



Swirling water and abrupt eddy lines make up the ornery side of Deception Pass's personality.

DECEPTION PASSED

Two intermediates meet the challenge of Whidbey Island's most devious stretch on their personal skills exam.

Nerves almost got the better of us as Claire and I launched our boats in Bowman Bay and paddled toward Deception Pass. We'd heard stories about the powerful currents creating huge standing waves, eddy lines so abrupt they can knock over a cabin cruiser, whirlpools so vicious they can drag a kayak under. We'd planned our trip precisely to paddle one hour on each side of slack current, on a day that had a low tidal exchange to

begin with, but doubts crept in as we floated toward the looming bridge, water lapping hungrily at our sides. Were those tables always reliable? Had we timed it right? Or were we about to get sucked into a dangerous situation beyond our intermediate abilities?

As if on cue, a sea lion stuck his hefty head out of the water, eyed us for a moment, then quietly dipped back under. It seemed like a good omen, and sure enough, the pass gently accepted our presence for the next two hours as we explored the rocky shoreline of the lucid green waterway, glassing birds and spot-

ting seals. We paddled through Canoe Pass, the small channel north of the main pass, then let the final legs of the flood carry us east to Strawberry Island. As the current ebbed, we drifted back under the bridge and out toward Deception Island in Rosario Strait, then paddled back to Bowman Bay with our newfound bragging rights: we'd finally navigated the infamous Deception Pass.

Deception Pass is only one of many outstanding places to paddle near Whidbey Island, in northern Puget Sound. Forty-five miles long, with nearly 150 miles of shoreline, Whidbey is a worthy destination for sea kayakers of all abilities. If it seems counterintuitive to plan a paddling trip just shy of the world-famous San Juan Islands, consider the advantages.

First, for those with limited time or money, the aforementioned Deception Pass Bridge allows convenient car access to Whidbey Island, eliminating the need to wither in lengthy summer-

PHOTO BY JOHN BURBRIDGE

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DESTINATIONS

WHIDBEY ISLAND, WASHINGTON

season San Juan ferry lines for a \$50 boat ride. Whidbey is also blessed with an abundance of public land, including seven state parks and numerous other hand-carry launch sites spaced at 5- to 10-mile intervals around the island. When Claire and I moved to Whidbey, we set a goal of circumnavigating the island in these manageable day-trip chunks, and three years later we put the last piece of the puzzle in place when we paddled from Double Bluff to Possession Point Park, on the southern tip of the island.

Although our circumnavigation involved car shuttles, this is not necessary to enjoy what Whidbey Island has to offer. Given the numerous launch sites, out-and-back trips allow single-vehicle paddlers to fully experience the wide variety of paddling options around Whidbey. The kayaking can be logically divided into three areas: the north end, the east side, and the west side. Each region exhibits a unique character, allowing paddlers to choose an appropriate level of challenge. As always, tidal and weather considerations will affect paddling conditions.

THE NORTH END

There's more to paddling the north end of Whidbey Island than Deception Pass, particularly for those who enjoy poking around small islands. East of the pass, launch at Cornet Bay, Hoypus Point, or Ala Spit to explore Skagit Island, Hope Island, and the surrounding waters. This protected area is a wonderful destination when conditions elsewhere are too windy and wavy, though close attention must be paid to the currents, especially around Hope Island. A good plan is to cross from Ala Spit to Hope Island at slack current, spend the day exploring the islands and Similk Bay, then cross back over to Ala Spit at the next slack. For those wanting to kayak-camp, Hope Island has five primitive sites and Skagit Island has one. There is also a Cascadia Marine Trail campsite located at Ala Spit. Nearby Deception Pass State Park has an excellent developed campground with showers. Reservations are recommended on summer weekends.

West of the Deception Pass bridge,

paddlers seeking protected conditions can launch in Bowman Bay (on Fidalgo Island). While the bay is usually calm, venturing out requires keeping an eye on the currents. Paddling from an hour before until an hour after slack current is usually a good bet for manageable conditions in Deception Pass. **IMPORTANT:** Don't confuse currents with tides—they aren't synchronized. Use only the Deception Pass Current Tables to time your trip. And don't underestimate the potential for danger and even death. Know your rescues and dress for immersion. If you're uncertain of your abilities, go with an experienced paddler or hire a guide.

THE EAST SIDE

Saratoga Passage, on the east side of Whidbey Island, is great for those in search of protected conditions and manageable currents. Oak Harbor and Penn Cove offer convenient paddling for beginners. Launch from City Beach Park in Oak Harbor and paddle south under Blower's Bluff (watch for seals hauled out on the rocks) to Penn Cove,

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a birder's paradise. If conditions are calm, cross Penn Cove to the quaint seaside town of Coupeville and land near the wharf. After lunch at Toby's Tavern and a mocha chip shake from Kapaw's Iskreme, head back to Oak Harbor to complete the trip. Penn Cove is where world-famous Penn Cove mussels are grown (sample them at the Captain Whidbey Inn), but please avoid the floating pens on the southwest side.

Your best chance to see a gray whale around Whidbey Island is in southern Saratoga Passage in early spring, anywhere between Holmes Harbor and Possession Point. The town of Langley, with its numerous galleries and fine restaurants, is definitely worth checking out, and you can launch at the marina.

THE WEST SIDE

The west side gives paddlers a taste of open-water conditions, with swells coming all the way up the Strait of Juan de Fuca and occasionally producing large surf action. For kayak surfers, the west side is the place to be, especially off Point Partridge at Fort Ebey State Park, a popular hang-out for the island's small but committed population of surfboarders.

Usually, though, the west side is calm enough for intermediates to handle. The stunning views of the Olympic Mountains across Admiralty Inlet are hard to beat, and paddlers interested in ship traffic will not be disappointed. In Admiralty Inlet, be aware of tide rips around points where the current gets constricted; usually they can be avoided. Currents are weak on the west side anywhere between Point Partridge and Deception Pass park.

Although you'll probably see cars with kayaks on top, Whidbey Island is a big place, and it's unlikely you'll encounter other paddlers on the water. Spotting wildlife is always possible, especially along the miles of undeveloped bluff and beach land, but it's equally enjoyable to paddle the shoreline and check out the sometimes expansive, sometimes eccentric vacation homes. Whatever your paddling ability or recreational desire, Whidbey Island is a true Northwest gem that will lure you back for years to come. □