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Insider's guide to Seattle

A metropolis with many monikers – Jet City, Rain City and Emerald City, to name a few – Seattle is an eclectic mix of funky neighbourhoods and skyscrapers, Gore-Tex and business suits. Its backdrop of lakes and mountains makes it picture-perfect, while the variety of indoor and outdoor activities at a visitor's fingertips makes it a place to please all sensibilities. And starting in July, 2012, you'll be able to see it all from 200 feet up when the new Seattle Great Wheel, a waterfront Ferris wheel, starts operation.

Five places to get delicious seafood in Seattle:

Ray's Boathouse: Nothing beats Ray's clean and uncluttered view of Shilshole Bay and the Olympic Mountains. Try the Classic Sampler – Alaskan king salmon, Chatham Strait sablefish in sake kasu and Dungeness crab cake. There's also a café, which provides a more casual atmosphere and offers 20 microbrews to pair with its seafood.

Seastar: This award-winning restaurant has an outdoor patio, a first-rate wine list, a separate raw bar and a happy hour. Plus, it's really pretty inside.

Spud Fish & Chips: It started as a shack in West Seattle in 1935; fortunately, building improvements have since been made. After your meal, you can stroll along the beautiful Alki Beach promenade.

Blue C Sushi: Now with six locations, the first (and best) address is in Seattle's fun and trendy Fremont neighbourhood. Blue C offers the Kaiten style of dining—sushi on a moving conveyor belt that winds its way around the dining room! It could be a great way to introduce the kids to sashimi.

The Walnut and the Carpenter: Just typing their name makes me hungry. Mmmmm, oysters! And no Seattle seafood expedition is complete without a visit to the Ballard neighbourhood anyway, the original home of Seattle's Scandinavian seafaring community and now one of the best places to walk and shop in the city.

Five favourite, independent coffee houses:

El Diablo: The mural-covered walls provide amusement while you sip your Cuban-style coffee, and the café is in the Queen Anne neighbourhood, which is a great side trip. Bonus: their Mexican hot chocolate is to die for.

All City Coffee: If you feel like exploring the industrial-yet-artsy Georgetown area, make sure to stop at All City where, from the sidewalk tables, you can compare the underbellies of planes just before they touch down at Boeing Field.

Top Pot Doughnuts: Now with eight locations, Top Pot has grown rapidly yet maintains their comfortable, welcoming vibe. The 5th Avenue and Capitol Hill shops are the ones to hit when you want to add a sugar rush to your caffeine buzz.

Bauhaus Books & Coffee: Just a short uphill chug from downtown and open until 1 a.m., this is a primo night-owl, quasi-hipster and people-watching hangout. A creaky old staircase connects the two levels with great views of the Space Needle from upstairs. And they sell Ding Dongs. What more needs to be said?

Herkimer Coffee: After communing with the animals at Woodland Park Zoo or doing some shopping in the Phinney Ridge neighbourhood, head down the street to Herkimer for a cup of shade-grown, pesticide-free java (there's also a University District location). For true coffee aficionados, their roaster keeps a blog with detailed descriptions of more than 35 varieties.

Five great restaurants that only locals would know:

Tamarind Tree: Located in the International District, this gem is tucked in the back of a busy parking lot, hidden from view. Once inside, diners can get lost in the pleasing contemporary decor and their extensive menu of distinct dishes. My favourite dish is the pork-stuffed tofu, with the chicken ginger vodka running a close second. The prices will make you smile, too.

Volunteer Park Café: The dinner menu includes yummy things like "Pot O' Gold," a roasted whole pumpkin filled with polenta and topped with a chanterelle sauce. Brunch is also an appealing option because it can be combined with a visit to the nearby Asian Art Museum or Conservatory of Flowers.

Buenos Aires Grill: The wood beams and floor, the romantic cosiness, the tango dancers whirling by as you dine—it all adds up to a uniquely memorable evening. Even though I'm not usually a big beef eater, they do it up right, plus I love that a visit makes me feel like I've time traveled back to a different century and continent.

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[Black Bottle Gastro-Tavern](#): Fresh, local ingredients in interesting combinations are the specialty here. Diners will discover choices like natural hanger steak with daikon/shiso and grilled octopus with fava bean cilantro pesto salad. Just reading the menu is a poetic experience.

[Poppy](#): The dining concept is Indian but the food defies all labels. Guests can select a seven- or 10-item thali – a platter holding small portions of several dishes—with things like lavender-rubbed Muscovy duck breast with rhubarb and asparagus with fried sage and lemon thyme. Located in Capitol Hill, it's easy to get there from downtown, and there are tons of other fun things to do once you're on "The Hill."

Five places to catch great live music:

[The Triple Door](#): The bonus of this locale is that you can watch great shows in an intimate setting while enjoying exquisite Asian cuisine from Wild Ginger, which has held the Zagat guide award for most popular Seattle restaurant 11 years running. In addition to the main stage, there's also The Musiquarium, a happy-hour lounge which features live music with no cover charge.

[Showbox](#): There are two great locations: one in the heart of the city, across from Pike Place Market, and one in 'SoDo,' or south of downtown. Holding just 1,100 and 1,800 music fans respectively, Showbox still books big names. I cried a little bit watching Paul Simon sing The Sound of Silence at the Market location in 2011.

[Woodland Park Zoo](#): For summer visitors, the zoo is a kid-friendly place to see outdoor performances by the likes of Rosanne Cash, k.d. lang and Ziggy Marley at very reasonable ticket prices. You can pack a picnic or nosh there on burgers, tacos and other light fare. Bring a blanket or some low chairs and you're good to go.

[The Crocodile](#): As Mick says, I know, it's only rock 'n roll, but I like it, I like it, yes, I do. Many rock legends have played at The Croc (think Nirvana and R.E.M.) and you never really know what kind of magic might happen up on their stage.

[Gorge Amphitheatre](#): It's 150 miles from Seattle, but I'd be remiss if I didn't mention this premier music destination. Watch the sun go down from a perch overlooking the Columbia River while acts like The Police and the Dave Matthews Band are on stage—it makes for epic concert moments. While it's possible to do a same-day round-trip, it will get you back to the city quite late, so there are also on-site camping options and nearby towns with small motels.

Five great outdoor activities:

[The Green Lake Loop](#): Walk, run, bicycle or roller skate—you can do it all on the paved path at Green Lake. At 2.8 miles, it's the perfect distance to burn off lunch from one of the quaint eateries nearby. It's also a great place to exercise Fido, as long as he or she is on a leash.

[Bainbridge Island Ferry](#): Craving the feel of the wind in your hair? Head for the downtown waterfront—by foot or bus is best as street parking has a two-hour limit—to Pier 52 where for less than 10 bucks, you can walk aboard the ferry for a round-trip ride. Once you reach the Bainbridge side, quaint shops and restaurants are just minutes away by foot.

[Sea Kayaking](#): With waterways to connect the Ballard Locks, Lake Union and Lake Washington, you could paddle uninterrupted for days! Rentals are available at various places throughout the city, with many rental shops concentrated around Lake Union.

[Alki Beach](#): If a sandy beach visit is on your list, try Alki in West Seattle. The two-and-a-half mile promenade is an easy stroll and, of course, is peppered with coffee shops. To get there from downtown, you can drive, ride the bus or take a water taxi across the bay.

[Biking on the Burke-Gilman Trail](#): If you jump on at its start in Ballard, you could pedal on the Burke-Gilman Trail for 17 miles. You'll pass through several interesting neighbourhoods before the pavement runs out and a large portion of the trail runs parallel to various waterways.

Laura Zera has lived and worked in Cameroon, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States. An insatiable traveller, her first book (published as Laura Enridge), [Tro-tros and Potholes](#), chronicles her solo adventures through five countries of West Africa. She's currently working on a memoir about being raised by a schizophrenic mother and her work can also be found in Booktrope Publishing's anthology Write for the Fight: A Collection of Seasonal Essays and at GoodFoodWorld.com. Originally from Vancouver, B.C., Laura has called Seattle home since 2004. She keeps in touch with people from around the world through her blog, [Stories to Connect Cultures](#).

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