

TRAVEL



Island In the Sun

California's best-kept secret is actually just a short flight off the coast. Full of charm, beauty, nature and an abundance of attractions, **CATALINA ISLAND** is a destination in itself. With the crowds abating but the weather still delightful, the ideal time to go is now.

THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HEAT RADIATES THROUGH the helicopter's glass cockpit, and the pilot hands me a pair of headphones with an attached foam-tipped microphone that presses against my lips.

"First time to Catalina?" I hear him ask.

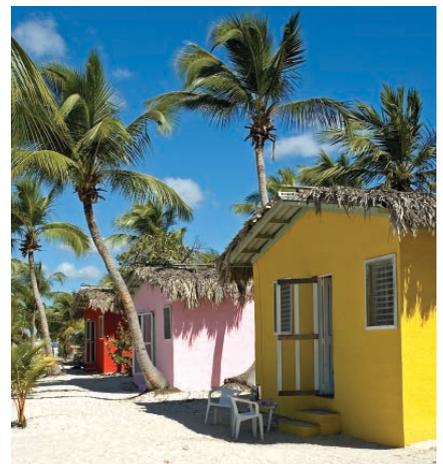
"No, not the first time," I say, "but it's been awhile."

"Enjoy the 14-minute flight," he says. "It's just across the channel."

It sounds close, and it is. Actually only 22 miles across the sea (with all due respect to The Four Preps) — a short helicopter ride, or less than two hours by ferry — separate the mainland from Santa Catalina Island. In the time it takes a morning commuter to navigate Los Angeles' notoriously clogged highways, one could travel to a laid-back island where there's not a single traffic light.

Yet many Angelenos have never been there.

As a middle school student, I envied classmates who ventured to Catalina Island Camps' summer program each year. When I was a junior in high school, I visited for the first time, taking the ferry over for the day with friends. In college, I completed my scuba certification there, and I sailed from Marina del Rey to Avalon, which is Catalina's only incorporated town. My aunt and uncle got married on the island. And in the 1980s, my dad, a television producer, shot several episodes of *Riptide* there with the show's star, a lumbering pink helicopter named Screaming Mimi. The island scatters throughout my remote memories, but for no good



COASTAL CHARM: The harbor and casino in the town of Avalon on Catalina Island; yellow, pink and vermilion beach houses



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reason I hadn't reconsidered Catalina until an invitation had me alighting anew.

John Moore, a fellow passenger, offers me a ride from the heliport, and the don't-take-rides-from-strangers tenet of an L.A. upbringing is left far behind — like the city itself. It turns out he's the founder and former owner of Island Express Helicopters, the company with which we just flew. He's lived on the island 28 years, and several times a month he travels "overtown," a word the locals use for the mainland.

"No plans to move back?" I ask him.

"Why would I?" he smiles. "This is paradise."

The island is home to about 4,000 year-round residents. It was William Wrigley Jr. of chewing gum and Chicago Cubs fame who cast the die and expanded a 76-square-mile rocky island in the Pacific Ocean into a coveted California destination, after he purchased it along with the Santa Catalina Island Co. in 1919 for approximately \$3 million. Under the company's watch, Catalina became an alluring tourist attraction, a movie set and playground for Hollywood, and a nature conservancy. It was also spring training ground for the Chicago Cubs from 1921 to 1951, with the exception of the war years of 1942-1945. As a baseball fan, I'm disappointed to discover that little remains to showcase the island's baseball pedigree. The diamond built in the same dimensions as the famous Wrigley Field in Chicago is now a parking lot, and the Catalina Country Club, once the team's clubhouse, has only a small collection of Cubs memorabilia. But then I meet Lolo Saldana, a local barber born on the island.

I sit in his shop, where he's been cutting hair for more than 60 years. As a high school golfer, Saldana said he once impressed Charlie Grimm, the Cubs' manager, by beating a favorite in a local tournament.

"He told me, 'I like your style,' and asked me if I had a glove and could meet him out on the field," Saldana remembers. "He hit a few balls to me and that was that."

A permanent home for the Catalina Island Museum is being built nearby, opening in 2015 as the Ada Blanche Wrigley Schreiner Building of the Catalina Island Museum, and Lolo's Barber Shop could be an annex. Chockablock with vintage photos (a shot of a 5-year-old Tiger Woods among them), golf trophies, children's drawings and Cubs memorabilia, the collection is a precious piece of Catalina's colorful mosaic.

AVALON LOOKS THE WAY I REMEMBER IT. Crayola-hued houses stack up the shrubby hillside behind town, ice cream melts down the arms of children carrying cones and the air smells of coconut sun-tan oil. Crescent Avenue, the palm-fringed drag along the main beach, is saturated in Popsicle colors, and shell wind chimes spill from boutique doorways. I notice that the swanky Island Spa Catalina is being built; it's due to open this month. This is where The Encanto Marketplace used to be, but I stop beneath the turquoise awning of Lloyd's of Avalon Confectionery and peer in the window. The silver-armed mechanism turns and stretches strands of pink, waxy taffy as it has for more than 70 years. When I was in high school, a piece of it loosened my "permanent"

Getting There:

Island Express Helicopters

www.islandexpress.com
Multiple daily flights from Long Beach, Santa Ana and San Pedro

Catalina Express

www.catalinaexpress.com
Multiple daily ferries from San Pedro, Long Beach and Dana Point

Catalina Flyer

www.catalinainfo.com
One daily ferry from Newport Beach

If You Go:

Catalina Island Museum (new museum opening in 2015)
(310) 510-2414
www.catalinamuseum.org

Island Spa Catalina
163 Crescent Ave.
www.islandspacatalina.com

Lloyd's of Avalon Confectionery
315 Crescent Ave.
(310) 510-7266
www.catalinacandy.com

Sandtrap Restaurant

501 Avalon Canyon Road
(310) 510-2505
www.catalinasandtrap.com

Zip Line Eco Tour

Located behind Descanso Beach Club
(800) 626-1496
www.visitcatalinaisland.com

Descanso Beach Club

1 St. Catherine Way, Descanso Beach
(310) 510-7410
www.visitcatalinaisland.com

Cape Canyon Expedition

(an extreme off-road adventure) is located at the Catalina Island Discovery Tour Plaza, which is one block from the beach between Catalina Avenue and Sumner Avenue.
(800) 626-1496
www.visitcatalinaisland.com

Catalina Casino

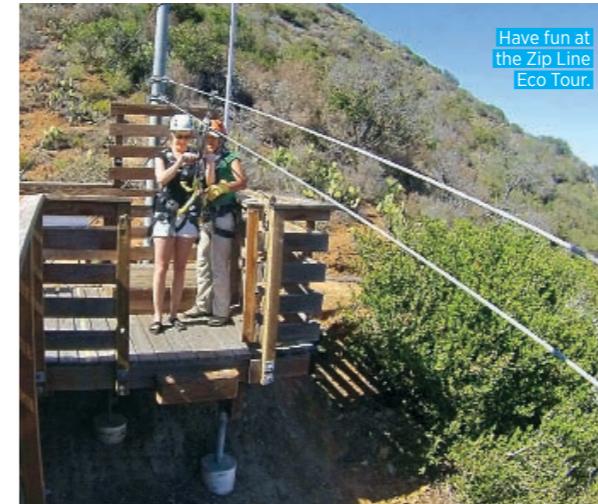
1 Casino Way
(310) 510-0179
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retainer, but there's no worry of that this time. The Green Pleasure Pier is still there too. Watermelon-green and jutting into Avalon Harbor, the pier is a hub of water activity and beckons beleaguered urbanites to snorkel, fish, parasail, paddleboard and dive.

Golf carts buzz about like summer flies, and a well-marked map handed out upon rental leads to sites and curiosities further afield. Near the Sandtrap Restaurant, I come across a giant aviary that I later learn was



Have fun at the Zip Line Eco Tour.

part of the now-closed Catalina Island Bird Park, once home to thousands of exotic species. Today it's filled with sand and toys and used by the local preschool. High up in the sky is the starting point for the island's only zip line, opened in 2010. Thrill-seekers scream down the three-quarters-of-a-mile course over five consecutive zip lines at speeds of up to 40 mph and end on the sandy shores of the Descanso Beach Club. The St. Catherine's Hotel used to be there, but now it's a place to lounge, swim or kayak, especially in September and October, the island's "secret summer," when crowds have thinned and the weather is still warm.

Also along my cart path is Western author Zane Grey's former house-turned-hotel. It was a film version of his novel *The Vanishing American* that brought 14 bison to Catalina in 1924. There are around 150 of them roaming the backcountry now, but the only way to visit the island's rugged interior is via the numerous hiking trails or by organized tours bookable online or in Avalon's Tour Plaza.

Catalina's most recognizable landmark is the stunning red-roofed Catalina Casino, built in 1929, which is used as a gathering

place instead of a gambling house. I've never seen the inside, so I sign up for one of the daily tours. The 1,184-seat movie theater on the bottom level, with its curved, painted ceiling and perfect acoustics, shows first-run films and hosts the Catalina Film Festival each September. Above, I can almost hear the tapping heels on the wooden floor of the glamorous round ballroom, where mainlanders came by steamer ship in the '30s and '40s for big-band-fueled dinner dances. Annual events, such as the Avalon Ball and New Year's Eve Celebration and ball, invite visitors to don their black-tie garb and relive the era.

On my last night, I stop into Luau Larry's bar for its famous Wiki Wacker, a potent rum concoction. A group of friends are gathered for a wedding, among them a helicopter pilot named Aaron Fitzgerald. I'm welcomed into their close-knit clan, and we pass the night swapping stories until we go our separate ways. A few days later, a photo arrives in my email. It's Fitzgerald sitting in the cockpit of a now-orange Screaming Mimi.

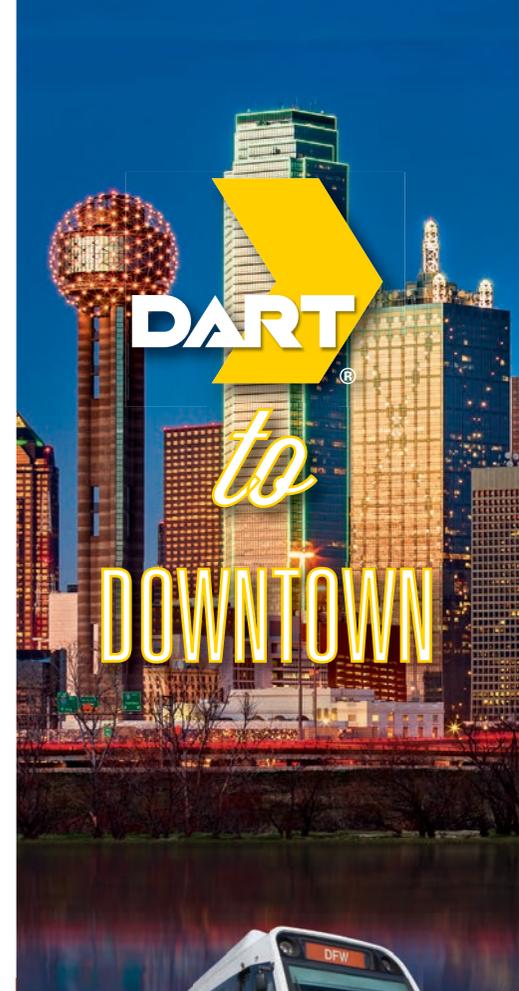
"Since your dad worked on *Riptide*, I thought you might like to see that Screaming Mimi is in good hands these days and thriving," he writes. "I am treating her well." Sometimes it's the whiff of coconut suntan oil or a piece of saltwater taffy that catapults us decades back, and sometimes it

 To learn more about the Catalina Film Festival happening Sept. 24-28, visit www.catalinafilm.org

To learn more about Catalina Island, visit www.catalinachamber.com

takes a serendipitous encounter to remind us that memories don't need to be measured in years gone by or the desire to re-create them. They are always present, preserved in place, much like Catalina, and we can revisit them anytime. 

KIMBERLEY LOVATO travels the world but loves coming home to California. In the March 1 issue of *American Way*, she wrote about being a redhead in Ireland.



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