

Sea Kayaking

Channel Islands National Park

Santa Cruz Island

Ventura County Reporter
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Kayaking adventures offer unique views of wild Channel Islands



Kayakers make their way around Santa Cruz Island with local tour guide Andy Babcock of Aquasports.



Guided kayaking tours highlighting the natural wonders of Channel Islands National Park immerse visitors in the islands' fantastic natural splendor, and allow them to safely sample the exciting sport. I recently explored Santa Cruz Island's rugged coastline with a company called Aquasports, one of only a few allowed by the National Park Service to offer commercial tours.

Lead guide Andy Babcock provided a basic course on safely maneuvering the tiny vessels, and assured novice kayakers that he'd be close by to help in case of any trouble. Aquasports equipped us with all the necessary gear, including life vests and paddle jackets to help keep us warm. Helmets allow safe exploration of caves so paddlers can venture into the dark interior of the ancient islands, and observe marine creatures living inside.

He explained the island's long geologic history while floating near rocks shaped by waves, wind and volcanic activity. We passed near a powerful blowhole spraying water from a crevice in the island. We saw colorful starfish and other ocean life clinging to offshore rocks. Babcock also taught us about the island's rich cultural history, including thousands of years of Native American habitation and the colorful ranching era.

Aquasports owner Eric Little says island kayaking is a resource that's overlooked and underappreciated by Ventura County residents who've never tried it. "People are flabbergasted because it's as beautiful as any paddling anywhere in the world," says Little. "People tell me all the time, 'I've lived here all my life and have never been out there,' and my response to that is, well let's go!"

Aquasports offers day trips and multiday adventures where the ocean voyage is set up with Island Packer Cruises and camping reservations. It also serves customers who arrange travel and camping on their own.

Trips to Anacapa and Santa Barbara Islands as well as the mainland coast are also offered, but Scorpion Bay on Santa Cruz has certain advantages over other destinations. The campground near Scorpion Ranch is more sheltered than those on other islands, and offers shade from tall and historic eucalyptus trees. Fresh water is also available from a well, unlike some other islands where visitors must carry all they'll need. It also features varied hiking trails and endemic plant and wildlife species, including tiny Santa Cruz Island foxes and bright-blue island scrub jays.

Little says all the Channel Islands have unique charms, but Santa Cruz is the most popular destination. "It's the most protected paddling of all the islands," says Little. "Anacapa has just as beautiful sea caves as Santa Cruz, but not quite as many and not as accessible on a day trip. Camping on Santa Cruz is unmatched anywhere in Channel Islands National Park. And the outer islands, Santa Rosa and San Miguel, are really windy."

Little says it's magical to view wild ocean creatures in their natural habitat in the close and personal way only a kayak can offer.

"When people go to the zoo, they have all the exhibits, but you can never actually get into them. You're kind of on the outside with a barrier between you. Well, there's no barrier out at the Channel Islands, so you're right in it. And if you want to reach out and touch a starfish you can do that," says Little. "If you have a group of sea lions that are herding fish into a sea cave in order to trap them and eat them, they'll be underneath your kayak, and you can see them because the water's clear."

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