

The Road Trip Report

Seattle, Washington

29-30 August 2026

*Lost
in air
and water*

Flying saucer

The Space Needle's viewing platform hovers 605 feet / 184 meters above Seattle Center, site of the 1962 World's Fair. In addition to the Needle, the property now is home to the Chihuly museum I previously wrote about, the Pacific Science Center, Seattle Children's Museum, several performing arts venues, and the Climate Pledge Arena, where both the NHL's Kraken and WNBA's Storm play.

Lost in air and water

MORE INFORMATION — Click on the underlined words.

I first visited Seattle and the Pacific Northwest in 1979, thanks to a strike at United Airlines. To recover from a 58-day shutdown, United offered half-price ticket vouchers good anywhere on the airline's domestic system for every new ticket purchased in the initial weeks after the strike.

It smelled like a bargain to me, especially when there was a cheap roundtrip to qualify from Charlotte, North Carolina, where I worked, and two vouchers bumped you to first class in a day when carving a prime rib in the aisle wasn't unusual on a cross-country flight.

The Seattle I saw then with my winter skiing buddy seemed like a slimmed down version of San Francisco, which I'd visited a couple of times during college. The Seattle I've visited many times since (see earlier newsletter here) has changed a lot. But I think my appreciation of it — stacked up on a ridge along an isthmus between Puget Sound and Lake Washington — has changed more.

There are too many cars crammed into not enough space, especially on Interstate 5, and too many people crammed along its renovated waterfront and the Pike Place Market. But I like the bustle of ferries, the sea planes visiting Lake Union, the stadiums where a railyard used to be, and the ability to see real mountains almost every direction you turn.

It's an urban outpost dramatically integrated into nature that includes an enormous, glacier-clad mountain to the south, Mount Rainier, when the clouds move out of the way.

We came this time in search of salmon, both on the plate and engaged in the life and death struggle to return to the stream in the mountains where they hatched and lived for awhile before touring the Pacific. The salmon we saw were on our plates.

Their return is solely to spawn a new generation; once that's done they die, providing food for bears, birds and their newly hatched offspring. They weren't swimming up the fish ladder from Puget Sound the afternoon we visited. But the harbor seals and sea lions seemed to be finding some at the Ballard Locks.

The Boeing factory in nearby Everett wasn't hectic, it being Saturday and all, but there were still some workers manipulating cranes or looking at computer screens for answers about what to do with the dozen or so 777s and 737s in various stages of completion.

There were plenty of people at Pike Place, though, to see the fish mongers play catch with someone's supper and down on the waterfront for the South Pacific fire dancers.



Flightless birds

A group of unpainted, engineless Boeing 777-9s sits on a ramp at Paine Field just north of Seattle in Everett. Boeing's newest wide-body passenger aircraft can seat up to 425 passengers and fly 9,200 miles / 15,000 kilometers nonstop.

The wingtips fold up on the ground so that the extra-long wings can be accommodated at standard airport terminal gates. It's being built in the world's largest building, by volume, on the other side of the airport, which employs 30,000 workers, almost half of Boeing's employment in the state. Photography is forbidden inside. The plant was constructed to build the 747, which is no longer being produced. The Triple-7 first flew in 2020, and 619 have been ordered by 12 airlines. However, it's not expected to begin commercial service until finally certified sometime next year.



Uphill by water

The *Serengeti*, somebody's yacht, and two boats rafted to it wait for the gates in Seattle's Ballard Locks — more formally known as the Hiram Chittenden Locks — to open and allow them to enter Lake Union on the northern edge of downtown. The locks raised the boats about 22 ft / 6.7 m from saltwater Puget Sound (sea level), where they entered the Lake Washington Ship Canal, to fresh water and ultimately Lake Washington, which separates Seattle from its eastern suburbs. There, on college football Saturdays, they can tie up for tailgates at the University of Washington's Husky Stadium. Chittenden was the engineer who designed the locks, which are operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and opened in 1916. He also designed part of the road systems in Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks.



Did someone say “shopping?”

Emily and Mary Wood at Seattle's premier tourist trap. Opened as a farmer's market in 1907, Pike Place Market is one of the oldest continuously operated markets in the United States.



Petal pushers

About 500 small businesses operate at Pike Place, including a famous fish market, attracting more than 20 million visitors, according to its 2024 annual report.

Playing with fire

When the Alaskan Way double-deck freeway viaduct, which had run atop the city's waterfront beginning in 1959, was finally removed in 2019, it opened the area up to more entertainment and visitor opportunities. Automobile traffic now runs beneath this area in a tunnel that cost \$3.4 billion to build and took six years to dig.



Busy ferries ferry the busy

The downtown ferry terminal and Seattle Aquarium on Pier 59 once were walled off from downtown by Alaskan Way. Now there's enough people on the wharf to fill a new giant Ferris wheel.





Boarding the MV Puyallup

The *Puyallup*, named for an indigenous tribe and meaning “generous people,” is one of 21 ferries operated by the Washington State Department of Transportation, the largest state-owned ferry fleet in the nation with 20 million passengers a year. It can carry 202 cars and up to 1,791 passengers. The smallest ferry — the *MV Tillikum* (“friends” or “relatives” in the Chinook dialect) — carries 87 cars and 596 passengers. The fleet covers eight routes in the Puget Sound region.



Water is wide

Our crossing on the *Puyallup* was westbound across Puget Sound from Edmonds to Kingston on the Olympic Peninsula. In the distance is another ferry making the 45-minute run in the opposite direction.