



# LA CONNER: TIME TRAVELS ON THE SWINOMISH CHANNEL

This tiny Skagit County town is uniquely located in the middle of a narrow channel and blends maritime history with charming modern activities

PHOTOS BY JOHN LUND

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**F**OLLOWING A STOPOVER AT ANACORTES and on our way to southern Puget Sound, we cross Padilla Bay to the entrance of narrow Swinomish Channel. The 11-mile journey through the channel makes us feel like we are headed into a bygone era, a time when boat travel was the only way to get to the historic town of La Conner.

Boating writers often describe the Swinomish Channel (pronounced SWIN-o-mish), separating the mainland from Fidalgo Island, as a “short cut” or the “chicken route” to La Conner—rather than going around Fidalgo Island and through Deception Pass—as if navigating this slim waterway is a piece of cake.

Today, siltation coupled with a lack of funds for dredging means boaters must pay full attention when navigating the channel, but the rewards of exploring the Swinomish far outweigh the risks. ▶

Rainbow Bridge in the background frames a scenic view from a sunny La Conner patio.



Along the way, boaters are treated to sweeping views of Skagit Valley farmlands with the Cascade mountains as a backdrop. The greatest reward comes when you pull into La Conner—a postcard-perfect historic town that pre-dates highways, trucks and automobiles; a time when Puget Sound’s Mosquito Fleet provided the only connection to the outside world.

La Conner is the oldest community in Skagit County, and with more than 160 19th-century buildings recorded on the National Registry of Historic Places and only 900 permanent residents, it is listed among Washington’s “very small towns.” La Conner is also well known for its annual spring Skagit Valley Tulip Festival when the surrounding region is turned into a brilliant kaleidoscope of red, yellow, and pink tulips, something that stirs the emotions of our Dutch-born crewmate Marianne.

We never sail past La Conner without stopping for lunch, at least.

**PORT OF SKAGIT—LA CONNER MARINA** Full-service La Conner Marina is operated by the Port of Skagit County and has a total of 2,400 linear feet of guest moorage on F float at the south basin and G float at the north basin, available on a first-come, first-served basis. During summer months, marina personnel will accommodate visiting boaters in vacated slips. Staff monitors VHF Channel 66A, or you can call 360-466-3118.

G float visitors need to check with the marina office to pick up a key card for access to the restrooms and showers.

Both marina basins have 30 amp shore power, water and Broad-band Xpress wireless internet. Restrooms, showers, laundry, pay phones, and recycling are nearby. The marina office is at the north basin. Adjacent to the marina is La Conner Maritime Service, which offers complete boatyard service and repair and can handle haul outs to 85 tons.

Fuel and diesel are available at La Conner Landing, between south and north basins. The store sells tackle, bait, ice, beer and wine, marine items and some groceries. Propane is sold next door at the Boater’s Discount Center. The south basin is also home to the Swinomish Yacht Club, which offers reciprocal privileges for other club members ([www.swinomishyachtclub.org](http://www.swinomishyachtclub.org)).

**LA CONNER OF YESTERDAY** The town’s maritime history begins in the mid 1860s when a trading post and post office was established on the west side of the channel where the Swinomish Indian Reservation is today. A few years later the post office was relocated to a building on the east shore originally intended to house the intercontinental telegraph. The line was to run from San Francisco up the coast to Alaska and across the Aleutians to Russia and Europe. The project was abandoned in 1867.

## THIS POSTCARD-PERFECT HISTORIC TOWN PRE-DATES HIGHWAYS, TRUCKS AND AUTOMOBILES

## NAVIGATING THE SWINOMISH CHANNEL



The Swinomish Channel connects Padilla Bay in the north to Skagit Bay in the south and separates Fidalgo Island from the mainland. The channel is narrow but well marked. Drying tidal flats surround the north and south entrances. Until recently, regular dredging kept the channel from silting up.

According to the U.S. Coast Guard’s Local Notice to Mariners (Week 34, 2011), “Numerous soundings of shoaling in the Swinomish Channel have been reported. The primary locations for the shoaling have been from the Swinomish Channel South Entrance, north to the vicinity of La Conner, Wash. Some depths have been reported as two feet below the charted depths. Mariners are advised to use caution when transiting this waterway due to the reported shoaling.”

NOAA Charts 18421 and 18427 will assist in navigating the waterway.

**RED RIGHT RETURNING** If you think of the Channel as a river—one that has two mouths or entrances—and keep in mind that the Red-Right-Returning rule applies at both ends, you will have no problems. The red markers switch to green (and vice versa) near the channel’s halfway point.

**NAVIGATION NOTES—FROM NORTH TO SOUTH** When entering the channel from the north, keep the northernmost red marker to starboard. When you see the swinging railroad bridge and highway bridges ahead, keep to centre channel as this is a shoal area. Buoy 29 marks the most troublesome stretch. South of the bridges, note the ‘Pipeline Area’ sign denoting a shallow area.

Alongside La Conner, about halfway, a shoal extends from the west shore. Stay on the east side of the channel until past La Conner. South of La Conner at Shelter Bay, a shoal extends from the west shore. Stay on the east side of the channel until past Shelter Bay.

The channel’s south entrance, west of Goat Island, is a shoal area. Stay centre channel by aligning the range markers on Whidbey Island and Dugualla Bay. Stay north of the red buoys. Watch for shoaling at Buoy 1.

When docking, head into the current. Staff on the fuel dock maintain a “Dock from this Direction” sign as a reminder. Checking current direction and strength is just as important when casting off. Remember to put power on before letting go. If the current is strong, wait until slack. The port is understanding and will delay check-out times during strong flood and ebb tides.



The charming, seaside town is a glimpse back in time to the days when La Conner was only accessible by boat.



## 2011 CANOE JOURNEY

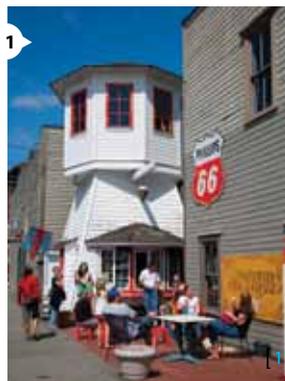
While we were visiting La Conner, the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community hosted 60 canoes from all over the northwest during the week of July 25, 2011.

The first modern Canoe Journey was held in 1989 as part of Washington State's centennial. Since then West Coast Salish First Nations (including British Columbia) have been gathering annually.

The theme for 2011 was "Loving, Caring and Sharing Together" during which 15,000 guests were treated to traditional dinners of salmon, clam chowder, crab, and elk stew. The week was filled with dancing, singing, drumming, story telling and a potlatch, a traditional way of redistributing wealth.

The Swinomish spent two years building the waterfront Swadabs Park and three large cedar hat-shaped pavilions—fine examples of Northwest Coast Native art. Surrounding the pavilions are interpretive panels telling the story of the Canoe Journey, the Great Flood, and the village of Txiwuc (the landing site).

The Squaxin Island Tribe of southern Puget Sound will host the 2012 Canoe Journey.



[1] The La Conner Ice Cream Tower is a welcome stop for visitors on a hot summer day. [2] Nasty Jack's antique shop has a great selection of antiques and curios. [3] Thirsty visitors should visit the La Conner Pub Tavern. [4] Historic Gaches Mansion houses the La Conner Quilt Museum. [5] The Ginger Grater has upscale kitchen gear. [6] The metal sculpture outside the Museum of Northwestern Art.

The community began to take shape in 1870 when John and Louisa A. Conner arrived and built a large store and dock. Using his wife's initials and married name, John renamed the town La Conner to honour his wife, who travelled across unsettled territory with a wagon-load of children.

In the early days, boats were the main mode of transportation in and out of town. The area was prone to flooding, and dikes were erected to reclaim the land from the Skagit River creating fertile fields with high yields of hay, oats, barley and hops.

Business boomed in the 1880s as warehouses, buildings and shipping docks proliferated and La Conner became one of the Northwest's leading shipping centres frequented by Puget Sound steamboats.

The arrival of bridges, highways and trucks bypassed La Conner, which had been slow to adjust to the age of the automobile. By the end of the First World War most of the town's shipping trade had petered out, taking with it much of its population; the remaining town folk got by on fishing, farming and forestry.

In the 1960s La Conner was rediscovered when artists, writers and other creative-types looking for a peaceful way of life infused the region with new energy. Many of the original buildings

were restored and eventually entered in the National Registry of Historic Places.

**LA CONNER TODAY** Walking distance from the marina, La Conner invites us to explore its many eclectic gift boutiques, art galleries, antique and collectible shops, and restaurants housed in colourful Victorian buildings, complete with creaky wood floors, lining the waterfront on First Street.

Be sure to stop by Nasty Jack's antique shop, on the corner of First and Morris. It always has an amazing assortment of antiques and curios.

Art lovers should head to the town's Museum of Northwest Art, on South First Street, that showcases contemporary art of the Pacific Northwest and has a great gift shop.

Quilters can step back in time at the La Conner Quilt Museum in historic Gaches Mansion on Second Street. The mansion was being repainted on our visit. It is one of only 12 quilt museums in the U.S. The Skagit County Historical Museum on Fourth Street tells of the region's pioneer days and, on a clear day, the deck provides a breathtaking view of the valley and mountains beyond.

While upscale kitchen gear might not be the first thing we think of when cruising, we enjoy The Ginger Grater, on First Street, in an old-fashioned mercantile

building. In an adjoining room The Olive Shoppe gets our attention with 140 gourmet olives and 70-plus olive oil varieties from all corners of the world, plus other locally produced delicacies.

Hungry from our morning explorations, we head for Kerstin's Restaurant where we enjoy an excellent seafood lunch on their new deck. If pizza is your thing, then the laid-back La Conner Brewing Company is the place. For breakfast or coffee, try the Calico Cupboard café and bakery where they serve a terrific country-style breakfast and claim to have "the sweetest buns in town." On this trip, dinner time finds us on the deck of La Conner Seafood & Prime Rib House where we watch the Swinomish boat parade over an excellent cut of prime rib.

You will find a great selection of fine wines in a shop in the historic Lime Dock building. La Conner Fruit and Produce Market, on First Street, is near the

marina and carries a variety of fresh fruit and local vegetables. When we need provisioning, we visit Pioneer Market, a full-service supermarket on Morris Street.

**B**Y PAYING EXTRA attention to the navigational details, we think you too will enjoy Swinomish Channel as you travel back through time to historic La Conner. ☺

**IF YOU GO**

**U.S. Coast Guard (Bellingham)**  
360-734-1692; VHF 16, 21

**Port of Skagit, La Conner Marina**  
360-466-3118; VHF 66A

**Visitor Information**  
360-466-4778

**La Conner Landing (fuel dock)**  
360-466-4478

BELOW Use caution when navigating in and out of La Conner through Swinomish Channel.



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