

washingtonpost.com

## GET OUT

By Pamela Gerhardt

Sunday, June 7, 1998; Page E02

Next time you find yourself in Seattle cursing the rain, head farther west to the Olympic Peninsula and Olympic National Park, where the weather really gives you something to talk about.

If you're visiting before midsummer, you can in one day take easy hikes through three different climates: snowy mountains, humid rain forest and foggy Pacific shore. In the summer, the lower mountains lose their snow and the roads can get jammed with people in REI jackets driving sport-utility vehicles, so try to go when school's in session.

Regardless of season, moisture is the operative word. The Olympic Mountains rise to nearly 8,000 feet just a few miles from the ocean, and all that water makes a lot of precipitation. Hurricane Ridge, in the northern section of the park, gets 30 to 35 feet of snow each year. Mount Olympus, the highest peak, can get three times that amount. Nearly 140 inches of rain fall each year on the forests below (by comparison, about 40 inches of precipitation falls annually on such cities as Seattle and Washington, D.C.).

Getting there is half the journey. The peninsula is big -- about 100 miles wide, east to west -- and you and your rented Lumina have to cross Puget Sound. From downtown Seattle, two ferries run more or less on the hour, one to Bainbridge Island (about a half-hour) and one to Bremerton (about an hour). The ferry ride is fun. You can get coffee (of course) and stand out in the biting wind and watch the city recede. Inside, heaters blast hot air, and you might find a cellist playing a "Brandenburg" concerto. Allow time for getting off and on the ferry, and avoid rush hour. Cars can back up for several miles, especially on the peninsula, where traffic flows off the boat onto thin, two-lane roads.

Plan to spend the night in Port Angeles, about 70 miles from Bainbridge, then get up early the next day for your hikes. The town itself is unremarkable. On the map it looks exotic and coastal, facing the Strait of Juan de Fuca. But there is not much to see. We stayed at the Best Western Olym-pic Lodge, which promised a view of the mountains to the south but did not deliver.

Since you will be experiencing several seasons in one day, the wisest idea is to wear everything in your suitcase and peel off layers as needed. Bring a Snickers bar and a bottle of Evian. We did not see one 7-Eleven on the peninsula.

Climate 1: Mountain Snowpeaks. Drive south from Port Angeles to the park entrance and onto Hurricane Ridge. (Make sure you consult the ranger about avalanche updates -- serious stuff in this territory.) This road is partially closed in winter, but you can drive as far as they will let you then get out and walk and watch the hard wind send snow into spirals. You can also watch the locals -- the ones not wearing REI -- slide down the mountains on tire tubes. If you're friendly, maybe they'll let you take a ride.

Climate 2: Pacific Coast. Drive west about 70 miles to La Push on the coast. There you can hike on three humid, loamy trails along Third Beach, Second Beach and Rialto Beach. In between the billows of fog and sea mist you will see spiky Sitka spruce and western red cedars growing out of jagged coastal rocks. In the sand, you might find the glass floats of Japanese fishing nets. Park rangers estimate it takes one year for the floats to cross the Pacific. Eight Native American tribes live on the coast, as they always have, and you will feel a bit otherworldly and out of time. As you hike, pay attention to signs warning about the hazards of incoming tides. I watched a 10-foot piece of driftwood ride a swelling wave and nearly clobber my friend in the head.

Climate 3: Temperate Rain Forest. Drive about 40 miles east to the Hoh Rain Forest, with easy trails lush with luminous moss and lichen and hairy looking spruce. Bring a poncho -- you might get wet. At this point, if you just gotta have some pizza-flavored Combos, a small store near the rain forest campground sells snacks.

After our three-hikes/three-climate day, we drove back to Seattle, getting off the ferry that night at around 9. As our car rolled off the boat ramp, I noticed moonlight twinkling on the sound. The rain had stopped.

Olympic National Park: 360-452-0330; Seattle-King County Convention and Visitors Bureau: 206-461-5800.