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Sequim: Can we keep this "quiet"?

By Ross Anderson
Special to the Seattle Times

SEQUIM — In 1792, George Vancouver and his crew sailed the Pacific Ocean, past Dungeness Spit and Sequim Bay and into neighboring Discovery Bay, where they launched their historic exploration of Puget Sound.

"The delightful serenity of the weather greatly aided the beautiful scenery that was now presented," the explorer observed in his journal. "The country exhibited everything that bounteous nature could be expected to draw into one point of view."

Two centuries later, Vancouver's journal still aptly describes this northern edge of the Olympic Peninsula — bounteous nature blessed by more than its share of sunshine and serenity. And much of it remains untainted by asphalt and concrete.

Sure, thousands of cars per day roar past on Highway 101, headed for Sequim, Port Angeles and points beyond. Some will stop at the regional Costco or the Seven Cedars Casino at the south end of the bay. Most will catch only a fleeting glimpse of the shoreline that entranced the explorers in 1792.

Those who do find their way to saltwater are treated to an intricate and relatively pristine corner of Washington's inland sea, a windswept refuge for gulls and puffins and seals and for the occasional kayaker who sets out to join them. It's a geography of weathered bluffs overlooking grassy sand spits shaped by centuries of wind and waves that continue to modify the work of the ancient glaciers.

The town of Sequim, named for an Indian word meaning "quiet waters," seems curiously disconnected from its seashore. It's a farming town, nestled in a sunny river valley, that has been steadily morphing into a retirement mecca. Its population has grown by more than a third just since 2000.

And that's nothing compared to what's on the drawing boards — two major resort developments with hundreds of hotel rooms, condos, retirement homes, restaurants and more.

But, thanks to its undiscovered seashore, this region still has much to offer the urban escapee. On any given summer day, one can kayak the shores of Sequim Bay in the morning and hike along a 5,000-foot alpine ridge in



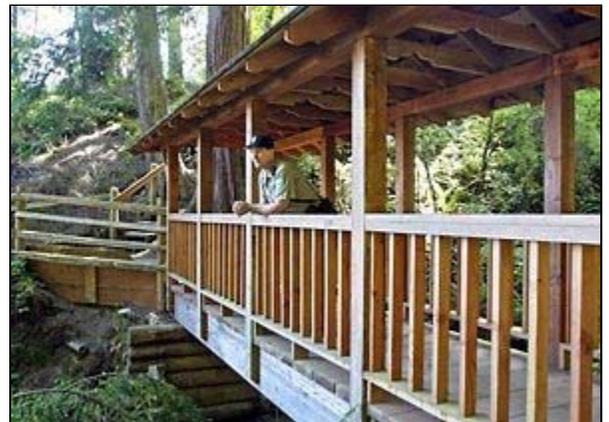
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The first Dungeness Spit Lighthouse was built in 1857. The present structure is 63 feet above sea level and staffed by a rotating group of volunteers who care for the houses and grounds. The five-mile Dungeness Spit and the shallow bay behind it comprise the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge.



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Mary Borland, owner of the Washington Olympic Lavender Farm in Sequim, tends to her flowers.



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Sequim Bay State Park head Ranger Steve Gilstrom at the park's covered walkway, built mostly with lumber salvaged from downed trees in the park.

the afternoon. One can harvest berries at a U-pick farm, play the slots at the local tribal casino or walk windswept Dungeness Spit to a working lighthouse.

The first stop for many visitors is Sequim Bay State Park, a wooded retreat wedged between the bay and Highway 101 just east of town. Despite its proximity to the highway, it's a popular getaway, offering campsites with stunning water views, surrounded by old-growth firs and WPA-style camp architecture.

While the park caters mostly to car campers, it also offers a launching ramp and moorage for boaters, and bare-bones campsites for kayakers. From here, mariners set out to explore the steep, wooded shorelines of Sequim Bay.

Don't leave home without your tide charts. The bay is kept relatively calm by Travis Spit, which extends across the entrance, leaving boaters with a narrow channel that is prone to tidal currents with each tide change.

It's worth the effort, however. Once you leave the bay, the seascape changes dramatically as you drift into the rare ecology of Dungeness Spit. The five-mile sand spit, arching gracefully out into the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the shallow bay behind it comprise the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge. It is home to thousands of seabirds — from gulls and plovers to rhinoceros auklets.

The inside, or eastern side, of the spit is strictly for the birds. Hikers and kayakers are welcome on the exposed outer shore.

If Sequim Bay is known for its quiet waters, then Dungeness is notorious for its winds, which scream off the Strait of Juan de Fuca and over the spit, there to delight the wet-suited windsurfers who come from miles around to ride a stiff northwesterly.

So far, the old fishing village of Dungeness and surroundings have managed to keep their Cape Cod-like ambience — all weathered piers, beached boats, crab pots and eelgrass.

Follow Vancouver's route a few miles to the east, and civilization gets even thinner. Protection Island, which guards the entrance to Discovery Bay, is another wildlife refuge, this one for glaucous-winged gulls and puffins and strictly off-limits to boats and visitors. Violet Spit, at the east end of the island, is a favorite haul-out for harbor seals, plus a few enormous elephant seals that have moved in more recently.

Paddle offshore and you can envision what this whole ecosystem looked like from the decks of HMS Discovery, Vancouver's lead ship.

Discovery Bay is bigger, deeper and more exposed than Sequim Bay, but there is even less boat traffic. It's simply out of the way for most boaters. Along some 20 miles of shoreline, there is just one small, private marina and only one point of public access — the Gardiner Boat Ramp, halfway down the western shore.

Launch a boat here, and you are truly retracing a historic voyage. It was here that the explorers anchored for two weeks while they repaired the ship, began their small-boat explorations, and brewed up a batch of "spruce beer" for the thirsty crew.



What to do near Sequim

Sequim Bay: Fine paddling on relatively flat water. Kayaks can be rented at the John Wayne Marina on the Sequim side of the bay. Reservations are recommended to camp at Sequim Bay State Park. Information at www.camis.com/wa/ or call 888-226-7688.

Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge: North on Sequim Avenue from central Sequim. Day use only; no camping or fires. Hike at low tide on the western side of the spit, allowing at least four hours for the round trip to the lighthouse. Information at www.fws.gov/washingtonmaritime/dungeness/visit.html.

Protection Island National Wildlife Refuge: Closed to the public. Boaters are asked to keep 200 yards offshore. The Port Townsend Marine Science Center sponsors guided boat tours of the shoreline, but there are no more cruises scheduled this summer. Information at cruises@ptmsc.org.

— **Ross Anderson**

SEQUIM BAY and nearby Discovery Bay and Dungeness Spit are about 70 miles from Seattle if you take the Edmonds ferry. From the Kingston landing, take Highway 104 to U.S. Highway 101 westbound to Sequim.

Alas, it is not a sure thing that these Olympic shores will maintain the "delightful serenity" that Vancouver enjoyed. Change is afoot. One major resort, backed by the heirs to Hollywood cowboy John Wayne, is planned for the forested shores surrounding the John Wayne Marina on Sequim Bay. Wayne Enterprises owns 160 acres there, and plans call for a lodge, restaurant, spa, vacation cabins and some 232 retirement homes, all oriented toward the bay.

A couple of miles down the road, the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe plans to expand its successful casino into a high-end conference center, with 500 rooms, restaurants and shops and a 100-foot totem pole.

On the other hand, a wilderness retreat awaits on the Miller Peninsula, which separates Sequim and Discovery bays. When a Japanese company's ambitious plans for a destination golf resort fell through in the early 1990s, the state obtained the land and assembled it into a 3,000-foot parcel of fir and cedar forests with miles of high-bank waterfront.

State Parks' development plan is on hold, awaiting the dollars necessary to proceed. But Steve Gilstrom, Sequim Bay park manager, anticipates "accessible wilderness" with a basic lodge surrounded by miles of trails and wildlife.

For now, the enormous site is closed to the public. But visitors can glimpse the possibilities from a tiny, unnamed Clallam County park on the north shore of the Miller Peninsula. There are no signs, just a gravel path from Buck Loop Road down a shallow ravine to a cobbled beach.

Here one can still see these shores in much the same way Vancouver did — seemingly untouched except by the unrelenting winds and waves.