

# LAGUNA BEACH

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Magazine

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ART: MAKING CANVASES BLOOM  
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# A CATALINA CENTENNIAL

Local island celebrates the 100th anniversary of chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr.'s investment with special tours and activities.

BY SHARON STELLO

**B**oasting a long and storied history, Santa Catalina Island, one of eight in the Channel Island archipelago, was first inhabited by Native Americans and then, eventually, by Spanish explorers. After Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo arrived in 1542, Sebastián Viscaíno came along on the eve of St. Catherine's Day in 1602, leading him to dub his discovery Santa Catalina.

The island later became a Mexican land grant before the U.S. gained ownership and, over time, it has attracted pirates, smugglers, hunters, ranchers and miners as well as, more recently, tourists, Hollywood's elite and even soldiers—military training was conducted there during World War II.

Catalina was slowly turned into a vacation destination in the 1800s. The Banning brothers bought the island in 1892 and founded the Santa Catalina Island Co. two years later to develop a resort area: They established Avalon city; built hunting lodges, a pier and access to beaches; paved roads and offered stagecoach tours. But after a fire destroyed half of the structures in Avalon, the brothers decided to sell.

Enter chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr. Without ever having come to the island, he started buying stock in the Island Co. Then, after making a visit in 1919, he realized what a gem this place was and bought out other shareholders to eventually become the sole owner. He built up infrastructure and added attractions—including the still-standing Catalina Casino, an iconic structure with a 1,184-seat theater and the world's largest circular ballroom—pouring millions of dollars into the island. And, since he owned the Chicago Cubs baseball team, Wrigley brought the players to Catalina for spring training in 1921, a tradition that continued until 1951 (except for a brief hiatus during WWII).

Now, 100 years after Wrigley's investment in the island—and also marking the Island Co.'s 125th anniversary—a celebration is planned throughout the year with special tours, activities and a historic exhibit at the local museum.







Top left: the Catalina Casino; bottom left: the interior of the casino's theater; top right and bottom two photos: the Inn on Mount Ada, the former Wrigley mansion

About an hour's boat ride from Orange County's coast, the island is a perfect getaway, with Catalina Express boats departing from Dana Point, Long Beach and San Pedro. Often considered a summer destination due to the beaches, winter and spring provide a whole new way to experience the island—with lush, green hills and, best of all, no crowds. Even if you've been to Catalina before, the centennial celebration promises plenty of new adventures.

## STEP INTO THE PAST

To get the lay of the land and a dose of history, take the narrated Wrigley's Catalina bus tour. You'll soak in canyon and ocean vistas while winding around the hills, learning about the former bird park as well as Catalina Chimes Tower—which has chimed four times an hour (except at night) since 1925 when it was built as a gift to the community from the Wrigleys—and the site of the former baseball field where the Cubs practiced during spring training. Tour participants will even get a peek inside the Catalina Country Club, which served as the Cubs clubhouse.

A slightly longer, two-hour tour also goes to Mount Ada, the former Wrigley mansion, as well as the iconic Casino, which isn't a place for gambling, but rather movies and dancing in the upstairs ballroom, drawing plenty of Hollywood stars back in the swing era. The 11-story art

deco structure was commissioned by Wrigley in 1929, honoring his 10th anniversary of purchasing the island. Three separate Casino tours are also offered including a behind-the-scenes look inside. Spectacular murals decorate both the exterior walls and the theater where current movies are still shown every night at 7:30 p.m. On Friday and Saturday, come an hour early to hear a performance on the original pipe organ.

For more history, head to the Catalina Island Museum for its new "Wrigley's Catalina: A Centennial Celebration" exhibit, which runs through Jan. 19, 2020. The display explores Wrigley's vision and construction of Avalon's homes, shops and hotels, furniture production and more through old photos, blueprints, maps, letters, other original documents and steamship artifacts. Delve further into the island's past by wandering through the museum's permanent installations. Here, you'll learn that among

Catalina's well-known visitors and residents was Norma Jeane, who lived on the island briefly before she was discovered and became actress Marilyn Monroe.

## ADVENTUROUS ACTIVITIES

Although separate from the centennial lineup, some activities are not to be missed while on the island. The Catalina Aerial Adventure is a ropes course set up among the eucalyptus trees. Test your balance and coordination in five fun, but challenging courses that incorporate log bridges, balance beams, zip lines, rope ladders and more that will have you feeling like a contestant on "American Ninja Warrior." Navigate from platform to platform by moving through each set of obstacles in this self-guided experience with options ranging from beginner to advanced.

The ropes course is also the meeting spot for a must-try adventure, the Zip Line Eco Tour. This



From left: the Zip Line Eco Tour; the Undersea Expedition; views from the Wrigley's Catalina bus tour



Top: the fire pit at the Pavilion Hotel; bottom: the pool courtyard at Island Spa Catalina

adrenaline-pumping, two-hour excursion will be the highlight of any visit as you ride five zip lines soaring up to 300 feet in the air. Coast among the green hills and fly like a bird above the trees with breathtaking ocean views on some lines.

After zipping through the air, dive beneath the sea in a semisubmersible vessel—think the submarine ride at Disneyland, but with real fish. The Undersea Expedition provides a window at each seat to glimpse orange Garibaldi, the state marine fish, as well as rockfish, spotted calico bass and, if you're lucky, a bat ray.

Opportunities also abound to explore Catalina's rugged backcountry, overseen by the Catalina Island Conservancy, a nonprofit land trust overseeing almost 90 percent of the island. These unspoiled lands provide habitat for more than 60 plants and creatures that can't be found anywhere else on earth. Visitors on jeep tours or shuttle rides up to the Airport in the Sky might also glimpse bison, which were brought to the island for the filming of a movie and allowed to remain. At the



The Catalina Island Museum is currently featuring "Wrigley's Catalina: A Centennial Celebration."

## ARRIVAL AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Hop on the Catalina Express ferry for a quick, approximately one-hour ride—just enough time to enjoy the views of OC's coastline as well as a cocktail and likely dolphin sightings. Sit on the open-air upper deck or stay inside for a warmer lookout spot with large windows; passengers are welcome to step outside and snap scenic shots as the island looms on the horizon and Avalon Harbor comes into view.

Upon arrival in Avalon, the dock is a short walk to the hotels, shops and restaurants. Or rent a golf cart—the primary means of transportation on Catalina as only a limited number of cars are permitted there—for freedom to drive around the island. However, those staying within Avalon will find everything is in easy walking distance in this small town.

For accommodations, one option is the Pavilion Hotel, which is centrally located along the waterfront. Comfortable rooms are situated around courtyards with tropical landscaping and a fire pit where complimentary wine and cheese socials can be enjoyed with friends, family and other guests each evening. In the morning, dig into the breakfast buffet complete with an omelet bar, included with overnight stays. Also included: access to the wellness studio for yoga, Pilates and other fitness classes at Island Spa Catalina, just a couple of blocks away. A wide range of relaxing massages, facials and other marine-inspired treatments are also offered here, plus a pool, hot tub, sauna, steam room and spa cafe with a healthy menu and an ocean-view relaxation deck. Hotel guests also receive a glass-bottom boat ride and bicycles are available for exploring.

For a more elevated stay, visitors might choose the luxurious Mount Ada, which is the former Wrigley mansion, high up on a hill with sweeping views of the town and harbor below. Refreshed just last year, this Forbes Four-Star bed-and-breakfast features six well-appointed rooms with historic charm. Sit by the fireplace in the living room or enjoy the vistas by day or night—including sparkling stars and the town's twinkling lights—from the wraparound terrace. Tip: head out to the kitchen for a midnight snack; there's an ice cream sundae bar and other treats in the butler's pantry available 24/7. Breakfast, lunch and an evening wine reception are also included, as are the greens fees for a round at Catalina Island Golf Course and a Casino tour. Guests also have access to a golf cart for transportation as well as the Island Spa Catalina's amenities.

Those planning a visit later this year can schedule a stay at the Hotel Atwater, now under renovation but expected to open in August. Just a block from the beach, this hotel was originally constructed in the 1920s and named after Helen Atwater Wrigley, the wife of Philip Knight Wrigley, who was William Wrigley Jr.'s son. Modern touches will be found throughout while the new PKW Eatery & Bar promises communal tables, shared plates and decor reflecting Philip's interest in aviation and tinkering with cars, boats and the like, adding personality to the space.

airport, a restaurant, small nature center and hiking trail are available.

## A TASTE OF HISTORY

With all of these activities, visitors are sure to work up an appetite. Enjoy lunch at Descanso Beach Club (originally completed in 1918, but remodeled in 2010 with additional updates later), located in a cove just beyond the Casino. The menu ranges from fish and chips to burgers, sandwiches, salads and tacos, plus tropical cocktails like a mojito or mai tai, plus the island's popular Buffalo Milk, a cold concoction that combines vodka with banana and coffee liqueurs, creme de cacao, whipped cream and nutmeg. In addition to tables, there are plenty of chaise lounges and cabanas on the beach to sit back, listen to the lapping water and imagine a time when Hollywood stars flocked to the venue.

Continue the sense of nostalgia by tasting throwback dishes and drinks at restaurants around the city. Venture to Avalon Grille back in town to dig into the baked Pacific swordfish and wash it down with a Wrigley martini. The strong cocktail was created by Wrigley's son, Philip Knight Wrigley, and was previously only served at a bar in the Wrigley Building, where Chicago's newsmen and executives enjoyed it in the 1950s. Those up at Mount Ada for lunch can taste the Old Plantation Vegetable Soup, baked Pacific swordfish and Poor Man's Rice Pudding, made with coconut milk and topped with fresh berries. These recipes appeared on the menu at the island's Hotel St. Catherine in 1922 (swordfish), 1926 (soup) and 1930 (pudding). Notably, the hotel was torn down in 1966, but the wood from the building was used to construct the Descanso Beach Club bar, helping history to live on in unexpected places. **LBM**

