

Channel Islands National Park: Kayak thrills, foxy neighbors



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The four main islands of Channel Islands National Park (www.nps.gov/chis) are as close as 13 miles off Ventura County's coast, yet neither my husband, Michael, nor I had been there. In May, we decided to check out Santa Cruz, the largest island, for a long weekend of camping, hiking, kayaking and wildlife watching. We hiked several miles on trails through fields of wild yellow mustard and along cliff tops, pausing to look down nearly 400 feet to waves, beaches and boulders. Our guided kayak trip took us to cool caves and tunnels, with swells big enough to get my heart racing. The tab: Island Packers charges \$79 round trip for you and three 45-pound pieces of gear (1691 Spinnaker Drive, No. 105B, Ventura; [805] 642-1393, islandpackers.com). Camping fees are \$15 per site per night (www.nps.gov/chis/planyourvisit/feesandreservations.htm). Aquasports charges \$125 a person for a guided three-hour kayak trip along the island's shore ([800] 773-2309, islandkayaking.com; reservations required). Total for two for two nights: \$188 plus \$250 for kayaking.

The Bed

There are no hotels on the island, so it's BYOB: Bring Your Own Bed (and tent). Island Packers ferries you to either Scorpion Anchorage, near the northeast end of the island, where we went, or to Prisoners Harbor farther west. The Scorpion Ranch campground has picnic tables, tap water, critter-proof food-storage boxes and composting toilets.

The meal

No restaurants here. Bring your own grub, gear and camp stove. We got a little carried away with creating chicken tacos with grated cheese, guacamole, fresh tomatoes and cilantro the first night and fusilli pasta with red sauce and garlic bread the second.

The find

The island fox. In all my years of hiking, camping and backpacking I have seen only half a dozen foxes, so I was hoping to encounter one of these cuties. The endemic island fox, at 4 to 5 pounds, is smaller than most house cats. Their numbers had been reduced to about 100 by the year 2000, but the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy developed a successful captive breeding program. As soon as we docked, I asked a ranger where we would have the best chance of seeing an island fox. "At your campsite," he said. It turns out there's truth to the phrase "as sly as a fox." I saw three adorable fox-savengers that afternoon.

The lesson learned

Go light. From the dock at Scorpion Anchorage it's nearly a half-mile walk on a dirt road to the first campsite and almost a mile to the last group campsite. We had thought of it as car camping — without the car — so we brought real food, pots and pans, and an ice chest on wheels. Next time I'll think of it as backpacking and bring freeze-dried meals that need just one pot of boiling water. After all, any food tastes great when you've been hiking or kayaking all day.