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‘THE MAGIC ISLE’

Catalina Island: Southern California Untouched

Story and Photos by Richard Varr



Our tour bus chugs down the curving road alongside parched green bushes and gangly treetops when we reach a clearing. We're high on a bluff, and I find myself skipping a breath, agape in awe.

"How would you like to wake up every morning with a beautiful view like this?" asked Carlos Cubillo, our driver and tour guide.

I see boats gently bobbing in a half-moon harbor atop Caribbean-like, aquamarine surf and surrounded by a mountainous landscape. At the harbor's edge, the red-roofed and rounded building with its imposing columns gives it all away — the unmistakable land-

mark of this famous American getaway.

"In 1929, the Catalina Casino was the tallest building in L.A. County. Six thousand people could fit up there. Imagine 6,000 people dancing in the big ballroom with the big orchestras, Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman," continues Cubillo, noting the 12-story structure actually never was a gambling hall but, instead, had a giant dance floor with such events broadcast live on the radio. "And what did they do when 6,000 people needed a drink?" he quipped.

This is my first visit to Catalina Island, sort of an extension of the rugged coast and scenic hilly landscape of sunny Southern California — dry and

mountainous desert terrain with cactus and tumbleweed-like brush inland, but also with its harborside town of Avalon and its colorful cityscape. With few cars on the island, golf carts instead sputter through Avalon's narrow streets. Shops and open-air restaurants line the mostly pedestrian main drag, Crescent Avenue, which faces the calm waterfront with views of the iconic Casino at almost every turn.

"On the left hand side, the home with the American flag is where Marilyn Monroe used to live before she was discovered and became a movie star," pointed out Cubillo as the tour continues. "It's a small town, everybody talks."

Although used in the 19th

century for cattle ranching and mining, and occupied by Union troops during the Civil War, it wasn't until the late 1880s that the island, just 22 miles from the mainland, became a resort destination. But, in 1915, a fire razed much of Avalon's new hotels and development to the ground and thus paved the way to begin building modern Avalon. That's because in 1919, chewing gum magnate William Wrigley, Jr. purchased the island.

"What you see and enjoy in Avalon today is really his vision," said Gail Fornasiere, deputy director of External Affairs for the Catalina Island Museum for Art & History. "He was a lover of birds and he really gave back to the people



Avalon street views, where traveling on foot or in a golf cart is the norm.



who bought his gum. He wanted them to have an island vacation. The island was kind of a utopian dream for everyone, not just the rich. He was super gregarious. They say he would smile for a photographer two blocks away.”

Fornasiere continued while taking me on a tour of the museum, pointing out how Wrigley was a master marketer on how to attract visitors year-round. He invited his hometown Chicago Cubs — which he would soon own — to the island in 1920, kicking off what would be the team’s spring training location from 1921 to 1951.

Wrigley built new hotels and attractions, including a cage for exotic birds from all over the world. He built two steamships to help bring tourists to Catalina. And in 1929, his new art deco casino opened with its huge domed ballroom and cinema, one of the first to accommodate sound movies.

The museum highlights how Hollywood soon came to Catalina Island, its seaside setting and hilly and mountainous landscape a perfect backdrop for the 300 or so movies filmed there, including classics *Mutiny on the Bounty* with Clark Gable in 1935, and *Chinatown* and *Jaws* filmed in 1974.

“Hollywood used Catalina to be whatever they wanted, so



they turned us into Tahiti, the American frontier and everything in between,” said Fornasiere.

Avalon was also home to a 16-year-old Marilyn Monroe for just six months after marrying her first husband, a merchant marine who was stationed on the island during World War II.

“We think this was a pivotal time for Monroe because she found herself not in a bad home situation anymore,” noted Fornasiere. “She kind of figured out her ‘Marilyn walk’ and was surrounded by soldiers.”

To see some of the rugged interior of this island, 22 miles long and eight miles wide, I hopped on a driving tour along the dusty and winding roads.

“We’re looking for some four-legged locals,” announced tour guide Reyna Fino in reference to the 150 or so bison that roam

there. It all started when 14 animals were brought for the filming of the silent movie, *The Vanishing American*, in 1924.

“When ready to film a bison stampede, they opened the corral, and the bison took off in 14 different directions,” said Fino. “They never got their shot of the stampeding bison. They tried to round them up but couldn’t find them.”

Over the years, the herd has grown and been managed by the Catalina Island Conservancy, created in 1972 by Philip Wrigley, son of William Wrigley, Jr.

“He donated 88 percent of the island to become the Conservancy for good reason,” said Fornasiere. “The family really wanted the island to remain in some way how they enjoyed it.”

Thanks to the Conservancy,

Catalina Island is a hiker’s paradise, with more than 165 miles of trails weaving throughout the hilly landscape, many with splendid island and ocean views. The multi-day, 38.5 mile Trans-Catalina Trail is for serious hikers and links five campgrounds as it ascends hills and stretches from Avalon to Two Harbors and beyond. A popular diving, camping and beachside village, Two Harbors sits along an isthmus on the island’s west side and is reached by hiking or by water, with boat tours from Avalon or by ferry from the mainland.

A hike more to my liking and stamina is the 30- or 40-minute walk up Avalon Canyon to the Wrigley Memorial & Botanical Gardens, also reached by the Catalina Trolley or a taxi. Cactus and other desert plants native to the island line the walkways of the Botanical Gardens, started in 1935 by William Wrigley, Jr.’s wife, Ada. An 80-foot-high tower dominates the memorial, with the concrete structures emblazoned with marble and glazed tiles from the island’s yesteryear tile factory dating back to 1927, but only in operation for 10 years. Original tiles also line Avalon walls and storefronts, especially along the waterfront

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Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, Calif.

area.

Back at the harbor, central Green Pleasure Pier is where tour operators sell tickets for fishing adventures and other aquatic activities, including glass bottom boats and submarine rides to see marine life along the island's exceptionally clear waters. In fact, it was a glass bottom boat ride that inspired the artist John Gabriel Beckman, who created the murals for Grauman's Chinese Theater in Los Angeles, to paint the island's popular mermaid mural on the outside of the Casino's theater in 1929 – a caricature often seen on local souvenirs and t-shirts.

"He came up with this amazing mermaid that was sort of the keeper of the underwater," said Fornasiere. "It enhances that art deco, early California mythical kind of magic that this island is."

To get to the island, Catalina Express has a fleet of eight slick and fast vessels, the larger ones two-hulled catamaran watercraft. The ferry service offers up to 30 departures a day from three Los Angeles area mainland ports, at San Pedro, Long Beach and Dana Point. I took the hour-long ferry from the Long Beach waterfront which conveniently has a RV camp, the Golden Shore RV Resort, in walking distance to the port for RVers who wanting to visit the island for a day or stay overnight or longer.

While on Catalina Island, I stay two nights at the Avalon Hotel, a centrally located boutique hotel just half a block off Crescent Avenue. Rooms have private balconies, some facing the ocean and harbor, while the views of the harbor and surrounding hills from the outside rooftop lounge and bar are particularly stunning. A continental breakfast is served outside in the shaded courtyard.

The ferry from Long Beach departs along Queensway Bay, passing the city's scenic waterfront with the retail shops and restaurants of Shoreline Village, and with splendid views of the Queen Mary ocean liner on the other side. The 1930s vessel with its signature black hull and red smokestacks recently reopened — after being closed for more than two years due to the pandemic and needed repairs. Visitors can tour the Ship Model Gallery, Winston Churchill-themed exhibition, boiler rooms and even take a ghost tour. The onboard hotel includes 347 original first-class staterooms and suites, restaurants and venues for meetings and weddings.

More of Orange County

About 25 miles east of Long Beach, the city of Santa Ana has one of Orange County's and Southern California's most noted museums. With a permanent collection of more than 90,000 objects, the world-class

Bowers Museum showcases art and artifacts — from pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, Native American cultures, African and Oceanic art, including from Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia.

While visiting, the macabre Spirits and Headhunters exhibition, with its three actual human heads, catches my eye, reminding me of scenes from movies where jungle explorers encounter savage tribesmen. They're skulls remodeled with clay, pigments and human hair, recreated to look like the deceased person and used in ceremonies.

Another museum highlight includes the art and artifacts of the area's history, from the baskets and pottery of Southern California Coastal Indians, and that from the subsequent 18th through early 20th century incursion of missionaries and ranchers bringing their religious icons, wagons and even a brandy still. Artists' eyes captured images from this period as seen in the museum's many paintings.

Santa Ana is also home to its small but popular zoo of the same name at Prentice Park. It opened in 1952 on land donated by local businessman Joseph Prentice with the promise of

showcasing primates.

"He made a unique stipulation in the actual deed that the zoo had to have 50 monkeys," explained Zoo Director Ethan Fisher. They include Brown-Headed Spider monkeys, White-Faced Saki and, as the name implies, the Black Howler monkeys — known for their deep guttural screams.

"You come to the zoo sometimes in the morning, and you can hear them vocalizing," noted Fisher. "It's like you're on vacation in Costa Rica."

And, for the first time I see a giant anteater, the size of an extremely large dog. The zoo's new exhibit features underwater viewing to see South American river otters opens this summer.

Yorba Linda

I can't leave Orange County without taking a short drive north to Yorba Linda, to visit the Richard Nixon Presidential Library & Museum. I sit at the former president's replica desk in an exact replica of his Oval Office and listen to snippets from his many phone conversations, including the Watergate scandal's "Smoking Gun" tape and excerpts from his televised farewell speech.

I walk through the actual Marine One helicopter that whisked Nixon and his wife, Pat, away from the White House on his last day in office. Also, on the grounds are his boyhood home and burial place.

As I leave California, I recall walking along Crescent Avenue to Catalina's ferry terminal, passing storefronts decorated with the island's tiles. I glanced across the harbor to see the Casino now aglow in the waning sunlight of early evening.

"It's often called the magic isle," I recall Fornasiere telling me. "It's like Southern California untouched."



The Bowers Museum houses more than 90,000 ancient objects.

Richard Varr is a freelance travel writer and photographer and frequent contributor to Houston Woman Magazine.