



THE OTHER WASHINGTON

Say ‘Washington’ and the assumption is US capital, east coast. Say ‘Seattle’ and the picture is ‘Boeing—industrial’. Wrong, wrong, and half-wrong misconceptions based on the general view that west coast equals beaches and that there is no life north of California. It’s Washington DC that’s the Federal capital and the other Washington, the State of, is on the north-western Canadian border. Seattle is a charming, somewhat old-fashioned seaport far from industrialised, far from dominated by Boeing (discreetly tucked away in a suburb.)



Cascade Mountains: static.panoramio.com

Domination comes from the snow-capped peaks that frame the city and the water that almost surrounds it. To the east soars the Cascade Range, to the west the Olympic Mountains. On a clear day glacier-topped Mount Rainier, all of 14,500ft, glistens in the south; the local expression for fine weather is ‘the mountain’s out’. The road to the visitors’ centre is efficiently kept open year round, even though it passes through Paradise, which claims the world’s snowfall record (91ft).

water, salt or fresh, is never far away; they say that one in six Seattleites owns a boat and there are few apartments that do not have marine views. The economic heart is the port, one hour nearer the Orient than any other in America, and the timber trade that passes through it is mightily important, as it has been ever since the logs skidded down to it through the town, via the original ‘Skid Row’.

The bustling maritime activity never ceases. Workers step off the dozens of ferries that bring them from their scattered island homes right into the centre of Seattle—a lovely stress-free way to commute. Loudspeakers announce pleasure trips round the bay; the hydrofoil takes off for its two hour voyage to Vancouver Island. Windsurfers and dinghy sailors spend their lunch hour fluttering impudently between the giant freighters. And all along the harbourside are restaurants and cafes, making the most of the animated seascape. The piers bring San Francisco to mind, but Seattle has resisted the hype and is resolutely first a working port—which the tourists are welcome to enjoy.



Seattle: www.localtrips.com

One street higher—and it is much higher since the city slopes dramatically and photogenically down to its waterfront, is the colourful Pike Street Market, a must on the itinerary of every visitor, and every cook for that matter, since this is Seattle's larder. The market was saved from unbelievably wanton demolition a few years ago and now buzzes with activity from buskers, jugglers, the stall holders of fascinating craft shops, and merchants of fruit, vegetables, spices, cheeses—a feast of colour and aromas from the produce of every continent in the world.

The fish stalls are the liveliest, with the salesmen putting on a non-stop variety act of throwing and catching the fish, chanting the virtues of their wares. And what wares! Enough to make a fish-deprived Englishman's eyes gleam like those of the salmon so potently, glisteningly fresh. You can take the fish home, packed up in ice, but first you must decide between six different species of salmon, smoked or fresh, Dungeness crabs, spider-like grey crayfish, or oysters, or halibut, or steamer clams, or any of the other craftily-arranged mounds of seductive specimens.

From the Space Needle, left over from the 1962 World Fair ("If you see one thing in Seattle, see it all") you get a 360 degree view of mountains, skyscrapers and waterways. Or you could retreat underground in a unique walking tour of an earlier Washington: spider-webbed shop fronts and hotel doors sunken below street level, preserved as a tourist attraction, while the new city rose on top. The witty guides keep up a hilarious commentary on the history, with much scatological reference to the cause of the subsidence—the inadequate sewers which twice a day, on the tides, regurgitated the waste back up the new flushing devices, designed by Thomas Crapper, and washed back again the imported soil on which the 19th century town was built.

After Seattle, decisions must be taken, since the state is far too vast to tackle indiscriminately. The south-east offers sunshine, vineyards, and the deepest canyon in North America—the 1998ft Hell's Canyon; the south-west has exploited the 1980 eruption of the Mount St Helen's volcano and the new Visitors' Centre is a big attraction. For huntin' shootin' and fishin', head north-west to pursue the elk, black bear, cougar, bobcat, turkey, pheasant and some of the freshwater fish that end up in Pike Place market. A 'two-nation vacation' is a popular possibility, heading due north to the romantic San Juan islands, five of them linked by ferry to Seattle and thence to Victoria BC, in Canada. South is the main skiing area, with alpinesque valleys full of summer flowers, and due west is the Olympic Peninsula, which probably has the greatest variety of all. Within the course of one week there, we had white-water-rafted, swum in icy mountain lakes, scrambled through deep snow, ridden along a seven mile beach, sat in natural hot water springs and trekked through the only rain forest in the northern hemisphere!

Through this hot rain forest, short or testing treks are clearly indicated in the steamy undergrowth, beneath centuries-old trees, festooned with moss and lichens. On a fine day when the sun shafts through the brilliant viridian vegetation, it is stunningly beautiful, but here it really does rain—140 inches a year. We saw little of the advertised wildlife, except David Bellamy and his camera team stampeding through the forest on a filming mission!

Not for the beach-loungers, not for Grand Hotel devotees and definitely not for lager louts, but for lovers of the great outdoors, American style, the other Washington should not be overlooked.

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