



[Back to Escape to San Juan](#)

Escape to San Juan

October 05, 2009

Amanda Baltazar

Sanity and cash-both are in short supply these days.

But if you need an escape and head out to the San Juan Islands in northwestern Washington state off-season you'll be saving yourself a little of both. You'll not only have the islands almost to yourself but you'll also take advantage of the many special offers available.

Your mental health and your pocketbook will both start thanking you from the get-go when you arrive at the ferry dock (in either Vancouver, Victoria or Sidney) and find only a handful of cars on line and ferry prices lower than during peak months. And once you're out on the islands, there are some things you really should take advantage of:

Eating

Surprisingly for such a small island, San Juan Island holds a number of excellent restaurants.

Duck Soup Inn is 6.4 kilometres four miles north of Friday Harbor, and despite its farmhouse look serves up the most un-farmhouse-style food.

If you're on the island in the summer and haven't booked weeks in advance, you won't get a table here but off-season you could get away without booking.

Executive chef and owner Gretchen Allison is offering 10 per cent off to customers who stay at the local Best Western, the Juniper Lane Guest House, Earthbox Motel or Bird Rock Hotel, all in Friday Harbor.

"The idea was to get more people in while it's quiet," said Allison, who will offer something similar again in the fall.

She has also dropped her prices on a couple of appetizers and is offering a bigger selection of them to draw people in. "If they are not sitting in the chairs, then that's not good," she said. Happy hour is on Fridays from 4:30 to 6 p.m.

In Friday Harbor itself is Coho. Owned by husband and wife team Anna Maria de Freitas and David Pass, this intimate dining room has only eight tables, so even in the off-season a reservation wouldn't go amiss.

The off-season menu offers a "three for \$30" (U.S.) dinner deal, which includes good-sized portions of unusual yet delicious dishes.

Coho is also offering a variety of wines at \$20 per bottle. "We are just looking to serve really good value wines," said de Freitas. "These are difficult times for all of us, so we're being creative."

Resting

Perhaps the most un-missable accommodation deal is at the Haro Hotel at Roche Harbor Resort, San Juan Island. In March, the hotel offered any accommodation for \$49 during the week, including its top-dollar suites. The prices rose to \$99 in April, \$149 in May and \$449 in the summer.



Duck Soup Inn is 6.4 kilometres four miles north of Friday Harbor, and despite its farmhouse look serves up the most un-farmhouse-style food.

AMANDA BALTAZAR PHOTOS

In the fall, these prices will likely run in the inverse, starting with \$199 this month. in September.

The hotel also provides (off-season) either a free spa treatment, a kayak trip, a whale-watching tour or dinner for two for anyone who stays three nights or more. "We've had people call in and ask if this is for real," pointed out lodging director Sam Jacobson.

Packed with the history of its settlers and the lime industry that was centered here, Roche Harbor is worth a day or two's visit. Don't miss the Afterglow Spa, located within the hotel. Try the most popular treatment, the Afterglow Signature Body Experience, a 90-minute indulgence involving a body scrub, hydrotherapy, and a revitalizing massage. Allow extra time to steam or sip tea in the lounge.

For B&B experience on San Juan Island, stay at Tucker House Inn, which de Freitas and Pass also own.

"The shoulder is the best time to visit," said de Freitas. "Visitors can explore without the summer crowds and Indian summer offers terrific and reliable weather."

This B&B not only offers warm and comfortable rooms and suites, many with balconies, but also one of the best breakfasts around-which will be no surprise if you've dined at Coho.

On Orcas Island, head for Bayside Cottages, about 40 minutes from the ferry landing.

In the spring, owner Jim Nelson offered the third night's stay for just \$1, which, not surprisingly, he said, garnered "some nice response." This program will restart again in October, once the tourist crowds thin out.

The nine vacation cottages are spread over 561/2-hectares 14 acres so each is private and beautifully maintained with its own feel and décor.

Walk down to a private beach from your cottage, or enjoy the four-mile hike to the nearby Moran State Park. Here you can enjoy 48 kilometres 30 miles of trails or climb or drive up Mount Constitution, whose peak, at 2,409 feet, will give you the best views across the islands and take away any breath you have remaining if you hiked.

Being Active

When you're not being a slave to your body's demands of food and sleep, there's great hiking on San Juan Island in both the English and American Camps and long walks to be had around the Westcott Bay Sculpture Park, whose 7.6 hectares 19 acres ensure that off-season, you'll be getting no one else in your photographs.

Or stick to the water.

On San Juan Island, Crystal Seas Kayaking offers trips from three hours to six days, as well as multi-island kayak-bicycle tours. Off-season you'll enjoy smaller groups and 10 per cent to 20 per cent savings on shorter trips.

On Orcas Island, join Shearwater Kayaks to travel around nearby islands, where you'll see wildlife including sea otters, bald eagles and deer. Off-season, said owner Jeff Zbornik, tours are much smaller and he's more readily on hand to point out local features.

If the wildlife appeals, whale watching tours leave from both islands. I suggest the three- to four-hour San Juan Excursions tours, during which you'll be likely to see orca whales (mostly likely mid-May through early September), porpoises, sea otters and plenty of seals sunning themselves on rocks.

If all this isn't enough to keep both your bank balance and your mental health in good shape, I suggest following the seals' example: Climb on a rock in the sun and take a long nap.

Amanda Baltazar is a freelance writer based in Anacortes, Washington. Her trip was partially sponsored by the San Juan Islands Visitors' Bureau.