



In the Skagit Valley, you can walk, run or cycle through the tulips — and sure, tiptoe too

WE WERE EXPECTING TO SEE TULIPS, fields and fields of tulips, at the annual Skagit Valley Tulip Festival. So when we spotted a brilliant red in the distance, we knew we had arrived. Still, when we rounded a curve, we were suddenly gobsmacked by a dazzling display of yellow petals.

“Stop!” I ordered my husband, rummaging in my camera bag for the right lens. As I jumped out to take some photos, he muttered, “They’re not tulips. They’re daffodils.” Sure enough, I was about to photograph a field of daffs. Coming from the Saanich Peninsula — the daffodil capital of Canada — this was too funny. But this field was more spectacular than any of the Vantreight Farm fields. (Sorry Ian!)

The difference — and this is also the case with the tulips that we would see in abundance the next day — is that most of the flowers in the Skagit Valley are allowed to come into bloom. Very few, less than five per cent, are picked while in bud. That’s because they’re grown mostly for the

bulbs. Vantreight’s is almost the exact opposite, with 90 per cent of the flowers cut in the field before they open.

Visitors less jaded than we would revel in the daffodils here too, and there’s actually more fields of them than tulips (about 180 hectares and 140 hectares respectively, plus 80 hectares of iris) — but we came for the tulips.

We brought our bikes, having heard that it’s fun to cycle the country roads between the fields. But the next morning the weather isn’t cooperating; it’s mid-April, yet it feels more like mid-November. The wind whips across the flat valley; we leave our bikes on their rack and drive.

The Skagit Valley is about a 24-kilometre triangle, hemmed in by the Skagit River, the Swinomish Channel and Highway 20, the highway from Anacortes if you take the Washington State ferry from Sidney.

We pick up a map with the fields colour-coded. I count 11 fields of tulips. We also plan to visit the one-hectare RoozenGaarde



From left: Most of the tulips are left to bloom in the field. Workers cut late-blooming 'Ile de France' tulips. The North Cascade Mountains form a backdrop for the colourful valley's annual April tulip festival.

Display Garden. It's owned by the Roozen family, which also owns the Washington Bulb Co. Inc., the largest tulip bulb grower in the US, maybe the world. (Roozen is synonymous with flowers here the same way Vantreight is synonymous with daffodils at home.)

Our first field is just down the road and it's even better than I expected; brilliant purple tulips form a solid carpet bathed in sunshine in the foreground, which gives way to a swatch of bright red, and beyond that, a ribbon of pale pink. Against the horizon, the North Cascades mountain range broods under a dark sky. The contrast is stunning. We take turns posing for photos with Oscar, our pooch, then drive to the next field.

This one alternates red and yellow with a red barn in the background. Turn another direction and a row of mature poplar trees, not yet in leaf, forms a pleasingly symmetrical backdrop.

I'm beginning to think local farmers have taken design courses. Even the muddy water pooling between some of the

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rows of tulips captivates, catching the image of the flowers nodding above and reflecting it back.

The RoozenGaarde Display Garden offers a different experience. It's a mini Butchart Gardens, planted with 300,000 bulbs. More varieties of tulips pop up here in the spring than Haagen-Dazs has flavours of ice cream.

Tulips, daffodils and hyacinth create a colourful geometric carpet under flowering rhododendrons. A river of blue *Muscari armeniacum* meanders through it.

It seems we've hit the nail on the head with timing. Officially, the tulip festival is the whole month of April, but about one week is optimal, when the early varieties are still blooming and the late ones have opened. Those dates vary depending on the weather. But throughout April, you can take part in related events, such as the annual tulip run, cycling events, an historic quilt walk, a wine festival in Anacortes and more. (For a complete list of dates and registration info, go to tulipfestival.org.)

As aesthetically pleasing as everything is — the tulip fields, the display garden, the historical village of La Conner with its shops and restaurants — what makes me smile when I recall our visit is not tulips, but, strangely, turkeys.

On our first evening, I take Oscar for a walk while my husband warms his feet by the fire in our room at the La Conner Country Inn. As we descend a flight of stairs I notice a sign saying "Yard

closed due to turkey damage." How bizarre, I think. The yard is thick with overgrown trees, but there's no sign of any animals, let alone turkeys.

Then we see them in another yard; six big birds with iridescent black and brown plumage, turquoise heads, and scarlet throats. They stand absolutely still. At first, I think they might be the work of an artist — La Conner was an artists' colony in the 1930s and still has an artsy side — but then they move. They preen. And they gobble.

"Wild turkeys!" I told my husband, after running back to our hotel. "Come and see."

By the time we return, they're gone. A man walking past tells us the turkeys arrived out of the blue three or four years ago. "They've divided the town," he said, when I ask about the sign. "Some people like them, some don't. Someone once shot one with an arrow."

This sounds an awful lot like the deer problem back in Victoria. I have to chuckle. Daffodils and deer on the Saanich Peninsula, tulips and turkeys in La Conner. You just never know what you'll find when you leave home.

*It takes about 3 1/2 hours to take the Sidney-Anacortes ferry and then drive from Anacortes to La Conner. The La Conner Country Inn offers a substantial complimentary breakfast and pet-friendly rooms. Email: cc@laconnerlodging.com for rates. The La Conner Quilt and Textile Museum features quilts inspired by the tulip fields. **VB***



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