

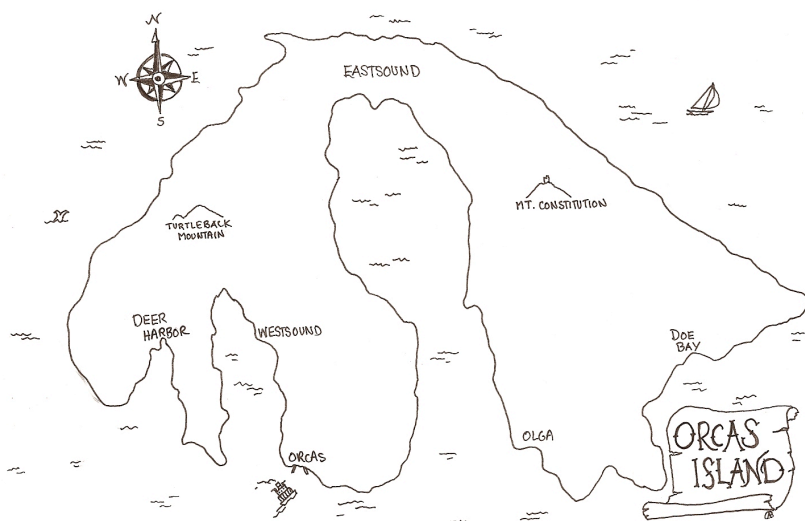
## **Following your heart**

This book is about an island and the people who love it, whether or not they live there.

The island serves as a backdrop to conflict, confusion and change, to intention, fantasy and reality. The forces that lead to these feelings are in L.A., Nantucket, Chicago, and Bozeman, in nowhere and everywhere USA.

Of course, for those who live *here*, uniqueness counts above all. No place on earth is quite as special as this island. No place has the same blend of issues, problems, opportunities, projections.

If you've read this far, you may know which island I'm writing about. Part of my own ambivalence emerges when even talking about this place, since it may bring more people here than would be coming anyway. The notion here is the irrational fantasy implicit in silence or secrecy—if you say nothing, no one will know! It reminds me of when my son would “hide” around age 4—his method was to cover his face, under the theory that if he couldn't see you, you couldn't see him!



At the same time, I'm not the Grinch who stole Orcas. I don't want to badmouth this place under the equally absurd fantasy that you might believe me and never come to visit. I'm reminded of a news story about Oregon some decades ago which depicted the state as a miserable place to live and thus one not to move to—the reporter was under an umbrella during a raging rainstorm. At the end of the piece, the camera pulled back and the viewer got to see the garden hose that was causing the rain on what was otherwise a sunny day.

So where, the Zen masters might ask us, is the middle way? What path can we, and by extension any other similar community in America, take, which shares what we have while not becoming either elitist or trashed (or both?)

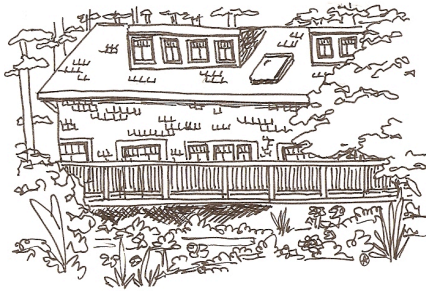
As often done in the old textbooks, the reader is invited to work out the answer to this question. (Actually, *if this book has any real purpose, the reader will feel inspired, preferably required, to work out the answer to this question, not really for Orcas, but for him/her self and 21<sup>st</sup> Century America.*)

Orcas Island, “Gem of the San Juans”, is one of four ferry-served islands located off the Northwest coast of Washington State. It is just about as far northwest as you can go in the continental 48 states. It’s about an hour and a half drive north from Seattle, and about another hour and a half cruise on the ferry to the Orcas dock. There were just under 4500 full time residents on Orcas as of the 2000 census, and as of 2008 the San Juan County population growth rate (starting in 1970 when the county was “discovered”) has been just under 4% a year, making it over this period the fastest growing county in the state.

Among the various hats I wear as a full time resident of Orcas is that of the owner / manager / employee of a small, private guest cabin<sup>1</sup>. The cabin offers a change of pace for its typical inhabitants, many of whom live in the Seattle area and want a break from the urban scene, if only for a weekend. I’d guess that maybe 20% of my guests are first time visitors to the island, and another 20% haven’t been here for years. However often they’ve been here, almost all find themselves experiencing an unexpectedly powerful love affair with the place, like the unplanned, electrifying look between two strangers that causes some to shake reality back into their heads and others to say “hello!”

It’s hard not to be entranced by Orcas, whether it’s your first visit or your fiftieth. Many of my guests ask me, “What do you do for a living?”, and I sense that their underlying motivation is something like either: “I wonder if I moved here what I could do?” or “You lucky bastard. Is it really as wonderful as it looks like to me?”

I was introduced to Orcas when a friend invited me to come here with my family in the summer of 1968, partly to camp on his property, partly so his kids could play with mine, partly to help him build his cabin, and, of course, largely so we could all share the



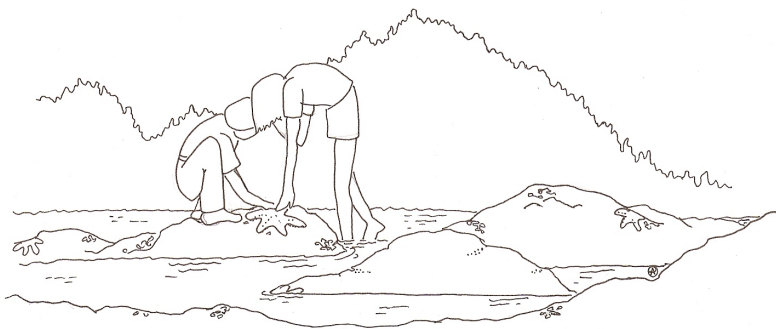
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1Garden House on Orcas ([www.doebay.net](http://www.doebay.net))

beauty of this place. He urged me to buy some land, but I was then a graduate student at the University of Washington, married with two children, trying to earn my way through a doctoral program—seldom did I have spare cash, much less enough to make the financial payments required. Somehow, and the details of that story speak to a time long gone from Orcas, I was able to make a deal to buy some land in 1972. I had earned my degree and with it a teaching position in Minnesota, and there was just enough money to make the purchase viable. My friend was a teacher as well, and we found ourselves spending our summers with our families on Orcas. As with everyone, things change, and I subsequently found myself in Seattle doing software work, mostly renting out my cabin to locals who needed a place to live, but always having some option to spend a weekend or a week as part of the deal. More time passed, more things happened and changed, and in 1986 I took a plunge and moved to Orcas full time.

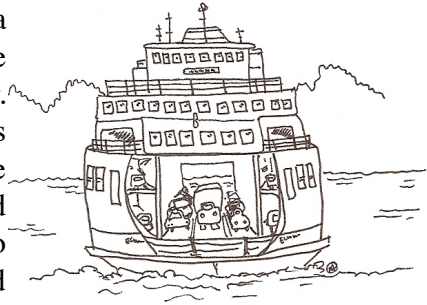
“Took a plunge”? Raising your eyebrows, looking at me with a skeptical glance, you might question my anxiety. But there was some, and in many ways still is, for reasons which I present in this book.

Orcas has got to be one of the truly neat places in the world.



Part of that comes from its insular nature. You can't walk here. You can't walk away from here. You are forced to change your urban, freeway, parking-place-scramble, scheduled-partner-quality-time, fear-for-personal-safety mentality when you finally make it onto

the huge, lumbering hulk of a Washington State Ferry some rainy Friday night in November. That oaf of a boat symbolizes escape—from the cares of the mainland, from the nanosecond time scale of the city. You can't go faster—you aren't driving!—and you don't want to be. You've left



one world to enter another, where the scale is small and the relationships are personal. If you live here, you know the phone guy, the garbage guy, the grocer, the post office staff by first name. You know a measurable percentage of the people you see every day, their kids, their cars, and their position in the island's gossip stream.

This book is a comment on the forces that influence, for both residents and visitors, the Orcas “experience”. It looks at the changes in that experience likely to occur in the future and what they mean to our community. Lurking here is a discussion of the migration away from the city, for those who can afford it, toward a 21st century rural lifestyle, a style with many of the cultural trappings of the world class city woven into the tapestry of a beautiful, low to very low density, “personal”, apparently-isolated, essentially crime-and pollution-free physical environment. Orcas becomes a metaphor for Idaho, Alaska, Montana, (*et al.*), where the latté-cognoscenti may find a community system within which the energies of their household can be blended. I muse on the reasons for this migration, not so much the obvious ones (it's safer, it's cleaner, it's doable, it's pretty, it's better for the children) but the less obvious ones, the ones that pluck heartstrings and touch on mythological themes running deep in the American psyche.

The information here is strictly my personal view. It is very likely that others may disagree with my perspective. The information is based only on my gut read of Orcas over the last several decades and not on surveys, interviews or opinion polls. This book is less about how we (read: Americans) got here than where we are and where we're going.

Although I discuss an apparent tension between locals and tourists, don't forget that a good 99% of the folks who call themselves locals were once tourists. Locals may like to think they've shed that skin, but figuratively, (and for *most* locals, literally), they aren't snakes. To form your own view of this (or any) place, and your possible place in it, hit the streets—people will talk. They love where they live. They want to keep it lovable, for themselves and visitors alike.