

Sea Kayaking Channel Islands National Park America's Galapagos

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SUMMER VACATIONS IN THE WEST Offshore Eden

Unparalleled kayaking, diving and that rarest of finds - solitude - await on 'America's Galápagos.'
And just getting to the watery national park is an adventure, breaching whales and all.



Only my footprints marked the wet sand along Water Canyon Beach. Only my ears heard the wail of sea gulls resonating off the sandstone cliffs above. Only my eyes saw a bright orange starfish rising and falling with the tide as the sea battered its rocky ledge.

I found solitude, adventure and an unspoiled, world-class beach only 26 miles from the Los Angeles megalopolis. And I reveled in it.

I'm not a loner, but occasionally, life in Southern California overwhelms me. The cacophony of screaming

horns, circling helicopters, bleating phones. None of those could follow me here. I was off the grid.

My nirvana was an isolated beach on Santa Rosa Island, part of Channel Islands National Park. The five rocky outcroppings off Southern California are so wild and isolated that they're often called America's Galápagos.

The park, accessible only by boat or plane, draws so few people that it ranks as one of the least-visited in the country; although it is within 60 miles of 18 million people, only about 80,000 visit each year. Seclusion is not only possible but also probable along its 175 miles of coastline.

In actuality, two of the islands are easy to reach by ferry. And those who make the trip find a place that is worlds apart from the mainland. An unspoiled land with an incredible array of plants and animals found nowhere else. An adventure-in-the-making where unparalleled kayaking and diving await. A place where hikers, sailors, fishermen and campers find first-rate wilderness activities.

MAGICAL WATERWORLD

I discovered the Channel Islands more than a decade ago. Since then, I've collected the islands the way some people collect fine art.

There are eight in the chain, but only five comprise the park (Catalina is a Channel Island, but is not part of the park.) The two inner islands, Anacapa and Santa Cruz, are closest to the mainland and easy to reach on scheduled boat trips; the three outer islands - Santa Rosa, Santa Barbara and San Miguel - can be difficult.

Boat service is infrequent and subject to mercurial weather and sea conditions. Even if you reach Santa Barbara and San Miguel, landings can be wet and wild rides through the surf because docks are nonexistent. The adventure quotient is high.

I finally bagged my fifth park island, Santa Barbara, this spring after several years of failed attempts.

But my collection has more tangible rewards than just adding another island to my life list. A friend once said that sea water courses through my veins, and the channel that separates the islands from the coast is a waterworld of wondrous sights: pods of whales gliding through moonlit seas, boisterous schools of dolphins wave-hopping in search of prey, squadrons of brown pelicans patrolling rocky shores.

The islands rose from the ocean floor millions of years ago, born of volcanic activity and plate tectonics; they lie in a region between the mainland and the ocean depths called the continental shelf. Four of the park islands are strung out in a line off Ventura; at one time, they were a single large island. The fifth, tiny Santa Barbara, is 60 miles south.

The easiest way to visit is by boat from Oxnard or Ventura with Island Packers (www.islandpackers.com), a family-owned service that's staffed by people who are such avid ocean lovers that I halfway expected them to burst into sea chanteys during a trip. Volunteer naturalists accompany each trip, leading hikes and explaining marine and island life.

The other ways to reach the islands can be mini-adventures in themselves, as I found when I visited Santa Rosa in May.

SANTA ROSA

The marine layer had just lifted when our twin-engine plane powered along the runway at tiny Camarillo Airport and rose noisily over fields full of ripening strawberries. The 10-seater headed out to sea.

I had joined a group of L.A.-area buddies headed to Santa Rosa for a day of surf fishing. They arranged the trip with Channel Island Aviation (www.flycia.com), which provides air transportation to the island. The round-trip flight, about 25 minutes each way, cost \$159 and gave me a bird's-eye view of Santa Barbara Channel and Anacapa, Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa islands.

We bounced around in the sky, buffeted by morning currents, buzzed over a pod of whales headed north and

then bumped down on a graded dirt runway.

While the fishing buddies practiced casting, I planned to explore. I had nearly six hours to wander.

Santa Rosa, the second largest of the islands, is in the outer waters, which means the weather can be devilish. High winds are the main problem, but damp, chilly conditions can be another deterrent.

The day was overcast but pleasant. I hiked into Cherry Canyon along a 3 1/2 -mile trail that's popular with day-trippers. Clusters of flaming Indian paintbrush lined the switchbacks as I climbed up a steep canyon, passing small groves of live oaks and manzanita. The only sound I heard was my own breathing and the clear notes and trills of a song sparrow.

At the top of a ridge, I looked out. Miles of golden grasses stretched to the sea, waving slightly in the breeze. There was no sign of life, other than the white hull and silvery mast of a sailboat at anchor in Bechers Bay far below.

Eventually, the trail took me to Santa Rosa's campground, where each site has an ocean view. (Camping is permitted on all the islands with reservations, [877] 444-6777 or www.recreation.gov.)

The campground had improved dramatically since my last visit four years ago. Flush toilets and a solar shower had been added, along with sturdy windbreak shelters at each site, making it the cushiest campground in the park. But no campers were there to enjoy the plush digs.

I continued my trek, making my way to Water Canyon Beach. I had saved this, the best, for last. I knew from my earlier visit that it was a stunner. Ranger Mark Senning, who has made his home on Santa Rosa for 10 years, calls it "world class," and I agree.

A lazy line of white surf curled along a beautifully shaped bay. Dunes soared 40 feet, the surface unmarked except for tiny waves etched by the wind. Sandpipers scurried along the wet beach, sea gulls surfed air currents, a curious seal poked its head out of the water offshore.

I knew the surf fishermen were out there somewhere, but with five miles of coastline, I didn't care. For a few moments, the beach belonged to me.

SANTA CRUZ

I made several trips to the islands for this story; most were aboard Island Packers' boats, the most common method of getting there. But the most exhilarating was on a 53-foot J160, a high-performance sloop named La Sirena.

I had joined a tour group put together by Wilderness Inquiry, and the ride was part of a three-day sail and kayak package to Santa Cruz, the largest of the islands.

The sailing was grand, but at one point, we weren't so sure about the kayaking.

The day had dawned gloomy. The 13 novice kayakers stood at attention, paddles held at their sides like rifles, while a guide carefully explained what should and shouldn't happen during the next couple of hours. It was raining lightly, and the wind was starting to kick up.

"We usually paddle into the wind first," the guide said, "but it keeps shifting today. We'll have to assess things as we go."

A few of the kayakers looked nervous. But most seemed ready to begin their mini voyage.

Wilderness Inquiry, a nonprofit, offers outdoor adventure trips "for people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities" (www.wildernessinquiry.com). What that means is that some of its campers are disabled. Nondisabled campers pitch in to help. **[Note: Aquasports has provided kayaks, kayaking gear, and guides**

for the kayaking portion of Wilderness Inquiry and other outdoor adventure group's Santa Cruz Island trips.]

Other groups sponsor trips to the Channel Islands too, including the Sierra Club, Elderhostel, the Santa Barbara Botanical Garden and the Los Angeles Audubon Society.

The drawing card for the Wilderness Inquiry group was exploring Santa Cruz, known for its sea caves and exciting kayaking conditions. Of course, everyone expected to be hitting the water on a warm, sunny day, not in a slow drizzle with wind waves kicking up whitecaps.

The trip through the caves was bracing but fun. And everyone made it back to shore in one piece.

"It just added to the adventure," said Liebe Gary of Echo Park, who uses a wheelchair after a 30-year battle with multiple sclerosis. "It's not the way it sounded in the brochure,"; she added, referring to the trip itinerary, "but I loved it." The sloops, which were provided and operated by members of the Santa Barbara Yacht Club, anchored off Scorpion Ranch, on the eastern end of the island. Campers slept on board, watching a scarlet moon play hide and seek behind drifting clouds.

Scorpion Ranch is the most popular stop for those who visit the Channel Islands; it sometimes gets as many as 150 visitors on a summer day. I didn't find solitude, but there were plenty of trails to hike, places to picnic and campsites to try in a canyon wooded with eucalyptus. And I'll never forget the sea caves.

SANTA BARBARA/SAN MIGUEL

Caves are also a draw on tiny Santa Barbara Island, and a beautiful beach is a hallmark of San Miguel, but both are so far out that you really have to work to get there, which is why they're the least-visited in the park.

Island Packers schedules a few trips to each annually, mainly in the summer. But sea and weather conditions often cause these to be canceled. I finally reached Santa Barbara on a beautiful day in April, when conditions were ideal. Rough weather last winter ripped out part of the pier, so visitors have to land by skiff on a rocky ledge. It would be treacherous in anything other than totally calm sea conditions.

The island is only a mile square, so hiking it is a breeze. And the ocean view is spectacular. Rocky coves are filled with barking sea lions and clear blue water that's reminiscent of the sea color in the Caribbean or the South Pacific. A tiny campground sits on an unprotected bluff.

Sea conditions were not as ideal in late May, when I joined a group of campers headed for San Miguel, 64 miles west of the mainland. Twelve-foot seas made the four-hour journey uncomfortable for many of those on board, as the Island Packers' 64-foot power catamaran lurched up and down through huge waves. I loved it, but I kept my views to myself and cheered only inwardly, out of respect for my seasick companions.

Luckily, the weather was better on San Miguel. It offers good hiking and, of course, lots of solitude.

ANACAPA

Sixteen miles east of Ventura, Anacapa's three volcanic islets rise steeply from the sea, seeming to float on the horizon like a distant mirage. The name, in fact, is derived from a Chumash word for "mirage."

The rocky, treeless shores here have been eroded by wind and waves, creating towering sea cliffs, caves and natural bridges, including 40-foot-high Arch Rock, the symbol of Anacapa and the Channel Islands.

Sea birds are everywhere, especially from April to July, when countless Western gulls nest on the islets - sometimes almost in the middle of the trail - and chicks hatch by the thousands.

My early May visit was in the middle of the nesting season, and angry gulls were very vocal; I could almost hear them cawing, "Get away from my nest." I had brought a picnic lunch and ate it near the island lighthouse, ignoring the bossy birds.

We boarded the boat for the trip back to Ventura in the late afternoon, and I took my usual seat on the top deck, watching for marine life. In the distance, I spotted a whale breaching. I didn't think much of it; whales usually breach only a few times. By the time you reach them, they're long gone. But this big boy of planet ocean hadn't seen that script.

He kept on breaching, propelling his 45-ton body out of the water again and again. I counted as our boat neared. The whale, a humpback, kept flying out of the water, then slapping back down in backward somersaults.

Our captain stopped so we could watch. Twenty times, 25 times. Other people on deck started to count with me. No one, including captain, crew or naturalist, had seen anything like it, they said. Once in a while, our new friend would take a mini-break, rolling over on his back to expose his white underbelly, then wave his pectoral fins languorously at us.

I kept counting. When the whale reached 40 jumps, the captain headed for home. I could see the acrobatic whale for a while, though, and before he faded from sight, I counted 49 breaches.

I know this sounds like a whale of a tale. But it's not. It's a true Channel Islands tale.

Just call me Ishmael.

