

A Favorite Vacation Spot

By STEVE FOX

Santa Catalina Island

A few kilometers from the jammed freeways and smoggy air of Los Angeles, Santa Catalina Island offers a tranquil getaway with beautiful beaches, historic buildings and hiking trails.



Courtesy Ruth Mayer



Catalina Gold by Ruth Mayer, who uses diverse styles to paint a wide variety of subjects—from seascapes, portraits and sports to abstract and impressionistic art. Mayer has traveled across the world and painted hundreds of works, but her favorite haunt is her gallery on Catalina Island. <http://www.ruthmayer.com/>

Americans love vacations, and one of the favorite destinations for those living in Southern California is Santa Catalina Island, which attracts about a million visitors every year.

Catalina, as it's commonly called, offers a quick getaway from the jammed freeways, smoggy air and nonstop pursuit of money and fame that characterizes much of Los Angeles. Reached primarily by high-speed ferryboats that run several times a day from the mainland, the island is a quiet, somewhat sleepy throwback to California as it was a half-century ago.

One of eight islands sprinkled over the Pacific Ocean off the California coast, Catalina is the only one with hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, stores and recreational facilities. The others, including the five rugged and undeveloped islands that form the beautiful Channel Islands National Park, are accessible only by private boats, small planes or helicopters. Two islands are controlled by the U.S. Navy, with one off-limits to the public and used for weapons testing and training. Most of Catalina is a nature preserve open to campers and hikers by permit only.

Avalon is the only town, with a population of about 3,500 that swells to more than 10,000 on summer weekends. Originally developed as a fishing camp in the 19th century, Avalon has dozens of hotels with room prices ranging from about \$75 to \$500 per night, as well as condominiums and cottages that can be rented by the week starting around \$1,000. The town is shaped like an auditorium, with multimillion-dollar homes perched on hills that rise sharply from its center and a picturesque small boat harbor situated like an oceanfront stage. Pleasure boaters from the mainland secure their sail or power boats to underwater moorings they rent from the city and go ashore on water taxis. The peaceful town, which sparkles with lights at night, is also a popular spot for

For more information:

- Explore California
<http://www.visitcalifornia.com/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home>
- Santa Catalina Island
<http://www.catalinachamber.com/seedo/index.asp>
- Santa Catalina and Hollywood
http://www.ecatalina.com/museum_hollywood.cfm

weddings and honeymoons.

"It's unique," says Tim French, a businessman from Atascadero, California, who has spent the last five Thanksgiving holidays at Avalon. "The town has a character you don't find elsewhere in California. It makes you feel like you've really gotten away."

Catalina became well-known across the United States during the 1920s, when a style of music called the "Big Band Sound" was broadcast by radio from the circular Casino building at one end of

Avalon. A song called *26 Miles*, written in 1957 by a California lifeguard (who had never been to Catalina) and referring to its distance from the mainland (it's actually 22 miles) became a huge hit and made Catalina even more popular.

"It's got almost everything I like about California," says Ed Ditlefsen, who grew up in California and now lives in Twin Falls, Idaho. "There are historical buildings, beautiful beaches, hiking trails with great views—all packed into one spot. You can eat Mexican food and spend very

Catalina's History Mirrors California's

Archaeologists have found evidence of human habitation on Catalina and other Channel Islands dating back at least 7,000 years. Early islanders subsisted on plants and sea life, meeting their other needs by paddling plank canoes to the mainland, where they traded sea otter pelts and carved stone bowls for other goods.

The first contact between Native Americans and Europeans came in 1542, when Spanish explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo visited the island and claimed it for the king of Spain. A second Spanish explorer, Sebastian Viscaino, came ashore 60 years later and named the island Santa Catalina in honor of Saint Catherine. Spain established missions on the mainland in the 1700s, but when what was then called New Spain broke away from the mother country in 1820, Catalina became part of Mexico. In 1846, the United States seized what would become the state of California from Mexico and Catalina came with it.

From that time on, Catalina has been a microcosm of

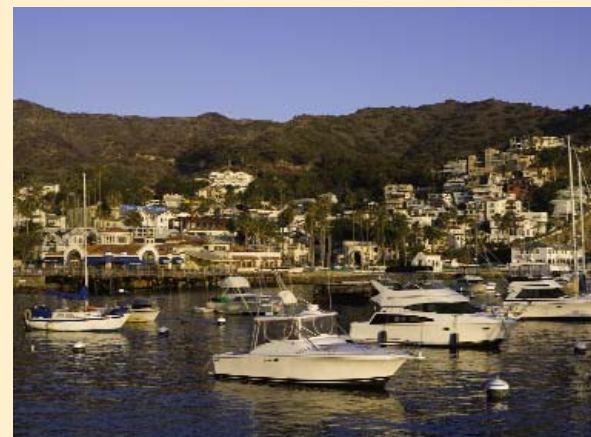
Pleasure boats moored at Avalon.

California history—miners burrowed into its steep cliffs during the 1849 Gold Rush, Union soldiers built barracks there during the Civil War, the timbers of a Chinese junk still lie in one of its harbors, and the island was used by the Navy in both World Wars. It remained in private hands until the mid-1970s, when title to almost 90 percent of its land passed to a nonprofit foundation dedicated to preserving and protecting the island's undeveloped areas.

Perhaps the greatest influence on Catalina was that of chewing gum tycoon William Wrigley Jr., who bought most of the island in 1919. Wrigley bankrolled an ambitious economic development program, building a country club, bird park, ferry boats, hotels and

the legendary Casino building. (The name came from an Italian word for entertainment—the Casino houses a large, ornate movie theater and a 1920s-era, ocean-view dancehall, but there has never been any gambling.) Wrigley's son continued his father's dream, giving Avalon an early California ambience and building a mid-island landing strip for small private planes called the Airport in the Sky.

Today, most of Catalina remains close to what it was when the Spanish arrived—grassy hills, rocky coastline and crystal-clear waters. It is a quiet, tranquil place just a few kilometers away from the non-stop energy and bustle of modern Los Angeles. —S.F.



Courtesy Catalina Island Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau



Photographs courtesy Catalina Island Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau



little, or have fresh seafood and good wines at a luxurious oceanfront restaurant. Lie on the beach, shop in the little stores or take bus tours to the interior of the island. There are so many choices."

Avalon is like a small village with red-tiled roofs, Spanish-style archways inlaid with colorful tiles, and a long, semicircular walkway next to the water. Golfing, camping, fishing, swimming, diving, hiking, shopping, reading and simply lying on a sandy beach are favorite activities for tourists, who generally come for stays of less than a week, according to the Catalina Chamber of Commerce.

"It's sunny, quiet and restful—the perfect place near the water to decompress," says Gary Libman, a college professor who lives in the Los Angeles suburb of Altadena. "Almost anything you could want is within walking distance. It's a wonderful blend of relaxation and convenience."

Catalina is 34 kilometers long and varies in width from 13 kilometers to less than a kilometer at a mid-island spot called Two Harbors, which has one store, one restaurant and one hotel. Two Harbors primarily attracts pleasure boaters, as well as campers who pitch their tents at designated areas nearby. The island is warmed with sun or partial sun an average of 267 days a year, with summertime temperatures rarely topping 26 degrees Celsius and winter lows averaging around 10 degrees. There is little rain—about 14 inches a year, all of it falling between October and April. The ocean waters surrounding the island vary in temperature from the low 20s in the summer to around 10 degrees in the winter. The sea is much clearer than California's coastal waters, making Catalina's beaches popular with swimmers and scuba divers who prow

Top: Santa Catalina Island narrows to less than a kilometer in width at Two Harbors, where boaters tie up to permanent moorings in the Pacific Ocean. Campers also come ashore on ferries from the mainland. Center: Many Hollywood movies have been filmed on Catalina, including Westerns that featured buffaloes brought from America's Great Plains. Left: Visitors stroll along Catalina Island's main seaside street, Crescent Avenue, in the early evening.



Courtesy: Catalina Island Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau

Catalina: Hollywood's Back Lot

Here's a Hollywood trivia question: What do the movies *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Jaws*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Chinatown*, *MacArthur*, *Apollo 13*, *The Hunt for Red October* and *Pearl Harbor* have in common? All had scenes filmed on or around Catalina.

More than 500 motion pictures, documentaries, television programs and commercials have used Catalina as a location, beginning with the silent films of the early 1900s. Because it is

close to Hollywood and easily reached, the island has served as the coast of North Africa, the beaches of Tahiti, the American frontier, and the lost continent of Atlantis. The mechanical shark in *Jaws* "swam" in Catalina's waters, palm trees used to simulate Tahiti still wave on the island, and descendants of buffalo used in Westerns now roam its hillsides.

Catalina was a favorite getaway for early Hollywood stars, including Charlie Chaplin, Clark

Gable, Jimmy Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall and Joan Crawford. Director Cecil B. De Mille filmed at least three pictures on the island, telling the local newspaper it was "the only place where I can get away to work amid real inspiration."

While film production has largely shifted to other locations, Catalina remains a favorite spot for television programs and commercials, music videos, magazine and advertising shoots.

—S.F.

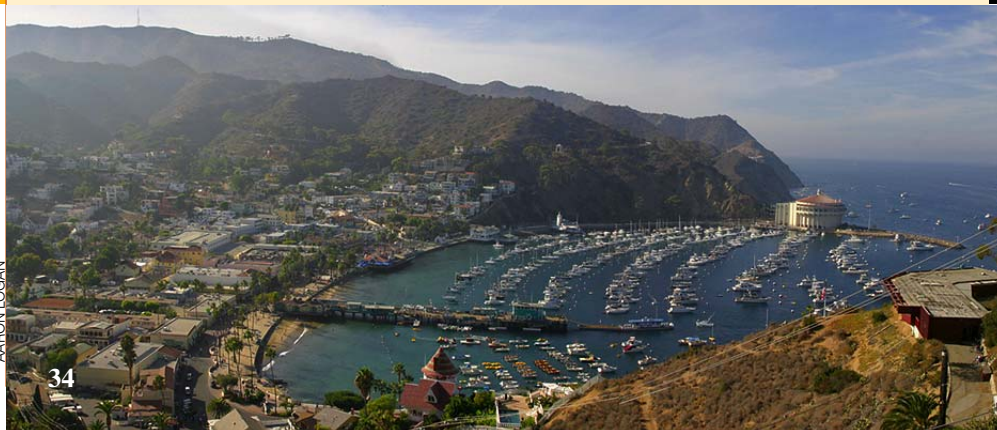
Above: Palm trees and arched doorways, reminiscent of Mexican and Spanish architecture, are evident throughout Avalon. Hillside homes above the town sell for several million dollars. Bottom left: Avalon Bay

the dense kelp forests. This vegetation rises from the ocean floor, providing cover for seals, sea bass and large numbers of bright, orange Garibaldi, which resemble giant goldfish and are California's State Marine Fish.

While prices have risen on Catalina, the island remains a relative bargain. Roundtrip ferryboat fares are just over \$50 per person, there are many choices of accommodation and food, and the beaches, fresh air and quaint, seaside atmosphere are free. It hasn't really changed much in the last 50 years, which is a large part of its appeal to busy Southern Californians.



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AARON LOGAN