



# AUTO TOUR

AAA Washington Travel Services

## *Skagit Flats – Fidalgo Loop*

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Skagit (SKA-jit) County presents a geographic microcosm of western Washington. Its scenic landscapes range from the saltwater shores of Puget Sound, through lush lowland valleys and across densely forested mountains to the glacier-clad Cascades towering more than 9,000 feet. The name Skagit is of American Indian origin, although its meaning is uncertain. Early 19th-century traders referred to the native peoples of this region as the *Scaadchet*. Subsequent explorers applied derivations of the name to various coastal features and primarily to the Skagit River. The Washington Territorial Legislature established Skagit County in 1883, from the southern part of Whatcom County.

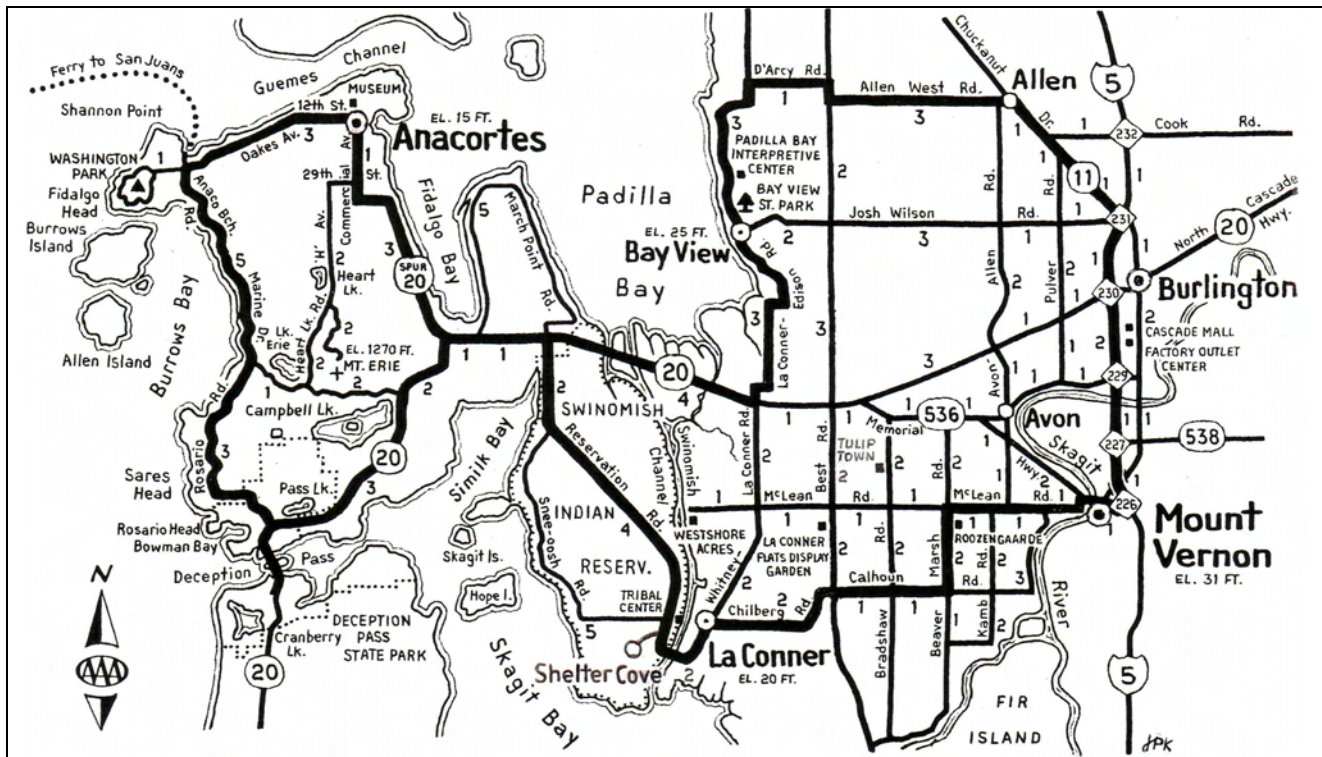


*Mount Baker forms a dramatic backdrop to the picturesque fishing port of La Conner, nestled beside saltwater Swinomish Channel.*

Our Skagit Flats-Fidalgo Loop Auto Tour traces a 62-mile, counter-clockwise itinerary through the western portion of the county. From the bustling I-5 corridor cities of Mount Vernon and Burlington, it strikes west to the shores of Padilla Bay. After bridging saltwater Swinomish Channel, the route circles Fidalgo Island through the port city of Anacortes and passes scenic Deception Pass State Park. Returning to the mainland and the picturesque fishing town of La Conner, it traverses the Skagit Flats, a fertile agricultural district specializing in the growing of flower bulbs.

Throughout April the area celebrates the spring blossom season with the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival. During festival weekend visitors congregate in the Skagit Flats between Mount Vernon and La Conner. Roads may be congested and they may be left turn restrictions at certain intersections. Autumn brings the season of fall colors to the mixed forests of western Skagit County. During October and November the woods are ablaze with the yellow and gold of bigleaf maple, black cottonwood and red alder.

All portions of the Skagit Flats-Fidalgo Loop Auto Tour are driveable year round. The summer months of July through September offer the best weather with generally sunny days and pleasant temperatures. Average maximum temperatures in July and August are in the low 70's F. Rainfall averages from 25 to 35 inches, with October through March bringing two to four inches per month. July and August are the driest months – each averaging less than an inch. Ice may present a hazard on clear winter mornings. Snowfall is infrequent and some years may pass with negligible accumulations.



# 1. Mount Vernon to Anacortes

## Northern leg (27 miles)

**MOUNT VERNON** (pop. 29,390, alt. 23 ft.), named for President George Washington's Potomac River home, sprawls along the east bank of the Skagit River. Fur traders established a trading post here in 1870. Farmers soon followed, settling on the fertile valley floodplain. In 1876 a volunteer group of townsmen undertook the daunting task of clearing a massive tangle of logs and brush that had accumulated in the river channel. This blockage made river navigation hazardous and hindered trade. In 1878 the first steamboat made its way up the Skagit providing the first tenuous link with the outside world. Mount Vernon grew slowly as a trading center for one of western Washington's most productive farming districts. It became the Skagit County seat in 1884.

Old canneries and warehouses line the Burlington Northern Santa Fe tracks just west of I-5. The compact business district of brick and stone buildings extends west from the freeway to the river. To access the district, take exit 226. Flower boxes decorate the attractive streetscapes. One of the more historic buildings in the downtown core is the **Lincoln Theatre** on First and Kincaid. Its auditorium houses a 1926 Wurlitzer theatre organ, a relic from the silent film era. The theatre hosts concerts and other live performances and screens classic films.



First Street in downtown Mount Vernon.

The city is working to find a permanent flood control solution and hopes to enhance its downtown riverfront with a promenade and housing. **Hillcrest Park**, east of the freeway at Blackburn Road and 13th Street, features picnic sites, recreational facilities and a Japanese Garden (Kure, Japan is one of Mount Vernon's Sister Cities). **Discovery Garden**, on the west side of town at 16650 Memorial Highway (SR-536), features plants that do well in the region. It's open daily 10am to 6pm. **McIntyre Hall**, on the campus of Skagit Valley College at 2501 E. College Way (SR-538), is the region's major performing arts venue.

**Little Mountain Park**, 2 miles southeast of town via Blackburn and Little Mountain roads, offers a panoramic view of the city, the Skagit Flats and the San Juan Islands from its 1,000 summit.

For more on the area contact the **Mount Vernon Chamber of Commerce**, 205 E. Kincaid Street; phone (360) 428-8547.

Just north of Mount Vernon, I-5 crosses the Skagit River. Its watershed ranks third largest in the West Coast states, after the Columbia and Sacramento. High levees flank the stream, protecting the lower valley from devastating winter and spring floods. From the bridge a view stretches eastward to the snowy peaks of the North Cascades. You may glimpse bald eagles perched in the cottonwoods lining the river. They frequent the area from December into February, drawn by salmon heading upstream to spawn.

East of the freeway, urbanization continues north to **BURLINGTON** (pop. 8,400, alt. 30 ft.), another prosperous trading center for the surrounding farmlands. Founded as a logging camp in the 1880s, it became an important rail junction served by both the Great Northern and Northern Pacific lines. Farmers moved in after loggers cleared the land. An early settler named the community for Burlington, Vermont. The city celebrates its agricultural heritage with the annual *Berry Dairy Days*, usually the third weekend in June. Two large shopping venues – **Cascade Mall** and **Outlet Shoppes at Burlington** – are on the south side of town, east of exit 229.

The **Children's Museum of Skagit County**, on Burlington Boulevard in Cascade Mall, nurtures learning and exploring with a series of theme areas: transportation, farmer's market, science, toddler area, farmyard, art studio and drama. The museum is open 10am-5pm Tuesdays through Saturdays; noon to 5pm Sundays; phone (360) 757-8888.

Just north of Burlington take I-5 exit 231. Chuckanut Drive (SR-11) angles northwestward across flat farming country. The landscape is a patchwork of pastures and fields of vegetables and berries. Principal crops include broccoli, cucumbers, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, red potatoes and vegetables for seed. The valley also produces roughly a third of the nation's green pea crop. Nursery stock, dairying and poultry are also important.

At the scattered crossroads hamlet of **ALLEN** (pop. 150, alt. 22 ft.), named for a partner in the area's pioneer sawmill, turn left (west) on Allen West Road. Three miles west, a zigzag to D'Arcy Road leads to La Conner-Edison Road – turn left (south) here. Soon we're skirting the wooded shore of Padilla Bay. In 1791, José de Narváez named this wide bay *Seno de Padilla* (Padilla Sound) for the Spanish colonial viceroy of New Spain (Mexico). Its waters, tide flats and shores constitute the **Padilla Bay National Estuarine Reserve**, established in 1980 to protect a variety of natural habitats. The reserve's **Brezeale Interpretive Center** has exhibits on area natural history (open 10am-5pm, Wednesdays through Sundays). The site has over three miles of interpretive trails providing access to the shore and inland woods and meadows. The upland area to the east is Bay View Ridge, a stony legacy of the last Ice Age.

A quarter mile down the road is **Bay View State Park**, one of the Washington's oldest, established in 1925. The 25-acre park has 1,300 feet of gravel beach on Padilla Bay and offers picnicking, beachcombing, saltwater swimming, fishing and camping. Eelgrass beds in the shallows provided habitat for Black Brants (*Branta bernicla nigricans*). Birders have tallied nearly 250 avian species in the district. In the nearby community of **BAY VIEW** (pop. 334, alt. 25 ft.) well tended yards and gardens face the shore. The town grew up around a store established in 1884.

South of Bay View, the La Conner-Edison Road skirts the edge of Bay View Ridge and swings down to the fields and pastures of the Skagit Flats where quiet sloughs meander toward the sea. After crossing the railroad tracks, turn right on multi-lane SR-20. This is part of the North Cross-State Highway, which extends 430 miles from Discovery Bay near Port Townsend to the Idaho border at Newport. A high bridge carries the roadway over Swinomish Channel, which separates Fidalgo Island from the mainland. The island is named for Salvador Fidalgo, a member of Francisco Eliza's expedition of 1790. The hills and forests combine with saltwater views to create a distinctive landscape. The Swinomish Tribe's **Northern Lights Casino** is just north of the west end of the span.

Beyond the west end of the bridge, several large oil refineries sprawl over **March Point**, a low, blunt headland which extends three miles off to the north. Originally called Sachem Point, a Massachusetts Indian name meaning 'Head chief,' popular usage altered its name to honor pioneer farmer Hiram A. March. Shell and Texaco built large refineries here in the mid-1950s. Shell and Tesoro operate the refineries today. Large tankers transport crude oil from Alaska and dock at the long moorings that fringe the tip of the point.

West of March Point Highway 20 splits. Bear right and follow SR-20 Spur, which skirts the shore of Fidalgo Bay into the bustling port of Anacortes.

## 2. Anacortes and Fidalgo Island

### Western Leg (30 miles)

**ANACORTES** (pop. 16,400, alt. 15 ft.), spreads across low hills on the northern part of Fidalgo Island. Views of saltwater channels and bays abound. First settled in 1860, it was initially called Ship Harbor. Town promoter Amos Bowman had it changed in 1876 to a Spanish-sounding rendition of his wife's maiden name 'Ana Curtis.' The Great Northern Railroad arrived in 1890 and Anacortes prospered as a fish processing center with more than half-a-dozen canneries. Today's economy turns on petroleum refining, ship building and repair and tourism. Anacortes is the primary mainland gateway to the scenic San Juan Islands (*see AAA Washington's Destination Focus on the San Juans for more information*).



*Anacortes' boat harbor as seen from Cap Sante*

Broad Commercial Avenue leads north into the city's central business district. At the foot of Commercial lies Guemes Channel, lined by old docks. Downtown Anacortes has a mix of retail shops, galleries, cafés and a number of attractions.

**Depot Arts Center** occupies the 1911 former Great Northern station at 611 'R' Avenue. A hub for the city's artistic community, it hosts changing exhibitions and coordinates an art walk the first Friday of each month. The center is open Thursday through Saturday afternoons. Donations; phone (360) 293-3663.

The grounds host the **Anacortes Farmer's Market**, Saturdays from mid-May through October.

Just south of the Arts Center at 7th and 'R', the **W.T. Preston Heritage Center**, commemorates the last sternwheeler "snag boat" to operate on Puget Sound (retired in 1981). The museum has displays on the historic vessel and other maritime exhibits. Open daily June-August, weekends the rest of year. Admission; phone (360) 293-1915.

**Causland Park**, two blocks west of Commercial on 8th Street, is a block-square city park established in 1919 as a World War I memorial. Note the unusual decorative motifs in its rock walls. The nearby **Anacortes History Museum** is housed in the 1909 Carnegie Library at 1305 8th Street. The exhibit gallery, on the upper floor, has permanent displays on Native Americans and early settlers, fishing and logging. Special exhibits change every two years. The first floor contains a research library, and archives. The museum is open Thursday through Monday by donation; phone (360) 293-1915.

Fourth Street leads east from Commercial to the rocky headland of **Cap Sante**, where a park overlooks the city and harbor.

From downtown Anacortes Highway 20 leads west through pleasant residential areas overlooking Guemes Channel. 'I' Avenue runs seven blocks north to the shore where a Skagit County ferry shuttles cars and passengers across the channel to **Guemes Island**. The 8 square-mile island is a mix of woods and agricultural fields and has a population of less than 600. Highway 20 ends at the **Washington State Ferry Terminal** on Ship Harbor. Here car ferries embark for the San Juan Islands.

Follow signs west to 220-acre **Washington Park**, located at the western end of Fidalgo Island. Just inside the park boundary is Sunset Beach, a nice spot for a picnic and a beachside stroll. A narrow, 2.2-mile lane loops around rocky Fidalgo Head overlooking Rosario Strait and the San Juan Islands. The park's woodlands include thickets of oak and madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*); the latter is a broadleaf evergreen noted for its peely, cinnamon-colored bark and glossy green foliage. Watch for bald eagles and hawks and you may see harbor seals, porpoise and orcas. The park has campsites, a boat launch and miles of hiking trails.

Anaco Beach Road and Marine Drive lead southward along the island's west shore. Views stretch across Rosario Strait to the San Juans. Five miles south of the ferry terminal, a road leads east; following signs four miles to **Mount Erie**. A narrow road leads to the 1,360-foot summit, highest point on the island. The impressive panorama includes the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the San Juan Islands, the Olympics and Vancouver Island to the southwest and west. To the south lie Campbell Lake, Deception Pass and Whidbey Island. Off to the southeast rises the distant snowy dome of Mount Rainier while the Cascade

Range forms the eastern horizon. The abrupt south face of Mount Erie is a popular rock climbing and hang gliding area. Retrace your route back down to the west shore; at the junction turn left (south) on Rosario Road, which skirts the rocky shore.

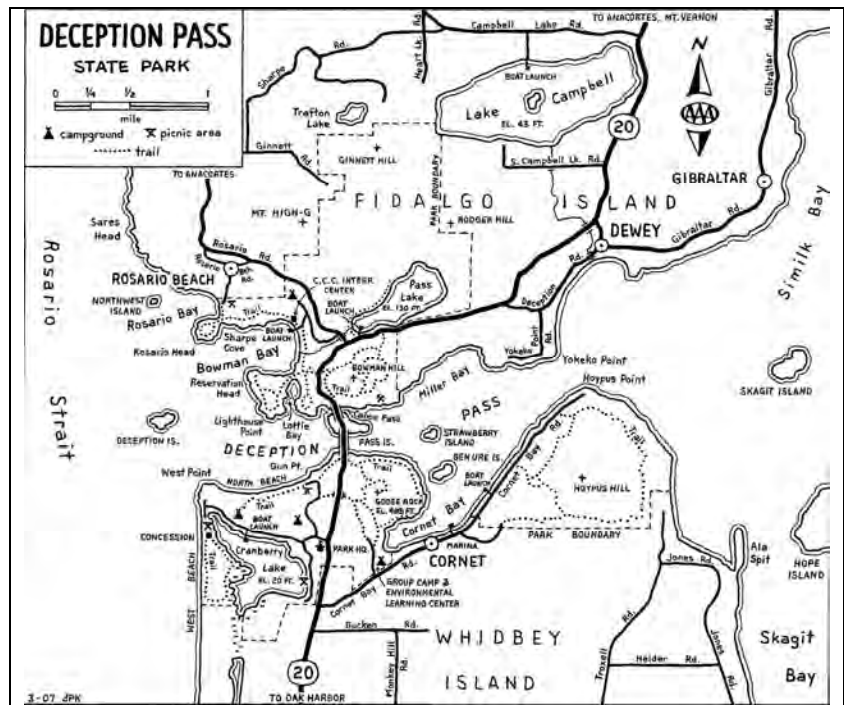
**Deception Pass State Park** is one of Washington’s scenic gems and its most popular state park. Its namesake feature is the narrow, cliff lined channel separating Fidalgo Island from the north end of Whidbey Island (see *AAA Washington’s Destination Focus on Whidbey Island for more information*). Within its 4,134 acres are freshwater lakes, tracts of forest, rocky hills, marshland, sand dunes and islands. Its 15 miles of saltwater shoreline range from cliffs with hidden coves and rocky headlands to tide flats and beaches of sand and gravel. There are more than 38 miles of hiking trails and six miles of equestrian trails.

The **Civilian Conservation Corps Interpretive Center** is in the Fidalgo Island part of the park, north of the Deception Pass Bridge (off Rosario Road at Bowman Bay). This CCC-built stone structure, documents the labors of this Depression-era group in Washington’s state park system. The center is open Thursdays through Mondays from April into September. Free. Phone (360) 675-2417, ext. 0.



Deception Pass Bridge as seen from Fidalgo Island [Photo: Washington State Parks]

The first European to see the area was Spanish navigator Manuel Quimper, who in 1790 named it *Boca de Flon*. After Joseph Whidbey navigated the channel from end to end in 1792, Captain Vancouver bestowed its present name, reflecting that he too had been “deceived” into believing the feature to be a bay.



The best view of the channel is from the landmark **Deception Pass Bridge** (parking area south of bridge). Built in 1934-35, it spans the channel’s narrowest part. The panorama is spectacular; 182 feet below, the waters pulse with a tidal ebb and flow that reaches 8 knots. Cliffs up to several hundred feet high, in places rising in a sheer face, flank the waterway. Their upper slopes alternate with grassy meadows and a dark, evergreen woodland of conifers and madrone. To the west the pass broadens into the open waters of Rosario Strait. A monument, located at the south bridge parking lot describes the discovery and naming of Deception Pass and Whidbey Island. South of the bridge lies the park’s main visitor area and campgrounds at Cranberry Lake, West Beach and North Beach. There is a marina at Cornet Bay.

**Deception Pass Tours** takes visitors on guided jet-drive catamaran trips through the scenic waterway. Trips depart hourly 11am-6pm from the marina on Cornet Bay from April through October. Admission (ticket booth at south bridge parking lot); phone (360) 914-0096 or (888) 311-7277.

North of the bridge, continue northeast on SR-20, which skirts tiny Pass Lake. Two miles down the road we pass larger **Campbell Lake**. The small island in its midst is in fact, “an island in a lake on an island.” Shady lanes branch off the highway, leading to weekend and summer cottages beside Similk Bay. *Similk* is a Skagit Indian word meaning ‘salmon.’

For a short distance we retrace the route (Highway 20) we traversed on the approach to Anacortes. Turn right (south) on Reservation Road, which leads across the wooded eastern lobe of Fidalgo Island. This area forms the **Swinomish Indian**

**Reservation**, a 7,172-acre tract established by the Point Elliott Treaty of 1855. Traditionally fishers, the Swinomish peoples originally lived on northern Whidbey Island. The reservation also became home to the Samish tribe, whose ancestral homeland included Fidalgo, Guemes and Samish islands, and the Skagit people from Fir Island. In 1868 Roman Catholic missionaries built the reservation's first church. Its bell survives at the present day church in the tribal community beside Swinomish Channel. Other points of interest in the community include a totem pole and old cemetery. At the south end of the reservation is **SHELTER BAY** (pop. 1,029, alt. 10 ft.), a gated residential community managed by a home-owners association. Retirees make up most of its population.

Our route spans Swinomish Channel via the **Rainbow Bridge**. The four-mile channel connects Skagit Bay to the south with Padilla Bay to the north, offering a safe passage for small craft. La Conner lies on its opposite shore.

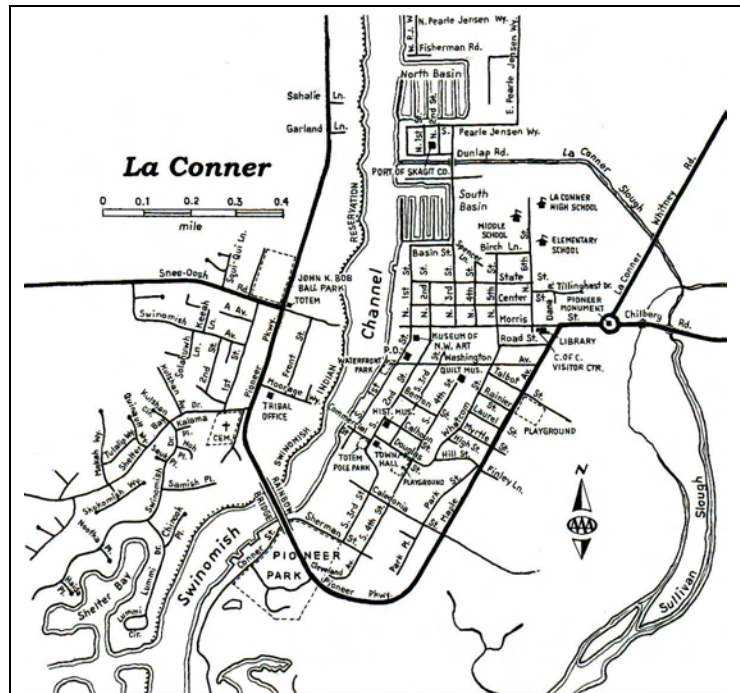
### 3. La Conner to Mount Vernon Southern Leg (10 miles)

**LA CONNER** (pop. 900, alt. 50 ft.) spreads along the east bank of Swinomish Channel at the edge of the Skagit Valley farmland. Several rocky hills lend topographic variety to the setting. The picturesque fishing port dates back to a trading post established in 1868. J.S. Conner purchased a store here in 1870 and named the nascent settlement for his wife (L)ouisa (A)nna. In the late 19th century dikes and drainage works transformed the boggy marshlands of the nearby Skagit Flats into a fertile agricultural district. Hops and oats were early boom crops and La Conner became an important trading center and port. Commercial flower bulb growing, for which the district is renowned, began in the early 20th century.



*Buildings on the west side of First Street face Swinomish Channel; Rainbow Bridge in background).  
[Photo: La Conner Chamber of Commerce]*

It's easy to appreciate how La Conner has attracted a colony of writers, artists and crafts people. Though still a small community, the town has capitalized on its geography and history, becoming an increasingly popular getaway destination.



First Street, with its phalanx of shops, galleries, boutiques and restaurants, forms the compact business district, crowded between the channel and a rocky outcrop. Some of the structures date back to the late 1800s. On the shore side of First, most of the older buildings extend out over the water and are supported by pilings. The dock-lined saltwater channel bustles with boat traffic. Visitors enjoy its cozy cafés and historic accommodations ranging from bed and breakfasts and country inns to a turn-of-the-twentieth-century hotel.

La Conner's attractions are numerous. The oldest structure is the 1869 **Magnus Anderson Cabin**, at the south end of town at Second and Commercial. The **Museum of Northwest Art** (121 S. First Street) features paintings, glass and sculpture by regional artists. The museum is open daily. View antique fire trucks and fire fighting equipment through the window of the **Volunteer Firemen's Museum**, at 611 S. First Street.

The 1891 **Gaches Mansion** (703 S. Second Street) showcases Victorian décor on its ground level and the exhibits of the **La Conner Quilt & Textile Museum** on its upper floors. It's open Wednesday through Sunday afternoons. The **Skagit County Historical Museum**, atop the hill at 501 S. Fourth Street, displays artifacts from Native American and pioneer times. Its observation deck overlooks the town. The museum is open daily except Monday.

**La Conner Marina**, at the north end of the waterfront (613 N. Second Street), has two boat basins and can accommodate more than 500 boats, including short-term guest moorage. The marina is also home to a commercial fishing fleet. Fidalgo Island protects Swinomish Channel from the rougher seas of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and is a favored north-south route for boaters. The Corps of Engineers maintains the channel for navigation. **Pioneer Park**, at the south end of town, offers camping, picnicking and fishing.

The La Conner Chamber of Commerce has a **Visitor Information Center** at 606 Morris Street at the eastern entrance to town; phone (360) 466-4778 or (888) 642-9284.

At the eastern edge of La Conner, follow Chilberg Road east onto the **Skagit Flats**, part of the Skagit River's floodplain. These fertile soils are one of North America's major commercial flower bulb growing districts. The bulb industry dates back to the early 1900s. In 1907, Samish Island resident Mary Stewart Brown planted the first bulbs for a mail order business. In 1926, Congress gave domestic growers a boost by placing an embargo on bulb imports, ostensibly to protect the American crop from disease.

The Netherlands, traditional source of bulbs for the world market, sent representatives to the U.S. to set up local bulb farms. A number of growers that had initially settled in the Lynden area in neighboring Whatcom County relocated to the Skagit Flats, where soil and climate proved more suitable to bulb horticulture. Today three major growers produce both for the cut flower and commercial bulb markets, selling their products worldwide.



*Farm buildings make a perfect backdrop for a colorful field of tulips*

The area south of SR-536, between Swinomish Channel and the Skagit River, contains most of the flower fields and in spring the flats are a patchwork of color, a visual spectacle that draws tens of thousands of visitors. The palate of colored fields surrounding scattered farm buildings against a backdrop of dark evergreen hills and distant snowy peaks is a photographer's delight.

Daffodils and tulips are the prime species, but iris is also important. The blooming season runs from March into mid-May. Daffodils appear first; tulips bloom throughout April and showy iris conclude the season in May. The area celebrates its annual **Skagit Valley Tulip Festival** throughout the month of April.

Although our Auto Tour suggests a particular route across the flats (see last paragraph below), almost any country road in the flats will take you by flower fields. During the blossom season expect increased congestion and some roads may be blocked. Be on the alert for bicycles. Exercise caution as valley roads tend to be narrow and lack shoulders. If you stop, pull well off the roadway. If you walk out into a flower field be prepared for mud. Observe NO TRESPASSING signs, and by all means, resist the temptation to pick your own bouquet. Flowers are sold at roadside stands and at the four major display gardens – **Westshore Acres, La Conner Flats, Tulip Town** and **Roosengaarde** (see map for locations).

Bicycling is a popular way to enjoy the valley sights. The terrain is flat and riding is easy on the network of paved county roads. **Tulip Country Bike Tours** offers a variety of guided trips during the Tulip Festival and throughout the summer. Their tour center is 3 miles west of Burlington on SR-20, then south on Avon-Allen Road; phone (360) 424-7461.

To complete the Auto Tour follow Chilberg Road, which becomes Calhoun Road after crossing Best Road. Continue east on Calhoun two miles, then turn left on Beaver Marsh Road. Continue north on Beaver Marsh, passing the display gardens at **Roosengaarde**, about two miles to McLean Road; turn right. To return to I-5, follow McLean Road into the western part of

Mount Vernon, where we join Memorial Highway (SR-536). The latter bridges the Skagit River and leads through downtown Mount Vernon where it joins the interstate.

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The AAA *Oregon-Washington TourBook* guide and AAA *Northwestern CampBook*, available at your local AAA Washington service center, lists lodging, dining and camping facilities, as well as points of interest. This information is also available online with AAA's TripTik Travel Planner at AAA.com.

***KEEPING  
INFORMED ON  
THE ROAD***

Here is a listing of Skagit  
area radio stations . . .

**ANACORTES**  
KLKI – 1340AM

**MOUNT VERNON**  
KAPS – 660AM  
KBRC – 1430AM  
KMWS – 90.1FM (NPR)  
KSVR-FM – 94.3FM

**OAK HARBOR**  
KWDB – 1100AM

jpk – 26 March, 2008