

Catalina Island offers tropical paradise with domestic convenience

You don't need a passport to experience incredible off-shore recreation

It's easy to fall into the habit of thinking you have to travel to foreign lands to experience dramatic views, rocky island cliffs, incredible diving, open-water fishing and other typically tropical activities that we Coloradans enjoy.

But it's simply not true. Just an inexpensive flight to Los Angeles and a boat ride will have you sunning, casting, paddling and hiking — as well as eating and drinking — on one of the most beautiful and relaxing islands off North American shores: Santa Catalina Island. In view of the California shoreline, it's a place that most have heard of but one that even many Angelenos have never been to. And here you can not only escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life, but you can get your Colorado-style kicks with a variety of eco- and adventure-based activities.

When planning your trip, there are three ways to approach your stay on Catalina. If you want to go quiet-rustic, head to the northern settlement of Two Harbors. Here you will find a solitary bed and breakfast with 12 rooms, one restaurant, a dive shop, no more than 200 permanent residents, a handful of camps and private yacht clubs, tent camping, sea lions, birds, bison, fish, beauty and peace and quiet. It's wonderful.

The southern colony of Avalon is equally as beautiful but quite different from Two Harbors. Maintaining the same beach-town vibe, with a distinctive Southern European look, Avalon sometimes has upwards of 3,800 residents and offers dozens of restaurants, many hotels, golf, sightseeing tours, numerous water-based activities, camping, trails and scenery.

The third option, of course, is to see both. During summer months and certain weekends into the fall, the island tends to fill up, so consider planning your trip during one of the shoulder/off seasons. The temperature of the high-visibility azure waters — ideal for scuba, snorkeling, sea kayaking and spear fishing — remain cold even when air temperatures reach typical Southern California highs, so come prepared with your wetsuit. And campsites do require reservations, with a roughing-it scale ranging from primitive to platform pup tent and gear haul.

For the paddling enthusiast, a circumnavigation of the island while camping several nights is the ultimate thrill. Sea lions, flying fish, whales and dozens of other species await your arrival. Read up on conditions and navigation before departing. For the serious bipeds, look into the Trans-Catalina Trail and multiday backpacking options.

You can bring anything you want over on the ferry (www.CatalinaExpress.com), from coolers and golf clubs to dogs and mountain bikes, so decide while planning your trip if you are looking for hardcore recreation, lightweight backpacking or luxury.

SPECIAL TO THE DAILY/
SANTA CATALINA ISLAND CO.

(1) A jeep tour can be one way to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life and take in the seascapes, secluded beaches and wild interior of Santa Catalina Island, which is about 22 miles from Los Angeles.

(2) Paddlers can circumnavigate Catalina and glimpse sea lions, flying fish, whales and other species.

(3) Catalina's Pavilion Hotel offers a wine-and-cheese happy hour and well-appointed rooms. (4) Serious bipeds can enjoy the island's many paths and trails — and its stunning views.

AARON BIBLE



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IF YOU GO

WHAT TO DO IN TWO HARBORS:

- > Rent an open-deck sea kayak (solo or tandem) and tour the bays, perhaps try your hand at kayak fishing.
- > Embark on a snorkeling or dive tour, depending on your level of expertise or underwater ambition.
- > Book a night at the historic Banning House Lodge, built in 1910 and named for one of the island's founding families, and enjoy the views and a delightful breakfast.
- > Hike, run and mountain bike the island preserve's roads and trails.

WHAT TO DO IN AVALON:

- > Enjoy a stay at the bayside Pavilion Hotel, with its famous wine-and-cheese happy hour and well-appointed rooms. Treat yourself to a fine-dining experience at the Avalon Grille.
- > The next night, go for a true local flare with seafood appetizers and drinks at the Lobster Trap and a relaxing dinner at Steve's Steakhouse. Indulge in the bone-in rib eye for him and the shrimp-and-scallop bruschetta for her.
- > For something a little different, sign up early for a nighttime zip-line tour. Bring a jacket for shoulder-season comfort. While at the newly revitalized Descanso Beach area, kill some time on the 35-foot monolithic climbing wall after lunch.
- > Guided tours of the ocean and hills surrounding Avalon are highly recommended. Because much of this space is a protected nature preserve, it's a good way to get up close and personal with the flora and fauna. The Undersea Tour, Cape Canyon Expedition, Skyline Drive Tour and Inland Expedition Tour can all be booked on-site. Pay a visit to the Casino (not a casino), the old Wrigley House and the Wrigley Memorial & Botanic Garden.
- > Walk or jog the streets and trails for a personal tour of this historic and unique destination.
- > For more information, rentals and reservations visit: www.visitcatalinaisland.com.