

Guest Column: The Faces of Hospitality & Tourism

Like it or not, tourism is a top economic driver for San Juan County. Visitors “import” new dollars, which benefit small businesses, non-profits, and residents as these dollars circulate throughout our island communities. This series of columns will help put faces to this industry – innkeepers, tour captains, and other entrepreneurs who make our communities so unique and vibrant.

There’s an old saying that women hold up half the sky. In honor of Women Making History Month, we wanted to highlight two women helping hold up the sky of the San Juan Islands’ visitor economy. Laura Saccio owns Bird Rock Hotel and Earthbox Inn and Spa, and Anna Maria de Freitas owns the San Juan Island Inn Collection with her husband – Tucker House, Harrison House Suites, and Coho Restaurant in Friday Harbor.

Laura was living a fast-paced life in Portland, Oregon when she and her family decided they wanted to live a more intentional life, outside of the traditional rat race. Having vacationed in the Islands, they felt called to live here. Now, almost 25 years later, it has become the “home of her heart.” She loves working with guests who arrive tired, hungry, or just desperately in need of a getaway, and helping them lean into the restorative energy of the island to have the vacation they really need. She feels constantly inspired by the people, art, land, and sea surrounding her.

Anna Maria is an island girl through and through, having grown up on Long Island with parents from Madeira and Sicily. Like Laura, she moved here from the East Coast for a lifestyle change and semi-retirement. That plan failed miserably – she’s working harder than ever but realizes it’s all about the lifestyle. Nature and the island light are a constant source of inspiration, and she loves sharing the bounty of the island with her guests – watching them savor biting into a fresh heirloom tomato, slurping an oyster, or experiencing the taste of lavender for the first time.

How do you think tourism benefits the Islands?

AMDF: Tourism is an exchange of ideas. We all benefit from this cultural exchange. Visitors become cultural ambassadors and help spread the word to protect our precious Island resources including our resident whales. Many tourists end up calling SJI home and they end up contributing to the fabric of our community as locals.

LS: As an avid traveler and would-be explorer, I like to think that tourism is a great connector, helping people become less xenophobic and to connect and understand the world outside of their own home grounds.

The last few years have been difficult for innkeepers like Laura and Anna Maria. Getting through the pandemic with all the challenges it posed and then managing the revenge rebound of 2021 and 2022. But without the strong community of businesses within the Visitors Bureau and three Chambers, Anna Maria says, “I am not sure our businesses would have come out of such a challenging time stronger than ever.” While they might technically be competitors, they have 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.