

Sea Kayaking

Channel Islands National Park

Santa Cruz Island and Santa Barbara

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On the Move in LotusLand

It's probably unfair to characterize Santa Barbara as a land of lotus-eaters. The locals aren't quite that addled into serene unconsciousness by the power of their city's gorgeous coastal setting.

Close, though. Like the Odyssey's flower-ingesting sailors, satisfied Santa Barbarans have little desire to venture beyond their metropolitan paradise. Their contentment is justifiable. Why not lie eternally languid amid the splendors of sea, sunshine, and bosomy mountains?

Well, because the Santa Ynez range, which rises directly behind the city, and the Channel Islands, which seem to float in the air 25 miles offshore, are both so interesting to explore. Yet hardly anyone does. It is geography that most residents regard as merely a picture frame for their Shangri-La. I lived in Santa Barbara for several years, and I've spent my entire life living within an hour and a half of the city. I'm always amazed that such beauty - contiguous to an urban area of 150, 000 and just 90 miles north of Los Angeles - can remain so uncrowded.

To be fair, some locals do appreciate their front range. They march up favorite day-hikes like Tunnel and Cold Spring Trails to waterfalls, splashing pools, and views that take in miles of coastline. But few residents head into backcountry, or explore the uninhabited archipelago protected in Channel Islands National Park.

The marine sanctuary is a natural wonder of California's central coast. More than a hundred sea caves pock Santa Cruz Island; 72 grottoes are more than 200 feet deep. Eric Little, a kayaking guide whose company Aquasports, takes visitors on one- and two- day paddles, first showed me the caves ten years ago. On a recent trip, he led me and a couple of friends to the Swiss - cheese seascape at the island's eastern end.

After a water taxi dropped us off at Potato Harbor, we paddled east toward Cavern Point. For a warm - up, we surfed a swell through a tall, arched passage that pierces a promontory. Easy. Surging T Cave is also a pass - through, though much longer, (354 feet). Here, a side channel makes hydraulics more interesting. I slid in on some swells, then found myself marking time in a seething chamber about 30 feet high. The waves that had swept me in crashed up ahead as other swells entered from the left via one of the side channels. It looked like a maelstrom, but Little counseled patience. Sure enough, the waves subsided, and I was able to paddle through, although one final breaker made my exit the equivalent of running a Class III rapid.

Paddling along the base of 300 - foot high sea cliffs turned out to be easy - a welcome respite between cave thrills. A harbor seal adopted me and flirted with my boat for a few hundred yards, until we entered Seal Canyon Cave, which is quite different from the high-arched chambers we'd been paddling. It's about six feet wide and ten feet high - a one-way corridor that stretches 600 feet into oblivion.

"Abandon all hope," shouted Little with inexplicable glee, as I turned on my headlamp and gingerly

paddled in backwards. (The cave is too narrow to permit a turnaround.) After 75 yards, I decided that the damp ceiling was getting just a little too low. A swell lifted me up, then dropped me into a trough: Daylight was suddenly extinguished. I knew it was just a black wall of water momentarily obscuring my view, not entombing me forever, but my thumping heart didn't buy the rationalization.

Santa Barbara casts such a powerful spell that even the most active traveler can easily mellow into unruffled quiescence. An evening stroll up State Street is a surefire way to throttle back. Walkways called paseos lead to sidewalks cafes, and froufrou shops. Even better are the paseos off side streets, which hide great used-books stores.

At the foot of State Street is Stearns Wharf, which burns down with regrettable regularity. At the moment, it's renascent, with a restaurant or two being built on it's sprawling pier, but it's not my favorite spot near the ocean. That distinction belongs to Arroyo Burro Beach, which is a few miles west. Known locally as Hendry's Beach, the strand extends for several miles at the foot of crumbly 60-foot bluffs. Wave watchers sit at the Brown Pelican café, Arroyo Burro's lone structure. Joggers and dog walkers enjoy the firm ebb-tide sand. It's the kind of beach where legal or not, everyone unleashes the pooch and tosses a stick into the surf.

If the locals loafing at Hendry's were to make an about-face and head up Highway 154 over San Marcos Pass, they'd find paradise - or, more prosaically, the Lower Santa Ynez Recreation Area in Los Padres National Forest. Paradise Road, off Highway 154, follows the Santa Ynez River to Upper Oso Campground, which occupies a secluded grassy valley. It's my favorite base for forays into the Santa Barbara backcountry. There, I can pitch a tent, lounge in a camp chair beneath one of the huge, spreading valley oaks that dot the glen, and depart on day-hikes, or mountain-bike forays.

The Santa Ynez range is laced with hidden and little-explored passageways. Pedal a flat 6.5 miles on Paradise Road to Red Rock, a picnic area beside a sandstone-walled swimming hole. Beyond the trailhead, a moderately challenging fire road climbs through California's signature landscape: rocky hills covered with wild oats that glow golden in the light of morning and dusk, and huge California oak trees, with their gnarled trunks and grizzled limbs.

The trail ascends hot, dry ridges, plunges into cool, damp valleys, and traces the south shoreline of Gibraltar Reservoir, the city's water source. My turnaround point is usually the Gibraltar Mine, an abandoned quicksilver vein. I used to poke around ore-crushing machinery and ramshackle barracks, but the forest service has fenced the site. Still, it's a good spot for lunch, with great views of the reservoir.

At night, when I don't feel like cooking at Upper Oso, I drive back up Paradise Road and across 154 to Cold Spring Tavern. The interior of this 1886 stagecoach stop is all swarthy wood and stone, and the menu features mesquite-grilled tri-tip, a Central Coast steak specialty.

There was smoke in the air when I set out from Upper Oso to climb Little Pine Mountain. It was disconcerting, but forest- and brushfires are a fact of life in California. After deciding that I was in no immediate danger, I hiked up Santa Cruz Trail and along Oso creek. Fifty yards ahead of me was the largest bobcat I'd ever seen; we charted parallel courses for another 50 yards until the cat slunk away into the brush.

The trail climbed steadily for six miles until it reached the summit ridge and the start of the steep final mile to the summit of Little Pine. For me, it was a race against gathering smoke, which seemed to come from about 12 miles west. In a short while I would lose my view, but while I had it, what a sight. Starting at an elevation of 4,000 feet and all the way to the summit at 4,480 feet, I could see over the Santa Barbara Channel to where Santa Cruz Island floated ghost-like in the haze - a view that would inspire even the most complacent would-be lotus-eaters to forsake the confines of the State Street and explore their secret backyard.

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