

APRIL 2021

CORONADO

M A G A Z I N E

Fresh | Spring | Living

Avalon Harbor from Mount Ada.

Catalina Island

*Twenty-six miles across the sea,
Santa Catalina is open
for you and me!*

by Kris Grant

After a solid year of slumber, Catalina Island is coming back to life. Sailboats aplenty once again moor in Avalon Bay, shopkeepers open their doors wide on Crescent Avenue and golf carts hum down its hilly streets.

It's hard to believe that Catalina Island is part of Los Angeles County. It bears little resemblance, with hefty mountains that jut almost straight out of the sea. But at the southwest end of this 76-square-mile island, the little city of Avalon lies cradled in a natural bay and houses about 90 percent of the island's 4,000 residents.

Yes, Avalon, the southern point of the most south west of the Channel Islands, is an incorporated city, one of the first in LA County. But unlike most of LA County, Avalon isn't mired in traffic congestion as only a total of 400 small cars and trucks are permitted on the entire island and the waiting list to apply for a permit is more than 20 years. Most locals walk or ride bicycles.

GETTING THERE IS PART OF THE FUN

I have traveled to Catalina five different ways. Once on the Big White Steamship from San Pedro Harbor. It no longer operates, replaced by today's fast and convenient ferries that leave from Long Beach, San Pedro, Newport Beach and Dana Point. On my trip last month, I chose Catalina Express, leaving from Dana Point; the crossing took 1 hour and 20 minutes.

I've also flown over in a private plane, landing at the "Island in the Sky" airport in the center of the island ten miles from Avalon. Another time, I sailed over with friends from Oceanside Harbor, mooring in Avalon Bay. I also arrived via a shoreboat from a Carnival Cruise ship anchored offshore. It will be a while before they return.



The Catalina Express leaves daily at 9:15 a.m. from Dana Point.

Catalina Express' fleet of eight fully stabilized vessels travel at speeds of up to 42 knots. My friend Nancy and I sat on the outside deck for the ride over on Saturday morning and opted for the inside cabin's comfortable airline-style seats for the ride home on Sunday's late afternoon return when the temperatures turned cooler. We each carried a roll-on suitcase, which a deckhand took off our hands and stowed in the luggage hold for us. There is no charge for two pieces of luggage, plus an additional piece of carry-on baggage. Most day-trippers carry just small backpacks.

We traveled over the first weekend in March, just a week after Catalina reopened to the public, and LA County was still in the purple tier, so no food could be consumed on the trip. But now that we've moved into the red tier, onboard food and beverage service has resumed.

Some people travel to Catalina just for a day, and that's do-able, although I recommend a three-day trip.

A ONE-DAY TRIP ITINERARY:

For a one-day trip, I recommend an itinerary that begins with a golf cart jaunt up, down and all around Avalon. Make a reservation at **Catalina Island Golf Cart Rentals and Tours**, conveniently located at the foot of the ferry pier on Avalon's main street, Crescent Avenue. One

hour (\$50) is all you'll need to circle the village, ride down canyons and up the scenic hillsides where you'll find several postcard-perfect photo stops.

Next, walk along the avenue, popping into some of Avalon's shops. Yes, some are unabashedly tourist-related with lots of Catalina-logoed beachwear and beach accessories, but you'll also find handcrafted jewelry, and home décor items, including famous Catalina tile.

At the north end of the avenue is the iconic **Catalina Casino**, which has never been a place of gambling. The word "casino" is

actually Italian for "gathering place," and that it is! The upper floors are dance and music venues. During the 1930s and 1940s, big bands would broadcast live via radio from the Casino's ballroom to a nationwide audience. Its lower-level Avalon Theatre features a 50-foot domed ceiling that soars over its 1,184 seats, with Art Deco murals adorning the walls. The theatre was one of the first to be designed for the latest revolution in movie making, "talkies," with groundbreaking acoustics.

Just a teeny tiny walk past the Casino is the Descanso Beach Club. You might opt to have lunch here, and the food is delicious, along with several signature drinks.

But, even better, indulge in the "beach club" atmosphere: don your swimsuit and head to the plush lounge chairs arranged in rows on Descanso's private sandy beach. Rates vary by season, but in April, chaise lounge chairs rent for a day for \$55 - \$75—and that's for two. Food and drink servers tend to your every need, so you could enjoy lunch right on the beach. You'll have access to restrooms, showers and changing rooms, super convenient if you're visiting just for the day.

If you need to catch the 5 p.m. ferry back to Dana Point, you'll need to be dockside at 4:30, so plan to head back by 3:30 p.m. You can grab some handmade candy or an ice cream cone along the way. Or you might want to stop for a drink and appetizers at Bluewater Avalon on the water at Avalon Bay. It's part of the Bluewater Boathouse group of nine restaurants, including Coronado's Bluewater Boathouse.



Golf carts line the street in front of the Hotel Atwater, originally opened in 1920 and now newly opened following a multi-million dollar renovation. Rooms at Hotel Atwater feature an "Island Deco" motif, premium bedding and Frette Italian sheets.

EVEN BETTER: MAKE IT A THREE-DAY STAY

If you want to truly see Catalina Island, make it a longer stay so you can explore its backcountry and learn more about the island's fascinating history.

Today, the vast majority of Catalina's land is governed by the **Catalina Island Conservancy**. The island was first discovered by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, the first Portuguese explorer who explored the California Coast. The Cabrillo Monument in San Diego commemorates the landing of Cabrillo, whose expedition landed Sept. 28, 1542 on the eastern shore of Point Loma. Just nine days later, Cabrillo pulled up to Catalina's shores, naming the island "San Salvador" after his flagship.

Sixty years later on Nov. 24, 1602, Spanish explorer Sebastián Vizcaíno arrived in Catalina on the eve of Saint Catharine of Alexandria Day, and named the island "Santa Catalina" in honor of the saint, claiming the island for Spain and its territory, Mexico. The island became part of the United States when Pio Pico, Mexico's last Governor of California, issued Boston native Thomas Robbins a Mexican Land Grant, making Robbins the first private owner of the island.

The island was bought by the James Lick Trust in 1867, which leased its lands for grazing sheep, cattle and goats. James Lick was a San Francisco millionaire philanthropist and landowner from Peru who, among other achievements, talked his friend Domingo Ghirardelli to relocate from his native Argentina to San Francisco where he established Ghirardelli Chocolate.

George Shatto, an early land investor in Los Angeles, purchased the island from the trust in 1887, and was the first person to envision the island as a tourist destination. His sister-in-law, Etta Whitney, gave Avalon its name after reading Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Idylls of the King" which recounted King Arthur's quest for "Avalion," which he described as "an island valley with ideal weather and fertile land."

Shatto built what is now Avalon's oldest house on the west side of the city and Hotel Metropole, the island's first hotel, still in operation today.

Shatto also established a "Tent City" in 1888 to accommodate early island visitors. I

couldn't help but wonder if Coronado's John Spreckels might have stopped by Catalina Island on one of his trips aboard his yacht, *The Lurline*, down the California Coast. Could Catalina Island's Tent City have been the seed of the idea for the Tent City that opened in Coronado in 1900?

Andrew, our driver/escort on our "Bison Expedition Aboard a Biofueled Hummer" told us the next chapter of the island's history as our Hummer charged up (indeed, up!) and away from Avalon on "the Old Stage Road." The road was carved out of the mountainside, when the three sons of Phineas Banning bought the island from Shatto. Phineas was known as "The Father of the Port of Los Angeles." His sons, William, Joseph and Hancock, would lead stage rides over

this road flanked by eucalyptus trees and, in many spots, beautiful views and sheer drops.

WELCOME, WILLIAM WRIGLEY!

After a fire in 1915 destroyed much of Avalon, the Bannings arranged a sale of the island to chewing gum magnate and owner of the Chicago Cubs William Wrigley, Jr. After viewing the vast acreage that was now his, Wrigley proclaimed, "The expansion of Catalina island will be one of my greatest fulfillments of my life. In traveling all around the world, I have never found a more restful or beautiful location."

And indeed, when Wrigley purchased the island, its destiny as a tourism destination was secured. His new "Santa Catalina Island Company" got right to work in 1919, building



The grand entrance to the Catalina Casino



You can rent a pair of chaise lounges for the day at Descanso Beach Resort for around \$65.

Restaurants have moved outside service to Avalon's beachside.



cottages and bungalows and a bigger Canvas Tent City in a canyon in a beautiful eucalyptus grove.

He constructed the Green "Pleasure Pier," Chimes Tower, his own mansion (now The Inn at Mt. Ada), the Wrigley Botanical Garden (still in operation today), the Catalina Island Bird Park (it closed in the '60s and its resident birds were moved to the Los Angeles Zoo), the Airport in the Sky, and the Catalina Casino in 1929.

Wrigley made Catalina Island the base for the Chicago Cubs spring training camp in 1921, a tradition that brought national attention to the island that continued through 1951.

Perhaps Wrigley's most enduring legacy is Catalina itself. While Wrigley experimented with several options for the vast interior of the island, his descendants took the definitive step to protect it in perpetuity, granting nearly 90 percent of Catalina Island to the Catalina Island

Conservancy, which is charged with preserving and protecting the island for future generations.

At the start of the tour, Andrew pointed out where the spring training camp used to be, near the Catalina Island Golf Course, a nine-hole course (with two tees for 18-hole play) that stretches up a canyon and into the foothills at the tip of Avalon. We had hiked the area earlier in the morning and learned it's the oldest operating golf course west of the Mississippi.

But now we were high up in the mountains, and the Bison tour, like all tours and even individual hikers and bicyclists traveling into Catalina's interior, must be permitted by the Conservancy.

We were going in search of the bison that live in the wilds of Catalina's rugged interior, and Andrew had an uncanny knack of spotting them from a mile away.

Andrew explained that in 1924, Wrigley allowed a motion picture company to bring a



Aboard our biofuelled hummer, we plowed hill and dale in search of bison through Catalina's vast interior.

small herd of 14 bison to the island for inclusion in the silent film version of Zane Grey's western novel, "The Vanishing American." The bison never made it into the finished film and the production company ran into funding problems; they left the herd to help pay their bill. An irritated Wrigley begrudgingly allowed the animals to stay, but soon discovered they were popular with visitors, so a few female bison were brought in as well and over the years the herd swelled, at one point reaching 750! Today, because the bison are part of Santa Catalina Island's culture and lore, the Conservancy maintains the herd and, by means of relocation and contraception, keeps their number at no more than a sustainable 150.

AN ISLAND TREASURE: HOTEL ATWATER

We stayed at the Hotel Atwater. Originally opened in 1920, Hotel Atwater was the first hotel built under Wrigley's direction. He named the hotel in honor of Helen Atwater Wrigley, wife of his son Philip Knight Wrigley. Helen was famous for her hospitality and interest in music and horses. Philip and Helen's Rancho Escondido in the center of Catalina was dedicated to raising Arabian horses.

The hotel was completely renovated in 2019 and stays true to the Wrigley family legacy

with nostalgic elements throughout. The casual island aesthetic of the hotel's inviting lobby has been enlarged and returned to its original layout, with inviting and comfortable guest seating throughout, and twin grand staircases (and a new elevator) leading upstairs. A colorful tropical island mural graces the back of the registration desk.

The lobby also displays some Catalina historic treasures, as well as Helen's harp and William Wrigley's 1850-pound steel safe, which was transported decades ago from his Chicago residence to the island.

The 95 guest rooms combine rich wood accents, bright colors, ocean-inspired finishes and hints of exotic art deco to create a memorable "Island Deco" escape. I even enjoyed walking along the hallways, which are graced with black-and-white historic photos, enhanced with bursts of color.

ON MY NEXT TRIP:

I'll take that 40-minute ride on the Glass Bottom Boat as an ode to Doris Day, and take the Cyclone powerboat that leaves daily from Avalon and travels down to the rustic town of Two Harbors. I'll tour Wrigley's Botanical Garden, but I definitely won't ride the Zip Line Eco tour on five separate zip lines down

Descanso Canyon at speeds approaching 35 miles per hour. No sirree, I won't do that. But you might want to; go for it!

IF YOU GO:

For general information, plus hotels, restaurants, activities, events:

www.LoveCatalina.com

Catalina Express: www.catalinaexpress.com

Catalina Island Company, Descanso Beach Club

and Hotel Atwater: www.visitcatalina.com

Catalina Island Golf Cart Rentals & Tours:

www.catalinaislandgolfcart.com



Bison have called Catalina home ever since 1924 when 14 of them were imported to the island for the making of a silent movie.