

September in the San Juans

Three days, three islands, one great cause

Story and photos by Susan Weaver

It's raining on September 20, 2008, the first morning of Trek Tri-Island in Washington State. We've just cycled four miles to the ferry terminal in Anacortes. "So much for the 'rain shadow' of the Olympic Mountains!" somebody jokes, alluding to the topographical quirk that brings to the San Juans just half the rain that Seattle gets.

Now I hear giggling in the restroom. I poke my head in and see several women bending over, butts toward the hand-driers. They're trying to dry their bike shorts, which they are still wearing. I laugh and they mug for my camera.

We — all 175 of us — are waiting for the ferry to Friday Harbor on San Juan Island, our headquarters for the next three days. This is the 26th year for Trek Tri-Island, a fundraiser for the American Lung Association of the Northwest (ALA-NW, www.cleanairadventures.org). But it's their first year for an all-San Juan Islands itinerary. The organization expects it to be a popular replacement for their Seattle-to-Victoria, B.C., ride, which had a stopover on Orcas Island. A standard for 24 years, the much-loved route was finally scrapped because entry into Canada with a baggage truck had become increasingly cumbersome since 9/11.

I've raised funds and flown cross-country alone for this ride. I'm eager to explore these islands that, together with the ferry route, have been named Washington State's newest Scenic Byway. As the ferry cruises toward our destination, I begin to see why. We pass island after green island, with white wisps of cloud gathered low about each one as if snagged by their hills and tall forests. There are 172 named islands among the San Juans. We'll cycle the three largest: San Juan, Orcas, and Lopez.

Saturday: San Juan Island

We roll our bikes ashore at Friday Harbor (pop. 7,512), county seat for the San Juan Islands. Not wanting to dally in the rain, we pedal uphill past

boutiques and restaurants. Along Roche Harbor Road, we sort into smaller groups, each finding our own pace. Even with its moody skies and muted colors, the varied landscape and gently rolling hills please me. We pass San Juan Vineyards' tasting room in a one-room schoolhouse. We spin by pastures and fields and small barns with weathered cedar siding and low, two-pitch roofs. A scarecrow in a long dress guards a roadside cutting garden — no bouquets for sale today.

Medrona trees, with their curling red bark and big evergreen leaves, crowd the roadside at English Camp National Historical Park. Beyond and down the hill, an English blockhouse still stands at Garrison Bay. It was built in response to the "Pig War," which began in 1859 when an American shot a British-owned pig rooting in his garden. After 12 years of joint military occupation, the boundary dispute between Great Britain and the U.S. was resolved peacefully: the San Juan Islands became American territory. The only casualty was the pig.

We turn in at Krystal Acres Alpaca Farm, our first rest stop. Under a pop-up tent, Trish, a volunteer, calls cheerily, "Welcome! Cocoa and tea! Peanut butter and caramel! ... Something for everybody!" Perky-eared alpacas — black, brown, russet, and cream — browse nearby, unperurbed by the drizzle.

I watch water drip off the tip of a cyclist's nose. The only dry one among us is three-and-a-half-year-old Betsy, arriving in a bike trailer pulled by her mother, Anne Marie, veteran of several ALA-NW tours. She's still smiling. "This ride is great," she told me earlier when I met the pair on this morning's ferry. "This is our first bike tour together. We're well armed with toys and stickers!"

I mount up again and whiz downhill past horses and sheep in their pastures. We climb and descend through stretches where tall cedars and douglas firs draw the eye upward.

At Mitchell Bay Road a ride marshal in bright jester's silks gestures grandly to the right: "This is the long route!" A flourish to the left: "This is the short route!" Again, to the right: "Those are the drowned rats!" To the left: "These are the wimp-outs!"

Each day we have a choice of two routes, flexibility that I



Spirits undampened. Trekkers at the Anacortes ferry terminal maintain their enthusiasm.

appreciate. And, okay, today I'm with the "wimp-outs," opting for 22 miles instead of 44. I'm not so much tired as ready for a dry restaurant in Friday Harbor for lunch and conversation.

Camp routine

Later, at the county fairgrounds a few blocks from downtown, I find my gear and

schlep it into a large hall. This will serve as both dining room and lodging for Trekkers, except for those who've booked an inn and the handful who've pitched tents outside for more privacy. Indoors it's close quarters; my ear plugs will come in handy for sleeping tonight. A few ingenious folks have put up freestanding tents. But most of us just

Nuts & Bolts Trek Tri-Island

Flying in for Trek Tri-Island couldn't have been easier. From Seattle-Tacoma Airport I took the Airporter shuttle bus (reservations recommended) to Anacortes, Washington, the ride's start point and gateway to the San Juans. The driver dropped me off just a half-block from my lodgings, the Anaco Inn. From there I walked three blocks next morning for the rental bike I'd reserved with Skagit Cycle Center. They'd assured me a proper fit from their inventory

of new bicycles and were as good as their word. The shop also had an arrangement with Trek Tri-Island to receive and assemble (for a fee) bikes shipped to them by participants.

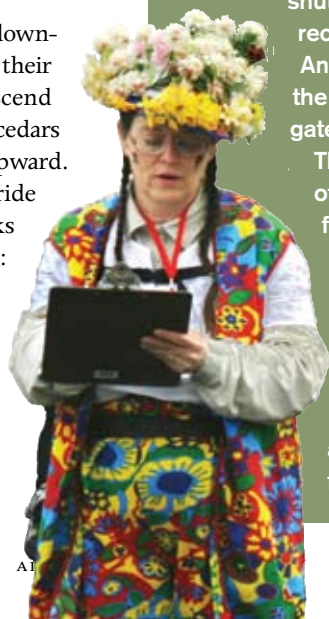
And if you wonder, "Why travel across the country for a three-day ride?," do as I did. Explore Seattle/Tacoma or the Olympic Peninsula. Or take a few extra days in the San Juans on your own.

— Airporter shuttle: www.airporter.com; 866-235-5247

— Anaco Inn: 888-293-8833

— Skagit Cycle: www.skagitcycle.com

— Visitors Bureau: www.VisitSanJuans.com; 888-468-3701 ext. 1



A cyclist's paradise. Trekkers ride on Orcas Island, where beautiful views unfold at every turn.

plop air mattresses and sleeping bags on the concrete floor, introduce ourselves to our neighbors, and head for the showers.

From their side of the shower building two guys emerge, laughing. "Showers?" one chortles, "I was in a shower for seven hours today! I was already crinkly when I got in the shower!"

At the tasty, baked chicken dinner, everybody has a story. Folks who did the long ride rave about seeing orcas off Cattle Point at the last rest stop. A pod of 83 frequents the islands from April through September.

I also hear of shenanigans from previous Treks, including one tandem rider named Mark who rode with a big stuffed gorilla as his stoker. He taped its feet to the pedals and hands to the bars. When somebody gave Mark a hard time about the gorilla not wearing a helmet, he got a helmet for it!

After dinner, the ride's top fundraisers are recognized. Cherese Timmer has collected the most, more than \$8,000. Altogether we've raised \$140,000 to help advocate for cleaner air, reduce teen tobacco use, and research cures for asthma. Then Trekkers cluster around a table to sign the "I'm riding Trek Tri-Island for ..." banner. Many know someone battling lung disease. A few tell me they have asthma themselves.

Sunday: Orcas Island

On the morning ferry I chat with Tony Oliver, from Soldotna, Alaska, clearly the

guy from farthest north on Trek. He has a salt-and-pepper beard and eyes that twinkle as he admits that back home he wears a pink tutu in triathlons. "Triathletes tend to be focused and serious, so I like to shake things up for laughs," he says. "It's about living in the moment, breathing life in, and trying to give something back ... Five years



ago I weighed 300 pounds and smoked a pack and a half a day, a 32-year habit. I quit everything — smoking, drinking ..." Not long before that he did his first American Lung Association ride in Alaska. It rained and snowed, but it was the beginning of a new Tony. "I never dreamed I'd be this happy."

We watch islands slip by and look for seals. Though the morning started drippy and overcast, sun breaks through as the ferry pulls into the dock. From the landing we climb and descend past horses in a field with a blue shimmer of sea beyond. I feel a sprinkle of rain, but it passes. Where Deer Harbor Road curves along the coast, I look out over small marinas with boats at anchor. A great blue heron perches on the post of a dock. In the sunshine, colors are intense. A new view unfolds at every turn, and I have friends to share the ride with. I feel ecstatic. The road rises and falls, never flat for long. I can tell my summer's hill training will be put to good use on Orcas, the biggest and by far most vertical of the San Juans.

The island is horseshoe-shaped, with the ferry dock at the bottom of one extremity. Now, with several Trekkers, I cycle Crow Valley Road up the lush rural interior. We pass fields, barns, a jewel of a tiny lake, homes that nestle comfortably in their settings. Occasionally we sight East Sound, which almost bisects the island, and we can make out the profile of 2,409-foot Mt. Constitution, literally the high point of today's long (50-mile) ride.

Near the top of the horseshoe we enter the village of Eastsound, with its shops and restaurants, the turnaround point for the short route. We join other Trekkers at an eatery with outdoor picnic tables, a great place to hail riders returning from Mt.

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Constitution. Over lunch we speculate how much more cycling we can do and still catch the 4:30 ferry.

Back at camp I learn that a few Trekkers, not keen about climbing the Orcas hills, stayed on San Juan Island to cycle the portions of it they missed yesterday. This is a benefit of having one overnight location for three days of cycling, and easy to do with the excellent maps and cue sheets provided. "A super day!" they say.

Monday: Lopez Island

The ferry has arrived and a volunteer in a camouflage utility kilt directs us. "Trekkers! You see all the cars backing onto the ferry for Lopez Island? We need you to back your bikes in too." We laugh and wheel on.

Smallest of the three islands, pastoral Lopez has the least intimidating hills and plenty of island charm. Along the road we're tempted by ripe blackberries that mix with white snowberries and red wild-rose hips. Sheep dot a nearby pasture. A sign reads, "VISIT THE SOUTH END FOR GAS AND SASS ... in Islandale."

A view of Griffin Bay and a white church steeple, both glittering in the sun, herald little Lopez Village on the coast. Sea kayaks for rent brighten a marina. The day warming pleasantly, we breeze through farm country again — a meadow with Queen Anne's lace, black angus grazing pastures bordered by towering

hemlocks and white firs.

At Shark Reef Park, our first rest stop, I take the recommended quarter-mile walk to the coast through moss-draped, old-growth fir and cedar. Seals loll on rocks off shore. Someone spots a bald eagle.

Back in the interior, cattle at pasture flank a small, white frame church. Yellowing aspens have begun to drop their leaves; open fields glow in September's slanting sun. I stop to talk with two artists who've set up easels in a sheep meadow. It's an idyllic spot with a view out to the harbor and hills on a far shore.

Curving to the coast, Port Stanley Road separates a string of cottages and a tiny private beach made whimsical with driftwood sculptures.

Too soon I'm on Ferry Road, my three days in the San Juan Islands coming to an end. Worth the journey, it's been a fun time with an easy-to-meet group. Supporting ALA-NW on our bicycles, we've helped people in the Northwest to breathe easier. And the riding has been fantastic. The varied and scenic roads, lightly trafficked in late September, are a cyclist's paradise. With the choice of two routes each day, Trek Tri-Island has offered something for every taste. Mountains, sea, farms and forests, a few charming towns, and inns if you require them — what more could you want? **AC**

Susan Weaver has been writing for Adventure Cyclist since 1999. Currently she's also working on a memoir about cycling day-to-day on her home turf in Pennsylvania.

Cycling for a Cause

There may be as many styles of fundraising as there are participants on Trek Tri-Island, but the important thing is that raising the required \$500 isn't that difficult — if you just start asking. On her seventh Trek, Patti Swanson, who works in pulmonary rehab, likes giving something in return, so she caters dinners to raise the money. Others simply ask. An 18-year veteran of the ride, Charlie Buchalter shamelessly follows any discussion of the event with "So! Do you want to sponsor me?" Even the man who repaired his camera before the trip kicked in half of the repair fee as a donation.

"Say that even the smallest amount is appreciated," advises Jessica Burton, one of five Stumptown Ramblers, a fundraising team from Portland, Oregon. "And I let them know that asking for money is hard. I thank people for their good wishes, even if they don't contribute. Then maybe next year they'll remember to save some money for my cause." Whether you want to raise \$500 or \$5,000, the American Lung Association of the Northwest offers tips on their website (www.cleanairadventures.org) to help garner donations. You only have to ask.