

Guest Column: The Faces of Hospitality & Tourism

As you are probably aware, tourism is a top economic driver for San Juan County. Visitors “import” new dollars, which benefit small businesses, non-profits like museums and farmers markets, and residents as these dollars circulate throughout our island communities. This series of columns will help put faces to this industry – restauranteurs, innkeepers, shopkeepers, tour captains, and other entrepreneurs who make our communities so unique and vibrant.

Jeff Friedman made a career change in his 40s. A drastic one—from 18 years as an IT consultant in Cleveland, Ohio to operating whale and wildlife tours in Friday Harbor, Washington. One vacation out to the Northwest and an encounter with orcas changed everything. It was scary and risky to make such a move. But as Jeff says, “I just took one step at a time and had a lot of support from others. We are so fortunate to live in a small and friendly community, and it is always important to network with and reach out to others for support and help.”

He thinks the best parts of living in the San Juans are the natural beauty and wildlife, which are so amazing and provide magical moments every day. Yet we still have close (but not too close) access to urban areas.

Jeff loves being able to share the whales, wildlife, and natural beauty of our area with people from all over the world. It is a positive, but temporary, escape for them. We get to live here. That’s a wow. He also values that sharing these experiences with visitors can build an appreciation for, and connection to, the natural world, and it changes their lives in ways that benefit everyone. Learning about the lives and cultures of whales provides inspiration and much more. His newest project is a podcast, “[After the Breach](#),” with one of his fellow captains, Sara Hysong Shimazu, that they started just after the pandemic to have fun and share the magic of whales with a wider audience. They share stories about whales from around the world, conversations with researchers, filmmakers, and other naturalists, along with different ways people can get involved in advocating for and protecting them.

How does tourism benefit the Islands?

“It brings perspective to those who live here of how special this place really is and how fortunate we are to live here. It also brings new people, new ideas and new energy to the Islands, which is important for any community to thrive. So many people who live here, whether recent arrivals or longtime residents, began as visitors. People are going to visit the island, whether they are here on vacation or are friends and family visiting someone who lives in the Islands. I joined the board of the Visitors Bureau because I wanted to be a part

of an organization that promotes sharing this special place with others in a responsible way.”

The last few years have been challenging for tour captains like Jeff – between the COVID pandemic, inflation, and mainland competition. The whales, however, remain a source of encouragement, with more families of Bigg’s killer whales spending time in the Islands along with increasing sightings of both familiar and unknown humpback whales. Through it all, there has remained a sense of a rising tide supporting one another as we navigate the ongoing ferry issues and other uncertainties. This sense of community has helped us through uncharted waters before and will get us through again.