

Sea Kayaking

Channel Islands National Park

Santa Cruz Island

Deep Magazine
Written by Chuck Graham
March / April 2010

Paddling with Tony Chapman

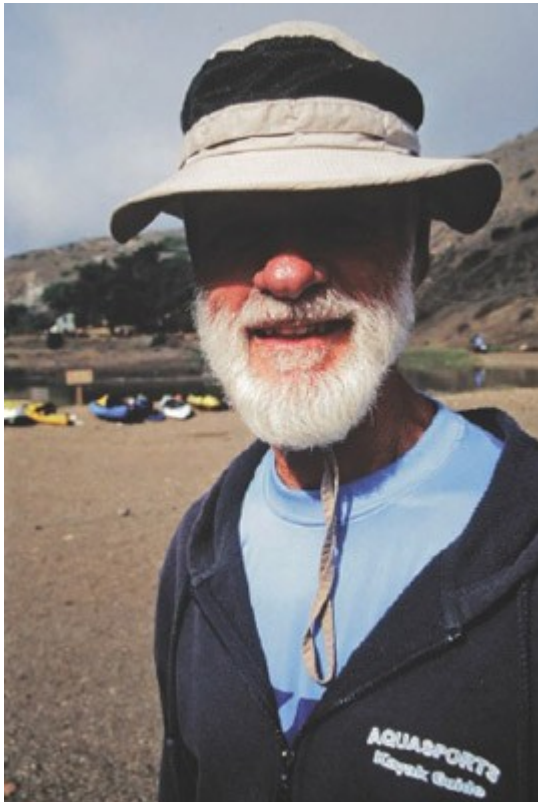


The good life, soaking it all in inside Scorpion rock.

He arguably knows the volcanic innards of the Channel Islands National Park better than any kayaker, spending approximately 120 days a year guiding tours through the honeycombed cliffs, primarily on the southeast end of San Cruz Island.

You would think Tony Chapman might get bored running tour after tour through many of the same toothy sea caves, especially after 23 years of guiding, but don't tell the 71-year-old that. Spending a significant amount of time on the unique island chain can be intoxicating considering the boundless adventure, challenging sea conditions and encounters with wildlife.

I caught up to Chapman between kayak tours at his workplace at Scorpion Anchorage, while enjoying a little spelunking in the many grottos popular in the region.



Tony Chapman: I saw an article in the Santa Barbara News-Press on Eric Little, owner of Aquasports. I called him and asked if he needed an EMT. At the time I was volunteering for Santa Barbara Search and Rescue, which I did for 15 years. It was my first guiding job. When I first started we chartered a boat out of Santa Barbara just after the islands became a National Park, but while it was still all private property within the park.

DEEP: What do you enjoy the most about guiding at the islands?

TC: I learn something different all the time. You're never repeating yourself. Spending 120 days a year out here would get old to most people, but the different sea conditions are a challenge and seeing things I haven't seen before are what keeps bringing me back. Any time I have an opportunity to get to a part of the islands I don't get to regularly, I'll take it.

For instance, I recently accompanied a swimmer, Penny Palfrey in from Santa Barbara Island to the mainland. First time ever someone had done it solo to where Marine Land used to be on the Palm Verdes Peninsula. It was 35 miles, 18 hours, two miles an hour. It was a new challenge for me, and new challenges are good.

DEEP: Favorite islands?

TC: I like Santa Cruz, but I like Santa Barbara Island because it's far out and because of its sea caves. There's something I get to do there that happens maybe once every 10 years when the conditions are just right. Sutil Rock is located off the southwest corner of the island. There's a crack that goes along the west side of the rock. High tide, and when it's not too rough, is the only time you can paddle through there. It's a real challenge to me.

DEEP: Experiences guiding at the islands?

TC: Umpteen. I assisted in a vertical rock rescue on Santa Cruz Island above In and Out Cave. A 17-year-old boy wanted to go cliff diving. He down-climbed 140 feet on a 340 foot cliff, got in a pocket, decided he had done something stupid and got stuck. I was guiding a tour at the time and heard him yelling for help. I assisted the park service on that one.

DEEP: Do you ever think about quitting?

TC: At my age, if you don't keep doing what you're doing, you lose the ability to do it. I enjoy what I do anyway, so what would I do if I didn't have this to do? I'd be bored and I'd miss it. There's no place where I can have more fun. I really don't enjoy guiding on the mainland. The islands are just so different.

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