

Sea Kayaking

Channel Islands National Park

Santa Cruz Island to Anacapa Island, by Kayak

A Feature Article
From The Los Angeles Times Magazine
May 16, 1993

The Kayak Channel

**"Loosely we coast where hideous rocks jag,
An acropolis of cormorants, an extinct
Volcano where spiders spin, a purgatory
Guarded by hags and bristled with breakers."**

-- Richard Murphy, "Sailing to an Island"

Saturday. I'm quite new at this. I've been out five or six times, and I'm getting better, but I still hang back a little, I wait and see. I'm careful. There are, after all, moments when the neophyte engaged in any potentially dangerous activity has to ask himself, "Do I really understand the dangers here, or am I just going along in ignorance?" Sea kayaking, for the beginner, raises exactly that question.

The ocean is calm enough this afternoon, a sunny day between storms. Not much wind. A slight chop on the surface. But the tide is high, and by the time the rolling groundswells bang into the rocks and slurp up into the sea caves that we pass, the water explodes with a weird sudden menace. Look out!

John and Tim, the two young daredevils in our group, both experienced paddlers, insist on playing around at the entrance of the sea caves, taking daring runs just inside and getting out in the nick, like Lilliputians fooling around at the mouth of the sleeping giant. I paddle clear, watching them apprehensively, since getting shmooshed up against the barnacled roof of the sea cave by a tidal surge is one of the things sea kayakers fear most, along with hypothermia and getting munched by a great white shark. Eric Little, our lead guide, hates hearing that one, incidentally. "You have more chance of getting killed by a falling airplane or a dog bite," he says, part of his large repertoire of actuarial rebuttals. Eric's the dark-bearded debonair character in the canvas hat with the whistle around his neck. He's been taking people kayaking along the Santa Barbara coast and out here to the Channel Islands since 1988, and has yet to see a great white. A couple of basking blues, maybe, and even -- 25 yards away -- the appraising eye of a gray whale taking a break from his annual pilgrimage to Baja. But no great whites, or, for that matter, sea serpents or giant squid. (There are great whites in these waters, it should be noted, but they're mostly seen farther north, around San Miguel Island). It's the sea itself that should get your attention, not the monsters in it, Eric contends. And I have no reason to doubt him.

There are six of us in this little expedition, brought out here by boat from Ventura Harbor: Eric, his friend and fellow guide Alice McPherson, my son Timothy and his friends John and Diana Bock. Today we're paddling around the east end of Santa Cruz Island, from Scorpion Bay to Smuggler's Cove for an overnight stay at a hunters camp there. Tomorrow if the weather holds, we cross to what are officially called the Anacapa Islands, but usually called just Anacapa, five miles southeast.

This is not a great distance--kayakers have paddled all the way from California to Hawaii, after all. But the open ocean makes guides cautious, and Eric and Alice have packed two radios (ham and marine), signal flares and dye to dump in the water so that the choppers can find us if a mutant Santa Ana rips up unexpectedly across the ocean and blows us out to sea. They also have pumps should we get swamped and state-of-the-art first-

aid kits and, of course, plenty of duct tape (which will prove critical).

We're in 17-foot Hydra Sea Runners (kayaks come in countless sizes and designs, all with terrific names such as Eddyline Wind Dancer and Nimbus Seafarer), having somehow crammed all of our gear, food, water, sleeping bags, extra clothes -- through openings the size of large hamburgers into forward and aft compartments.

These one-seater kayaks are "sit-insides," and, along with our life vests, we wear spray skirts, which attach to the cockpit and keep us more or less dry. Most of my limited experience in kayaking has been with the friendlier "sit-on-tops," which are self-bailing and much easier to get in and out of. I know that the Hydra's are quite stable and hard to tip, but still, the possibility of getting dumped in the cold water is never far from my mind.

As we near Smuggler's Cove several hours later, I'm surprised that the hand-over-hand motion we use to propel the kayaks -- paddle with one hand push with the other -- is not more tiring than it is. Catch the groove, and you feel as if you can go on forever. But my legs, cramped in the same position, slightly bent at the knees, are starting to bother me, and I'm eager to get ashore. Contrary to Eric's first rule of sea kayaking -- never get out of reach of the guides signal whistle -- I push ahead to be first around the point and into Smuggler's Cove.

Here's the "cove" then, and the stodgy fat pleasure boats snoozing placidly at anchor, and here comes the kayaker slipping in with commando stealth to scout for just the right landing wave -- not too big, just the right modest little drool. And then he paddles in behind it, landing on the strange beach leaping from the cockpit, dragging his craft up on the rocky shore.

What's here? Where is he?

He knows they used to run sheep and pigs at this end of the island and that they both went native, and then the hunters came. He sees that it has low round hills, greening in early February, and, up to the right, primly domestic rows of olive trees. In the weeds just up from the beach, in the clutter of driftwood brought in by the storms, he sees an old clunker of a handmade canoe, rust brown and full of water. Just ahead, there is a thicket of eucalyptus trees. From them comes the sound of hammering.

Soon enough the others have landed and we go off to check out the accommodations. Here and there along the way are the rusted engine blocks, the 50-year-old tractor, covered in vines and weeds. (Mechanical things get left where they die on the islands; it's too much trouble to take them off.) A demented tom turkey -- really aggressive, taking nutty flying leaps at us (soon we've all got sticks; "Down, you turkey!") -- suggests another twist in the islands evolutionary scheme. Trailed by his adoring (or maybe skeptical) hens, the tom seems to believe he's in charge here.

No one else is. Up ahead, the two-story adobe, a ranch house turned hunter's camp, is open and unattended. Down in the bramble, in what used to be the garden, a band of not-very-wild wild pigs root and snort in the dirt. Are they that stupid -- the designated prey wandering into the hunters camp -- or are they smart enough to have already dismissed us as unarmed and unthreatening?

"Built in 1898," the proud builders stamped into the adobe above the front door, which opens into a well-stocked kitchen. The bunk rooms are around back, up a dirt path. The house is an interesting mix of eras and modes: the stove is gas (or would be if we could figure out how to turn it on), but the electricity runs off solar batteries, is weak at best and in some rooms nonexistent. We'll cook dinner on the barbecue pit out front, but first there is a run back to the beach with an old cart.

Later, I look around the game room next to the kitchen, which is a kind of informal museum of island amusements of the past. There are pictures of hunters and their dead trophies of sheep and pig; a dusty glass case with Indian artifacts -- bits of pottery and arrowheads; a sign that says "No liquor sold to Indians"; a leather couch with a big rip in it; a dart board; an old window-shade movie screen and a card table with three decks of cards.

The item that affects me the most, though, is a photo of a shirtless man who has hooked his legs over a fence, and hangs over backward next to the skinned carcass of a sheep. I know there is a message here but I don't know what it is.

All in all, the adobe is an excellent place to spend the night -- the tequila and margarita mix left by our absent hosts doesn't hurt -- and later John Bock comments that it was a bit like being "the last people on earth."

The truth is that we've come at a moment of significant change, the last tick of "privateness" on what was once the largest privately owned island in the continental United States.

"Cruz," as old island hands sometimes call it, is the patriarch of the family of four great snoozing crocodiles that make up the northern portion of what is now officially called the Channel Islands National Monument. (In the south are San Clemente, Santa Barbara, San Nicholas and Santa Catalina, the most famous of the archipelago by far.) Santa Cruz always had it over the others in several important ways: It was not only the biggest of the islands, 25 miles from tip to toe, but also the most varied topographically, with its 2,500-foot peak (occasionally dusted with snow), seven-mile interior valley and its hundred miles of coastline.

San Miguel, the most westerly of the islands, is the scabrous runt of the family, windblown, nearly treeless, its surrounding waters treacherous with wind and lethal tides and currents. Santa Rosa, next to Santa Cruz and just a bit smaller, has wide grassy plateaus, excellent for cattle grazing, which still goes on there. Just east of Santa Cruz -- it seems south, but the coast jogs weirdly here -- is Anacapa, the baby, or rather babies of the family, really three skinny islets connected by subtidal reefs.

But Santa Cruz was always the glamorous one. That was where the movies had been made in the silent era, where once both a winery and tourist hotel had flourished, where a solid ponderosa-like ranch house had been built, nothing like our crude digs, which was once one of eight outlined bunkhouse ranches scattered around the island.

Our adobe is the so-called "Gherini property," the eastern tenth of Santa Cruz Island, awarded by court order back in the '20s to one faction of a squabbling clan; the others got the remaining 90%. The last owner of that majority portion died in 1987. He was the environmentally sensitive Carey Stanton, who left his property to the Nature Conservancy. At about the same time, a three-quarters interest in the Gherini property was sold to the U.S. government. The remaining interest was owned by a lawyer in Ventura, who is said to be "in negotiation" with the National Park Service, though no deal has been made. Two park rangers are already in residence here as a kind of advance guard -- it was their hammering we had heard as they worked on temporary quarters -- but like U.N. troops waiting for orders, they can exercise no authority. It was the lawyer from whom we'd secured permission to come ashore and stay the night.

The rangers are in a contemplative mood tonight as we join them around a great driftwood bonfire they've built on the beach. The island has so many "owners," one is saying, from the Chumash and Canolino Indians, through the Spanish, Mexican and assorted Anglo proprietors, and soon it will be under the National Park Service flag. When that happens, he continues, his face bright from the fire, the hunting will end, and with it the prey.

"No more Porky Pig," he adds.

Sunday. Between the islands, miles from shore, out in the wide ocean, we have our eyes open for the locals: dolphins or their monster cousins, gray whales. So far we've encountered only the occasional seal for company -- if this is anybody's 'hood it is probably theirs -- popping their heads out of a kelp bed here and there and looking, really looking, at this curious procession of 17-foot plastic bananas paddling by. Their expression seems to say, "Eh, what's up, Doc?"

Seen from mid-channel, little Anacapa does an excellent impression of some forbidden mid-Pacific monolith, rising abruptly into a dark, jagged peak like a great flinty arrowhead. This is the first time Eric has made this crossing, and from everything he has been able to learn, we should anticipate a powerful current running next to Anacapa -- at a speed of nearly three knots, nearly identical to our normal paddling speed. It could even

repel us all the way back to Santa Cruz.

Stroke, stroke, stroke....But it isn't the current we're fighting after all but a swell that follows us and, like a schoolyard bully, pushes us off course every chance that it gets. I need two big strokes on the left for a very quick stroke on the right just to keep our course. Stroke, stroke, stroke.

It's exhilarating to be so far away from land under your own power. Except for the seals and gloomy pelicans swooping low and judging us correctly as mooch-proof, we're pretty much alone here. Now and then a speed boat passes, rocking us with its wake, and now just ahead we see a fisherman sitting contentedly, pole in hand, and on the back of his idling boat, his feet up on the railing. He shouts something at us. What's that? Closer now, he says it again and laughs: "Hey, did you guys see the great white that just went by -- 40 feet at least." (Kayakers get some of the razzing that pioneer joggers used to get in the mid-'70s, the point being: What are you doing out there in that silly outfit getting all sweaty when you could be up here, at ease and out of the elements?)

We cruise around the northern tip of Anacapa unopposed (we are almost disappointed when the current fails to materialize) and head down the island. The skinny little Anacapas stretch five miles end to end, curling like a children's pulltoy, one islet following another, down to the bottom where we are to be picked up later in the afternoon. Up close, they look like chunks of mossy cake, gradually getting chewed up by the sea.

The Islands, all of them, have oft-repeated stories attached to them -- tales of the many shipwrecks they have seen; of plane crashes (there were two, unconnected, in which seven people died, on the same day March 9, 1966 on Santa Cruz -- perhaps the strangest island statistic of all); the lonely island suicides. And there is an occasional murder, perhaps in its time not quite considered murder (when one of the owners of Santa Rosa Island killed a deserting Chinese laborer in late 1800s, he was found not guilty, since the Chinese had no legal right to leave.)

Paddling now down the coast of Anacapa, I look for what the guidebooks call "the bleaching bones" of the Pacific Mail's Panama-bound Winfield Scott, a 225-ft side-paddle-wheel steamer that hit the Anacapa rocks on the night of April 3, 1853. (All 200 shivering passengers stumbled safely to shore and were picked up eight days later.) I see nothing.

In the early '20s, a man named Ira Eaton, who also ran the hotel on Santa Cruz Island, leased all of Anacapa for the state government for \$10 a month and ran some sheep there. But there was a security problem: "This winter," Eaton's wife wrote her memoirs, "some Austrian fisherman -- good friends of Ira's -- stopped off at Anacapa to visit with the caretaker, filled him with Dago red and stole 90 of our sheep!"

Then there was the story of Raymond "Frenchy" LaDreau, for whom Frenchy's Cove, where we landed for our lunch, was named. A path leads up from the little beach to a flat grassy patch, not more than 10 feet across, on what is now probably the island's narrowest point -- now more than 50 feet from one coast to the other. This is where Frenchy lived, in what was probably an old fisherman's shack, from 1928 to 1954.

"Not at all the proverbial recluse," writes Karen Jones Dowty in a 1989 edition of the occasionally published Northern Channel Islands Anthology, "Frenchy welcomed all visitors to his steep rock-walled home." He had many cats, and made bouillabaisse from the lobster he trapped, the fish he caught and the abalone he pried from the rocks below. He was free to roam the rest of the island, of course, and he had his visitors and his nominal "official" role as "the unofficial Park Service representative, reporting acts of vandalism and island activities."

But still, 28 years on a piece of ground not much bigger than a Fotomat booth? Frenchy's wife had died, it was said, and he'd come to the island in a state of mourning. Dowty adds that "as the years passed, Frenchy's sorrow over the loss of his wife did not lessen and his wine drinking increased." When he was 68, he suffered a fall and the Park Service decided to move him to the mainland. He was put on a bus in Port Hueneme. "His destination was not known," Dowty says, "and that was the last they ever saw of him." Not a single scrap of wood, a nail, a stone, remains to suggest his curious, long tenancy.

We suddenly hear yells from the beach, and when we get back down from the grassy patch that was once the site of Frenchy's shack, we discover that the sea has made a sneak attack on Tim's kayak, selecting it from the others and pulling it out into the surf, rolling it over and over. When we drag it back in, it is missing a hatch cover -- without which it can't take to the sea. Fortunately, Eric and Alice have brought that duct tape: wrapped around and around the kayak's snout, it makes the craft seaworthy again. Then, because it is getting late and we still have another hour's paddle to our destination, we push off.

The bottom end of the island is about as brave and doomed a piece of real estate as you'll ever see. Sloping down into the water here, it has already lost big chunks of itself and sooner or later you know it'll all be gone. (From the air, these little islets look like a last glimpse of a mountain range just before the waters close over the top.

Up on top of the cliffs is the lighthouse -- built in 1932, automated since 1968 -- and a house where the park ranger lives. A sturdy metal landing 15 feet or so up from the water and, above that, a staircase with 153 steps leading up the cliff have been ingeniously implanted in the corner of a tiny cove -- which, because of powerful tidal surges and a booming, splattering blowhole nearby, has the look of some remote and precarious installation in the North Sea.

We are supposed to hoist our kayaks onto the landing, to make it easier for our pickup boat to take us on board. Eric has learned by radio, though, that the boat will be late, and some of our group decide to try paddling through the rock formation known as the Arch. The Arch is a break in the last rocky scrap of the island before it sinks into the sea. Just inside is a furious little cove where the waves rise out of nowhere, race in berserk runs at each other, and then -- crash! boom! pow! -- disappear only to rise up again somewhere else. As Tim later comments: "It looked like a testing pool in which the worst kayaking conditions had been created."

The Arch obviously offers a fine opportunity to get flipped over or thrown up onto the rocks, and the rest of us watch skeptically as Tim, John and Eric cowboy through, maneuver past some rocks and start playing in the waves.

The 12-mile run from Santa Cruz has increased my confidence, and realizing that this is my last chance to do something really stupid on this trip, I think, Why not? and head through the Arch myself.

There's an aspect of kayaking that's a little like riding a horse, and at first it feels good to get up some speed and to ride a few waves while staying aboard. Then, just as I am starting to feel almost cocky I hear Tim yell "Look out!" I can see from his expression that something terrible has risen in back of me, but it's too late to do a thing about it.

It turns out to be one of the ocean's little jokes -- a monster wave that had loomed suddenly behind me, and then veered off and disappeared.

"You should have seen it," Tim says later. "I'm glad I didn't," I reply.

Fortunately, we don't have to hoist our kayaks up to the landing after all. The boat that is to take us back to the mainland picks us up directly from the sea. We are sitting around the deck of this vessel when, a mile or two off shore, it develops engine trouble. As we sit dead in the water for an hour or so while repairs are under way, I wonder if anyone else in our group shares the thought that keeps running through my mind: why not get out and paddle?

Santa Barbara-based Fessier is the author of a book on the Cotton Club murders, "The Big Ride".

Aquasports outfits trips to the Channel Islands year-round, for non-paddlers and experts alike.

[Aquasports Home Page](#)