



# Northwestern Washington & the San Juan Islands

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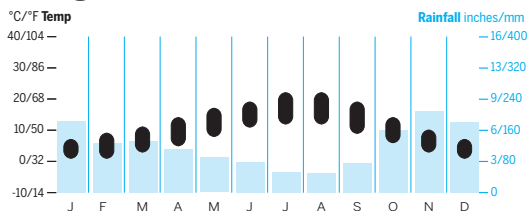
## Why Go?

Spread between Seattle, the Cascade Mountains and Canada lies Washington's most archetypal region, a 'greatest hits' of the Pacific Northwest with all the sights and sounds outsiders traditionally associate with the land of pure air and West Coast hedonism. There's the skyline-hogging volcano (Mt Baker); the wilderness-flecked natural parks (everywhere); the liberal, collegiate city (Bellingham); the antiresort ski 'resort' (Baker, again); innumerable islands (the San Juan archipelago), and even a small stash of credible vineyards.

The Northwest's urban hub is laid-back Bellingham, while its rural highlight could be any one of the 200-plus islands that speckle the northern reaches of Puget Sound. Cultural life tends to be influenced by the fast-developing metropolises of Vancouver and Seattle, ensuring that the music's electric, the microbreweries are abundant, and the coffee is aromatic.

## When to Go

### Bellingham



**March–April**  
Vibrant flower displays at the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival

**June** Dutch-inspired 'Holland Days' festival in Lynden

**September–October** Avoid summer crowds and enjoy fall colors in the San Juan Islands

## NORTHWEST COAST

### Bellingham

POP 80,000

Imagine a slightly-less-eccentric slice of Portland, Oregon, broken off and towed 250 miles to the north. Welcome to laidback Bellingham, a green, liberal and famously liveable settlement that has taken the libertine, nothing-is-too-weird ethos of Oregon's 'City of Roses' and given it a peculiarly Washingtonian twist. Mild in both manners and weather, the 'city of subdued excitement,' as a local mayor once dubbed it, is an unlikely alliance of espresso-sipping students, venerable retirees, all-weather triathletes and placard-waving peaceniks. Publications such as *Outside Magazine* have consistently lauded it for its abundant outdoor opportunities, while adventure organizations such as the American Alpine Institute call it home base.

Historically, Bellingham is actually four different towns - Fairhaven, Sehome, Whatcom and Bellingham - that amalgamated into a single metro area in the late 19th century. Despite vestiges of an ugly industrial past along the waterfront, and a flirtation with out-of-town 1980s mall development directed mainly toward bargain-hunting Canadians, Bellingham's downtown has been revitalized in recent years with intraurban trails, independent food co-ops, tasty brunch spots and - in genteel Fairhaven - a rejuvenated historic district.

Bellingham is 18 miles south of the Canadian border crossing at Blaine and 89 miles north of Seattle on I-5. The current city center is west of I-5; exit 253 leads to Holly St, a major downtown artery and one of the few streets to cut through the area without getting caught up in conflicting street grids.

If one event sums up the essence of modern Bellingham it's the annual Ski to Sea Race, held in May. It's a seven-leg team relay from the top of Mt Baker down to Puget Sound that involves skiing, cycling, running and kayaking, and enshrines the eccentric combination of magic and madness that make this great city tick.

#### Sights

##### Whatcom Museum of History & Art

MUSEUM

(www.whatcommuseum.org; 121 Prospect St; adult/child \$10/8; ☉noon-5pm Tue-Sun; ♿) This revamped museum is spread over three

buildings: historic Whatcom City Hall (built in 1892), the adjacent Syre Education Center, and the innovative new Lightcatcher building, which opened in 2009. The last incorporates a spectacular 37ft glass wall and is Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified. A rich array of exhibits includes historical material, Northwest art and Native American basketweaving. There's also a small shop and a special Family Interactive Gallery with exhibits and art for kids.

The Whatcom Museum has formulated an **Old Town Bellingham Walking Tour** that starts close to the museum and incorporates 20 sites in and around West Holly St. Pick up a map and leaflet when you visit the museum.

##### **American Museum of Radio & Electricity**

MUSEUM

(www.amre.us; 1312 Bay St; adult/child \$5/2; ☉11am-4pm Wed-Sat, noon-4pm Sun) This museum showcases more than 2000 exhibits relating to the early days of electricity and the golden age of radio. It houses the largest collection of its kind in the US.

##### **Western Washington University**

ART GALLERY

Founded in 1893 as a teacher training institute, WWU was redesignated as a university in 1977. Environmental Studies is a popular specialty here. The **WWU Visitors Information Center** (☉7am-5pm Mon-Fri) at the end of South College Dr can provide details of a self-guided tour of the campus' two dozen outdoor sculptures, and you can also pop into the **Western Gallery** (www.westerngallery.wvu.edu; ☉10am-4pm Mon-Fri, until 8pm Wed, noon-4pm Sat) to view the art exhibits. The gallery is closed for summer recess.

##### Whatcom Falls Park

PARK

Have you wandered unwittingly into the North Cascades? No. Instead, Bellingham's eastern suburbs are bisected by a wild region that stretches from Lake Whatcom down to Bellingham Bay. The change in elevation is marked by four sets of waterfalls, including **Whirlpool Falls**, a popular summer swimming hole. There are numerous trails in the park as well as picnic tables and recreational facilities.

#### Activities

Wegged precariously between mountains and sea, Bellingham offers outdoor activities by the truckload. Lakes Whatcom,