

Sea Kayaking

Channel Islands National Park

Santa Cruz Island

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Setting Sail

**All too often, a trip to Santa Barbara
goes only as far as the beach.
Take it a step further,
and set sail for Santa Cruz Island.**

Our kayaks lay in a bowl of brilliant sun light, rising and falling on the gentle Pacific swell. Santa Cruz Island's steep cliffs rose sheer around us, a few shrubs clinging to the weathered rock. The high entrance of Painted Cave, the island's most spectacular sea cavern, lay before us, cool and dark on this hot summer's day. We made our way slowly into the gloomy depths, our yellow paddle blades bright in the gathering shadows. The sun shone like a beacon onto the back wall of the cave, 600 feet from the entrance. I glanced back and saw our schooner, Spike Africa, silhouetted in the distance.

The cave opened up to the right into a 150-foot side chamber, where sea lions barks echoed like thunder in the dark. The harsh sound echoed off the roof, as if great beasts from the underworld lurked in the shadows. Eric, our guide, shone his flashlight on the lichen-covered cave walls, on a rocky ledge near the back, where an enormous sea lion reared above his companions. We paddled close by into a low chamber at the rear of the great cave. Obviously used to kayakers, the sea lion stood his ground with deafening barks. Beyond his perch, the surf broke with a sonorous rumble that drowned the senses, rocking our kayaks in a gentle seesaw. The jagged rocks above us seemed to press down on the boats until we emerged into the main chambers, where the darkness rose to the high ceiling 125 feet overhead. Curious sea lions swam around us, their inquisitive heads a few feet from our paddles as we emerged from darkness into dazzling brightness. Behind us, barking sea lions chased us from this magical kingdom.

Every visitor to Santa Barbara gazes off shore at Santa Cruz Island, some 25 miles away on the far side of the calm waters of the Santa Barbara Channel. Sometimes the distant peaks float on a white haze, for the westerly winds can blow strongly out at the islands. The haze only adds to the mystery, beckoning visitors to a unique California world. Time and time again people ask me if anyone lives on Santa Cruz, if they can go ashore, and, most often, how they can visit the island.

Until recently, the 96 square miles of Santa Cruz Island were under private ownership. You needed a private yacht to visit the island's coves, and shore excursions were difficult to arrange. These days you can easily take a day excursion in a powerboat, go whale watching, fishing, diving, or just sight-seeing. But few people enjoy the special experience of seeing Santa Cruz Island from the decks of a wooden gaffrigged schooner and of crossing the Santa Barbara Channel under sail. Fortunately, Aquasports offers just such excursions aboard the schooner, Spike Africa, combining sailing, kayaking, and other hands-on activities with gourmet food and a chance to experience the power and beauty of a large sailing boat. Her unique all-day voyages

offer a chance to see Santa Cruz Island up close and personal, with the promise of a fine sail home.

The day I went along, Spike Africa had left Santa Barbara in the wake of a warm summer's dawn. As Captain Bill Irvine set course southwestward for the three-hour trip to Painted Cave 25 miles away, we breakfasted on coffee and bagels, familiarizing ourselves with one of the West Coast's most remarkable sailing vessels. Spike Africa was built by engineer Bill Sloan on a one-acre lot in Costa Mesa, California, 20 years ago. Sloan was a lifelong ocean sailor, with a passion for traditional schooners. He built his dream boat from his own plans, which he destroyed before launching her, so no one could ever duplicate her lines. Then he named her after his sailing mentor - as nice a compliment as one could ever pay a sailor. Alas, Sloan has passed on, but his 70-foot masterpiece sails on. She had been featured in several films, including *Joe Versus the Volcano*, starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. Spike Africa is an ideal boat for a day's adventure to Santa Barbara's Channel Islands-comfortable and seaworthy, with berths for nine, and day accommodations for 25 or more.

The summer wind fills in about noon so we motored all the way across. The mainland receded into the haze as Santa Cruz Island's rugged skyline rose over the horizon. At first the peaks hovered above the horizons, as they often do when seen from the mainland. Then the lower lopes of the western shore filled in-steep cliffs and deep canyons, sheer precipices tumbling into the Pacific. We could see breakers crashing against the rocks far out at sea.

As we neared the island, I shared the island's colorful history with my companions. Twenty-four miles long and about seven across at its widest point, Santa Cruz was home to Native American fisherfolk for more than 7,000 years. When the first Spanish caravels arrived in the Santa Barbara Channel in 1542, several thousand Chumash Indians lived on the island, fishing in its coves and beaches. The distinctive gray soil of their ancient shell heaps and villages can be seen from hundreds of yards off shore. The Chumash fared poorly in the face of Old World diseases brought by the Spaniards, and Santa Cruz eventually became home to sealers and otter hunters, who rapidly decimated the wildlife population. Now the Nature Conservancy and the National Park Service own the island.

As the steep cliffs of Painted Cave loomed high above us, Spike Africa turned into the light wind and sea, and the Aquasports crew unloaded the kayaks. We looked on anxiously as the kayaks bobbed in the swell, but Eric soon reassured us with a thorough kayaking orientation on safety, paddling techniques, and most important of all, what to do if you tipped over (hold onto your kayak at the stern, then haul yourself aboard until you could sit down-easier said than written!) Even us beginners were at home and paddling like "old salts" under the watchful eyes of the experienced Aquasports guides.

One by one, we donned life jackets, then stepped down into a rubber dinghy tied alongside Spike Africa. The guides embarked first, easing their rear ends across from the dinghy into the kayak seat, then paddling backward clear of the jumble of boats. My turn soon came. I sat on the rubber pontoon, looking somewhat apprehensively at the narrow kayak a few inches away. I had visions of sliding over and missing the kayak. Taking my heart in my mouth, I slid across, grabbed my paddle and, seconds later, was paddling comfortably in the slight swell, watching the fun. All 11 kayakers headed inshore in bright sunshine, toward a narrow cove, where sea lions basked on narrow ledges. We soon found ourselves paddling among cavorting, friendly beasts, who seemed to play hide-and-seek with us as we explored a low overhang.

We paddled a few yards eastward to Painted Cave, skirting sheer cliffs and off-lying rocks, the endless swells echoing off the iron-bound shore. Long trails of kelp caught our paddles as we slipped into the bowl-like cove where Painted Cave lies. We paused to revel in the cool shade, to admire the whites, reds, grays, even greens of the fantastically convoluted volcanic rocks around us. The wonders of the cave left us awed. We moved on, watching pelicans dive at full speed a few yards away, getting soaked by a cooling water blowhole at the foot of a hollowed

out cliff. Some of us ventured into a lower-roofed sea cave, resting our paddles as the swell boomed like a giant organ in the confined sound box of the overhang.

The silence was complete, except for the never-ending waves, and the drip-drop from the ceiling. I thought of the Chumash canoes entering the caves for important rituals. They believed the caverns were gateways to the supernatural world.

Reluctantly, we headed back to the ship and came aboard for a sumptuous buffet lunch on deck. Spike Africa took us eastward, past the best island anchorages: Fry's Harbor, which supplied the rock for Santa Barbara Harbor's breakwater, and the most famous of all, Pelican Bay, where yachts from all over California gather every summer. From 1910 to 1937, Pelican boasted the only hotel on the Channel Islands, a small resort run by bootlegger Ira Eaton and his wife, Margaret. Many Hollywood stars spent relaxed weekends in the small cabins whose concrete foundations are all that remain of their visits and legendary parties.

Six in the evening, the sun in the west: we headed for the mainland, with one sail set to steady the ship in the swell. The seven miles closest to the island are always windier than the rest of the Channel; prevailing afternoon winds funnel past the northern coasts of the island from distant point conception, a headland so windy it's called "Cape Horn of the Pacific." Spike Africa heeled slightly to the breeze, engine ticking over to keep her moving in the swells, while we feasted on savory chicken-and-turkey-stuffed tortillas. The wind eased, so Captain Irvine set full sail. The schooner surged ahead, steady as a rock. She heeled to a comfortable angle, then settled down to a steady seven knots, the only sounds the swoosh of the waves and the creaking of the rigging. We sat or lay on deck enjoying the unique sensation of sailing just as California sailors would have a century ago. By this time, all of us realized how lucky we were to have this experience in the 1990s, so we reveled in the magnificent climax of an adventure-filled day. The wind stayed with us as we neared the shores of the mainland, the welcoming lights of Santa Barbara twinkling in the warm darkness. It was late by the time we entered the harbor, but no one minded after our excursion to an unspoiled California of more than a century ago.

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