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Catalina BY JENN TANAKA calls

A DAY TRIP TO THE HISTORIC SEASIDE OASIS OF AVALON RESTORES AND INSPIRES

Was it a dream?

Did we really escape our taxing schedules and relentless emails for a whole day? I'm thinking this as an esthetician gently exfoliates my forehead during a facial at the Island Spa Catalina.

We needed a getaway. But how did we escape the realities of motherhood and a full-time job – especially when it feels as if the world depends on us at all time?

But ask and the universe will listen.



The view of Avalon from Wrigley Road near Mt. Ada.

In May, the *Coast* team – executive editor Samantha Dunn, creative director Karen Kelso and I – was invited on a work retreat to Avalon on Catalina. Located among the California Channel Islands, Avalon feels like a film set in a Lifetime movie or a romantic town drawn in a wistful novel. Even its name – “Avalon” – has a storybook allure. Island lore says the city was named after a line in a Tennyson poem called “Idylls of the King.” The poet envisioned a mystical place where King Arthur found solace and recuperated after an arduous battle. Like Arthur, we too had found our haven in Avalon.

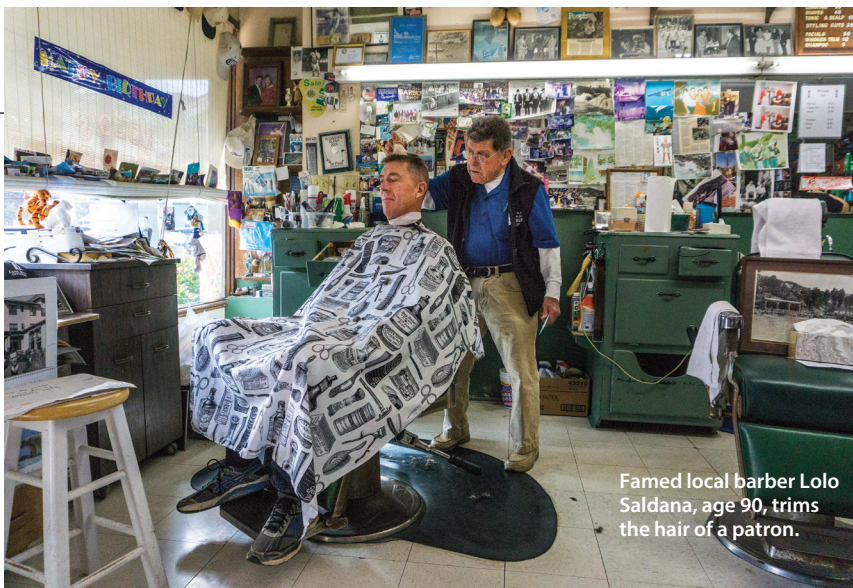
That morning our team of three boarded a Catalina Express vessel. As we pulled out of the San Pedro harbor, the blue waters splashed below. Our trio clung to the rail and let the salt-kissed sprays of ocean water sprinkle our faces. It’s as if we were being cleansed. From the demands. The duties. The drudgery. Yet, in just an hour, we were transported. (If we had flown by helicopter it would’ve taken us 10 minutes.) We left our realities on the mainland and basked in Catalina’s seaside oasis.

With an array of hotels, activities and other attractions owned and operated by the Catalina Island Company, the space remains a closely maintained endeavor. The Catalina Conservancy’s main priority is protection of the island. While the rest of California is rushing to demolish and modernize, Avalon is refreshingly laid back, comfortable with its historical nuances. Golf carts remain the main mode of transportation. The pastimes involve long periods outdoors with nature – hiking over the hills to Two Harbors, snorkeling in the blue ocean, spotting Garibaldi fish as they dart up to the surface, buffalo tracking and other carefree, seemingly lost ways to pass the day. That’s the beauty of Catalina. You slow down simply because that’s what the locals do. Everyone is friendly like residents of a seaside Mayberry.

The town barber, 90-year-old Lolo Saldana, trims hair in his shop steps from the boardwalk. He spends his days talking story. Decades spent on the island are swirled in Saldana’s memories. On his walls, pictures with Hollywood stars are turning brown in their wooden frames. Baseball memorabilia line the shelves – bobbleheads and signed balls, opening day flyers and Cubs jerseys. For 60 years, he has cut hair on Avalon. In that time, Saldana has collected the island’s story. Locals stop by for a chat. Others sit down for a quick trim. They all bask in his presence.

Just outside the barbershop, we board an air-conditioned bus for Catalina Island Co.’s 125th anniversary tour. The hour long excursion takes guests to Avalon’s main historic locations. Immediately, the Wrigley family’s connection to Catalina is evident. The chewing gum magnate and baseball club owner treated Avalon as his field of dreams. It was the site where Wrigley’s Chicago Cubs held spring training for three decades (1921-1951). During the tour you pass by the grown-over-field. A shuttered bird sanctuary and exotic botanical garden illustrate how the company preserves nature through experiential education.

Mt. Ada, the former Wrigley mansion, is now a Forbes’ Travel Guide 4-star hotel. The quaint family home was transformed into a bed and breakfast with expansive views of Avalon and beyond. Lunch is served on the outdoor patio, which offers the most picturesque views of the harbor imaginable.



Famed local barber Lolo Saldana, age 90, trims the hair of a patron.



The view across Avalon Bay from Casino Way in Avalon on Catalina Island.

While the past is deeply rooted in Avalon, changes emerge. A newly remodeled Hotel Atwater will open this summer. The Catalina Island Museum hosts community events and summer movie nights. An exhibit by Elizabeth Turk (a 2018 Women of Coast honoree), which casts bird calls in sculpture, opens July 13 and is anticipated to attract a large group from the mainland. Turk's art, much like the museum itself, plays with Catalina's relationship with wildlife. How do we preserve and still enjoy a place like this? How do you keep from destroying the wonder in the wonderful?

Annual events such as The Original Catalina Wine Mixer (Sept. 6-7) and the Conservancy Ball (April 25, 2020) held in the historic Casino building answer this by attracting new visitors. They illuminate the island's beauty and community. As we left for the mainland, nature bid us adieu with a lightshow. The sun's rays bounced off the water's surface. Twinkles of gold and fuchsia shimmered against the horizon. As the ship gained speed, the temperature dropped and the wind kicked up. Our trio laughed as we recapped our blissful day. By the time we arrived home it was dark. But we were happy. Next time, we'll bring the kids. ■



Mt Ada, the former island escape of William Wrigley Jr. and his wife Ada is a 4-star Forbes property. The home was completed in 1921.



Debbie and Jerry Daniel's celebrate a wedding anniversary on the balcony overlooking the bay at Mt Ada.