

Seattle by train: A great weekend getaway

SCOTT AYERS - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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If you want to get away for a romantic weekend with a loved one, take the kids to see the sights or a ballgame on a warm summer night or just want to reward yourself with a fine hotel, fine dining and a night of music or theater, there are few better options than a weekend train trip to Seattle.

Riding the Amtrak Cascades is simple and relatively inexpensive - with prices starting at about \$45 per person roundtrip, depending on what days you travel and how far in advance you buy your tickets.

Southbound trains leave Bellingham at 8:35 a.m., arriving in Seattle at 11:05 a.m.; and 7:40 p.m., arriving in Seattle at 10:10 p.m.

Northbound trains leave Seattle at 7:40 a.m., arriving in Bellingham at 9:49 a.m.; and at 6:50 p.m., arriving in Bellingham at 8:58 p.m.

Read on for options for places to stay, places to eat and things to do or see this summer in Seattle. Then book your tickets online at amtrakcascades.com, or stop by the Amtrak ticket office at the Fairhaven Station, 401 Harris Ave.

THE TRIP

The Amtrak Cascades offers a very relaxing 2 1/2-hour trip from Bellingham to Seattle. Be sure to sit on the west side of the train for magnificent views of the San Juan islands,

Padilla Bay and, further south, Puget Sound and Olympic Peninsula. The view is especially impressive on the evening train on the way back home. There are few sights more spectacular than the sun setting over the water as you glide along the train tracks where the water meets the Chuckanut Mountains.

Between Bellingham and Seattle you will stop at Mount Vernon, Stanwood, Everett and Edmonds, before you wind your way along the water into north Seattle, past the Shilshole Bay marina and then across Salmon Bay just west of the famous Ballard Locks. Once into downtown Seattle the train enters a tunnel for the last couple of miles before arriving at the King Street Station, which has served as Seattle's train depot since 1906.

WHERE TO STAY

There are not a lot of hotels south of downtown near the train station. Perhaps the most noteworthy is the Silver Cloud Hotel Stadium at 1046 First Ave. South. The location puts you just steps away from Safeco Field, home of the Seattle Mariners baseball team. Rooms are \$130 a night or more.

More options are available downtown. Walk across Fourth Avenue from the Amtrak station to the International District Metro station and, for \$1.75, take the new LINK light rail train north. Or flag a taxi for about \$10. Downtown hotels can range from the cheap to the very pricy - with the ones discussed here ranging from \$150 a night to more than \$300 a night, depending on when you make your reservation and when you are staying. You may find last-minute deals online.

Once downtown, the Fairmont Olympic hotel is the top of its class. The only Seattle hotel rated five diamonds by AAA, the Olympic, 411 University St., is renowned for its attention to detail in facilities and service.

The twin towers of the Westin Seattle hotel, 1900 Fifth Ave., are renowned as the hotel where presidents and royalty stay. More importantly for you, the views from the hotels' upper floors facing west and north are unbeatable.

Spacious, luxurious bathrooms are what set apart the Grand Hyatt Seattle, 721 Pine St. In some of the guest rooms, the bathrooms - with glass-enclosed showers and a separate tub big enough for two - are as big as the living area.

You won't find giant bathtubs at the new Hyatt at Olive 8, though. In keeping with the environmental ethic of the first hotel built in Seattle to be certified by the U.S. Green Building Council, the bathrooms are shower-only to conserve water. And the toilets are "duel-flush" - you will understand when you see one. You'll find this stylish, modern, but conscientious hotel at 1635 Eighth Ave.

If you are looking for something a little more unique, consider Hotel Max, 620 Stewart St. Home to more than 350 original paintings and photographs, the entire boutique hotel is a work of art. The art is in the lobby, hallways and guest rooms, making up for small rooms and bathrooms.