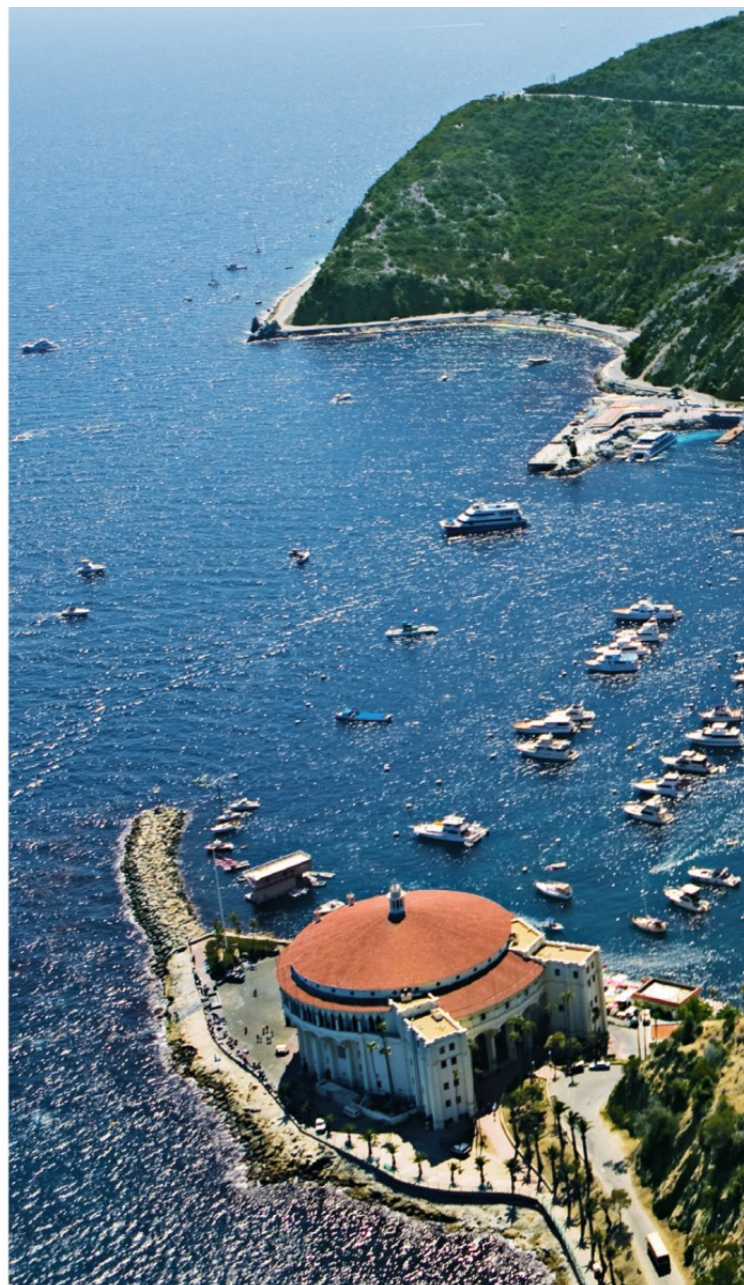


ISLAND FOR A DAY

— ❁ —
by Allison Hata

As the 500-passenger catamaran glides quietly out of Newport Harbor, gentle waves lap at its sides and send rays of sunlight dancing across the aquamarine expanse of the Pacific. The Balboa Peninsula blurs as the vessel embarks on its daily 75-mile jaunt to Catalina.

An island dating back 7,000 years, Catalina's past is filled with enchanting tales of smugglers, pirates, movie stars and soldiers. This storybook mystique has seeped into downtown Avalon's charming cobblestone streets and on up to the meandering trails in the wild backcountry. Orange County's off-season is a perfect time to escape for a day and discover both adventure and relaxation in this nearby island paradise.



A GRAND TOUR

Whether visitors arrive via ferry, helicopter or private charter, the first impression of the island is likely formed with a glimpse of the art deco Catalina Casino, which cuts a stately figure against the rolling hillside. Built in 1929, the 11-story non-gambling “casino” — from the Italian definition meaning “gathering place” — was once home to the world's largest circular ballroom and the first theater in the nation designed for modern talking pictures.

For first-timers, an immersive guided tour of the casino is one of the best ways to get acquainted with the history of Catalina's center. The glitz and glamour of the island's golden age, when it served as a backdrop for more than 225 films, is easy to imagine while visiting areas of the building previously closed to the public, including green rooms once used by Hollywood leading man Cary Grant. A scenic vehicular tour is also ideal for visitors seeking a quick overview



Photo courtesy of Catalina Island Company

of major Avalon-area landmarks, such as the former mansion of chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr., who was responsible for developing much of the island in the early 1900s.

For those who prefer to get their fill of the island by connecting with nature, options abound. Sign up for an eco tour led by a naturalist with Catalina Island Conservancy, which protects more than three-quarters of the island as a nature preserve. Jeep excursions offer a front-row seat to 160 miles of wildlife in gated parts of the canyons accessible only by the conservation group. A lucky few will even capture on film some members of Catalina's cast of characters: a herd of 2,000-pound bison descended from the 14 animals brought to the island for the making of a film in 1924.

Independent travelers can design a self-paced itinerary by renting a golf cart from one of the shops lining Crescent

Avenue, Avalon's main thoroughfare. A one-hour rental allows enough time for a scenic spin into Avalon's hillsides, following Pebbly Beach Road as it makes a wide loop leading to the Wrigley mansion. Golf cart passengers can access the Wrigley Memorial & Botanical Garden, where a 130-foot structure built using stone and flagship blue rock from the island affords a peaceful lookout over hills and ocean. Surrounding the memorial is a 37.8-acre garden showcasing the diversity of Catalina's natural landscape with a desert collection of rare and endangered plants.

TREKKING THE TRAILS

Winter is also an ideal season for exploring Catalina's myriad trails. Day-trippers looking for a hike to complete in just a few hours can begin at Wrigley Memorial & Botanical Garden, which doubles as the entrance to Garden to Sky Trail.

Extending 6.5 miles from bottom to top, the wide, pebbled path ascends to a summit that affords majestic views eastward and across the water to SoCal's coastal towns. On a clear day, visitors may catch sight of the other Channel Islands in the distance. Garden to Sky is one of many Santa Catalina backcountry trails protected by the Catalina Island Conservancy.

A popular route for backpackers is the 37-mile Trans Catalina Trail, which winds through remote stretches of unspoiled wilderness and beachfront campgrounds before arriving on the other side of the island at Two Harbors.

For a day trip, however, it's always a safe bet to explore the trails that create a crisscrossing web across Avalon. One of the easier routes is a 2.3-mile track on mostly flat terrain that leads to

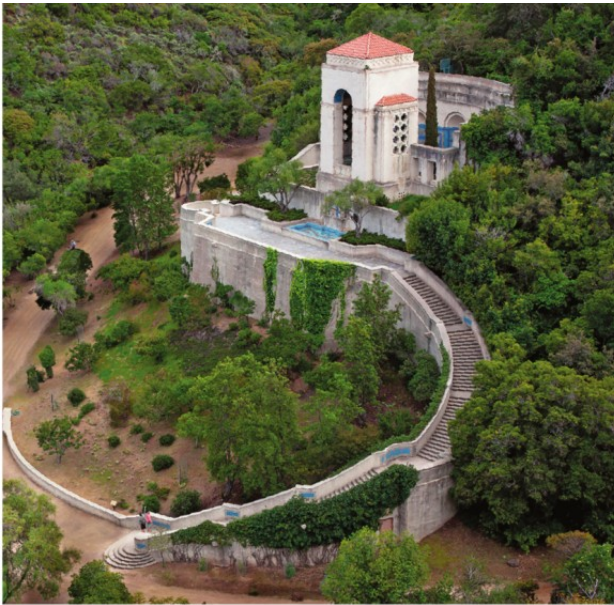


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Catalina Island Casino Theatre, photo courtesy of Catalina Island Company.

*Wrigley Memorial & Botanical Garden, hikers trek the trails on the island,
photos courtesy of Catalina Island Conservancy.*

Kayak adventure, photo courtesy of Catalina Island Company.



the Spanish-style Catalina Chimes Tower via Hogsback Trail through the streets of Avalon. An incline brings visitors to the hills above Catalina Casino, where they can snap a postcard-perfect shot of the harbor while enjoying the ringing of the bells installed in 1926 by Wrigley and his wife, Ada Elizabeth.

ADVENTURE UNBOUND

After fueling up with a bite to eat, enjoy a leisurely walk along the bay path. Just beyond the casino, the private Descanso Beach serves as another landmark, guiding visitors toward adrenaline-filled activities on the water and hidden in the hillside.

One cannot fully appreciate Catalina's unique coastal habitat without exploring the Pacific waters that surround it. Sometimes referred to as a "living laboratory," the island's thriving marine life greets snorkelers and scuba divers face to face, while those who prefer to stay dry can board glass-bottomed boats or even submarines to see California sea lions, gray whales, dolphins and black sea bass swimming amid giant kelp forests. To add a workout to the adventure, grab a kayak or hop onto a stand-up paddleboard, or SUP. Guided tours for all levels are available daily and add an element of excitement and fun to the ocean experience.

Thrill-seekers can burn off energy on a ropes course at Catalina Aerial Adventure, a new offering in Descanso Canyon with configurations for all skill levels. Beginners brave the suspended tunnels and cargo nets, while advanced explorers can climb higher into the treetops and traverse swinging log bridges that pose a heart-pumping challenge. Balance and upper arm strength





Aerial Adventure (left) and Catalina Zip Line (right), photos courtesy of Catalina Island Company

certainly help, but the self-paced activity lends itself to those less athletically inclined as well.

While testing their mettle on the ropes, visitors are occasionally serenaded by joyful shouts echoing between the canyon walls. A quick glance upward pinpoints the source: A daring zip line journey sends passengers hurtling through the canyon at breakneck speed.

The young and young at heart can partake in this high-flying adventure with the Catalina Zip Line Eco Tour, an excursion that begins with a shuttle ride to the top of a 3,700-foot course. Led by knowledgeable guides who infuse a good deal of humor into ecological awareness, the tour includes five stops that educate on the local wildlife and ecology, including a roaring brushfire that threatened to burn through the island in 2007. In between, participants are encouraged to step fearlessly off each of the five platforms for exhilarating experiences, like soaring 300 feet above the canyon floor at up to 45 mph and descending a nearly quarter-mile stretch of zip line.

Some day-trippers may trade the thrills of a zip line for a more cerebral experience inside a cultural institution like the Catalina Island Museum, and that's the beauty of an escape to Avalon.

No two itineraries are alike, yet each is neatly woven together through activities that draw on the island's breathtaking landscape and colorful history, both of which will live on in the memories of visitors for years to come. 🌿

IF YOU GO

plan it book it

CATALINA CASINO
40-minute walking tours
offered daily at 11:45 a.m.
and 2:30 p.m.
800.626.1496

AVALON SCENIC TOUR
50-minute bus tours offered
daily at 11:30 a.m., 12:30,
1, 2 and 3 p.m.
visitchinalinaisland.com

**CATALINA ISLAND
CONSERVANCY**
Permits, trail maps and
Jeep Eco Tours
catalinaconservancy.org

GOLF CART RENTAL
Four- or six-passenger golf
carts, two-hour rentals.
301 and 625 Crescent
Ave. Or reserve online at
catalinaislandgolfcart.com

**DESCANSO BEACH
OCEAN SPORTS**
Kayak and stand-up
paddleboard (SUP) rentals,
kayak tours, snorkeling,
beach fun and more.
310.510.1226
kayakcatalinaisland.com

**TWO HARBORS DIVE &
RECREATION CENTER**
Rent snorkel gear, kayaks,
SUPs, beach umbrellas,
mountain bikes, wetsuits,
scuba gear and more.
310.510.4272
visitchinalinaisland.com

**CATALINA AERIAL
ADVENTURE**
Tickets for 90 minutes
of climb; ages 7 and up,
with restrictions.
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CATALINA ZIP LINE
Two-hour zip line tours,
with restrictions, tandem
rides for kids.
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