

Sea Kayaking

Channel Islands National Park

Santa Cruz Island

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by Dave Strege

Caves of Santa Cruz Island are like a Disneyland ride for kayakers

The island swallows kayakers whole and, before long, spits them out like watermelon seeds. At least it seems that way.

The incoming ocean swell carries a kayaker into the darkness of a sea cave, the outgoing swell carries the kayaker back out. Or kayakers paddle into the mouth of one cave and exit from another. A tunnel connects the two and the short voyage between becomes a sort of "Pirates of the Caribbean" ride.

Santa Cruz Island isn't exactly Disneyland, but it is an amusement park of nature, where beginning-to-advanced kayakers can tickle the tonsils of the island. "Years ago, when I first went out there, we paddled in and out of the caves and we couldn't believe our eyes," said Eric Little of Aquasports, a commercial kayak outfitter. "If you were going to build a kayak park, you couldn't do a better job."

Hundreds of sea caves can be explored along Santa Cruz and Anacapa islands, the two most popular destinations for sea kayakers in the Channel Islands, sometimes described as America's Galapagos. And the best part about it is hardly anyone knows they exist. Or if they do, they ignore them. "People spend thousands of dollars to go to the Greek Islands, and we have these islands right here," Little said. "You get on the boat and just go."

Evidently, easy access doesn't mean the same thing to everybody. Channel Islands National Park is among the least visited national parks and the likely reason is because the islands are separated by oceans. "You can't drive there," park ranger Bill Faulkner said. "If you can't drive, most people don't go. Some people get seasick." Santa Cruz Island is 1 1/2 to 2 hours from Ventura by boat, the mode of transportation by 90 percent of the 30,000 annual visitors who land on the islands. Others come by plane. However you get there, the elbow room at Santa Cruz Island becomes even greater after Labor Day weekend. Now is an ideal time to kayak the islands. "The water is the best and the crowds have gone," Little said. "It's the best season. It's my favorite time."

" Five adventure seekers thought so, too, taking a one-day trip Sunday to Santa Cruz Island with Aquasports. Island Packers is the authorized concessionaire to the Channel Islands. The Vanguard departed Ventura Harbor at 8:30 a.m. and arrived at Scorpion Anchorage at the east end of Santa Cruz Island at 10 a.m.

Dozens of dolphin escorted the boat for part of the 19-mile trip. Whales, seals and sea lions are other marine life you might see along the way.

Park ranger Derek Lohuis greeted the new arrivals at the dock and gave a short orientation about the island. "Gulls, ravens, foxes, skunks and mice - they're all excited you arrived today with food," Lohuis said.

The message was clear: Secure your food. You're also told to avoid deer mice because they carry the hanta virus, a disease characterized by flu-like symptoms followed by respiratory failure. Finally, be sure to leave everything you find on the island behind, carry out your trash and be back at the dock for the 3 p.m. departure of the Vanguard.

A short walk along the rocky shoreline led to a group of yellow kayaks awaiting passengers. There, Aquasports guide Tony Chapman gave an abbreviated lesson on kayaking and safety. "I'm an emergency medical technician," he said. "I don't like to use my skills if I don't have to, so don't do anything your mother wouldn't approve of your doing."

Soon, the kayakers were paddling toward the first cave. In the distance, another group of kayakers could be seen at the cave's mouth. An instant later, they disappeared. Swallowed.

The cave angles to the right to a bigger opening. The entrance is marked by an arch in the rock that resembles the profile of Marge Simpson of cartoon fame.

Chapman called the next cave the Blimp Hangar because it's so big you can steer a blimp into it. Actually, it resembles a huge amphitheater. At the end was a small beach. On it was a harbor seal.

Cavern Point Cave goes in 300 feet. Halfway in, a blow hole can shower you if you're close enough to it when a wave hits. The sound at the end of the cave, where the swells slam the wall, is thundering.

"It can be very intimidating in there," Chapman said. It can be dangerous, too, if you are not careful. Helmets are a must. A wave can wash in and slam unsuspecting kayakers into the back wall. Or worse, a wave can fill the cave, and the water and resulting high pressure can crush a kayaker.

"If you're inside when a big wave comes in, it's very dangerous," Faulkner said. "If you're a beginner, you shouldn't go into the caves. Never go in without a helmet. The best way to experience a sea cave is with a guide so you have someone saying, 'This is safe, this isn't safe.' Then over time you begin to learn and figure this out, and you can go by yourself."

Mindy Froelich, 24, of Camarillo enjoyed the security a guide offered. "I would've never gone into a cave by myself," Mindy said. "I barely went into many as it was. I wouldn't say I'm claustrophobic, but ..." One cave Mindy passed up was a long one that had aqua-colored water and an opening to the outside world below the surface that lit the cave's interior. Faulkner describes it as a swimming pool at night with the light on.

Seeing even a third of the caves in the 2 1/2 to 3 hours you have on a kayak in a one-day trip is impossible. The famous Painted Cave, for instance, is on the north end of the 24-mile-long island and requires a boat and more time to access. Said to be the largest navigable sea cave in the world, Painted Cave has mineral-stained walls. Boats as big as 80 feet can enter the cave, which is four football fields long.

The caves, rock formations, cliffs, tunnels, arches, blow holes and rock gardens make the Channel Islands a world-class kayak destination. "Caves are interesting to everybody," Faulkner said. "There's just something about them. Maybe it's something primitive. There's a curiosity you're able to satisfy in seeking out these locations."

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