

Tune Into Catalina

Hop a ferry for beaches and backcountry hiking –
plus a bit of bygone Hollywood glamour –
in California's Channel Islands.

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUIS GARCÍA

A yachter rows
out to his mooring
from Avalon.

Quick Escape

CATALINA ISLAND IS EASIER FOR many Angelenos to get to than some L.A. neighborhoods. Leave the city's notoriously snarled freeways behind in favor of an hour-long ferry ride toward the horizon, and soon the honking horns "overtown" (island-speak for the mainland) give way to seagull squawks. Yes, crowds swell during summers and on weekends, when frat boys and bachelorette parties loiter late into the night outside Luau Larry's or the Marlin Club, Avalon's oldest bar. Arrive off-season or on a weekday, however, and it's hard to believe this beach town belongs to the nation's most populous county. With fewer than 400 cars and trucks permitted on the entire island, Avalon is blissfully smog- and road-rage-free – there's not even a stoplight. What you will find, however, is an inviting slice of old California shimmering as bright as the golden garibaldi fish that swim off its shoreline, plus hiking, biking, and four-wheel-drive fun just minutes outside the town limits.

Catalina is the most touristed of the eight Channel Islands strewn along the Southern California coast. It's been inhabited by the Gabrielino-Tongva tribe, claimed by Spain and Mexico, owned by private developers, and frequented by smugglers, bootleggers, and prospectors. But it was in 1919, when William Wrigley Jr. of chewing gum and Chicago Cubs fame purchased the island, that Catalina rose to prominence as a playground for Hollywood filmmakers, movie stars, and baseball fans (the Cubs held spring training here for 30 years). Decades later, Wrigley's heirs established the Catalina Island Conservancy, a private land trust that still protects nearly 90 percent of the island's 74 square miles of unspoiled beaches, hidden coves, and craggy hills.

Arriving visitors first spy Catalina Casino at the north end of palm-fringed Avalon Bay, but there's nary a roulette wheel or neon light inside. Wrigley Jr. had the round, 12-story-tall building constructed in 1929 as a venue for big-band legends, who kept its 20,000-square-foot dance hall swinging. These days, guided tours take visitors into the casino's nooks and the main level's Avalon Theater, a 1,180-seat, acoustically perfect cinema that hosts the Catalina Film Festival each September (17 through 26 this year).



Clockwise from top left: Naughty Fox's ahi poke nachos, zipping up to Two Harbors on the Cyclone, and Silver Canyon Tile artwork.

Colorful tiles depicting birds and island life line the path from the casino to Crescent Avenue, Avalon's waterfront walk – a nod to the now defunct Catalina Island Pottery. Its hand-glazed tiles are embedded in sidewalks and adorn public buildings, private homes, and fountains around town. About half are reproductions, says Robin Cassidy, a potter and the owner of Silver Canyon Tile, who works with the city to repair and replace damaged tiles. She also leads two-hour workshops for visitors to create their own.

Most residents get around on golf carts; visitors can rent them by the hour at Catalina Island Golf Carts for easier access to views from the steep hills above the harbor

and attractions farther afield, such as the Wrigley Memorial & Botanic Garden. But since Avalon is only four blocks long, it's easiest to dip in and out of shops and restaurants on foot. Early arrivals should pop into Toyon Grill for a latte and avocado toast with a view. For lunch: shellfish and other seafood dishes at The Lobster Trap or the recently opened Naughty Fox, home to a patio ideal for people-watching over plates of ahi poke nachos and grilled fish tacos. The local happy hour call is a Buffalo Milk, the island's boozy frozen cocktail of vodka, Kahlúa, crème de cacao, and banana liqueur.

But in order to discover the beaches and hidden spots that really make Catalina

TIP

"An easy escape from the L.A. area, Catalina is perfect for families looking for adventure and couples seeking a bit of romance for the day or a long weekend. Make sure to book golf carts, bikes, and excursions, such as dive boats and tours, in advance, even if you're just day-tripping."

— Robin Sanchez, *Virtuoso*
travel agency executive,
Santa Barbara

special, you have to get out of Avalon. Jutting from the main beach, the Green Pleasure Pier serves as the departure point for kayaking, diving and snorkeling trips in the surrounding kelp forests, and the *Cyclone*, an open-air speedboat that zips along Catalina's impressive coastline to the small outpost of Two Harbors (population 300) for hiking, swimming, or chaise lounging at the beach club. Boaters can charter a yacht to sail the coast and anchor at deserted coves.

The island's interior is where Catalina separates itself from your average California beach getaway, whether you're in search of Catalina's endemic gray fox and resident bison on a four-wheel-drive excursion, heli-hiking or heli-mountain-biking, or burning off a Buffalo Milk on moderate hikes on the island's hundred-plus miles of trails. Trekkers can set out on a multiday tramp along the Trans-Catalina Trail, a 38-mile odyssey. Fifth-generation islander Larina Cassidy, who owns a local outfitting company with her stepmom, hauls gear for hikers and sets up tents on beach campgrounds along the same rutted roads her great-great-grandfather, Manuel Hernandez, once traversed in a horse-drawn wagon. What she says she loves best about life on Catalina is the same thing visitors who return again and again say too: "There's always something different to do."

Catalina's biggest surprise by far: the existence, so close to L.A., of an island where the buffalo literally roam, and where, in the course of a day, you can hike a mountain, snorkel in the sea, and be dressed (in flip-flops) for a locally caught lobster dinner just in time for a SoCal sunset. VI

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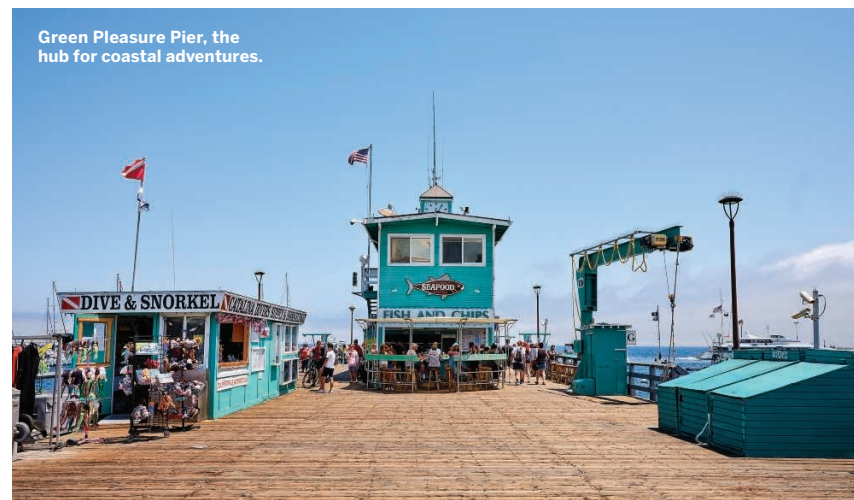
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Quick Escape



CRUISE ON OVER

Five ways to put Catalina on your map.

Terranea Resort's adventure concierge organizes activities, including day trips to Catalina Island via the *Catalina Express*, which departs from Long Beach, just 30 minutes away. Guests return to the 582-room resort to dine alfresco at one of its nine restaurants, relax at the 50,000-square-foot spa, or lounge by one of four pools. *Doubles from \$575, including breakfast daily and a \$100 resort credit.*

Along the Newport Beach coastline, the 204-bungalow, 128-villa **Resort at Pelican Hill** has ocean views from its championship golf course and impressive Coliseum Pool. Among the many off-property requests fielded by concierges: surf lessons just down the road or a Catalina Island adventure aboard the *Catalina*

Flyer ferry, 20 minutes from the resort. *Doubles from \$795, including a \$50 breakfast credit daily and a \$100 resort credit.*

Royal Caribbean International sets sail round-trip from Los Angeles for the first time in a decade beginning this November. The company's revamped, 3,386-passenger *Navigator of the Seas* will embark on five-day cruises, with a call at Avalon en route to Ensenada. *Departures: Multiple dates, November 29, 2021, through December 19, 2022; from \$229.*

Explore Channel Islands National Park and marine sanctuary aboard **Lindblad Expeditions'** 100-passenger *National Geographic Venture* or *Quest*, round-trip from L.A. The five-day sailings are

filled with paddleboarding, hiking, and Zodiac excursions and wrap up with a day on Catalina for wildlife tours or an afternoon at Island Spa Catalina or Descanso Beach Club before returning to L.A. *Departures: Multiple dates, October 29, 2021, through November 5, 2022; from \$3,200.*

Virtuoso travel advisors can work with **American Excursionist** to create custom Catalina adventures. One example: a private day trip from L.A. that begins with a helicopter flight to Avalon, followed by a four-wheel-drive tour of the island's interior and lunch aboard a private yacht to spend the afternoon swimming and snorkeling from remote beaches. *Departures: Any day through 2022; from \$12,000 for up to five travelers.*