

Sea Kayaking

Channel Islands National Park

Santa Cruz Island

The New York Times
October 14, 2005
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Southern California's Offshore Wilderness



LOCAL CELEBRITIES California sea lions bask on a rock near Anacapa. Tens of thousands of sea lions and seals make their home in Channel Islands National Park.

CHANNEL ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK

"DOLPHINS at dawn are good luck." That's what the woman standing near me along the rail of the Truth, a 64-foot twin-diesel diving boat, said after we spotted a dozen of them leaping in the rosy wake just before sunrise. We were bound for Channel Islands National Park, a scattering of five islands that rise in abrupt sheer cliffs off the coast of California, near Ventura.

Formed millions of years ago by the workings of volcanoes and tectonic plates, the islands range in size from one to 96 square miles. All were used for cattle or sheep ranching at some point, and three were home to the Chumash for thousands of years before that. Since 1980, the islands, along with the sunken lands and sea within one nautical mile of each, have been a national park, but despite their great beauty and abundant wildlife, they remain one of the country's least known. Only about 80,000 people a year ever make it out to the islands themselves, and even fewer people reach the outer islands - Santa Rosa, San Miguel and Santa Barbara - which have less frequent boat service and unpredictable weather and ocean conditions.

But going to them is worth the effort, especially in the fall. For snorkelers, divers and kayakers, the clear waters offer views as deep as 40 feet, with myriad sea life, including octopuses and brilliant orange Garibaldis,

the state fish of California, and there are hikes to wind-swept cliffs, arid golden-terraced hills and pristine white-sand beaches, some so thickly covered with seals they look black-brown.

Our three-day trip was organized by the Sierra Club, on a 30-passenger boat chartered from Truth Aquatics, one of the park's three concessionaires. We made first for San Miguel, the most difficult of the islands to reach because it is in the western Santa Barbara Channel, which has strong winds, unpredictable fog and mercurial seas. "It's weather dependent," said the Truth's captain, Don Rowell. "Fall is the better chance of getting there than during most of the year because of prominent northwest winds."

But, sure enough, as we approached the island after a four-hour trip, thick fog obscured its outline. There was a rumor on board that rough surf at the beach might prohibit landing, which is made by skiff because there is no pier. Would the dolphins bring us luck? Anticipation grew as everyone searched the gray horizon for land. Suddenly, the clouds lifted to reveal the treeless, sun-splashed outline of San Miguel, its sheer black cliffs rising 500 feet above a two-mile stretch of white sand and the emerald green waters of Cuyler Harbor, the main harbor on the 9,325-acre island. Blobs near three lone palms turned out to be 25 enormous northern elephant seals molting on the beach.

The northern elephant seal was once considered all but extinct, but it now thrives on San Miguel, one of the primary rookeries for four species of seals and sea lions. The park service says that 100,000 of them breed there annually, far from human contact. Enthusiasts who camp on the island may see up to 70,000 whiskered pinnipeds from a distance at remote Point Bennett via a 16-mile round-trip hike.

Captain Rowell anchored in the sheltered western portion of the bay, and we made splashy landings in groups of eight. Scott Rouse, a naturalist who accompanied us on the trip, gathered everyone on the beach for a talk, as he would each day along with a park service volunteer. (All interior hikes on San Miguel, uninhabited except for park staff, must be led by rangers or park naturalists.) We then set off for the steep 500-foot climb through buttercup-studded Nidever Canyon. A fork near the top led to the campground and the ruins of a sheep ranch.

I opted for the longer hike to Harris Point with its promise of panoramic views. A fog bank eclipsed the western view just short of our destination, but not from a trail paralleling the high bluff above the shimmering turquoise-rimmed bay to the east. I was careful not to get too close to the edge - cliffs can crumble and some historians say that may be how the Channel Islands' first European explorer, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, met his death in 1542. There is a monument to him on San Miguel. (There is also some uncertainty about his background; the memorial identifies him as a Portuguese explorer and renders his name in that language - not Spanish.) Looking out toward majestic Prince Island, a 40-acre rock that rises up just outside the harbor, it seemed as if this place had not changed in the last 460 years.

WE got a close look at the thousands of seabirds that make their home on Prince Island, which is off limits to humans, when we pulled out of the harbor that afternoon. The outcropping protects birds from San Miguel's only four-legged predator, the island fox, and provides a significant nesting site for 90 percent of Southern California's seabirds, including three species of cormorants, black oystercatchers, Cassin's auklets, western gulls and snowy plovers. The endangered California brown pelican, which can have a wingspan of up to seven feet, can also be seen.

Early on our second morning, we cruised past the Skunk Point State Marine Reserve on Santa Rosa Island, where hundreds of snowy plovers lay their eggs. Captain Rowell stopped at a small cove further on, and some visitors went ashore in skiffs to walk up the slopes and see the rare grove of Torrey pines, a forest remnant from the ice age.

The lure of Santa Rosa extends to the sagebrush-scented hills. It is a mountainous island (1,574 feet at its highest), with terraces that end in cliffs plunging to the sea, and uninhabited apart from park rangers and a few people from the Vail Vickers Company, which still leases a small portion of the island. Miles of unpaved ranching roads traverse the island, and smaller paths lead through sandstone canyons, making the 53,051

acres a hiker's dream. I opted for the sun-baked eight-mile trek to Carrington Point, with plenty of water and sunscreen (there is little shade beyond the giant cypresses at the rustic old ranch house).

The views along the massive promontory jutting into the sea give a sense of what California must have looked like for hundreds of years. But Carrington Point is also known for the excavation in 1994 of the most complete dwarf mammoth skeleton ever found. And Chumash middens dating back at least 8,000 years erode from the cliffs above the sea. On our hike, we saw some tell-tale abalone shells glimmering in the sun after our steep descent to the coast.

The Chumash, a seafaring people known for their redwood plank boats, lived on the islands for at least 11,000 years before being relocated by missionaries in the 1700's.

"They were hunters and gatherers from the ocean, so when they occupy an area for a long time, there's going to be an accumulation of shell trash from the mussels and clams and abalone that they harvested," Mr. Rouse, the naturalist, said. "So it's basically a trash heap. You find broken bits of everyday items that they would use, like bowls and tools."

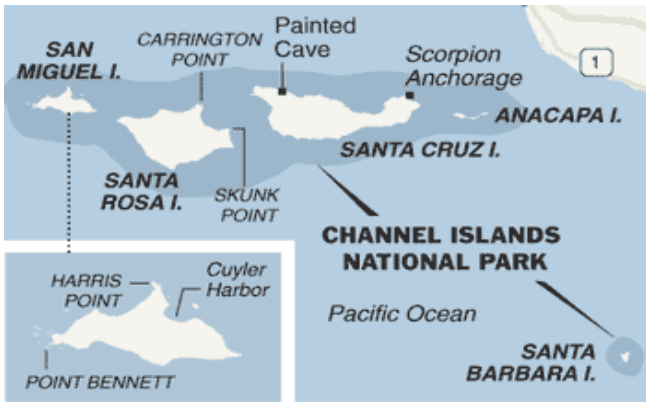
Eager to get on the water after a scorching day on Santa Rosa, we crossed the choppy six-mile channel known as the Potato Patch to the rugged northern shore of Santa Cruz to explore the Painted Cave, about 1,200 feet long and the largest known sea cave in the world, by kayak. We sailed right into the enormous first cavern, then anchored in a nearby cove and pulled sea kayaks from the boat rack. We paddled around the bend toward the cave, its enormous mouth gaping from black lichen-covered cliffs above dark-green waters. A barking orchestra of sea lions could be heard as we entered the first cavern, but the haunting sound diminished as we entered the second, smaller cavern. Slight swells lifted us up and down, the ceiling about 30 feet away. There was no sound but the lapping of waves and droplets of water falling from above. As we entered a third cavern, the ceiling now 15 feet away, we were swallowed by darkness, the entrance a pinhole of light at our backs. A flashlight illuminated the few dozen seals lounging on slick wet rocks and regarding us with dark, suspicious eyes. Not wanting to disturb them any further, we paddled back out.

We spent our third night anchored in Pelican Bay, a small cove where resort cabins served guests from 1910 to 1937, including Hollywood luminaries like John Barrymore and Gloria Swanson. Lights from our boat flooded the black waters of the cove and drew hundreds of jumping sardines, mackerel and flying fish, which in turn attracted the sea lions that feed on them. Inside the main cabin, Mr. Rouse pulled several echinoderms from a tank: red bat stars, big spiny purple giant stars, purple sea urchins and the red sea urchins known to sushi aficionados for their salty sea taste and harvested along the coast. I went on deck afterward, hoping to see a sky blasted with stars, but the final night, alas, was overcast.

We cruised over to Scorpion Anchorage on our final morning. Knowing that we had a four-hour voyage back to the mainland, I chose to stretch my legs with a quick hike past old ranch buildings and the ancient Chumash village site of Swaxil (now a campground) into Scorpion Canyon and saw an island scrub jay along the way.

Back on the Truth, as we headed across the channel, the view of the receding island was accentuated by the outline of Anacapa Island further in the distance. Eventually, all views were lost to the haze. But as luck would have it, a new show began: dark-gray common dolphins surrounded our boat and could be seen leaping by the hundreds for as far as the eye could see.

Kayaking tours are available through Aquasports:
800-773-2309, www.islandkayaking.com



WATERWORLD Santa Cruz, the largest of the five islands of Channel Islands National Park, has a huge sea cave, which can be explored by kayak.



RUGGED PARADISE The islands are an unspoiled pocket of Southern California, viewed looking east toward Anacapa Island from Santa Cruz Island.