



SEA BIRCHIN'

Casual days rule by the warm waters near Washington's northern border.

ONCE a burgeoning midcentury resort town nestled on Washington's northern coast, **Birch Bay** (www.birchbaychamber.com) has quietly receded from the limelight like an ebb tide. Yet families in the know head to the bay's crescent-shaped cove for affordable, low-key fun—highlighted by swimming in one of the Pacific Coast's warmest spots.

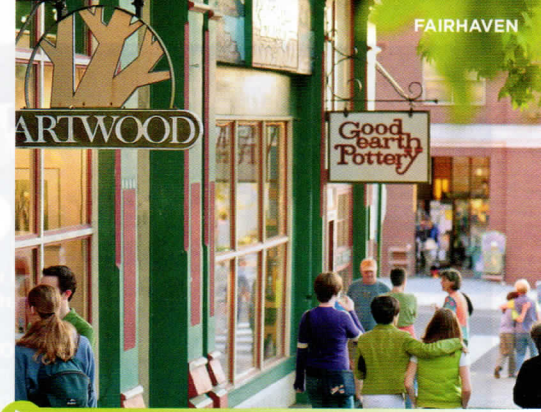
Meleah Butruille, a mom from Leavenworth, loves to walk the beach in search of butter clams, steamer clams, and horse clams with her three children and husband. "We get absolutely muddy and sandy," she says. "But what can be better than that for kids?"

Low tides expose living treasures, including hermit crabs, sunflower starfish, and the occasional octopus or two. Butruille says her son Evan likes to "rescue" tiny crabs, moving them from the rocks to the tide pools. "I haven't the heart to explain that he's just moving the crabs around in their habitat," she says.

Teens ride bikes along the flat road hugging the beach, meet newfound friends for ice cream at **The C Shop** (www.thecshop.com), then head for the **Birch Bay Waterslides** (360.371.7500)—four giant chutes and a 60-foot hydro drop that elicit a constant chorus of delighted screams.

On cloudy, windswept days, fun-seekers drive go-karts, play miniature golf, or ride a mini-train at **Miniature World** (www.miniatureworld.org). Or some head for the tree-lined championship golf course at **Semiahmoo Resort** (www.semiahmoo.com) or tour the family-run cellar at **Dakota Creek Winery** (www.dakotacreekwinery.com). And anyone can finish the day off right with butter-dipped fresh Dungeness crab.

But before retreating for dinner, many summer visitors linger late on the beach, wading in the water. Its unexpected warmth stems from the bay's shallow, protected location. The other warmth you'll be feeling stems from Birch Bay's simple, unassuming charms. —LORA SHINN



> BELLINGHAM

Bell Ringer

An hour-by-hour guide to bustling Bellingham

BOUNDED BY PUGET SOUND and its miles of waterways, Bellingham has garnered a reputation as a paddler's paradise. But this college burg less than two hours north of Seattle also ripples with a vibrant cultural scene for all palates. —JOANNA NESBIT

> **10 a.m.** Explore the striking Lightcatcher building at the **Whatcom Museum of History and Art** (www.whatcommuseum.org), where a 180-foot curved glass wall bathes the interior in natural light. Nearby, the hands-on displays inside **Mindport Exhibits** (www.mindport.org) include experiments with light patterns and sound vibrations.

> **Noon** Dig in at **La Fiamma** (www.lafiamma.com), where a 550-degree wood-fired oven churns out artisan-style pizzas. From April through December, sample local goods at the adjacent **Saturday Farmers Market** (www.bellinghamfarmers.org).

> **2 p.m.** Explore **Sehome Hill Arboretum** (www.wvu.edu/share/), a 180-acre forest preserve springing up on the hill above Western Washington University. Complete the afternoon at one of the city's best-kept secrets, WWU's **Outdoor Sculpture Collection** (www.westerngallery.wvu.edu/sculpture.shtml), which features installations from internationally renowned artists including Isamu Noguchi and Anthony Caro.

> **5 p.m.** Stroll the boutique- and gallery-packed streets of the **Fairhaven District** (www.fairhaven.com). Stop in at the iconic **Village Books** (www.villagebooks.com) for a self-guided walking tour brochure, dine Spanish style at **Flats Tapas Bar** (www.flats tapas.com), and end the day with a walk along the waterfront's South Bay Trail to Boulevard Park, a favorite spot for catching sunsets.