

# Oak Harbor & Coupeville

Story and Photos by  
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**F**all cruising means finding destinations that might be closer to home for weekend or extended weekend getaways. Ideally fall destinations also offer a choice of mooring at a dock or anchoring-out. They may offer a choice of shoreside activities with interesting things to see and do. Oak Harbor and Coupeville are both destinations on the east side of Whidbey Island that, depending on the weather patterns, can often offer protected fall cruising from the

*Photo above, right - Oak Harbor and the Oak Harbor Marina. Photo right - Just inside of the wharf building in Coupeville, look up and meet Rosie the Whale - a male gray whale complete skeleton hung from the ceiling. Photo below - You never know who you might be docked next to at historic Coupeville, recently, the Hawaiian Chieftain shared the dock with the Lady Washington.*

sleepy rural area until the Deception Pass Bridge was completed just 75 years ago in 1935, closely followed by Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in 1942. The Navy wanted a base for aircraft to patrol and defend Puget Sound. Oak Harbor, off Saratoga Passage, was identified as an ideal area for a seaplane base



*Photo above - Toby's, in Coupeville is just one of the many local favorite restaurants. Try their fresh local steamed mussels.*

south or north, with a lot of restaurants, shops and places to explore.

This area was first explored by Captain George Vancouver in 1792. He named it Port Gardner. During the Wilkes Expedition of 1838-1842, Captain Charles Wilkes renamed the area Saratoga Passage after a famous naval vessel of the War of 1812. The name stuck and Vancouver's name became the name for the bay off Everett.

The area was settled in the 1850's as a center for the area's fishing and farming. Whidbey Island stayed a





been like to see a large PBY Catalina patrol plane lumbering into the water down one of the ramps and taking off across Crescent Harbor.

The large gently sloping seaplane ramps are now used as trailer boat ramps with a nominal charge for the public, and no charge for active or retired military. Crescent Harbor is also a good anchorage, especially if winds are from the south. The small marina will allow you to dock your dinghy. For active and ex-military the small marina on this side of the bay is open to you for reasonable moorage fees. This is a little known secret benefit for our vets and active military. Call 360-257-4842 for availability. The docks are nicely done with a covered picnic area. There is no power available on the docks.

If you do not own a boat, active or retired military and DoD civilians can rent sailboats, powerboats, kayaks and all sorts of recreational gear at incredible prices. Want to go crabbing - rent a power boat for \$40-\$72 per day and add rental crab traps, bait etc. See navylifepnw.com for more information.

The large hangar in the Seaplane Base area, is now a Navy Exchange, the size of a super-store, perfect for provisioning for active and ex-military using either marina area.

Just a few hundred yards away to the south, and in Oak Harbor, is the Oak Harbor Marina. The Oak Harbor Marina is well protected and about two-thirds of the way up the east side of Whidbey Island along Saratoga Passage. Use caution when the winds are from the southeast when using Saratoga Passage. The topography of the 18 mile long Saratoga Passage can funnel and accelerate the wind, creating challenging conditions on the water.

When arriving from the north, stay to the east of the R "2" buoy. The area between the buoy and Maylor Pt. is shallow and foul. You enter the harbor through a well marked channel that turns 90 degrees to the right (and east) towards the marina.

with an area four miles north of Oak Harbor for what became Ault Navy Airfield with runways for land and carrier-based aircraft to train and operate from.

The Oak Harbor Marina is on the south side of the area still called the Seaplane Base, though the Navy has not flown seaplanes from there in 40 years. The area north of the Oak Harbor Marina, on the Crescent Harborside was guarded and closed



*Photo above - You can find all kinds of salty characters in Coupeville including the crew of the Hawaiian Chieftain.*

to the public up until a few years ago when a recent base commander, also a recreational sailor, realized there was little harm in opening up the area to the public.

The heritage of the base is still evident with old hangar buildings, large apron areas and concrete ramps leading down to the water. One can imagine what it must have



*Photo below - Having a bike onboard can be a big help to explore Oak Harbor. Shops are a pleasant 1/2 mile to a mile away. For active and retired military, the Navy Exchange is just across the parking lot. Photo far below - Coupeville Wharf with moorage dock in the center and anchorage to the right with a view of Mt. Baker in the distance.*



The marina has space for 420 boats in covered and open moorage. Guest moorage is on the outside breakwater dock when you first enter, or in assigned slips from the harbor master's office. The outside breakwater moorage has picnic tables, and at the western end a restroom garage. The barge, called the "Water-Loo" has two aluminum potty areas as well as pump-out, but no shower. It is clean, rustic but a welcome relief if needed.

The guest dock is a long walk to the showers and restrooms located below the Harbor master's office and in another building closer to the fuel dock. The marina has pump-out, reasonably priced fuel, a lift for small boats up to 6,500 pounds and a repair yard with a trailer for haul-out of larger vessels for repairs.

The marina is shallow and the depth should be noted if your stay coincides with a minus tide. This will change over this winter when dredging will restore the fuel dock area and the marina to more normal depths. If you prefer to be at anchor, you can anchor just outside of the arrival channel.

Once ashore, it is a pleasant walk of just over a half-mile to the stores and restaurants that stretch for another mile along the waterfront. The grocery stores are almost a mile and half away, just past the Highway 20 intersection. There is a free bus service that operates when you call and will pick up 20 and 50 minutes after the hour. If you need to shop for major items there are shops and stores for just about anything (including a Walmart) in Oak Harbor,



The dock at Coupeville with a view of the historic seacoast town behind. Kayak rentals are available from the gift shop on the wharf.

but you may need a bicycle, taxi or car to get to and from the boat with your purchases.

The quaint commercial area of town is along Pioneer Street where you can find shops and restaurants. Not too far is a rental car agency if you would like to explore the many parks and other sights in this area of Whidbey Island.

Pioneer Street has gift shops and galleries, bakeries and ethnic restaurants. Fraser's Gourmet Hideaway's name says it all for a wonderful dining experience. It is one block off Pioneer, up Southeast Dock Street. Down below is Yummies Eats and Treats bakery

and deli.

Across the street is Whidbey Beer Works, with a very extensive collection of unusual beers for sale from microbreweries and breweries around the world. Next door is Lotus, with a tea bar and offering art classes. The schedule noted that they also offer belly-dancing classes on selective days during the month!

Back on Pioneer Street you can find Paint Your World™ where you can paint your own ceramic pottery for firing and glazing. There are galleries in the Harborside Village building and cafes to sit and enjoy. Stop by "Bayleaf" for a wonderful selection of wines and cheeses. Ask them to pre-

pare their European Luncheon for you for a hike or forenooning under way. The shops and entertainment in Oak Harbor will satisfy any crew with plenty to see and do.

The marina at Oak Harbor is a popular destination for boat owner's rendezvous and you could find yourself there on a crowded weekend. If you are thinking of visiting next year, don't plan on visiting July 17th to the 22nd. The marina is already planned to be full for Whidbey Island Race Week.

After a pleasant stay in Oak Harbor, cruise a short distance to the south to Penn Cove, home of the well known Penn Cove mussels. On the southwest shore is the town of Coupeville, where you can step back in time. Coupeville was founded in 1852 by Captain Thomas Coupe and is said to be the second oldest town in the State of Washington. The town has retained its classic charm with historic buildings, old seacoast style homes, and even the home of Thomas Coupe from the mid 1800s.

The moorage at Coupeville is a historic wharf that can fill up during the best summer months with 400 feet of moorage. You may also find groups who cruise to Coupeville or historic sailing vessels such as the *Lady Washington* and the *Hawaiian Chief* as I did during a recent visit. You can anchor in the area to the southeast of the wharf, in front of the town, or to northwest of the wharf, and there may be an

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available mooring ball. There is a fuel dock and showers on the wharf, but no power or water. Check with the harbormasters office for more information.

The historic red wharf building houses a gift shop with kayak rentals, a small store with espresso, bakery, deli counter and wine sales called "Local Grown", and a quaint restaurant called "Kim's Cafe". When you first enter the building, look up and meet "Rosie" the whale. Rosie is the assembled skeleton of a male gray whale that died and washed up on the beach on Whidbey Island during the late '90s. The skeleton was cleaned and hung from the ceiling for all to admire.

Coupeville fits the bill as an excellent cruising destination. There are many interesting shops and destinations. You can stop by the waterfront restaurants such as the popular "Front Street Grill" or "Toby's Tavern", well known for their steamed Penn Cove mussels, fresh from the bay. During the day you can stop by "Knead & Feed" a waterfront bakery and restaurant or "Mosquito Fleet Chili and Pies".

One block up from the waterfront is "Christopher's" for casual dining with another "Bayleaf" store for wine and cheese and other specialties. "A Touch of Dutch" will set you up with Dutch delicacies that may be a new treat for your palette.



Photo above - Bayleaf, in Oak Harbor, can prepare a "European Lunch" to enjoy in town or underway with imported cheeses, meats and a special wine. There is also a Bayleaf store just up the street from the Wharf in Coupeville.

If a mid-day treat is your hankering, between the many gift stores and galleries is "Kapaws Iskreme World Headquarters" with hand-rolled cones and 20 flavors of ice cream made locally.

Now the special cruising tip. After a day and evening in Coupeville, or an excursion in the dinghy from the wharf, you can travel further into Penn Cove to the west. Continue past the extensive mussel farm operation to a quiet cove with the Captain Whidbey Inn onshore. You

can anchor in front of the Inn if you like and tie the dinghy to their dock below the log-cabin Inn.

The Inn is over 100 years old and exudes old world charm. When you enter the Inn you are greeted by a large stone fireplace. Book a reservation for dinner at the "Ship of Fools" restaurant for fine dining, or stop by the "Judge Skills Tavern at the Inn" for more casual dining indoors or out on the deck - weather permitting. The "Captain Whidbey Inn" is romantic, classy and tucked



Mark Bunzel is Publisher at Fine Edge Nautical & Recreational Publishing. His newest cruising guide "Cruising the San Juans and Puget Sound" will be available in early 2011. He holds a USCG Masters license for power and sail and is the co-author of *Cruising the Virgin Islands*.

away. This can be a special treat for your first mate or the entire crew. Call first, The Inn restaurants are only open Thursday - Sunday.

Oak Harbor and Coupeville both have a full schedule of annual special events celebrating arts, crafts, the sea and good food. Check the local area web sites for a full schedule to coincide with your cruising plans.

Two great locations, close-by, but with a far-away feel. One quiet and old and both with plenty to eat, see and do. Terrific destinations for your fall cruising. **www**

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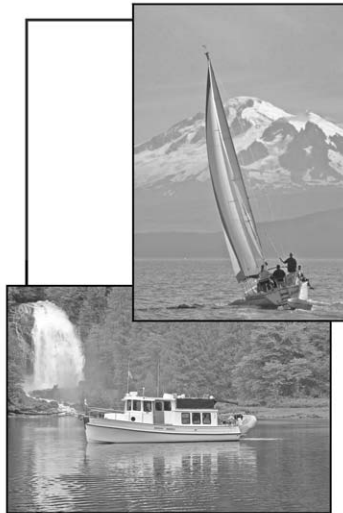
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