



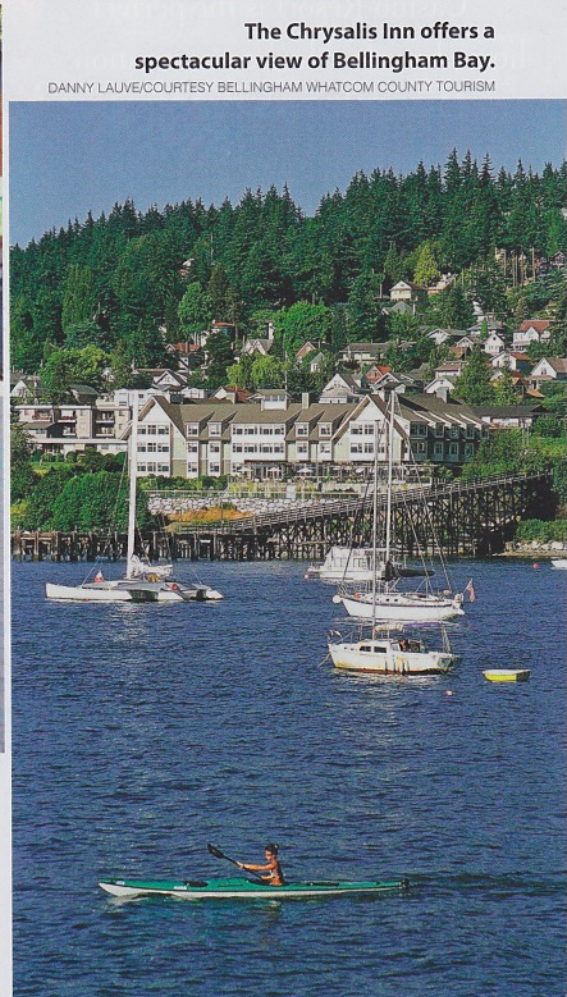
**The Sentinel**, a statue by Seattle artist Ellen Sollod, incorporates stainless steel and dichroic glass. The Whatcom County Museum is in the distance.

JOANNA NESBIT



**Dirty Dan** in the Fairhaven District.

JOANNA NESBIT



**The Chrysalis Inn** offers a spectacular view of Bellingham Bay.

DANNY LAUVE/COURTESY BELLINGHAM WHATCOM COUNTY TOURISM

Bellingham, Washington,  
draws visitors with  
a myriad of outdoor  
pursuits and a vibrant  
arts scene.



Chalk ArtFest.

# The *belle* of the northwest corner

STORY BY JOANNA NESBIT

**Y**EARS AGO, while traveling in New Zealand, I signed into a youth hostel guestbook where another visitor was listed from Bellingham. That in itself seemed remarkable, but even more remarkable was the number of stars, underlines, and comments surrounding the name, things like “I love Bellingham,” “Bellingham is so cool!” “Bellingham is beautiful.” To me, Bellingham was the rain-soaked mill town where my family shopped (I grew up on a nearby island), but that guestbook gave me new perspective on the place I ultimately returned to live.

Bellingham lies nearly 90 miles north of Seattle and has the good fortune to border a bay tucked between the San Juan Islands to the west and Mount Baker to the east. Vancouver is just an hour north. A city of about 75,000, Bellingham still manages to retain a small-town vibe where fleece and Texas reign supreme.

With its proximity to Puget Sound and the North Cascades, Bellingham is a magnet for outdoor enthusiasts and has snared national attention for it. *Outside* and *National Geographic Adventurer* say it's a paddlers' town, but Bellingham also attracts skiers, snowboarders, cyclists, mountain bikers, runners, hikers, climbers, and sailors.

It's more than an outdoor mecca, though. Western Washington University, perched on Sehome Hill, gives the town a laid-back intellectualism that also feeds the cultural scene. Visitors will find a vibrant art community, live music and theater, museums, a farmers market, cuisine for all palates, walking trails, and shopping, both downtown and in Fairhaven, a charming historic district in south Bellingham. Fairhaven serves as the Alaska Marine Highway's southern terminus, where Alaska-bound travelers can catch a ferry, and is home to Amtrak's depot for

visitors traveling by train (a lovelier shoreline journey you will not find).

Despite the academic influence, Bellingham has, for the last century, served as an industrial center, and a Georgia Pacific pulp mill operated on the central waterfront from 1963–2001. The paper mill shut in 2007. With G-P defunct, the town is slowly shedding its blue collar roots as the waterfront undergoes a dramatic facelift over the next few decades. Plans are underway for trails, WWU satellite buildings, urban housing, businesses, and a new marina.

## History

Bellingham's current boundaries originated as four towns in the mid-1850s: Whatcom, Sehome, Bellingham, and Fairhaven. Until white settlers arrived, the area was home to the Lummi people, who lived along the shores of Bellingham Bay, named by Captain George Vancouver in 1792. Whatcom, the first permanent European settlement, was established in 1852 by Henry Roeder and Russel Peabody as a sawmill site to supply lumber to their hometown, San Francisco. Gold miners flooded the area during the Fraser River gold rush, and later industries included fishing, logging, and coal mining. The four towns were incorporated in 1903 under the name of Bellingham after residents squabbled over alternatives and ultimately compromised.

## Downtown and Fairhaven

Downtown offers restaurants, galleries, and shops, including a cluster of antique stores in Old Town, easily accessible on foot. Bellingham's downtown in recent years has undergone a revitalization, due in part to the work of Downtown Bellingham Partnership. Bellinghamsters have responded, with 60 percent consciously supporting independent retailers. Restaurants, grocers, and

The Farmers Market in downtown Bellingham.



JON BRUNKY/COURTESY BELLINGHAM WHATCOM COUNTY TOURISM

caterers are on board, too, with many taking the 2009 Fresh & Local Pledge through local organization Sustainable Connections to support local farms and suppliers. The “Buy Local” campaign has been good for the town, preserving independent businesses and farmland, connecting townies to their vegetables, and creating a foodie's paradise.

Local produce and handcrafted items are also available at the Farmers Market in Depot Market Square. With a new permanent cover (built from a recycled bridge), the market runs April through Christmas and draws up to 10,000 visitors each Saturday. While you're there, Ralf's Bavarian Bakery is a must-visit for

fresh organic Bavarian pretzels.

For shopping, check out the Greenhouse for kitchenware and furniture and the new Digs for modern decor, or browse through Henderson Books' huge selection of secondhand books. Don't miss Mallard Ice Cream for homemade ice cream in traditional and specialty flavors.

Historic Fairhaven is well-loved by visitors for good reason. The turn-of-the-century brick buildings give the four-block district a distinct charm. Compact and laid-back, Fairhaven is filled with shops, galleries, restaurants, and bakeries, all worth visiting. You could easily spend your whole weekend here. Stop in at Village Books, the

cultural anchor, to pick up brochures for self-guided walking tours, including the historic tour and the haunted tour (especially popular around Halloween). For a special treat, check out Katie's Cupcakes. In the Village Green adjacent to Village Books, find a statue of Dirty Dan, Fairhaven's colorful founder, and below the Green, the trail connecting to Boulevard Park's boardwalk, a stunning walk along Bellingham Bay.

## Arts and Culture

Bellingham supports a thriving arts community, second only to Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the number of artists per capita. You can catch the Downtown Art Walk the first Friday of each month, during which galleries and businesses are open late, or stop in anytime at Blue Horse Gallery for a selection of Northwest artists, as well as Allied Arts for local artist exhibitions. Lucia Douglas Gallery in Fairhaven also exhibits Northwest artists.

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## EVENTS

OCTOBER 3/4 & 10/11:

**Whatcom Artist Studio Tour**—Artists open their studios for two weekends in October. (360-650-9691; [studiotour.net](http://studiotour.net))

DECEMBER:

**Annual Holiday Port Festival**—Family-friendly event with music, performances, and gingerbread house contest at Bellingham Cruise Terminal. ([portofbellingham.com](http://portofbellingham.com))

APRIL:

**Fairhaven's Dirty Dan Days**—Annual celebration of seafood and community founder Dirty Dan Harris with live music, food, kids' activities, a piano race, and more. (360-733-2682; [fairhaven.com](http://fairhaven.com))

MAY:

**Procession of the Species Parade**—Community parade celebrating human connection to nature. ([bpots.org](http://bpots.org))

**Ski to Sea Festival** (Memorial Day Weekend)—85-mile multi-stage relay race from Mount Baker to Bellingham Bay, downtown parade, and Fairhaven Festival where it all ends. relay info: (360-734-1330; [skitosea.com](http://skitosea.com)) festival info: (360-739-9625; [fairhaven.com](http://fairhaven.com))

JUNE:

**Bellingham Scottish Highland Games**—Celebration of Scottish culture at Hovander Homestead, Ferndale. (360-647-8500; [bhga.org](http://bhga.org))

AUGUST:

**Allied Arts La Bella Strada and Chalk ArtFest**—Downtown chalk art festival, live music, and artwork. (360-676-8548; [alliedarts.com](http://alliedarts.com))

**Bite of Bellingham** (same weekend as La Bella Strada)—Features a selection of "bites" from local restaurants. (360-739-2338; [downtownbellingham.com](http://downtownbellingham.com))

The Pickford Cinema is the only independent cinema in town, offering the best in indie films and documentaries as well as film festivals such as NW Projections Film Festival, Children's Film Festival, and Traveling Pickford Show. For live theater, look for performances at the iDiOM Theatre (edgy, original works), Upfront Theater (comedy/improv club), the Mount Baker Theatre, Bellingham Theatre Guild (community theater), or WWU.

The city's museums are clustered downtown. The Whatcom Museum campus, on Prospect Street, was originally four buildings, the most prominent the 1892 Old City Hall museum. With a new building under construction, visitors are advised to visit the museums' website for the most up-to-date information on which buildings are open to the public.

In November, the Whatcom Museum Lightcatcher Building, a 43,000-square-foot facility, will open on the corner of Flora and Grand, one block over from the Old City Hall museum.

Features include fine art galleries, an interactive family gallery, and a café and courtyard, both also serving as gathering spaces for performances and evening functions. Because the new building will be equipped with state-of-the-art climate controls, Whatcom Museum will be able to offer fine art exhibits never before seen in Bellingham. Look for a Smithsonian exhibit in early 2010.

Several independent museums reside within several blocks of each other. Mindport is an all-ages discovery museum that blends art and science. Around the corner, the American Museum of Radio and Electricity is another interactive museum for all ages. The exhibits encompass four centuries of scientific achievement with a working radio station, old radios and telephones, and a diorama of *Titanic's* wireless room. The nearby Bellingham Railway Museum profiles the region's train history and features a whimsical three-dimensional diorama of old Bellingham with a G-scale train, antique logging equipment, and historic buildings.

## Parks and Trails

With hundreds of acres devoted to open space, 28 developed parks, and almost 70 miles of multi-use trails, Bellingham puts a premium on green space. Try Whatcom Falls Park for woodsy walking trails with a waterfall, or the Stimpson Nature Preserve, an old-growth forest walk. Sehome Hill Arboretum has a viewing tower and trails, and WWU's campus is just below, where you can take a self-guided tour of the outdoor sculpture collection. South of town, Larrabee Park's Fragrance Lake trail offers a fabulous viewpoint of the San Juan Islands. Boulevard Park, on Bellingham Bay, is a must-visit for water views and boardwalk into Fairhaven. The Interurban Trail, connecting Fairhaven to Larrabee State Park, is a shady 6+-mile trail with waterfront vistas, ideal for biking or running.

Just 6 miles east of Bellingham, the Glen Echo Botanical Garden has recently opened after 40 years of planning. Themed gardens include a begonia and fuschia garden, an English garden, a rose garden, and a "blue" garden. There's even a Giant Stump Garden, where plantings surround the remains of centuries-old trees.

## Beyond Bellingham

A trip to Bellingham is hardly complete without venturing toward the mountains or along the water. Head up the Mount Baker Highway for spectacular mountain views, or putter down Chuckanut Drive, arguably the most scenic drive of the state. Lummi Island, my childhood home, is an easy day trip with a ferry crossing. A cruise on Bellingham Bay is a lovely way to orient yourself too, with most operating May through September. Whatever you choose, you'll begin to see why those travelers went nuts for Bellingham half a world away. Now if we could just do something about the rain. □