

Something for Every Seattle Season

Paige Stringer

After twelve years of living in Seattle, I have fallen in love with this beautiful corner of the universe and most definitely have rain in my veins (although I still haven't been able to stomach the taste of coffee).

Seattle offers a great deal in terms of arts, music, culture, and still retains much of its small-city charm in spite of burgeoning growth. What makes Seattle special is its unique connection with nature in each of four distinctive seasons. There are other cities that rival its proximity to the water (San Francisco), and mountains (Salt Lake). There are other areas that shine in specific seasons (Charleston in the spring, Montpelier in the fall), but there are precious few that intertwine themselves spiritually and physically with the natural setting in quite the same way that Seattle does.

Rimmed with the snow-capped mountains of the Olympics and Cascades, and with Mt Rainier's looming presence providing an exclamation point, Seattle is unquestionably one of America's most beautiful cities.

It all starts with the famous Seattle rain, which of course, is the source for the area's lush forests, deep lakes, and flowing rivers. I am convinced that this city would have been loved to death long ago, if not for the saving grace of its rain. There are many people who can't fathom living in a place where winter accentuates its short days with a cloak of pewter and relentless wet that soaks through to the bone.

Living in a place where the slugs are four inches long and the moss and mold thrives is not for everyone. However, those that do live here have accepted the weather and perhaps even embrace it. When I first moved here, I was surprised to see my recreational soccer team play games in weather that would have sent my native California mates packing long ago. I learned that umbrellas are so not cool. And, when I complained to the local market grocery clerk about another in a string of gray and wet days, she merely shrugged and said, "But, that's what makes the air so fresh". That simple statement encapsulates the attitude of Seattleites. Is it raining? So what? Throw another log on the fire. Rainy days suggest reading books, personal reflection, conversations with friends in warm coffee houses, and other soul-inspiring activities that slow us down a bit from our hectic lives.

Seattle weather offers a subject of conversation, a point of humor that never seems to tire. Where else can one find such creative descriptions in the forecasts about what appears to be the same daily outlook? To name a few: partly sunny, partly cloudy, variable clouds, clouds then sun, overcast, sun then clouds, sun breaks, and my favorite – areas of sun. As if implying you should consider yourself lucky if you happen to catch a ray in one of those "areas of sun".

The weather brings pronounced seasons, and each season offers unique rites of passage that the locals embrace as part of their experience here. The seasonal traditions are as comfortable and well-worn as a favorite pair of jeans, washed hundreds of times and broken in to fit the curves of the body, and they help to bring the community together.

I tell people who have just moved here or who are repeat visitors to Seattle that after hitting the usual tourist traps, they should experience some of those Seattle seasonal traditions that embrace the natural beauty of the area and are vintage Seattle. In that vein, here are some suggestions to get outside yourself, both literally and figuratively:

Winter

Bald Eagle Festival (www.skagiteagle.org; Jan 24-25, 2009; Concrete) - In late January every year, hundreds of bald eagles visit the Skagit River to prey on the weary salmon. It is truly a sight to see such an abundance of these huge, proud birds perching amongst the treetops along the river. Stop by the Bald Eagle Interpretive Center in Concrete for lectures, guest speakers, displays, photography, and nature walks with knowledgeable guides. Be sure to take a look in one of the high speed telescopes for an intimate glimpse of the eagles along the river's edge.

Curling at the Granite Curling Club (www.curlingseattle.org; (206) 362-2446; 1440 N 128th St) – Ok, I know this is a strange Canadian sport, but when the local newspaper promoted the facility's open house, I had to go. I convinced a friend to come along, we curled, and we had a blast. The Granite Curling Club in north Seattle is the only curling facility west of the Rockies, which means it is a national landmark (for curlers anyway). Strap a piece of duct tape on your shoe and face the thrill of careening down the ice while trying to keep up with a 30 lb stone.

Storm watch at the Kalaloch Lodge (www.visitkalaloch.com; (866) 525-2562; Forks)- Kalaloch, located in the Olympic National Park on the Washington coast, is one place where bad weather is a desired commodity. The lodge and its 15 cozy cabins line a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean; an oasis of civilization among miles of undeveloped beach and towering pines. Light a fire in the fireplace and settle in for a spectacular nature show when the storms roll through and churn the sea. When the sun comes out, enjoy walks along the beach. This isolated enclave is a perfect destination for romantic getaways.

Spring

Skagit Valley Tulip Festival (www.tulipfestival.org; April 1-30; Skagit Valley, I-5 exits 221 - 236) - More tulips are distributed out of the Skagit than just about anywhere in the world. In April, the fields are awash in psychedelic colors that stretch for acres. The tulips are the main attraction, but the yellow daffodils that arrive first are a spectacular warm-up act in their own right. Avoid the car traffic by renting a bike in Mt Vernon and take a ride through the country roads to take in the vision of flowers against the snow-capped mountains. After checking out the flowers, head up to the Deception Pass Bridge for Pacific ocean views that are absolutely breathtaking.

Ride on the Victoria Clipper (www.clippervacations.com; 800-888-2535; Victoria Clipper Terminal, Pier 69) - What better way to take in the scenic Puget Sound than aboard a boat? The Clipper offers many packages and options, all at affordable rates. An added bonus is the champagne breakfasts they offer on some cruises. A sure bet is a weekend option to Victoria that includes an overnight stay at the storied Fairmont Empress Hotel.

Windermere Cup (www.windermerecup.com; May; U. of Washington)– Opening Day of the boating season offers crew races in the Montlake Cut near the University of Washington campus. Stand on the Montlake Bridge and watch as crew teams ranging from youth clubs to the over-70 age bracket race underneath. The day-long, free event culminates with the Windermere Cup, which pits the UW crews against other collegiate and international teams. The races are followed by a boat parade of yachts and vintage boats that lasts for several hours.

Summer

Seafair (www.seafair.com; check schedule for events and locations; Jun-Aug) – Seafair has been Seattle’s traditional summer festival for over 50 years. The calendar of events includes community events, parades, the Blue Angels, the Navy, Coast Guard, and hydroplane races on Lake Washington. Thousands of people attend every year and it is just one big summer-long party.

Seward Park (www.sewardpark.org; Lake Washington Blvd and Orcas St) - Greenlake is arguably the most popular park in Seattle, and Discovery Park offers terrific views and many forested trails to explore. You can’t go wrong with either one, but to escape the crowds, venture south of Seattle to Seward Park. Located on the shores of Lake Washington, this spacious and well-maintained park boasts a 2.5-mile loop through old-growth forests, a sandy beach, tennis courts, and an interpretive center. It is a favorite haunt for runners, cyclists, and walkers. Take in the cherry blossoms while exercising along the 8-mile route that follows the lake to the Madison Park neighborhood.

Concert at Chateau Ste Michelle winery (www.ste-michelle.com; Jun – Aug; Woodinville) – Seattle’s robust music scene comes alive in the summer and the season’s schedule offers something for everyone. One of my favorite places to take in a concert is at the Chateau Ste Michelle winery, located in Woodinville, about 30 minutes east of Seattle. The outdoor sound stage is set on the winery grounds with Mt Rainier as its backdrop and open seating on the lawn. Bring a picnic, sip a glass of the Chateau’s wine, and enjoy the show.

Fall

Issaquah Salmon Days Festival (www.salmondays.org; Oct 4-5, 2008; free shuttle Issaquah Park & Ride, Newport Way and State Route 900 9am-7pm) – The town of Issaquah, on the east side of Lake Washington, celebrates the annual return of the salmon to our streams with an award-winning festival that draws over 150,000 visitors each year. Enjoy a full weekend of hatchery thrills and exhibits, streets lined with artists and crafts vendors, a parade, food tents, live

entertainment, and the kids' favorite Field of Fun. With such a warm homecoming, it is no surprise the salmon return every year. Wouldn't you?

Remlinger Farms (www.remlingerfarms.com; 425-333-4135; 11am-3pm weekdays, 11am-4pm Sat, Sun; Carnation)– A visit to this working farm outside of Carnation is a great way to settle into the fall season. Take your family and delight in picking out the perfect pumpkin from the large patch. Pet the barn animals, take a plunge in the hay, ride the vintage train, and wander the stalls of fresh produce and mercantile. Wrap up the afternoon with a slice of pie and a warm cup of steaming apple cider. It is all there for the taking, an experience straight out of some Eddie Bauer fall catalog.

Husky Football (www.gohuskies.com; Sept-Nov, U. of Washington) –University of Washington Husky football is a mainstay of Seattle Septembers, established long before any of today's local professional sports teams called the city home. Take in the cheers of 70,000 adoring fans, dance along as the band plays "Tequila", the team's unofficial fight song, and cheer the canine husky mascot running out of the team tunnel, and you'll be hard-pressed not to become a fan yourself. Set on the shores of Lake Washington, the stadium offers amazing views from the stands. The low angle of the autumn sun through the crisp, frosty air gives off such a yellow hue that the place really does shine Husky purple and gold.

Take a hike (www.issaquahalps.org)– In a city where there are hiking opportunities at every turn, I recommend a series of peaks located a mere 30 minutes away from downtown Seattle. Termed the Issaquah Alps, the most popular are Squak, Cougar, and Tiger mountains. They provide a wealth of trails through lush forests and offer views that will take your breath away. Be sure to check out the interpretive center garden where rainwater drips onto drums to produce catchy tunes. A cheesy tip to help remember the order of these mountain peaks - what would you do if you were caught between a cougar and a tiger? Squak.