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Hiking the Pacific Crest Trail to Stehekin, Washington

BY BRANDON FRALIC

“Just four and a half more miles!” I announce to my hiking partners as we soak our feet in icy Maple Creek. Four and a half more miles of slow, steady walking along the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) to our camp for the night. We are traversing 18 miles in two days—from the 4,500-foot heights of Rainy Pass to High Bridge—before settling at the shores of Lake Chelan some 3,400 feet below. We take it easy as the August sun beats down on our overloaded packs. Stehekin, here we come.

Fifty miles away from the bustling beach town of Chelan, Stehekin is tucked in the North Cascades—inaccessible by road—a remote destination seemingly lost in time. To reach it, you must travel by boat, plane, horseback or foot. Hiking is perhaps the most rewarding way to make the journey, and hundreds of people do so each year. However you choose to arrive, getting to Stehekin truly is as much fun as being there.

We opt for the easiest hiking route. This section of the PCT follows Bridge Creek’s lead in a tumultuous tango—crossing over its many bridges, rising high above the creek and dipping down to kiss its rushing waters. Bridge Creek Trail is mostly downhill, sheltered

by Douglas fir and ponderosa pine, decorated by wildflower meadows earlier in the summer. It’s the only place where the PCT crosses into North Cascades National Park, a pedestrian highway for those just passing through.

Numerous North Cascade peaks are visible at breaks in the forest, some of them snow-capped well into August. The trail is very quiet. We are just a few miles south of the North Cascades Highway, and already far removed from life’s everyday distractions.

After a 13-mile day, we are delighted to discover some basic amenities at Bridge Creek Camp. Picnic tables, an outhouse and the nearby creek make for a comfortable backcountry stay. Best of all, bear boxes keep our food safe from wildlife, granting us the

peace of mind to sleep restfully before another day on the trail.

In the morning, we meet a PCT thru-hiker heading north. She’s walked all the way from Mexico, logging over 2,500 trail miles. Inspired, we press on—cautiously avoiding a pair of western rattlesnakes near Coon Lake—to High Bridge. Here, various groups of hikers await the red Stehekin Valley Shuttle. Outfitted with ceiling windows, these tour buses make four trips between High Bridge and Stehekin daily, providing an essential service for car-free visitors. For \$7 each we are shuttled down the valley, 11 miles to Stehekin Landing. But not before a stop at the Stehekin Pastry Company.

Everyone says you must visit “the bakery”. Our shuttle driver announces a brief stop, long enough for all on board (including himself) to get through the line. The bakery’s fame extends well beyond Stehekin’s mountainous borders. We’d heard tales of it long before our trip; it was the very promise of gooey cinnamon rolls, cold drinks on a hot day and deli sandwiches that kept our spirits high during those final trail miles. I can only imagine the sheer joy felt by thru-hikers as they step up to the counter.

Arrival at Stehekin Landing is

WHEN YOU GO

Stehekin Pastry Company,
stehekinpastry.com

North Cascades Lodge at
Stehekin, lodgeatstehekin.com

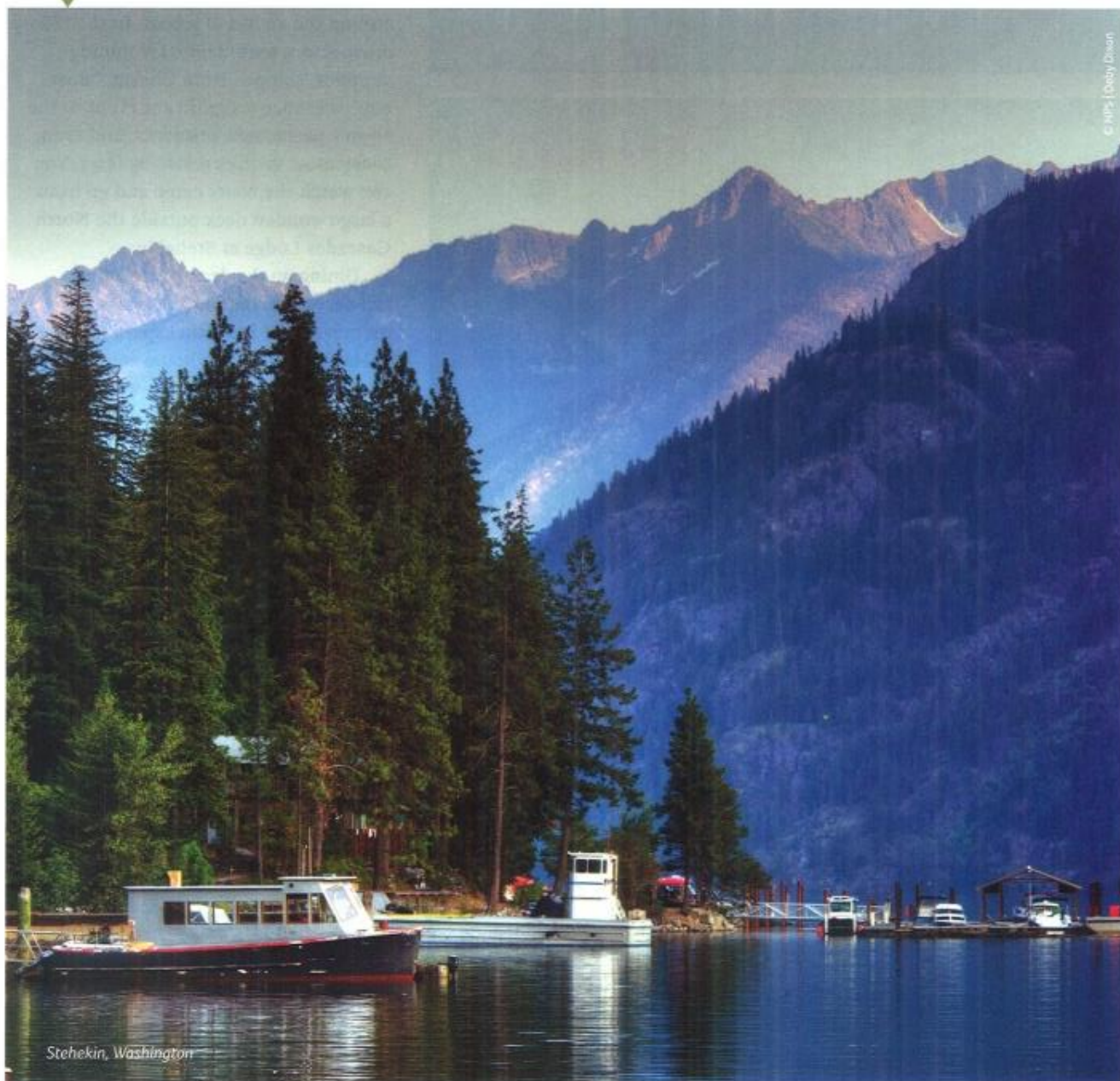
Golden West Visitor Center,
[nps.gov/noca/planyourvisit/
visitorcenters.htm](http://nps.gov/noca/planyourvisit/visitorcenters.htm)

GETTING THERE

Hiking: You must acquire a free backcountry permit for all overnight stays in North Cascades National Park. Permits can be obtained at the Wilderness Information Center in Marblemount. A Northwest Forest Pass is required for parking at the Rainy Pass Trailhead. You'll also need to deal with the logistics of returning to your vehicle; a sympathetic friend willing to pick you up in Chelan and drive you back to Rainy Pass is a godsend. nps.gov/noca/planyourvisit/permits.htm

Lady of the Lake: To reach Stehekin by ferry, hop aboard the Lady of the Lake in Chelan. This leisurely scenic cruise runs year-round and lasts 4 hours each way. During summer, the Lady Express runs 2.5 hours each way. Schedules vary seasonally; see ladyofthelake.com for details.

Chelan Seaplanes: For a speedy 30-minute trip between Chelan and Stehekin, fly with Chelan Seaplanes. chelanseaplanes.com



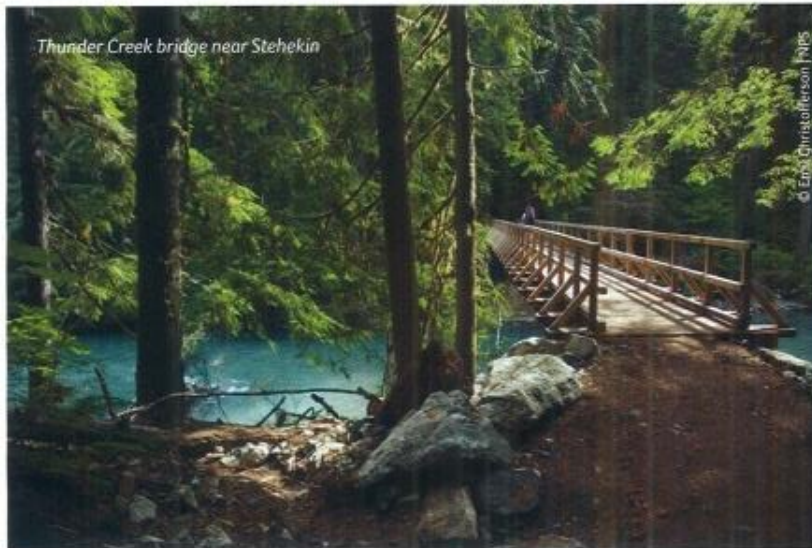
Stehekin, Washington

© NPS/Dusty Dwan

SUMMER



Backcountry camping in the North Cascades



Thunder Creek bridge near Stehekin



The Lady of the Lake docks at Stehekin

unforgettable. Carved out by glaciers to depths of nearly 1,500 feet—the deepest natural lake in Washington and 3rd deepest in the United States—Chelan’s sparkling fjord-like waters greet you. Across the lake there is no shore. North Cascade peaks rise sharply from the depths, piercing the clouds above. Far from the reaches of WiFi and cell reception, Stehekin’s usual slow pace of life turns to hustle and bustle at times, punctuated by the comings and goings of red shuttles and the Lady of the Lake passenger ferry.

Life in Stehekin has long revolved around the arrival of a boat. In the 1880s, prospectors waited here for mining supplies, shipped from Chelan. “Boat day” was once a significant event to the town’s permanent residents, and even today most visitors arrive by ferry. You can watch the boats come and go from a large wooden deck outside the North Cascades Lodge at Stehekin.

Dining on the deck of the only full-service restaurant in town is the quintessential Stehekin experience. We spend a leisurely two hours enjoying the natural scenery and people-watching. Thru-hikers frequent the post office for resupply boxes and open them, beer in hand, with the wide-eyed wonder of a five-year-old on Christmas morning. A tourist at the next table asks me if we drove here. With a smile, I reply, “We hiked 18 miles on the PCT.”

As we finish our dinner, a uniformed ranger from the nearby Golden West Visitor Center announces the evening program. But we are weary and retire to our rustic room at the lodge. We drift into dreams of mountain passes, dancing trails and cinnamon rolls. We’ve arrived in Stehekin, but it’s the journey that will remain etched in our memories long after the boat takes us home. 🌀