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BEERS ON THE BAY: BELLINGHAM BREWS CRUISE

BY BRANDON FRALIC

WHAT ACTIVITIES COME TO MIND when considering a summer day on Bellingham Bay? Paddling, whale watching and sailing are among the more popular options. And if your preferences skew toward happy hour, Bellingham's slice of the Salish Sea offers several bayside bars and bistros. All told, there are endless ways to play on the bay. Yet only one combines the best of both worlds: a leisurely cruise paired with locally-brewed Bellingham beer.

Enter the Bellingham Bay Brewers Cruise. Offered by San Juan Cruises since 2012, this 1.5-hour cruise gets you out on the water with beer in hand and wind in hair. A rousing mix of classic rock and country music plays as you sip Boundary Bay IPA, squinting into the sunlight. Seagulls call out; a harbor seal bobs in the wake. Come summertime, this is the quintessential Bellingham experience.

It all takes place aboard the 96-foot Victoria Star 2—a passenger ferry once used to shuttle supplies in the Gulf of Mexico. Claim a window seat or a spot on the upper deck for the best views. The Victoria Star 2 features plenty of indoor seating, along with standing areas (and a few first-come, first-served seats) at the bow and stern. You really can't go wrong. Situate yourself near one of the three brewery stations for easy access or rotate between the cabin and deck for some variety.

Beginning in Bellingham Bay, the vessel swings south. Feel the ferry rumble underfoot as you gaze out over open waters to Lummi Island and its sisters, the San Juan Islands. Chuckanut Mountain rises portside as the captain steers into the twinkling waters of Chuckanut Bay. With constantly changing scenery, there's always something to see while you sip. Marvel at million-dollar homes along Chuckanut Drive, peering above and beyond them to the emerald forests of Larrabee State Park.

On your return journey, the Victoria Star 2 sails past its point of origin before circling back near Boulevard Park—a wonderful place to watch the boats go by on another day. Downtown Bellingham comes into view along with BC's Golden Ears peaks—visible some 50 miles due north on a clear summer evening. This scenic ride alone is worth the cost of entry. But let's not forget about the beer. After all, it's included in the price of admission.

Bellingham's own Boundary Bay Brewery is on board for every cruise. A longtime community-builder in Bellingham, Boundary Bay was the first brewery to partner with San Juan Cruises for the inaugural Brews Cruise. Each cruise features award-winning Boundary Bay beers (think IPA, Scotch Ale and perhaps something seasonal) along with offerings from two guest breweries from the Northwest.

POUR

With three breweries each offering three beers, you can potentially taste your way through nine unique selections during the hour and a half journey. Brewery representatives are happy to pour you a 9 oz. taster, chatting about their brews as the Victoria Star 2 cruises on. Beer and savory snacks abound. Breweries raffle off swag. It feels like a miniature floating beer festival. It's no wonder this brews cruise sells out quickly.

Buy tickets early to secure a spot. Cruises depart from the Alaska Ferry Terminal in Fairhaven at 6:30 p.m. every Wednesday from May 30 to September 19. Two additional Oktoberfest cruises are held in September, featuring fall harvest beers and German-inspired food pairings. It's advisable to show up 30 minutes early for all cruises, check in and secure your spot in line for the best seats on the boat.

This cruise is for those 21 and older only. Tickets are \$39 for the brews cruise and \$49 for the Oktoberfest cruise. Reserve at whales.com. To plan your Bellingham stay, go to bellingham.org.



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