

EXTREME(LY) WASHINGTON

HOW TO GET AN
OUTDOOR RUSH
IN BELLEVUE'S
BACKYARD

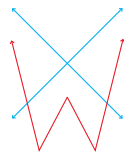
BY
ALLISON
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HOW HIGH ARE YOU PREPARED TO GO?

Washington state is at its most glorious from on high, whether viewed from the top of a backcountry ski hill, the front seat of a floatplane, the jumping-off point of a zip line, or even the 14,410-foot summit of Mount Rainier. All it takes is a little gumption.



North
Cascades
Heli-Skiing



HELL-BENT HELI-SKIING

✠ The North Cascades aren't close to anything. But that's the best feature of the angled peaks—all it takes is a little work to access the wildest, most untouched land in the state. And an ASTAR B2 chopper.

Before taking off in a helicopter, a skier must cross the north-south Cascade mountain range on Highway 2, then head to the old-timey western town of Winthrop. An epic ski begins, oddly enough, at the elegantly rustic **Freestone Inn**, home of feather pillows, soaking tubs, and one **North Cascades Heli-Skiing** Heli Barn crammed with demo gear and skis as fat as snow tires.

Don't take it personally when you're asked to step on a scale; weight distribution is carefully calibrated. After practice with avalanche beacons and reminders not to wave ski poles near helicopter blades, it's time for takeoff.

Within moments, no houses or cars are in sight, just the occasional glimpse of the snowed-in North Cascades Highway winding between the slopes. After a 10-minute flight, choppers drop skiers among the jagged peaks, below granite spires, and above glades of trees in a 300,000-acre zone—and always above perfect, untouched powder.

And yes, this is powder. One, two, even three feet of light, airy, sugary snow. It's into an open bowl one run, onto a tree-covered slope the next, always room for long, smooth turns. Guides direct the bird to the razor-edge ridgelines so fine that there's nowhere to go but down.

Skiers need to fuel up at the same time the chopper does, so during lunch the pilot returns to base and leaves the group stranded, gloriously, in the wilderness, the only sounds the whomp of a distant avalanche.

A single day is seven runs of about 12,000 vertical feet. Additional runs are available for a fee, depending on the snow conditions. Most skiers will be daydreaming of those feather pillows back at the lodge. From \$1,077 per person.

LESSER EXTREMES

Think an outdoorsman can't enjoy a loud, rumbly snowmobile? The machines can quickly cover ground that would take a hiker all day to navigate—and they're pretty fun to whip around corners. Guided snowmobile tours leave from Mountain Springs Lodge in Leavenworth and head as far as the 5,814-foot-high Sugarloaf Lookout.

Kenmore Air
over the San
Juan Islands

SOAR, SAIL, SEE WHALES

✠ Like any flight, floatplane routes on **Kenmore Air** have one seat that's just better. No, not some exit-row or bulkhead seat, but the one beside the pilot, knees just inches from important-looking dials and switches. For this shotgun view, you have to request it—it's worth it.

From takeoff on Lake Union, powering past floating homes and between sailboats, you're elbow to elbow with the pilot—who also acts as ticket agent, baggage handler, dockhand, navigator, and flight attendant (so don't expect peanuts). Then it's over the Ballard Locks, Elliott Bay, and wide-open Puget Sound for a 45-minute flight. Whidbey Island is a patchwork of small farms to the right, a lighthouse

in Port Townsend is just visible out the left. Rain? No problem. Only fog grounds this 50-year-old seaplane.

Landing at Roche Harbor on San Juan Island is smoother than most airliner touchdowns, and it's time to leave the aircraft in favor of a human-powered sea kayak on the San Juan archipelago. Sky-blue double kayaks form a floating wagon train that slowly bobs out of the sleepy marina, past docks, beach houses, and pocket-sized islands dotted with a few trees. By the time the flotilla reaches Haro Strait, which separates the United States from Vancouver Island, there's nothing but a distant sailboat here, a passing ferry there, and little wind to disturb the surf.

By law, watercraft cannot venture within 100 yards of marine mammals; too bad the animals never got the memo. Harbor seals, insatiably curious, pop up in dark blue waters, and the black fins of killer whales break the waves. When they're close, no one breathes—in awe, not fear. The resident orca pods are so familiar to locals that some whales even have names and known personalities.

Even if orcas don't appear, there are waterfowl, otters, lighthouses, and rugged bits of shoreline to distract the kayaker. And one has to dig deep—where are you, core muscles?—to paddle back to Roche Harbor in time for the floatplane trip back to dry land in Seattle. From \$242 per person.

LESSER EXTREMES

Don't float? Several outfitters offer boat tours, and captains share sightings, so an orca encounter is almost guaranteed. San Juan Outfitters has kayak and boat tours. Both Western Prince and San Juan Safaris leave from near the Friday Harbor Whale Museum, which houses three orca skeletons.

Kayaking the
San Juan Islands



BAG MOUNT RAINIER

Step, pause, breathe, repeat. That's all it takes to get to the summit of 14,410-foot-tall Mount Rainier, as long as you can repeat for seven or eight (or more) hours in the pitch dark and the kind of cold that makes bones ache.

The reward is worth every tentative step, but an ascent up "the mountain," takes careful planning or a spot with one of three local guide companies: **Rainier Mountaineering Inc.** was founded by local climbing legend Lou Whittaker in 1969, while the newer **Alpine Ascents** and **International Mountain Guides** offer similar trips. Climbing can require up to a year of athletic training but no special skills.

It starts at Paradise. After gear checks and safety talks, the walking truly begins up the crowded trails

in the wildflower-laden Paradise meadows. Eventually the route hits a snowfield, which means crunching, slow steps up to Camp Muir, named for the famous naturalist. John Muir was bowled over by the mountain's beauty on his own climb in 1888, calling it "the grandest excursion of all."

No one sleeps easy at Camp Muir. Earplugs and a facemask help; nerves don't. The flat step is halfway up a mountain but as busy as the parking lot below, crowded with tents and an old stone hut, and the thin air still carries the chatter of dozens of climbers looking to borrow a cup of noodles or brag about frostbite. Sometime around midnight it's time to hike again, but now clad in helmets, crampons, and harnesses that tether climbers together. There's no talk-

ing; because ropes must stay taut for safety, every climber gets a 40-foot island of solitude to step, pause, breathe, and repeat. Mountaineers attempting Everest also often come to Rainier because it has every scary terrain type as that sky-high peak. From Muir on up, there are deep glacier crevasses and dangers on an epic level. It's too dangerous to even look at the crevasses and caves cut like hatchet marks into the glacier's icefall; to peer into their eerie light-blue depths is to waste unnecessary seconds on a shifting, lethal mountain.

In the dark, it's hard to tell each person's tiny headlamp from the stars. Metal crampons hit rock, a screech like nails on a chalkboard—this is Disappointment Cleaver, a promontory as discouraging as its name. Then

LESSER EXTREMES

Not every hike in Mt. Rainier National Park has to go to the summit; the 5.5-mile Skyline Trail from Paradise's visitor center delivers spectacular views of the Tatoosh Range; the paved 1.75-mile Alta Vista Trail has glacier and meadow panoramas. Outside the park, Crystal Mountain's gondola whisks riders to a 6,872-foot viewpoint and the state's highest restaurant.

JAMIE & JUDY WILD / DANITADELMONT.COM

Mount Rainier

the sun starts to rise, and the long, freezing slog ends at Mount Rainier's summit crater. In the protected bowl, flat and big as four empty football fields, it isn't about the view but the company; conversation erupts after hours of silent stepping, and climbers eat candy bars as rewards.

Eventually everyone strolls to the highest point, where the wind whips at the tiny American flags that mark the true summit, Columbia Crest. The snow here has been so disturbed it's as if this were the sight of a snowball fight, and strangers share cameras and pose for photos. Below, the state's smaller hills and mountains ripple like water, still misty with morning clouds. But on top of Mount Rainier it's as sunny as high noon. Turns out the climb also ends at paradise.

COURTESY ADVENTURA

ZIP TRIP

Of course zip-lining is safe. After all, you're wearing a helmet and harness, and two separate carabiners attach to the zip line. Kids do it. But when the time comes to step off a stable 50-foot platform and sail through the leafy Washington outdoors, it seems preposterous. Who jumps off a perfectly good ledge?

Woodinville's **Adventura** adventure park at Redhook was erected in the middle of the region's winery and brewery playground; it's an off-the-ground jaunt to do before flights of the chardonnay kind.

Orientation is kind of like camp; you're kitted out with harness and helmet, then asked to parrot back instructions to master the safety protocol. Practicing the prescribed routine—hook one carabiner to the thick cable, then the other, and always with a buddy—sparks easy camaraderie within the group as everyone exchanges names before agreeing that no one looks good in this odd crotch-cradling, bubble-headed, getup.

Then it's up on the play structure, a rope-and-log jungle gym located five stories off the ground. The initial ascent up via a rope cargo net is the hardest part—they have challenges like this on *Survivor*—and the reason you need

closed-toe shoes. This tangle of coarse rope swings in every plane, making the inch-by-inch climb humbling. It looked so easy from below, and now you're flailing like a too-green sailor caught in the rigging.

But then, finally, on the sky level of the play park, stability: a series of small platforms, all separated by goofy, tricky passages. Travel by grasping a rope swing, navigating a tangle of slack lines, taking a giant leap, or going hand-over-hand through suspended loops. Every route has a trick testing balance and coordination. It only takes one fall, and a catch by the secure harness, to lose

the fear. Former strangers yell encouragement or advice, and no one cares anymore about their dorky helmets or graceless movement.

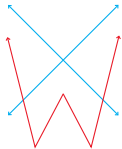
Until, of course, it's time to take the zip line down. The final fall isn't about dexterity, it's about letting go. "You can go upside down," the staffer says, as if that would make the 50-foot drop more reasonable.

And so, halfway down to the rural valley floor, almost everyone flips upside down in a moment of fast, free, pure, giddy abandon. Washington's greenery becomes a blur, and feet hit the hard dirt of Woodinville while the shriek still echoes off the brewery next door. ■

LESSER EXTREMES

Discovery Challenge, inside Bellevue's Eastgate Park, features ropes courses and a 150-foot zip line. The Northwest Trek Zip Wild course, near Mount Rainier, has swinging bridges suspended above a safari-like animal preserve. Friday Harbor's Zip San Juan has eight zip lines through the island forest. Down near the Columbia Gorge, Skamania Lodge's Zip Line Tour is a canopy trip with an 800-foot-long ride.

Adventura



HELI-SKIING
Freestone Inn 31 Early Winters Dr, Mazama; 509-996-3906; freestoneinn.com
■ **Mountain Springs Lodge** 19115 Chiwawa Loop Rd, Leavenworth; 509-763-2713; mtsprings.com
■ **North Cascades Heli-Skiing** 509-996-3272; heli-ski.com
WHALE WATCHING
Friday Harbor Whale Museum 62 First St N, Friday Harbor; 360-378-4710; whalemuseum.org
■ **Kenmore Air** 425-486-1257; kenmoreair.com
■ **San Juan Outfitters** 360-378-1962; sanjuanislandoutfitters.com
■ **San Juan Safaris** 360-378-1323; sanjuansafaris.com
■ **Western Prince** 360-378-5315; orcawhalewatch.com
MOUNT RAINIER Alpine Ascents 206-378-1927; alpineascents.com
■ **Crystal Mountain** 33914 Crystal Mountain Blvd, Crystal Mountain; crystalmountainresort.com
■ **International Mountain Guides** 360-569-2609; mountainguides.com
■ **Rainier Mountaineering Inc.** 360-569-2227; rmiguides.com
ZIP-LINING
Adventura 14300 NE 145th St, Woodinville; 866-981-8665; adventuraplay.com
■ **Discovery Challenge** 14509 SE Newport Way, Bellevue; 425-452-4240; ci.bellevue.wa.us/challenge-course.htm
■ **Northwest Trek Zip Wild** 11610 Trek Dr E, Eatonville; 360-832-6117; nwtrek.org
■ **Skamania Lodge Zip Line Tour** 1131 Skamania Lodge Way, Stevenson; 509-427-0202; zipnskamania.com
■ **Zip San Juan** 360-378-5947; zipsanjuan.com