## Time Travel to Living History Destinations

Immerse yourself in a different time and culture for a unique learning experience.

**BY MARIE SHERLOCK** 

"It's loud and intense and chaotic. And probably as close to the reality of the Civil War as you want to get."

# The year is 1855.

I'm sitting on the deck of the chief factor's house at Fort Nisqually, a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trading outpost on Puget Sound. It's a beautiful summer day and the fort's inhabitants are out in full force to welcome Angus McDonald and his brigade of trappers who are bringing in a year's worth of furs. Bagpipers and a volley of musket fire announce their arrival. McDonald is greeted warmly by the fort's chief factor, Dr. William Tolmie, also a Scotsman by birth. They embrace and share a toast (of Scotch, no doubt). A festive day of games, food and entertainment follows.

Okay, it's not actually 1855—but it sure feels like it. I'm at Brigade Encampment Weekend at Fort Nisqually Living History Museum, part of Tacoma Metro's Point Defiance Park. As I walk around interacting with the fort's "residents," I feel very much a part of the mid-19th century landscape.

And that's the beauty of living history demonstrations: You are there, immersed in a different time, culture and—most definitely—technology. It's as close as you'll get to time travel.

Living history programs recreate the past via reenactors, dressed in period costumes, depicting a historical time and place. Visitors gain a deeper sense of history in the process. "It is cliché, but living history programs help bring the past to life, demonstrating how people looked, acted and even spoke," explains Bob Cromwell, chief of interpretation at Fort Vancouver, another living history location.

The Pacific Northwest has a treasure trove of these destinations. Here's a sampling of what you can experience.

## Fort Nisqually

IT WAS ALL ABOUT THE LATEST FASHION CRAZE.

If not for the demand for beaver pelts—to satisfy Europe's beaver top hat obsession—the British Hudson's Bay Company likely would never have descended upon the Northwest, building a series of fur-trading outposts. A visit to Fort Nisqually, founded in 1833, will give you a good grounding in what life was like for these early settlers.

On any given day, you can grab a self-guided tour brochure and make your way around the fort's nine buildings. You'll see a handful of reenactors "going about the work of the Fort, cleaning the chicken coop, sewing, cooking, and you can ask them questions and chat about the history," says Allison Campbell, the fort's events and volunteer coordinator.

But Brigade Encampment Weekend is the living history mother lode here. In mid-August, more than 100 volunteers descend on the fort to portray life as it was at the fort in 1855.

And the reenactors know their stuff. I have a long, fascinating conversation with Tolmie, expertly portrayed by volunteer Rich Repp. Tolmie tells me about his work as chief factor, a job that is not unlike a modern-day CEO. Slipping out of character to answer a few questions, Repp notes that Tolmie and McDonald were, indeed, very good friends. That warm welcome was authentic. "They assumed you were dead if you didn't show up," explains Repp. "Tolmie was very glad to see his friend." Repp has been playing the role of Tolmie for eight years. "We'll research for hundreds of hours so when we bring our character to life you'll get a real feel for these people and their lives," he says.

Repp's hard work has paid off. When he's in character, I absolutely feel like I'm talking to Tolmie in 1855.

## San Juan Island National Historical Park

THE PIG WAR WASN'T JUST ABOUT A PIG.

If you've ever visited San Juan Island, you're probably familiar with this "conflict." Here's the nutshell version of what happened: In the mid-1800s, England and the U.S. claimed ownership of the San Juan Islands. In 1859 an American farmer shot an Englishman's pig that was rooting around in his potato patch. That act nearly started a war—but cooler heads prevailed. The islands were jointly occupied until 1872 when arbitration determined they belonged to the U.S.

Each July, San Juan Island National Historical Park's English Camp holds an Encampment Weekend (there's also an American Camp on the south end of the island). "Encampment represents one of the several times a year that the two camps got together to celebrate a holiday or other event," says Park Ranger Doug Halsey.



#### **Time Travel to Living History Destinations**



Who doesn't love a conflict where the warring factions party together and the only casualty is a pig?

Up to 40 reenactors pitch tents, don period costumes and demonstrate skills of the era, from blacksmithing and carpentry to weaving and lace-making. These reenactors—nearly all volunteers—are not here on a lark. They have studied extensively and are exceedingly knowledgeable about their roles.

For example, sisters Shelly and Bonnie Skolfield educate visitors on the eight-step process mid-19th century women endured to get dressed. Putting your shoes on was number three, "because you won't be able to bend over once you put your corset on," says Shelly (donning the corset is number four). Other *de rigeur* parts of the ritual include a "bum roll" (these add an extra boost to your bottom, a 19th-century J-Lo effect), an adjustable steel hoop and at least one petticoat.

This attention to detail is what makes the characters come alive. "It's a great challenge to see how authentic you can get," says Shelly. Union Gap Civil War Reenactment

BE A SPECTATOR TO A NORTH VS. SOUTH SKIRMISH.

Every Father's Day weekend, you can dive into another historic conflict in Union Gap, Washington. This battle may be more familiar to you.

Washington State's largest Civil War Reenactment Battle is part of Union Gap's Old Town Days. According to spokesperson Rich Bright (aka Major Bright, U.S. Cavalry Commander), the event attracts up to 350 volunteer reenactors, most of them depicting soldiers, along with a cavalry of about a dozen horses.

Visitors interact with reenactors at three separate camps— Union, Confederate and civilian—learning about period skills like leather work, weapon maintenance and cooking. The weekend isn't complete without Lincoln's Gettysburg address—yes, it's delivered by another reenactor.

But the main attractions are clearly the skirmishes. Bright notes that they are "loosely scripted" to depict a different Civil War encounter each year but with as many as 250 soldiers fighting and up to 15 horses involved, they "never come out the same or as planned." Which, really, just adds to the authenticity.

During the battles—five are scheduled throughout the weekend, each lasting about 45 minutes—guns blaze, cannons roar, commanders in the field bellow orders and smoke fills the air. The crowd of spectators, not far from the action, cheers and screams along with the soldiers.

It's loud and intense and chaotic. And probably as close to the reality of the Civil War as you want to get.



I think they nailed it.





#### Other living history destinations

- > Barkerville Historic Town, Barkerville, B.C., barkerville.ca
- Burnaby Village Museum, Burnaby, B.C., burnabyvillagemuseum.ca
- Champoeg State Heritage Area, St. Paul, OR, oregonstateparks.org
- End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, Oregon City, OR, historicoregoncity.org
- >> Fort Langley National Historic Site, B.C., pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/bc/langley
- >> High Desert Museum, Bend, OR, highdesertmuseum.org
- > Philip Foster Farm, Eagle Creek, OR, philipfosterfarm.com
- > Pioneer Farm Museum, Eatonville, WA, pioneerfarmmuseum.org
- >> Pomeroy Living History Farm, Yacolt, WA, pomeroyfarm.org

### Fort Clatsop

FORTUNATELY, NOT ALL HISTORIC DESTINATIONS ARE MEMORABLE DUE TO A CONFLICT.

Fort Clatsop, five miles south of Astoria, is a living history option that focuses on the daily life of its residents, the celebrated members of Lewis & Clark's Corps of Discovery. The fort is a replica of the structure the Corps called home during the winter of 1805-06, after they had made their arduous journey to the Pacific and before returning east.

To truly "time travel" at Fort Clatsop, visit during the summer months when volunteers and staff don period costumes and transport you back to that cold, rainy winter. They'll show you how to start a fire with flint and steel, make candles, tan hides and write with quill pens.

But the most popular presentation, according to Jill Harding, the fort's chief of visitor services, is the muzzleloading program. A costumed reenactor methodically demonstrates the steps for loading these high-tech-for-theirtime weapons. You'll learn where the phrase "lock, stock and barrel" originated (they're the main components of a muzzle). The program concludes with a successful firing of the gun.

Harding is quick to point out that, above all, the muzzle was a survival tool for the Corps of Discovery, "used to obtain food and clothing, for trade, for scientific collection and for celebration," like ringing in the New Year, "with a volley of gunfire."

A little excitement in an otherwise long, dreary winter.

#### Fort Vancouver

## WELCOME TO THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE AMERICAN PACIFIC NORTHWEST.

Fort Vancouver, like Fort Nisqually, was a Hudson's Bay Company outpost. Indeed, it was the company's Western headquarters, established in 1825.

As you enter the visitor's station, you'll see a chalkboard listing which living history demonstrations are available that day. The blacksmith shop, kitchen, carpenter shop and bake house are all possibilities. I'm lucky to be visiting the fort on a day when volunteer Al Lindholm is firing up the forge in the blacksmith shop. Lindholm is engaging, knowledgeable and gregarious, and I find myself mesmerized by a subject that, before my visit, was not even on my radar.

Lindholm waxes seamlessly about the blacksmith shop and its pivotal role in the fort's survival and success. Because the HBC's primary trade was in beaver pelts, traps were the most important items created at the shop, along with virtually any metal object the fort required, from axes and nails to plows and soup ladles.

Lindholm notes that while the reenactors use mid-19th century tools and techniques, the materials have changed a bit, from the then popular wrought iron to steel today. That iron—and everything else the fort needed but couldn't produce itself—had to be shipped around Cape Horn from England, a year-long voyage. Consequently, ordering and receiving items was a two-year process. Not exactly Amazon Prime.

Lindholm's impressive command of facts and adept use of the tools of the period is typical among reenactors. "We have an invaluable crew of over 200 dedicated volunteers," says Cromwell. "They study the history of the park in incredible

#### When you go

- Sort Nisqually, metroparkstacoma.org/ fort-nisqually-living-history-museum
- >> San Juan Island National Historical Park, nps.gov/sajh
- >> Union Gap Civil War Reenactment centralwaagmuseum.org
- >> Fort Clatsop, nps.gov/lewi/planyourvisit/ fortclatsop.htm
- >> Fort Vancouver, nps.gov/fova/index.htm

detail and allow visitors to experience it in ways we could never achieve with staff alone."

Meanwhile back at Fort Nisqually, Tolmie (Repp) continues my education on the value of living history experiences. "You end up interacting with a real, three-dimensional character," he explains. Rather than simply visiting a location, "you're really visiting the history of these places."

I concur wholeheartedly.



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