only one major road going through it. Combine the wild nature of the Hoh River Rain Forest with the charm of Victorian-era Port Townsend and you might just accidentally forget to catch that flight home.

For those with less time and energy, the Snoqualmie Valley makes a quick and easy escape from the city. Its pastoral landscape, dotted with orchards and imbued with an eerie feel, is a lovely place for a leisurely drive.

Just a short ferry ride away is Victoria, the Olde English-style capital of Canada's province of British Columbia. Its high teas, B&Bs and famed botanical garden make it a pleasantly quiet retreat.

## ISLANDS

It's almost criminal to be in Seattle and not get out on the water. Puget Sound (p187) has some of the most gorgeous islands in the country, and it's a great area to explore by ferry. An outing on the sound makes a relaxing day trip, whether you're going by car or bike or just on foot.

Bainbridge Island (p188) makes an easy day or half-day trip from downtown Seattle. Explore the island's main town, Winslow, with a stop at the local winery. Rent bicycles to pedal around the easily accessible island.

If you have time for a longer island-hop, start with Lopez Island (p191), the closest and most agricultural, and full of pastoral charm. Then press on toward Shaw Island (p193), where the traffic-free roads are a cyclist's paradise. And don't miss San Juan Island (p190) with its fetching Friday Harbor that's hard not to love. This is

a fairly substantial town, so there are plenty of options for dining and sleeping, while the picturesque farmlands just outside the town are close enough to reach on foot.

## NATURE

Seattle has the advantage of being one of the few major cities in the US with easy access to wilderness right outside its back door. Nature wild enough to get lost in is as close as Discovery Park (see p98), but it's even easier to get lost on the Olympic Peninsula, where misty trails meander through the regal forests of the Hoh River Rain Forest (p198). At the end of your hike, play on the rugged beach – but be on the lookout for vampires and werewolves (see the box, p38).

To see what happens when nature has a bad day, visit the Mt St Helens Visitors Center (p196). The site does an amazing job of displaying the terrifying power of a volcano.