

Take train to Vancouver, then cycle home to Seattle

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Whenever I visit Vancouver, B.C., I itch for my bike. It's a stellar cycling city, with miles of seawall trail and well-signed, interconnected neighborhood routes. But the great cycling doesn't stop at the city's edge, so on a recent trip, I charted a homeward path from Vancouver to Seattle that took me aboard ferries for a fun and adventurous detour: via the roads and trails of Vancouver Island's Saanich Peninsula and Washington's northeast Olympic Peninsula.

You can easily make a vacation on your bike with camping gear, rail and ferry transit, and a few days to explore.

Amtrak [www.AmtrakCascades.com] deposits you in the heart of Vancouver, just a block from the False Creek cycling trail. My spouse and I quickly connected with the Adanac greenway route that led to our Airbnb. A day tour took us on trails skirting downtown: Coal Harbour, Stanley Park and English Bay. Cafes on Granville Island sustained us, and East Van[couver] microbreweries revived us post-tour.

If you go

- Bringing your bike on Amtrak Cascades trains: AmtrakCascades.com/Baggage.htm
- Vancouver cycling map: bit.ly/1uOJG3R
- Victoria area cycling map: saanich.ca/services/roads/cycling.html
- Olympic Discovery Trail map: bit.ly/1fbUNRV
- Tsawwassen ferry: bcferries.com
- Black Ball ferry: cohoferry.com
- Washington State Ferries: wsdot.wa.gov/ferries

The next day we headed for home. But our getaway was far from over.

South across the Fraser [River]

Departing Vancouver via the funky Kitsilano neighborhood was a simple matter of following the big, green bike-route signs, this time the Cypress route. We forded the Fraser River's north arm via the bike-ped path attached to the Canada Line Skytrain to Richmond on Lulu Island. Six miles east along River Road sat a bigger challenge: the Alex Fraser Bridge on Highway 91, soaring over the river's south arm.

Once off the bridge we again found River Road, this one with an excellent bike lane and miles of open farmland with river views. It took us through Ladner and, in a few more miles, to the long causeway to the Tsawwassen ferry terminal.

Forty miles of cycling led to a 90-minute ferry ride, arriving at Vancouver Island's Swartz Bay in late afternoon. This massive terminal serves all of the Gulf Islands as well as Vancouver. Busy. But a quick two miles brought us to McDonald Campground on the outskirts of sleepy Sidney. A quiet, wooded site offers water and toilets, but no showers. Adjacent campers were there by bike, too. Vancouverites Shawn and Simon were beginning a cross-Canada trek of 5,000 miles to St. John's, Newfoundland.

Our second biking day was a bit shorter on the connected trails to Victoria. A scant 20 miles south to the capital city via the Lochside Regional Trail meant we could tarry and explore, starting with the Sidney bakery and coffee shops. There we chatted with two more Vancouver bike-campers, Mary and Peggy, who had tried many area trails. This day they were headed to the San Juan Islands via Washington State Ferries from Sidney.

We pedaled past the WSF ferry dock on our way out of town. The rail-flat Lochside is mostly paved, with sections on hard-packed gravel. The shady trail gives way to neighborhood streets periodically, but none with traffic or even stoplights. Restrooms and water are plentiful.

As the trail approaches Victoria, it meets the east-west Galloping Goose Trail at the Switch Bridge. "The Goose" would take you west to Sooke in about 24 miles or to Victoria's Inner Harbour in just under three miles. We headed to camping at Thetis Lake, six miles up the Goose. After visiting the lake's swimming beach, dinner was just a mile away at what's said to be B.C.'s oldest tavern, the Six Mile Pub.

Our third day began with another city tour, exploring Victoria's waterfront via the Seaside Touring Route. We found Emily Carr's home on Government Street, the totems in Beacon Hill Park, and the Garry oak forest at Government House — with a slight detour to the imposing Craigdarroch Castle — all accessible by the Rockland Avenue bicycle route. A late afternoon ride aboard the Black Ball ferry to Port Angeles took us to a night in that small city, so we could get an early start for a full day on the Olympic Discovery Trail (olympicdiscoverytrail.com).

Skirting the Strait

The ODT is a key connection, paved and off-road for 20 miles from Port Angeles to Sequim, then another 10 miles to Discovery Bay. After stunning views of the Strait of Juan de Fuca across to Victoria, the sights turned to woodland, farms and trestle bridges.

After a Sequim coffee stop, we visited the Jamestown S'Klallam tribal center at Blyn. The tribal art gallery is overseen by an amazing pair of linked totem poles. The trail runs down Old Blyn Highway until about Mile 30, where we launched ourselves across busy Highway 101 to the wide, loud shoulder lane. It's highway riding for 10 miles to Discovery Bay, unless you want to vault back and forth across the highway twice to ride sections of Old Gardiner Road. We declined, and put up with the heavily trafficked two-lane.

The last leg into Port Townsend began with a climb from Discovery Bay along Highway 20's minimal shoulders. Then we picked up the unpaved but comfortable Larry Scott Trail into Port Townsend. You can camp at Fort Worden State Park, two miles beyond downtown Port Townsend. As the visit happened on our wedding anniversary, we decamped to comfort at the Swan Hotel and luxuriated in Italian flavors at the Fountain Café.

Cycling the last 50 miles from Port Townsend to Seattle offered a little of everything. From the Larry Scott Trail, we aimed for the foodie paradise at the Chimacum farmstand. Cycling Center Road avoided the hilly coastal route, but then we were back to highway riding on Highway 104 to the Hood Canal Bridge. We hummed across the bridge's wide bike lane and continued on 104, with mostly a good shoulder lane, to Kingston. The ferry took us to Edmonds, where we climbed to the Interurban Trail, which deposited us back in Seattle.

With three different ferry lines, bridges large and small, urban and rural trails in two countries, and plenty of natural and man-made sights, this circuitous route from Vancouver to Seattle soothed the itch to see many familiar locales from behind the handlebars.