

Stuart Island

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Stuart Island is located about 5 miles northwest of Roche Harbor and it is closer to the Canadian Gulf Islands than to most of the San Juan Islands. Only four people made it for the trip although two others were planning to come along but missed the ferry. Those of us who made the ferry had a great time. We had planned to use a shuttle service to ferry us and our kayaks directly to Stuart. We then planned to paddle back to Anacortes. For a variety of reasons, this didn't work out. Instead, we took the Washington state ferry system from Anacortes to Orcas. We then launched from the Deer Harbor. Finding suitable launch sites and places to park can be problematic throughout the San Juans so the Deer Harbor Marina is a good place to know about. At present, they charge \$5 per boat to launch and park your car. They didn't seem to care if you'll be gone for one day or for several days. There are certainly other launch sites on Orcas Island. One other site is the public dock at the head of West Sound. There is some free public parking along the road at this site but it tends to fill up quickly on nice weekends during the summer. Deer Harbor was a better launch site for us because we got a late start on Friday afternoon and we wanted to make it to our campsite on Jones Island before dark. Jones is only about two miles from Deer Harbor and about six miles from the launch site in West Sound.

We camped on the south side of Jones and had the large campsite to ourselves. The tame deer and raccoons rampaged through our site most of the evening. Jones is a great island but you really need to be careful about your food. You can't leave anything out for even a few minutes and you need to hang your food at night or lose it to the raccoons. The deer will practically follow you into your tent.

On Saturday morning, we packed up and headed out towards Stuart. The first part of the route involved a two-mile crossing to San Juan Island, then northward towards Spieden Island. We got an early start so that we could get through Spieden Channel at slack water. The tide rips in this channel can be quite strong at times. We paddled along the south shore of Spieden and got great looks at the exotic wildlife on the island. Years ago, someone started an exotic game park here. This business venture failed but the island still supports a sizeable herd of non-native animals. From the west end of Spieden, it is another two-mile crossing to Stuart and another couple of miles to our campsite in the state park at the head of Reid Harbor. The total distance from Jones to our campsite on Stuart was about ten miles. There was practically no wind during our paddle but the route is very exposed, particularly to the southwest. On a windy day, this could be a very challenging route, even for experienced paddlers.

The campsite on Stuart is one of the few in the San Juans with freshwater available. There are numerous campsites both in Reid Harbor and also in Prevost Harbor on the north side of the island. These harbors are very popular with both kayakers and the yachting crowd. There were several other groups of kayakers camped here and several dozen yachts anchored in Reid Harbor during our stay. On Saturday afternoon, we took a walk across the island to Turn Point Light. There are great views from this point and there is quite a parade of ships past the point as they head to and from the port of Vancouver. One of the highlights of the walk across the island is a visit to the Stuart Island Public School. This is a tiny school with only a handful of students. There is a museum at the school and an untended gift shop that sells postcards and T-shirts that are made by the students. Sales raise money for the school and payment is strictly on the honor system. You make your selection, take an envelope and mail in your payment when you get home. If only we could use this system everywhere.....

On Sunday we took a leisurely paddle around the island to Prevost Harbor. When we headed back to our campsite in the afternoon, we found the Zodiac anchored in Reid Harbor. The Zodiac is the very large sailing ship that ties up in Fairhaven during the summer months. On Monday, we headed back to Deer

Harbor but took a more northerly route. We paddled along the north side of Johns Island, then past Flattop Island and on to Jones Island for a brief stop before heading back to Deer Harbor. We had a great trip with great weather the entire weekend. Although I am anxious to get back to Stuart sometime soon, the paddling in this area is quite exposed and there are very strong currents to contend with in several spots. With strong winds and the wrong currents, paddling in this area can be very dangerous. This is not a paddling destination that is suitable for beginners, even under the most benign conditions.