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## Day tripping

### Local businesses and activists make transportation easier on the San Juan Islands

By: *Amanda Baltazar*



*Using a Miata provided by Orcas Island Shuttle allows visitors to see a panorama of islands from atop Mount Constitution.*

There's a small outcry every year among vocal groups of people who are displeased at the limited number of runs Washington State Ferries makes to the San Juan Islands, particularly in winter months.

But really, the water part of the islands' transportation is the most reliable and established. The three main islands – San Juan, Orcas and Lopez – have no public transportation. Instead some local businesses and residents are doing what they can to provide transportation around the islands.



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Dan Ward owns the eponymous San Juan Transit, which he's run since 1994. There are two sides to his business: One is running transit tours in April, May, September and October for groups, especially some of the ferries that come to the island. The second consists of three buses that depart from Friday Harbor to other areas of the island. One travels up the east side of the island, and one up the west, both terminating in Roche Harbor.

Ward also runs charter buses, catering to special events such as weddings and reunions, mostly for visitors. Business is looking good so far for 2010, but was down last year because there were fewer visitors. "Friday Harbor is a barometer of the economy but we've been pretty consistent for the past 16 years," said Ward. "Last year and 2002 were bad years. After 9/11 people wanted to stay at home more."

What has also changed is where visitors are coming from. This year people are coming from Washington, Oregon and California, but previously, many travelers came from New York, Illinois, Florida and Texas. Until 2001, around 20 percent of Ward's business was international; that business has dropped to 5 percent, although the Canadian market rebounded last year, he said, and he expects that to continue this year.

"People don't want to fly as much," said Ward. "And I think it's also that expenses are high, and people are watching their dollars a lot more."

Ward doesn't advertise, relying instead of the San Juan Islands Visitors' Bureau. But his company is attractive for visitors, offering an easy and affordable way to get around. San Juan Transit's rates haven't changed in many years; a trip costs \$5, or travelers can buy a \$15 unlimited day pass.

### Orcas Shuttle Spawns Tour

San Juan Transit is one of only two transit systems in Washington that is not run by the state and not subsidized. The other is over on Orcas Island. The Orcas Island Shuttle is run by Amy and Ed Masters, and has been since 2003.

The company is a bus shuttle service and car rental business, which "booms" during the summer months, but goes into hibernation in the winter. During the cold months, the company does maintenance and repair work on the cars and it's all done in-house "which is one of the reasons we can survive here," said Amy Masters.

Orcas Island Shuttle operates 90 days a year. The business started with the shuttle bus "because we didn't really know what we were doing," said Ed Masters. They started adding the cars a couple of years later and now there are about 30 cars in their fleet. "In the summer they're all typically on the road on any of those days," pointed out Masters. "You go one week on the side of those 90 days and there'll be one car on the road."

There are other challenges, however, Amy Masters explained, such as more expensive fuel. "Everything is more expensive on an island and we don't have easy access to parts – we might need them immediately but we can't get them."

Orcas Island Shuttle operates similarly to San Juan Transit, but the Masters have introduced a new business component. Last year they replaced their three-hour guided tour with an audio tour called Orcas Island Tour.

The tour is available on a CD and comes with a map, or visitors can download it in MP3 format from the company's website. Each stop on the tour is numbered on the map and visitors can skip to the relevant track on their CD or iPod and listen to the information.

"We sell most to our rental car clients – we leave it in the car with their paperwork," said Ed Masters. "We've also had folks using it on their iPod on the bus."

The Masters don't advertise their audio tour because visitors tend to trip over it online as they are researching their trip to the island, given the logical name of the tour. The CD costs \$15.95 with a rental car; the MP3 costs \$14.95.

The Masters created the tour themselves. "Technology allows you to do this," said Ed, who explained that they have a dedicated sound booth room. "We have some basic recording equipment and we already have a body of information from doing the tours for so many years," he added.

"It was a fun thing and a new thing to learn – recording, making the CDs and doing the covers. Now you can make a product that at least has a semblance that someone knows what they're doing! This has really been exciting and it's certainly been an education for us."

Sales of the audio tour are strong, but what's been surprising is that CD sales are doing better than the MP3, said Ed Masters.

"I thought we were firmly in the iPod age. The CD is more popular maybe because the demographic that comes here to Orcas is not the Las Vegas demographic – it's the 40, 50, 60 [year-old] demographic, who think that CDs are cutting edge," he said.

"I'm more excited when I sell them the tour than the car because it's the new baby," he added. "A lot of heart and soul went into these and the rental cars are just a commodity. The tour has a soul of its own."

The audio tour is "a nice addition" to business, he pointed out. "The rental cars are our mainstay and they support the service that we came to the island to start – and that's the bus. But we realize at this time there's not enough to make that a standalone business. We still provide it because that's our contribution to the island (and we want to be green) but the rental cars are our main business and support keeping the bus running."

Next up, the Masters would like to create tours for Lopez and San Juan Islands, and eventually collate them into a boxed set.

### Rideshare for Locals

Both of these companies are designed to shuttle visitors around the islands, but for locals, a ride share program has been developed.

"It's been a continuous need," said Anne Sheridan, a local photographer/designer and one of the founders of the sjRIDESHARE program.

For sjRIDESHARE, a selected route has designed stops and significant intersections where people can hitch-hike (which is legal in San Juan County). Drivers know that they can pick up the hitch-hikers along these routes.

"The idea is ... we're encouraging people to do this in a safe way," said Sheridan.

An engineer has evaluated all stops for the safety of cars pulling over. Safety guidelines are also available, and stickers can be affixed to car windows showing a logo designed by Sheridan. "It is a completely voluntary system," she said. "The county couldn't approve people in case they turned out not to be OK."

There are currently 19 stops on San Juan Island; six on Orcas; and two on Lopez. For Lopez Island there's also a website ([www.lopezrocks.com](http://www.lopezrocks.com)) for ride sharing, bartering and trade – an electronic community bulletin board.

Down the line, Sheridan hopes for funding. With this the ride share program could be extended to help people find rides on the ferries and a website could be created along the line of Lopez' site.

And of course there's a green side to ride sharing.



*Two San Juan Island residents catch a ride from Friday Harbor from an sjRIDESHARE pick up point.*

"I think it's good the more we all become aware of driving and general resource use," explained Sheridan. "People are using this [system] for all different reasons – maybe their car is being repaired, or they don't have a car, or they care about the environment. A lot of it is about helping people find ways to solve transportation needs."

**Byway Channels Tourism**

Another piece of the transportation puzzle is the establishment of a Scenic Byway – a route (road and water) that the islands designate for visitors to travel on, allowing locals to decide where they'd like to channel the tourist impact.

Maps along the route will illustrate scenic, recreational, natural, historic, cultural and archeological locations.

The Byway's proposed length consists of 30 miles of a marine route and an 85-mile land route. It begins at the ferry dock in Anacortes and travels through the San Juan Islands.

Half a million visitors travel to the San Juan Islands annually "so the Byway is the best way to manage them," pointed out Liz Illg, the Scenic Byway Coordinator.

If the Scenic Byway is approved, federal funding will be allocated, which will help the islands' support their programs as well as provide signage and facilities along the route.

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