

HIKE. PADDLE. REPEAT.

DISCOVER THE BEST OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST ON AN ADVENTURE CRUISE

By Cassandra Overby

I sat at the knobby summit of Eagle Cliffs on Cypress Island in the San Juans in a warm spot of sun, enjoying a moment of solitude away from my hiking group and looking down at the water far below me. It was an incredible sight, the deep blue of the Salish Sea broken only by a series of small, picturesque islands as far as the eye could see. I counted my blessings but didn't bother counting the islands. I knew the stats by heart—there were 172 named islands out there. Only four of them had ferry service, but I'd already explored more than that in the last week, making a small dent in the 168 that are only accessible by water taxi or private boat. I'd paddled their rocky shores and hiked their woody interiors with abandon, and in the process I'd gained a far better appreciation for this landscape that I'd always somehow taken for granted. And it was all thanks to an adventure cruise.

Like many of the 43 other guests aboard UnCruise Adventures' Wilderness Discoverer, a relatively small cruise boat traveling through the San Juan Islands and down to Olympic National Park, I was on my first adventure cruise. I'd signed up for it months before after falling in love with the concept. It offered enough active outdoor opportunities—hiking, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding—to scratch your adventure itch and enough creature comforts—hot tubs, happy hours, three-course gourmet meals—to give you a relaxing vacation. It seemed like the best of both worlds, even for a logistics junkie who normally likes to have her hand in everything related to trip planning. The thought of tackling several bucket-list adventures while letting someone else take care of the details was enticing—and ultimately, that's what sold me.

Luckily, the execution was as good as the idea and I slipped into the adventure cruise life like I'd been living it—and letting someone else do the heavy lifting for my adventures—all along. There was a lot to love. Each day consisted of two big adventures, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. There were a variety of enticing options to choose from, both on the sea and on land,





A trip on the Wilderness Discoverer offers guests many chances for outdoor adventures, including kayaking and hiking. Photos courtesy of UnCruise Adventures.

everything from guided kayaking to small skiff tours, snorkeling, stand-up paddleboarding and open paddling. There were easy hikes, intermediate hikes and challenging hikes, all of them guided. I felt like I was at an adventure buffet. Not only were there numerous choices, but because the ship moved to a new location each day, you could do the same two activities over and over again and still see—and experience—different things each time.

I quickly settled into a routine that I relished, getting out on the water in the morning and exploring on land after lunch. There was no better way to start the morning, after loading up on hot bacon and even hotter coffee, than with an early paddle, when the water was flat and big bundles of dense fog suffused everything with mystery and moodiness. We'd always spend the first several minutes in near-silence, crossing the open water in our kayaks with strong, sure strokes and relaxing into a more leisurely pace once we sidled up to the shore. There was so much to see: gigantic masses of sea kelp, pretty purple and pink starfish, crabs scurrying about on the sea floor below. One morning, two Pacific white-sided dolphins casually swam by us. Another time, we watched from a distance as 300-pound harbor seals hauled themselves out on tiny rocky islands, holding yoga-like poses as they strained toward the sun.

There was something enthralling about getting to know the edges of each island by small boat in the hours before a hike. It was a new experience, to linger on the edges of a place I couldn't wait to explore, to let the anticipation of all I might see slowly build. How many times on land had I moved from the car to the trail as quickly as possible, not bothering to look around me until I was deep in the trees? How many times had I let the broader context of my hike go unnoticed?

It wasn't just the buildup to the island hikes that I quickly grew to appreciate. It was the knowledge—and stories—of the enthusiastic naturalists who guided them and helped me slow down and really see what was around me. All of a sudden, I did see things—a lot of things. There were rough-skinned newts that blended into the dirt trail at my feet and turkey vultures that circled high above. But it wasn't just seeing the fauna that was interesting; it was learning about it. I'd never known that rough-skinned newts are some of the most toxic animals on earth. I was floored that the brown slugs I'd always seen in my parents' garden and on trail were an invasive species, engaged in a glacially paced territory war with endemic banana slugs.

There was so much to soak in as my feet pounded the trail. I learned how to tell the difference between a hemlock and a Douglas fir (the Douglas fir has ridged, bacon-like bark and much bigger cones). And I listened rapturously to a Native American legend I'd never heard about how the Douglas fir cone got its shape thousands of years ago, in a great fire, when the tree welcomed mice to take shelter in its branches from the heat of the flames. (If you look at one of these cones, you'll see what looks like little mouse butts sticking out, as if the mice are inside.)

There were plenty of opportunities for bigger sights as well. On Orcas Island, we took a break at a long, serene lake (one of my favorite spots of the entire trip) on our way to the lookout of Mount Constitution—and an amazing view that rivaled the one from Eagle Cliffs. On Sucia Island, we ambled past more than a dozen remote pocket beaches and a series of dramatic cliffs that were unlike anything I'd ever seen in the San Juans. And at our last stop, in Olympic National Park, we walked alongside the North Fork Skokomish ►



Guests spend the day exploring outside and then enjoy evenings and nights relaxing on board.

River in a verdant tunnel of chartreuse leaves and towering cedars—one was 14 feet across! I couldn't believe that a place could be so green.

Late every afternoon, I'd return to the boat exhausted, amazed—and ready for all of the little luxuries that ship life entailed, from the cocktail-and-appetizer happy hour that greeted us on arrival, to the hot tub that warmed me up when I was chilly. Most afternoons, I greedily combined the two, sipping a drink from the full bar as I soaked my sore muscles and watched the world go by. This was the time we were normally en route to our next destination, and there was no telling what we'd see. One day, it was a pod of five orcas that I got great close-up views of, thanks to the binoculars that were thoughtfully stashed in each stateroom and a captain who took us off course for half an hour to watch the whales from a respectful distance. Another day, it was herds of hybrid animals on a private island that was once used for big game hunting and is now the peaceful home of the offspring of exotic animals—including mouflon sheep from Corsica, fallow deer from Europe and sika deer from Asia—that bred with the indigenous wildlife. There were engineering marvels to watch for as well; during our trip, we passed through the Ballard Locks, under the Deception Pass Bridge and through the Hood Canal Bridge.

After a drink and a good, long hot tub soak, it was time to slide into the next big event: dinner. There was always something tasty on the menu—a land option, a sea option and a vegetarian option—but what I enjoyed most about the meal was sitting with someone new every night. There was a couple from the United Kingdom that was enjoying their very first trip to America; a group of women solo travelers from all over the U.S. who had signed up to travel together; and lots of folks from the Pacific Northwest. As different and interesting as everyone's story was, we all had something in common: We loved the outdoors. And that, just as much as our shared experience of the cruise, is what bonded us. We'd share stories of

our favorite adventures around the world as the wine flowed, the courses stacked up and the sun hit the horizon beyond the boat's big windows.

After dinner, everyone slowed down, our bodies happy-tired from all of the activity and readying themselves for a long and restful sleep. There was always a short evening activity in the lounge, typically a presentation on something related to our excursions, from the breeding customs of birds to traditional foods of the Native Americans. One night, there was even the opportunity for a night paddle. It turned out to be my favorite experience of the entire cruise.

Sliding through the water at night was like entering a different world. Sounds were amplified—I could make out the muted conversation of a couple sharing a late meal on a sailboat nearby and the laughter of friends playing cards on a raft made of three different boats. We paddled until their lights and sounds couldn't reach us and we were bathed in blackness near the shore of Sucia Island. I started to notice a faint glow every time I dipped my paddle in the water; it got brighter as my eyes adjusted to the dark, until it was a glittering mass of burning embers. I'd only seen this—bioluminescence—once before, on an overnight sailing trip when I was a child. I felt the years melt away as I ran not just my paddle but my fingers through the cold water, making glittery trails under the surface. It was magical. I played in the water, entranced, until at last, nearly an hour later, the guide signaled the group to make our way back to the homey lights of the cruise ship.

That night, like every night of the adventure cruise, I fell into a deep slumber thinking of my kayak gliding smoothly through the deep water, my feet hitting the trail on a remote island and my heart falling for an area that only days before I'd thought of as just my backyard. It's amazing what you can discover when your life becomes as simple—and full—as paddle and hike, rinse and repeat. ■

TRY IT YOURSELF

A trip with **UnCruise Adventures** is a bucket-list adventure. Trips are available in the spring and fall. For this trip, the author took a 7-night trip, Explore Olympic Wilderness and San Juan Islands, which departs from Seattle. Trips begin at \$2,095 per person. The Wilderness Discoverer is 176 feet long with 38 cabins and can accommodate up to 76 guests and 26 crew members. All ages are welcome.

uncruise.com.

OTHER TRIPS

Puget Sound Express:

A three-day cruise in the San Juans features lots of wildlife viewing and chances for exploring some of the islands. The cruise leaves from Port Townsend and lodging is on San Juan Island. Breakfast, lunch and lodging is included. \$950 per person for double occupancy or \$1,100 for single occupancy. pugetsoundexpress.com.

North Cascades

Institute: NCI teams up every year with the crew of the Orion, a beautifully restored 1934 wooden sailboat, for a two-day trip to explore some of the lesser-known San Juan Islands. A trip in May has already sold out, but check back for a trip planned for September. Food is included, and guests camp on the islands. \$395 per person. ncascades.org.