



Lake at Mount Rainier

# A hidden gem

Surrounded by unspoilt natural beauty, **Ian Murray** vows to spread the word about Washington State's spectacular Hood Canal, Olympic and Mount Rainier regions

It's the name that doesn't do it just justice. Put simply, they should never call it a "canal".

For canal read fjord. For the British that's a far better description of the glorious waterway that links Mason County in Washington State to Puget Sound and the Pacific Ocean beyond.

A fabulous scattering of waterside towns and villages, up-scale resorts, and spectacular views along what should rank as one of the great road trips in the American west.

Whichever way you read it then, the Hood Canal is one of those hidden gems whose time has surely come.

We were following the 101 Highway as it hugged the waterside as our adventure in Washington State continued to amaze, surprise and delight at every turn.

The plan had been, like so many UK visitors to the region, to take a few days in the Seattle area before catching a cruise ship to Alaska. But instead of spending all of our time in the city, we were advised to strike out and take in some of the glorious country that surrounds what has now become one of the United States' most rapidly growing and truly buzzing metropolitan areas.

In fact, there's no need to stray far from Seattle Airport to find an oasis of calm. Our first night was at the Cedarbrook Lodge hotel, just ten minutes' drive from the air terminals. After a long flight to the Pacific Northwest, in our case via Las Vegas,

the Cedarbrook Lodge, with its striking lobby area and superb lounge and Copperleaf restaurant was a welcome, soothing spot to calm frazzled nerves.

I'd recommend it to anyone who wants to drop bags and ease down. Set in 18 acres of wetlands, with walking trails and jogging tracks as well as a gym and spa area, the hotel features original artwork and amazing views from its wall to ceiling windows.

The following day, after a delicious breakfast, we headed south-east towards Mount Rainier National Park. Mount Rainier is an active volcano and dominates the skyline from anywhere in the Seattle region and well beyond.

Our plan was to ease our way along the easy to follow highways through the small towns and settlements that lead towards Mt. Rainier. Along the way there was time to stop at the pretty town of Enumclaw with its boutiques and cafes. Just the place to stroll the small Main Street and grab a coffee and pastry to go.

Our target was the Crystal Mountain Resort with its spectacular gondola ride to the summit of Crystal Mountain itself. On a fair day there are glorious panoramic views over fields of wildflowers and the Cascade Range of mountains. Alas, we had chosen a day when the clouds enveloped the summit, but we still enjoyed a fabulous lunch at The Summit House restaurant imagining what the views should be. We vowed to return.



Grove of the Patriarchs

Olympia with State Capitol Building in distance



Just a ten minute drive from Crystal Mountain and we checked in to the Alta Crystal Resort, which proved to be a wonderful all-American experience. Fabulous cabins and a wonderful pool just inviting us to take a dip, the resort is a true find and should not be missed. Run by owners Vivian and Steven Cadematon, the resort has a marvellous homely feel.

There is no restaurant, but the lobby-cum-general store offers provisions for you to rustle up a meal in your cabin's superbly equipped kitchen. Our cabin could have comfortably slept six people and included an open log fire, welcome on a wet and chilly evening. The late August rain, however, did not prevent most of the guests from gathering for one of the resort's regular and popular BBQs.

After we had polished off the sausages and burgers, a few of us truly hardy souls gathered around an open fire – a marvel of combustibility in somewhat downpour conditions – to enjoy that classic American camping treat 's'mores. The marshmallows melted, the chocolate oozed, the biscuits remained brittle. Heaven on a toasting fork.

The following days the rain had departed and the sun was peeking through the clouds. We headed deeper into Mt Rainier National park. Our first stop was the Grove of the Patriarchs. We had been warned we would be overwhelmed by these ancient woodland giants – and we were.

Reached by a short trail, the Patriarchs are huge Cedar and Douglas Firs that have survived for over a thousand years. The grove is breathtaking in its majesty and a visitor could spend a day taking in the sheer size and beauty of these links to a time when no European had set foot in the North West.

A 15-minute drive further into the park brought us to Paradise, a small community that overlooks Mt Rainier. Here the clouds parted and the volcano in all its glory emerged into view. Quite stunning.

The drive out of the National Park and on towards the city of Olympia and the Olympic Peninsula itself we found to be a stop-and-go affair, as we pulled over constantly to take in the amazing views.

Olympia is the capital of Washington State and although it is a small city of some 60,000 people it proved to have a big heart and vibrant personality. The waterfront

community is almost overshadowed by the giant Capitol Building which dominates the skyline.

Impressive and making a statement, as well as housing the government of the state in its awesome legislature rooms, the Capitol has the world's fourth largest dome and is home to one of the largest collections of Tiffany crystal – and how. The company were brought in to create the lighting for the building in 1933 and the giant chandeliers and wall lights are stunning.

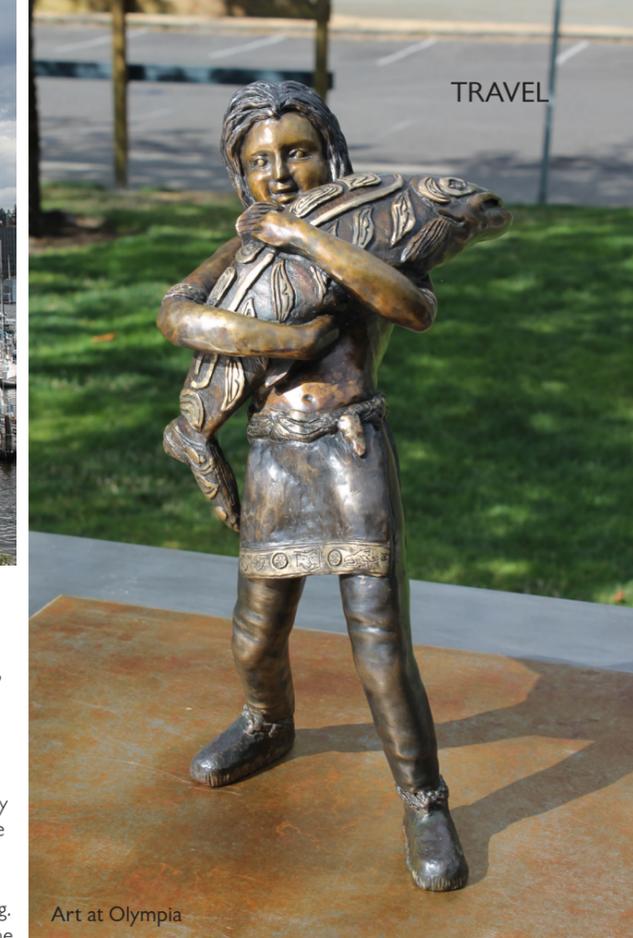
Olympia's waterfront has undergone a renovation of late and now includes a public art tour and array of bars and a brilliant microbrewery The Oly Taproom (Oly being a term of endearment for Olympia). Visitors can use the newly introduced STQRY Tour with an app downloaded for free to their smartphone which brings points of interest to life on a walking tour.

Quite the best place for dinner we decided was Anthony's Hearthfire Grill overlooking the harbour: the setting sun silhouetting the kayakers criss-crossing the open water. For breakfast it was the Oly Rockfish Grill over on 4th Avenue – brilliant food and company – and then a short stop at where the city began at the Tumwater Falls Park on the outskirts. It was here pioneers established the first industry around the rushing waterfalls.

The industry is now gone but the walks in the preserved parkway, the site of the former Olympia Brewery, are marvellous fun.

Leaving Olympia behind, we turned northwards and the Hood Canal, arriving at the stunning Alderbrook Resort and Spa in a little under two hours. The waterside setting is superb, the atmosphere pure Americana. Just two hours straight journey from Seattle itself, the Alderbrook is a dream away from the bustle of city life.

Gloriously appointed rooms overlook the sparkling Hood where the resort's own boats take to waters so clean that chef picks oysters from the shallows where the manicured lawns meet the sand. We were hooked the moment we stepped into the lobby with its huge stone fireplace. Lunch overlooking the water, a quick peep at the spa, a sit in the sun in one of the chairs facing the Hood Canal. Blissfully stunning. We vowed to return.



Art at Olympia

And so we began to follow the hockey-stick shaped Hood Canal, turning us north towards where the waters meet the Puget Sound itself.

On the way we stopped at the marvellously named Hama Hama Oyster Company to stunning seafood in their al fresco bar and grill.

Where the canal met the sound we knew we would find the lively settlement of Port Townsend with its whale watching and links to the film *An Officer and a Gentleman*. The lavender fields around the town of Sequim awaited and finally the Kitsap Peninsula where we would leave the Olympic Peninsula itself and take the half hour ferry ride across to downtown Seattle.

It had been a stunning introduction to a beautiful part of the world that, amazingly, is so poorly known by we Brits. Time to change all that.

#### FACTFILE:

- Travel to Seattle direct with British Airways and Delta Airlines.
- Stay ten minutes from Seattle Airport at the Cedarbrook Lodge: cedarbrooklodge.com.
- Visit the Crystal Mountain Resort and ride the gondola: crystalmountainresort.com.
- Stay at the Alta Crystal Resort: altacrystalresort.com.
- In Olympia stay at the Double Tree Inn by Hilton. For more visit visitolympia.com.
- Eat at Anthony's Hearthfire Grill: anthony's.com.
- Hood Canal – stay and dine at the Alderbrook Resort: alderbrookresort.com.
- Visit the Hama Hama Oyster Company: hamahamaoysters.com.
- More information from: visitseattle.org and for Washington State: experiencewa.com.
- More information: olympicpeninsula.org.