



Focus Feature

Alderbrook known for Hood Canal views

Alderbrook Resort

By CARY ORDWAY

You hear about Hood Canal and, quite honestly, if you've never been there it's difficult to imagine exactly what that is. Having grown up in the Wenatchee area, the image that first came to my mind was the irrigation canals that are just wide enough for an inner tube to slosh its way through the fruit orchards. Others might conjure up the canals of the Netherlands. Then there's the Panama Canal.



Well Hood Canal, it turns out, is definitely wider than those irrigation canals, for this body of water can accommodate just about any seagoing vessel you choose. The people who promote the canal call it a fjord – actually the only one in the lower 48 states. To us it looks like a never-ending lake nestled in just about the perfect location with the majestic and snow-capped Olympic Mountains a constant backdrop for postcard-like pictures that visitors grab looking west from the eastern shore of the canal.

Our visit to Hood Canal began with a ferry ride, although it wasn't completely necessary. Looking at the map, it just seemed like the most direct route to Union, Washington and its famous Alderbrook Resort was to hop a Washington State Ferry in Seattle, disembark at Bremerton and head to Belfair and along the western shore of the canal on down to Union. But truth be told, you can also swing down Interstate 5 through Tacoma and back up to Union without taking a ferry – and it takes pretty close to the two hours it took us to get there using the ferry.

But ferries are not just transportation in Washington. They're mini-cruise ships where you can get out of your car and go upstairs to sit and view some of the most spectacular scenery in the country. Okay, you won't be hanging around long enough to take advantage of the Midnight Buffet, and there is no shuffleboard, and you won't have a stateroom – but then what do you expect for a \$30 cruise?

About an hour on the ferry and you arrive in Bremerton. This “navy town” is loaded with historic homes and it's an interesting – if a bit congested – drive through town headed for Hood Canal. Within minutes you're driving by giant aircraft carriers and other naval vessels and then not long after that you're skirting Hood Canal itself on your drive down to Alderbrook Resort and Spa. Headed south on Highway 106 the only thing between you and the canal are the vacation homes lined up neatly along the shoreline using up every single inch of space on these expensive waterfront lots. Some are older, some newer and all are fun to think about as you imagine living one day yourself on a piece of land with this kind of water view.



And what a view it is. The wooded shoreline and hills just in front of the Olympics make this feel like a mountain lake, not an extension of Puget Sound. The locals use it like a lake, too – lots of waterskiing, boating, fishing, shoreline parks. We passed through one such park just before we got to Alderbrook – this one called the Twanoh State Park, known for its oyster beds, gorgeous views and good swimming because of the warmer-than-usual water temperature.

Then suddenly we arrived at Alderbrook. Close to 100 years old, Alderbrook Resort and Spa has been a gathering place around here for a long, long time. Back when it first

opened it was more about camping and people who arrived by boat. Today it's about luxury in a unique setting – a place to “rough it” where you sleep in luxurious comfort and feast on expertly prepared gourmet meals, all the while having full access to such amenities as a full spa, a fitness center and the Alderbrook Golf Club. With its waterfront setting – where incidentally most towering trees have been left in place – the 88-acre property feels like it would be perfect for a Summer Camp. Except this Summer Camp comes with luxurious guest rooms and amenities that your teenagers can only dream about.

Speaking of teenagers, we brought a couple to the resort with us and rented one of the resort's very elaborate cottages. These cottages pre-date the updated main lodge areas, but they too have been upgraded well beyond the basic accommodations they once were. In our case we had two separate bedrooms, a bath and a living room area with flat-screen television. The kitchen was well-equipped and sufficient for most family meals you would be preparing on vacation. A comfortable dining nook looked out on the water and the resort grounds.

The lodge units are smaller, but quite luxurious. Most of the units have water views, while there also are several lower-priced garden views. All the rooms offer premium linens, window daybeds and oversized soaking tubs. If you're coming as a couple, the main lodge is ideal; if you have kids, the cottages are a better choice.

The kids also will enjoy the "Gamers" X-box game room that offers nine 37-inch TV's and one 55" TV with individual Xbox controls and headsets. The pool was also a hit with our kids – it's indoors but with see-through walls and ceilings taking full advantage of the canal scenery. There is also a nearby steam room and a sauna that are shared with the Spa but can be accessed without being signed into the Spa.

If you are traveling with kids, the resort restaurant is a bit of a splurge with most entrees going for between \$35 and \$50. But the cooking here is among the best we've enjoyed and, unlike many high-end restaurants, the portions here are quite generous. We started off with the Dungeness crab cakes, which offered a preview of the spectacular tastes we would enjoy throughout the meal. The Caesar Salad is a great option if you're on a budget – just \$20 or so but good and quite filling with the grilled chicken add-on. We also enjoyed pan-seared sea scallops, a double cut pork chop and wild king salmon, all cooked to perfection.



By the way, don't overlook the free oyster barbecue held out on the grounds in the late afternoon – for those who love oysters, they do not come any fresher. They're taken straight from the bay to the barbecue where they are cooked in the shell. This also is a great chance to meet your fellow guests and the resort managers.

The sleeping at Alderbrook is blissful – it's very, very quiet. For some reason, even our teenagers calmed down, kind of overcoming that youthful urge to keep talking no matter what. It was early lights out in our cozy cottage and a lazy breakfast the next day.

If we'd had more time, we would have taken a tour on the Lady Alderbrook, a 54-foot boat that has been renovated and set up for cocktail and dinner cruises. Guests can take a tour of Hood Canal with narration by a longtime resident of the area. Along the way, guests will learn of the area's rich history that involves Native Americans and a big move toward tourism that never really took off – which has allowed Hood Canal to keep its family vacation getaway feel that it has today.

So finally, after a brief but thoroughly enjoyable stay at the Alderbrook Resort and Spa, we now have a new definition for “canal”: It’s a really cool place to build a resort.

AT A GLANCE



WHERE: Alderbrook Resort and Spa is on the shores of Hood Canal, a couple of hours drive southwest from Seattle. The journey can be partially by ferry, making it even more interesting.

WHAT: The resort offers luxury accommodations in a beautiful treed setting with Hood Canal and the Olympic Mountains as a backdrop. Visitors can choose from a variety of activities such as swimming and golf and also enjoy world-class amenities such as the Spa and the resort’s high-end restaurant.

WHEN: Year-around. The best weather will be in the summer, but even when it rains it’s a beautiful setting and an ideal family or couples vacation spot.

WHY: The quiet and calming resort atmosphere combine with the location’s natural beauty to create a memorable getaway experience.

HOW: For more information on the Alderbrook Resort and Spa, please phone 1-800-622-9370 or visit www.alderbrookresort.com.

Photos, from top: Alderbrook has ideal location on scenic Hood Canal; Alderbrook Resort has been thoroughly updated to offer luxurious rooms and cottages; teen-agers are introduced to fresh oysters; several historic cottages have been completed remodeled

Photos courtesy of Alderbrook Resort and NorthwestTravelAdvisor.com