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PERFECTION REFINED:

Latest evolution of the
ideal Northwest getaway

By Dan Aznoff

IF YOU WERE GIVEN the opportunity to design the ultimate vacation destination in Washington, you'd start with a romantic point of waterfront tucked into the Northwest corner of the state surrounded on three sides by the pristine waters of the Puget Sound with inspirational sunsets to the west and views of a majestic Cascade peak that dominate the horizon to the east.

Your resort would have a casual atmosphere with dining options that range from fine bistros to casual eateries. Between meals, guests could divide their time between water sports, the challenge of seaside golf courses and the indulgences of a world-class spa.

Your slice of perfection would have easy access to beachfront trails that twist past mountains of bleached driftwood with access to tide pools teeming with life from the sea. The beach would be within walking distance from a dense forest that offers shade from the sun and cover for the small



to a myriad of outdoor activities.

The destination is just the right distance away for a romantic weekend getaway. The golf courses and spa make it an ideal location for an important business conference that does not exclude spouses. The beaches and forest make it a great place for an extended vacation with children. And the pet-friendly facilities make the resort a place the entire family can enjoy.

The Semiahmoo Resort was built inside the historic low-profile structure that was once the world's largest salmon cannery. It sits on 1,100 acres of a long sandy spit near the Canada-U.S. border. The resort takes its name from the name of the indigenous people in whose language means "half-moon," which describes the crescent-shaped land the resort was built on.

The destination opened as the ultimate golf getaway in 1994 as home to the Loomis Trail Golf Club and Semiahmoo Golf and

Country Club. The latter was designed by Arnold Palmer and was voted the sixth best golf course in Washington state by Golfweek in 2011.

For some reason, the original hotel, restaurants and spa closed in December of 2012. The property was purchased one year later by a hotel group from Seattle who reopened in August of 2013 after \$6 million in renovations. The upscale resort now has 183 deluxe air-conditioned guest rooms plus 28 luxury suites.

The dining options at Semiahmoo cater to almost every palate, including snack bars on the golf course and inside the spa. The Packers Oyster Bar behind the hotel offers casual waterfront dining and an exceptional happy hour. The Pierside Kitchen offers choices that highlight fresh seafood from the waters of the Puget Sound and produce from farms in the nearby Skagit Valley. The Great Blue Heron Grill offers cuisine in an elegant atmosphere that is appropriate for



a quick burger or a romantic date-night dinner.

For the adventurous types, the hotel has bikes, kayaks and paddleboards available for rent. For those who enjoy activities on the sand, there is beach volleyball, sandcastle building and a nightly gathering around a fire pit where the resort provides all the ingredients to build the perfect s'more.

Whether or not you have a sweet tooth, the seats around the fire pit offer exceptional views across the water of the armada of sailboats and yachts that troll the international waters and across to the shops and homes in the Canadian town of White Rock.

Semiahmoo Spit offers more than 300 acres of tideland and roughly 1.5 miles of trails ideal for walking, biking and birdwatching. The region's tide pools, estuaries and waterways attract thousands

of geese, ducks, gulls, loons and shorebirds each year and recently made the Audubon Society's list as one of Washington's top birding destinations. It attracts a thriving population of endangered species including the bald eagle, peregrine falcon and the marbled murrelet.

Point Whitehorn's Marine Reserve and Blaine Marine Park are both located just a few clicks from the front door of the resort. Both offer waterfront experiences worth the price of admission.

The first ½ mile of forest trail at Whitehorn is wheelchair accessible and takes visitors past twisted stumps and specimens of native growth forest. The beach itself is strewn with heaps of driftwood and makeshift shelters built around fire pits.

Lucky visitors to the beach can get up-close views of the seals that feast off the fish in the waters that lead into the Strait of Juan de Fuca. If you're quiet (and really lucky), you

can see bald eagles positioned on top of the tallest old trees as they watch over the beach for signs of migrating salmon. The eagles can be seen in mid-air battles with crows as the rivals compete for the highest perches on the oldest trees.

The pristine beach gives no clue of the history of the reserve. The shoreline was originally an unattractive piece of seashore that was held, but not developed, by the Whatcom Land Trust until an oil spill from a Bellingham refinery in 1999 dumped thousands of gallons of thick oil on the beach.

The WTL used fines levied against the oil companies to purchase .3 miles of the Georgia Strait wetlands from BC Hydro that was developed to become Whatcom County Park. That purchase was leveraged to fund access to the beaches and protect the shoreline from future environmental damage.

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From the solitude of the deserted beach, it's a short drive into the community of Blaine that sits just south of the international border. Blaine is the American side of the shared home of the Peace Arch international monument.

There are sidewalk cafes in town that straddle the boundary. The Peace Arch City Cafe offers gluten-free options for breakfast or lunch, while Bob's Burgers & Brew earns its top spot on every review of restaurants in Blaine for its grass-fed beef and scores of ice cold beer on tap.

The one must on every visitor's list is Edaleen Dairy Ice Cream Shop, where tourists stand in line for a cone of maple nut ice cream with Canadians who come into the United States to buy their limited daily allotment of milk.

A Blaine favorite for all ages is a ride on the Historic Plover Ferry that plies the waters between the Blaine Harbor marina and Semiahmoo Spit. Built in 1944, the ferry was originally used to transport workers to and from the cannery at Semiahmoo.

The 20-passenger ferry provides a great vantage

point to watch the eagles soar and seals frolic in their own backyard. The ride also provides close encounters with majestic pleasure craft that anchor in the harbor of White Rock on the Canadian side of the waterway. Space is almost always made to accommodate bikers or passengers who walk on for the short ride from Blaine back to the resort.

The ferry departs on the hour from the Blaine Visitor's Dock and returns on the half hour from the Plover Dock at Resort Semiahmoo. The floating piece of history operates during the summer months, beginning Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, including on the Fourth of July.

For shoppers, nearby Birch Bay Square offers

outlet prices on items not normally found in discount centers, including an outlet for discounted food and toys for pets. The Big Box Outlet in Langley, B.C., offers a favorable exchange rate in addition to discounted prices.

The bottom line is that Semiahmoo offers something for everybody. It is an overlooked treasure that deserves to be enjoyed by locals in addition to visitors from around the world.

No need to design your perfect vacation destination. Just pack your bags—and don't forget the binoculars.

