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> MOUNT BAKER

Big Snow, Bigger Air

EACH FEBRUARY, the “snowiest place on earth,” Mt. Baker Ski Area (360-734-6771; www.mtbaker.us), hosts the Legendary Banked Slalom. Once the bad-boy event on the professional snowboarding circuit, the slalom’s edge still remains sharp—especially since the area boasts the Road Gap, a launching point where powder hounds catch air over two lanes of car traffic that link the main and upper lodges. The gap’s inaugural breaching came in 1989, when boarder Shawn Farmer pioneered the out-of-bounds stunt. Alpine skiers followed, and the jump has become an international rite of passage for professional snowboard-

ing and skiing athletes.

But hard-core shredders aside, most folks make the trek 56 miles east from Bellingham on Highway 542 to Mount Baker for the family-friendly atmosphere. The ski area, properly speaking, is on the shoulders of Mount Shuksan, 10 miles east of Baker’s 10,778-foot-high volcanic cone.

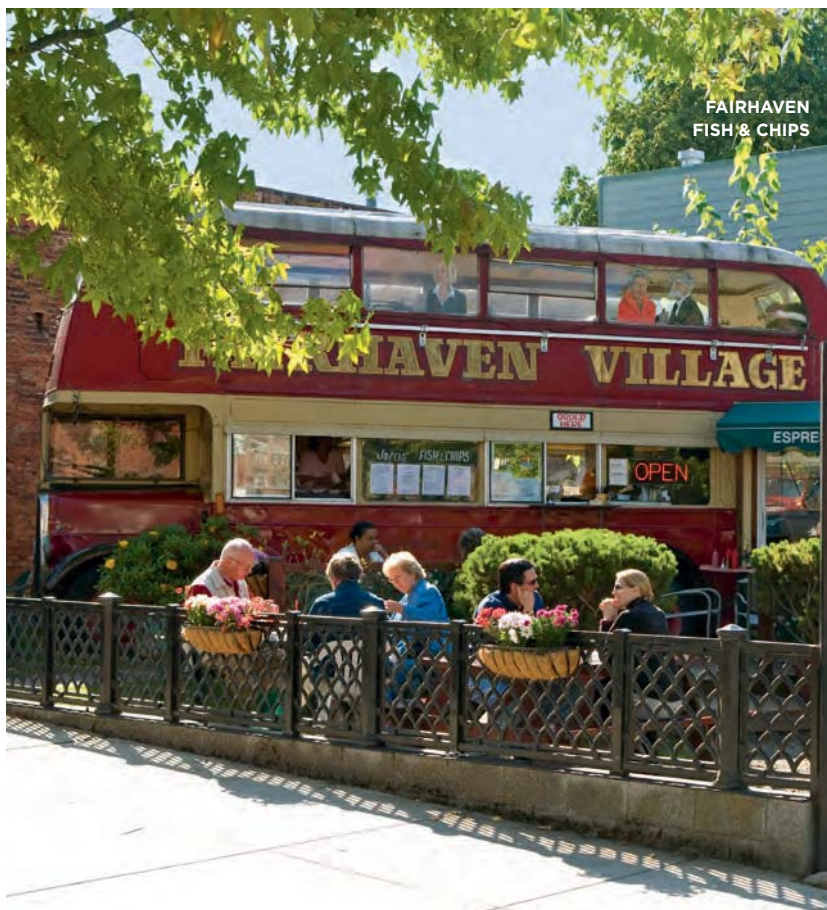
The surrounding North Cascades National Park (www.nps.gov/noca) is a draw year-round. Boating and fishing are very popular here, as are birding, wildlife watching, and horseback riding.

But from November to April the snow is the story here, and the Mt. Baker Ski Area



records impressive accumulation, averaging about 647 inches per year. The 1998–99 season put the mountain’s average snowfall to shame, setting a world record of 1,147 inches. While last year saw about half that amount, it’s still powder aplenty at what’s billed as the “snowiest lift-serviced resort in the world.” —**AMANDA CASTLEMAN**

FAIRHAVEN
FISH & CHIPS



A FAIR SIGHT

Gas-station pizza and double-decker soft-serve set a Bellingham historic district apart.

BE A LOCAL LOVER," a retro poster instructs. "Think local. Buy local. Be local." That's an easy-enough task in Fairhaven, Bellingham's historic district, which packs more than 300 small businesses into a few square, red-brick blocks a couple of miles south of downtown. Even Yorky's Market (360-676-1934; www.yorkstonoil.com/yorkyfairhaven.htm), a gas station, has a wood-fired pizza oven in this artsy, mellow enclave.

Dirty Dan Harris, a New England sailor, founded Fairhaven in the 1850s. By the late 1880s, the sleepy village had become a boomtown, full of saloons, bordellos, and opium dens. The colony suffered shootouts, crooked cops, tribal conflicts, and election scandals. Annie Dillard famously captured the Bellingham Bay area's vice in her best-selling novel *The Living*.

In the early 1900s, the town got scared straight, but the rambunctious spirit lingered. Six decades later, Fairhaven pinwheeled into one of the largest longhair enclaves north of San Francisco. The groove continues today with yoga, massage, pottery, fair-trade trinkets, and handmade jewelry on offer. Shoppers can purchase a powder-blue, gas-sipping Vespa scooter at Chispa (360-647-1196; www.greenpeoplemovers.com) alongside *pandolce* (sweet bread) gelato at Sirena Gelato (360-733-6700; www.sirenagelato.com).

"I live here for one simple reason," says Edward Readicker-Henderson, the Bellingham-based author of *Under the Protection of the Cow Demon*. "The dogs browse in the bookstore next to their people."

Even on a damp weekend, Fairhaveners congregate on Village Green. Couples lounge on the benches; families chatter in groups. Children wrestle under the outdoor cinema screen, framed by a bright mural. Dogs splash in a foot-pedal-activated trough. Diners clink microbrews over salmon burgers at the Colophon Café (360-647-0092; www.colophoncafe.com),

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> LOCAL FLAVOR

From Mudflat to Mouth

Shellfish are an abundant treasure on the coast.

SUNSET GILDS Samish Bay, and the San Juan Islands fade into the china-blue horizon. "This may be the best view I've ever had from a restaurant," says Jessica Mintz, of Seattle, as she slurps half-shells on the deck.

It's a common reaction here at the Oyster Bar on Chuckanut Drive (360-766-6185; www.theoysterbaronchuckanutdrive.com) nestled among the firs on a cliffside ribbon of road connecting Burlington and Bellingham. Early incarnations of this culinary outpost included a 1930s shack and an eatery serving only ham and deep-fried oysters. Today, the restaurant's sophisticated offerings include Kobe beef, wild-nettle soup, and hazelnut-lime California red abalone. The restaurant also has a 659-label-strong wine list that has repeatedly been bestowed with a Best Award of Excellence by *Wine Spectator*.

But the chief draw remains seafood fresh from the waters below. As the menu details, the Kumamoto oyster has a firm, rich, creamy

TRIP TIP

Tool along scenic Chuckanut Drive on the way north to Bellingham.

flavor with a buttery-sweet and mildly fruity finish, while the Samish Bay Pacific is the local favorite for its crisp, clean taste.

Best of all, these shellfish boast a petite carbon footprint, having been raised just offshore from the eatery. "At low tide, people can see the oyster beds below," says co-owner Linda Colbert. "For decades, our slogan has been, 'The oysters we serve today slept in Samish Bay last night.'" —AMANDA CASTLEMAN



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SKAGIT VALLEY

Sweet Smell of Success

Turning ice cream into an olfactory attraction

LIKE OTHER FARM stands that line the twin forks of the Skagit River, Snow Goose Produce (360-445-6908) sells fresh vegetables—many of them locally grown and organic, of course—plus flowers, plants, vegetable starts, preserves, and fresh seafood. What sticks in people's minds, however, is the mouthwatering aroma that wafts from the back of this former granary between Conway and La Conner.

The sweet smell comes from waffle irons—seven of them, to be exact—steaming enough batter to make as many as 1,000 ice cream cones a day. "People tell us they can smell it on the road as they drive by," says Mike Rust, Snow Goose's co-owner.

Rust started Snow Goose in 1985, naming it for the large white birds with black-tipped wings that flock here from October through April. Two years after the stand's opening, Snow Goose started selling ice cream too. "My mom's ideas," Rust says. "She's the one in the family with the good business ideas. The ice cream was an afterthought that got out of hand."

How far out of hand is evident on a warm spring day during the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival (360-428-5959; www.tulipfestival.org), an event that attracts more than a million peo-

PHOTOGRAPH TOP BY EMILY KELTON, RIGHT BY ANNE MURPHY

THE SKAGIT VALLEY
TULIP FESTIVAL



Tulips, produce and 48 flavors of dreamy ice cream

ple to the area each year to ogle 300 acres of eye-popping blooms. The line for ice cream runs through Snow Goose's parking lot and meanders along like the nearby river. "Their patience and good humor always amaze me," Rust says of his customers.

But the payoff is worth it—48 flavors packed in heaping helpings on top of those cones. "We call them immodest ice cream cones," says Rust. "We serve the biggest scoop we can for the best price we can charge. Our only size criterion is being able to tell a single from a double."

Snow Goose Produce is open daily from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. (hours vary depending on the season), from the first weekend of daffodil picking (typically in late February) through the first weekend of October. And while you're there, pay a visit to other Skagit Valley farms and farm stands, an updated list of which is available at www.visitskagitvalley.com/skagitvalleyfarms.cfm. —MIKE GREENSTEIN

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FAIRHAVEN

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part of the indie Village Books (360-671-2626; <http://villagebooks.booksense.com>) complex.

Nearby, a queue forms at the red double-decker bus that serves fish-and-chips alongside 44 flavors of soft-serve that include tutti frutti and piña colada (Fairhaven Fish & Chips; 360-733-5021). Steps down Harris Avenue, gilded mirrors tile the wall in Skylark's Hidden Café (360-715-3642), seemingly straight out of an Anais Nin biopic. Slip down an alleyway to the Abbey Garden Tea Room (360-752-1752) and take high tea—complete with raspberry sorbet and sausage roll.

But Fairhaven isn't all granola and boutiques. Both Amtrak trains (360-734-8851; www.amtrak.com) and Greyhound buses (360-

'Dogs browse the bookstore next to their people.'

733-5251; www.greyhound.com) stop here, but even more thrillingly, it's the southern terminus for the Alaskan Marine Highway (360-676-8445; www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs). The public ferries that ply Alaska's Inside Passage dock here, bristling with tents and lounge chairs under heat lamps for deck passage.

Plaques line the sidewalk to the port, serving as evidence of the area's checkered past. "City garbage dump site, smells like the breath of an elephant, 1890," one declares. With a little attitude adjustment, that sentiment seems to sum up modern Fairhaven fairly well: earthy and eccentric, but utterly charming. —AMANDA CASTLEMAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN KELLIHER

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