

MAP BY NILRATAN MAITY

In Starbucks country

Seattle's home to the world's most famous coffee chain and Microsoft, and ringed by the beautiful Pacific Northwest countryside, says **Arundhati Basu**

A fishy kind of theatre was underway in the Pacific Northwest. Dungeness Crabs, royalty amongst the crustacean species in the American West Coast, stared back at us with beady black eyes and fiery orange claws from carts alongside freshly caught fish of all shapes and sizes. Beneath placards announcing the arrival of the Copper River Salmon, rubber overall-clad fishmongers tossed robust, silvery fish at each other and chanted in tandem. A crowd gathered within minutes for the piscine entertainment.

The locale for the free performance was Pike Place Market in downtown Seattle, a fabulous hunting ground for locavores. Armed with cups of iconic Original Starbucks coffee from the first store of the chain (you just have to scratch that one off your foodie bucket list), we were witnessing the famous Pike Place phenomenon one early morning. The business model of the energetic fish-sellers has inspired

The shores of Lake Washington are lined with waterfront properties that belong to billionaires including Bill Gates who has a futuristic home here

case studies at universities, schools and even a book-documentary called *FISH! Philosophy*.

With its warren of 500 shops selling everything fresh from cherries to tea picked by monkeys somewhere in China, Pike Place turned out to be the soul of Seattle.

We had an in-depth experience of the eco-friendly, health-conscious and vibrant culture of the Pacific Northwest during a month-long

Mount Rainier, the highest mountain of the Cascade ranges, towers in the distance and is visible from many parts of Seattle

holiday in Washington State's coastal city of Seattle. Note: Most of the trivia about the city was picked up from my nine-year-old nephew.

The towering presence that hangs over the city's horizon is the heavily glaciated and almost ethereal Mount Rainier. The highest mountain of the Cascade ranges also happens to be an active volcano, and is Seattle's beacon of beauty. I went with the intent of hiking the volcano's many trails and hoped to get near a glacier or two but the ghastly heat had me do an about turn.

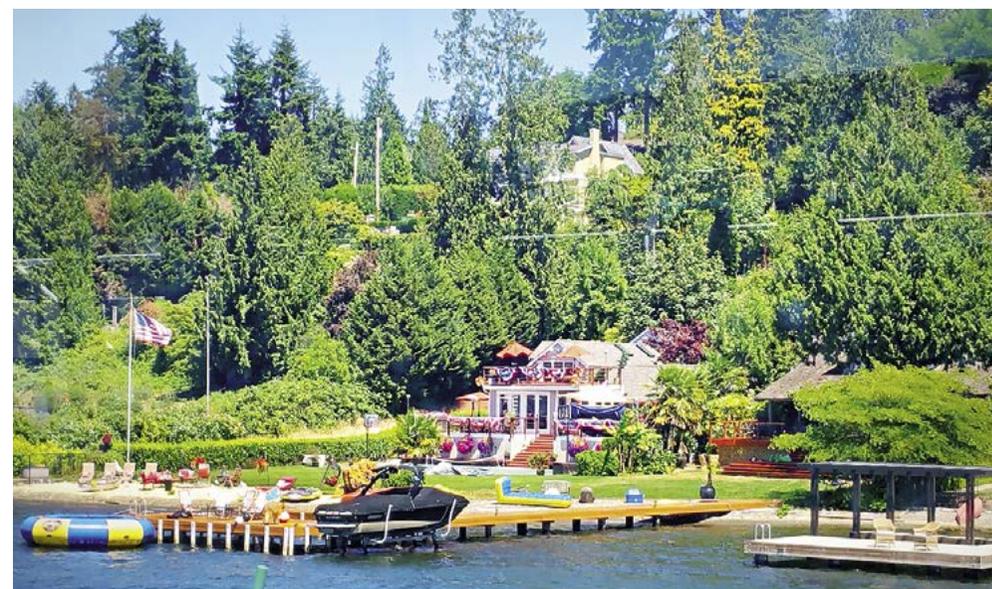


Photo: Arundhati Basu

Caught in the midst of one of the worst heat waves the city had seen, we were gasping for chilled beer while traipsing around the streets of its downtown area. Yet we carry a sizeable bag of memories — gaping at the Space Needle; tasting beers at microbreweries; contemplating queueing up for 'hand-held pies' at Pike's Russian bakery of Piroshky Piroshky; tucking into delectable Spud Fish & Chips at Alki Point with the Cascades and the rippling waters of the Sound in front of us.

If that wasn't enough, we also listened to the saxophonist at the atmospheric Pioneer Square and cruised Lake Washington — keeping a lookout for Bill Gates' futuristic home and gasping with envy at the other billionaire waterfront properties. Finally, we also watched the sun go down in a blaze of colours from the posh Sunset Hill quarter in downtown Seattle with its mansions.

We went on Bill Spiedel's underground walking tour in downtown and discovered the city's past before Seattle became home to Microsoft, Nordstrom and Starbucks. Its first settlers were the Denny Party, a group of Americans who arrived in 1851 at the westernmost Alki Point that juts out into the Sound. They shifted base to Pioneer Square in 1852 and from there began a story of raising the city from its original mucky tide flats, the Great Fire of 1889, and the Yukon Gold Rush that brought in a host of gold-diggers. Women were shipped into Seattle to marry its bachelors and the city also had many powerful madams at that time.

Leaving life in the fast lane behind in downtown, we set off on long drives through the incredibly beautiful coun-



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Pike Place Market in downtown Seattle has become famous for its fish market; (Right) The world's first Starbucks café in Seattle is a must-see for visitors to the city



tryside of the Northwest. Evergreen stretches (from which Seattle gets its 'Emerald City' epithet) stretch for miles and miles while emerald rivers with Native American names, such as Skykomish and Sammamish, skirt the roads.

Not too far from the city, there are beautiful little villages and towns, such as Snoqualmie with its beautiful waterfalls, and the Snohomish, which is called the 'antique capital of the Northwest'. The historic town was chock full of the prettiest antique shops, chatty owners and vintage dress shops that set my heart aflutter.

I also loved the cutesy, drive-in espresso booths. And really with the Seattle-ites' coffee culture, it is unthinkable not to give in. If you are particular about milk, they offer a bunch of different options — from hemp, goat, soy, eggnog to almond and rice. And try beating this one: The largest mug serves almost a 1,000ml of coffee.

Then, the coffee jargon had to be taken in the stride too. Did I demand a

'wet' or 'dry' cappuccino? Would I want either of those really, I rallied? Absolutely, came the pert answer. A 'wet' drink, it turned out, has more creamy milk. The 'dry' more frothy milk and so it stays insulated and hot longer. My coffee-craving genes were at an all-time high.

There were days when we took the ferry to 19th century logging towns such as Port Gamble where time stands still. We followed it up with a Olympic Peninsula Loop Drive that took us to Sequim (pronounced Skwim), a town at the base of the Olympic Mountains renowned for its lavender farms. Our senses were steeped in the fragrance of lavender

— drinking chilled, lavender iced teas and having lavender ice cream.

Now then, America has its places that might almost have been in Europe. There's a Bavarian village called Leavenworth in Chelan County in Washington, at the foothills of the Cascades. When its sawmill industry died and the Great Northern Railway Company was re-routed around the city, Leavenworth was on the verge of an utter breakdown. Enterprising minds, in the early '60s, set to transform it into a village with an alpine look — numerous baskets of bright petunias hanging from the eaves of cottages and horse-drawn carriages trotting through town.

Despite tucking into hot and spicy dishes through my entire holiday — the Americans even grade the level of chillies in their food — the most excruciating save-my-soul-and-call-the-firemen experience I had was in Leavenworth. In a speciality store called A Matter of Taste my brother-in-law called my attention to a particular red sauce. Next he saw me dipping a pretzel into it with great gusto. He warned me a tad too late. By then, the whole world had come crashing down around my ears. There was fire in my mouth, fire streaming out of my ears, fire in my belly.

Fortunately, there was wine at hand. A wine tasting noon went by in a blur, me nodding vigorously at the fine

words of appreciation from the eager wine-seller while quaffing glasses of wine to douse my insides which were on fire. In a while, a series of cramps seized my stomach. The only way out of which was double scoops of maple syrup and pecan ice cream. Yes, my first American holiday was made of such rainbow moments.. ♦

READY RECKONER

- **How to get there:** Airlines such as Etihad, Emirates, Air France and Qatar Airways fly from Calcutta to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport with a couple of stops.
- **Where to stay:** Funky Hotel 1000 (www.hotel1000seattle.com) is a high-tech hotel in downtown Seattle with infra-red scanners in rooms (so that hotel staff can check it is occupied) and other fancy features.
- **What to do:** Stay a weekend in Kalaloch Lodge (www.thekalaloch-lodge.com/hurricane-ridge.aspx) in Hurricane Ridge and go on hikes.