

Catalina Cruisin'

L.A. Parent editors hit the island for a whirlwind—but fun—tour

It's just an hour (or two) away, but most of the *L.A. Parent* editorial staff hadn't been there since our teens. Now as 25 of us—eight families in all—landed on picturesque Santa Catalina Island, the boats rocking gently in the shimmering harbor, scenic hills surrounding the bay, we wondered why we had waited so long to return.

While the legendary lure of that island-you-can-see-from-the-mainland-on-a-clear-day is reason enough for most Southern Californians to check out Catalina, we were pleasantly surprised to find less-hyped reasons to visit. Like the architecture—a mishmash of Victorian and 1920s bungalows with vibrant Catalina tile popping up on storefronts, fountains and over doorways. And one of the most charming things about Catalina is the feeling of safety. Our rental beach house was left unlocked for us to find—with the keys inside. While cycling we were told to “just leave the bikes,” and they were always there when we came back. (Try doing that on the Santa Monica bike path!)

In keeping with the retro feel of the one-square-mile city of Avalon, telephones, in most hotel rooms, are rare. Good if you want to get away from it all, but a big detour if you're trying to plug your laptop into the information superhighway. But who wants to work when you can stroll through town, explore the ocean from above or below, observe the island's wildlife and unspoiled beauty (kept that way by the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy), fish and just kick back. Here's what we did.

Tours

The **Avalon Scenic Tour** is like a sampler plate—you get a little taste of everything. And even the kids will enjoy this 50-minute, nine-mile narrated tour aboard an open-air shuttle that lives up to its name. Tickets are \$6.50 for adults, \$3.50 for children.

An exciting excursion for youngsters—and many adults too—is the **Glass Bottom Boat**. The 40-minute tour flew by as we peered through the boat's large windows facing the undersea world. Can't time nature, so you never know exactly what you'll see, but halfway through the tour the skipper stops the boat to feed the fish for a guaranteed look at marine life. You'll see nocturnal creatures on the night tour. Daytime cost: \$6.50, adults, \$3.50, child. Nighttime: \$6.75 and \$4.

My colleague and I differ on whether you should bring the kids

on Catalina Island's longest excursion, the **Inland Motor Tour**. OK, at 3 hours 45 minutes, the tour is a little long for very young kids, but it does make three stops—the first has bathroom facilities, the last one, be advised, does not. All I can say is, Catalina's beautiful interior is the wildest place your kids will see this close to L.A. (we scored three buffalo sightings), and I'm glad my daughter had a chance to experience it, corny tram-driver jokes and all. (So there, Mimi!) Adults, \$24.50; kids, \$13.

The pièce de résistance of island architecture is the dome-shaped **Avalon Ballroom and Casino**, an art deco show palace built in 1929. The Casino Tour gives you a downstairs look at the theater and upstairs view of the ballroom, the world's largest circular dance floor. If your kids think the El Capitan in Hollywood is cool, they'll be humbled by the recently restored murals and silver-leaf ceiling in the theater, which gives the feeling of sitting beneath the stars. And leave those poker chips behind, “casino” is an Italian term for a building used for social meetings and public amusements (such as dancing). Cost: \$7.50, adults; \$3.75, children.

For more information on all island tours, call Discovery Tours, (310) 510-2500, or Catalina Adventure Tours, (310) 510-2888.

Activities

Sure you can take a cruise around the island, but for close-up fun, we rented a **pedal boat**. Roomy enough for two adults and 17-month-old Nikki on mom's lap (leaving me to do the pedalling!), we spent an hour in Catalina Harbor, enjoying the breeze and the view of the hills, and checking out some of the fancier boats anchored in the bay. We even spotted some dolphins just beyond the well-marked outer boundary. About \$6 an hour at Wet Spot Rentals, (310) 510-2229. Also at Joe's Rent-a-Boat, (310) 5100455. (Motor boats available, too.)

In order to see as much as possible during our short visit we rented **bikes** from Brown's Bikes; five-speeds are \$6 per hour (child seat optional), a bike with a child's trailer attached costs \$10, and a kid's bike is \$5. Strollers are also available at \$5 per day. Call (310) 510-0986.

We cycled to the **Wrigley Memorial and Botanical Gardens**, 1 3/4 miles inland, a tranquil native-plant garden with wonderful views down to the harbor. Entry is \$1.

Although it may not seem like much of a beach activity, our 4 and



Reeling in Catalina's bounty.

6 year olds loved the 18 holes we played at **Miniature Golf Gardens**. The imaginative, tree-shaded course is located right in the center of town in the Island Plaza. Cost: \$5 per person.

Want to try a **snorkeling or scuba** adventure? (It was a little chilly for us in May.) Call Catalina Diver Supply, (310) 510-0330, or Avalon Aquatics, (310) 510-9505.

Accommodations

If a beachfront, centrally located property is your goal, then you can't get much closer than the **Hotel Mac Rae**, where you can actually hit the sand (and shops) in less than a minute. Recently refurbished, the hotel has a few rooms with ocean views and a pretty, flower-filled courtyard. Free video rentals and continental breakfast. Call (800) 698-2266. Summer per night rates are \$110 to \$170 weekends, \$70 to \$150 weekdays.

Just a few steps to the beach, the clean, modern rooms of the **Pavilion Lodge** are set around a grassy courtyard that's perfect for playful kids. The convenient location makes it an easy (and stroller-friendly) walk to anywhere. Rooms are equipped with refrigerators and coffee makers; and complimentary coffee, tea, muffins and juice help you wake up gently. Midweek rates start at \$129; weekends \$158. Call (800) 633-4423.

While **La Paloma Cottages** doesn't bill itself as "secluded" (it prefers "the garden spot of Avalon"), secluded it is. Once there, you can congratulate yourself on finding one of the island's best deals. The family-run La Paloma gives you what you need—a clean and comfy place to rest that's a block or so from the beach. (If you're vacationing with toddlers, ask for one of the newer "Las Flores" rooms, which saves you from climbing a series of stairs.) Rates from \$70 to \$165 per night. (800) 310-1505.

If your family craves breathing room and your home cooking, consider a bedroom suite at the **Seaport Village Inn**. This home-away-from-home sports a separate bedroom and a fully equipped kitchen (including hot-air corn popper). The Von's supermarket is a five-minute

walk. Other amenities include shared BBQs, spa and sundeck. The summer rate is \$199 a night for one to four people; \$15 for each extra person. Smaller rooms start at \$109. For reservations, call (800) 222-8254. (A word of caution: climbing the hill to the hotel seemed like Mile 26 of a marathon to me. The view, however, is worth the effort.)

Can't beat the comfort of a **beach house**—especially when traveling with kids. (The blender came in handy when the editorial staff met at my house for margaritas and chips!) We felt right at home in our squeaky clean, two-bedroom, two-bath, Victorian-style rental, just a short block away—and an easy walk—to the beach. Summer rentals start at around \$200 a night; 10 percent mid-week discount. Call Hunt and Associates at (310) 510-2721.

The ocean-front location of the Mediterranean-style **Hotel Villa Portofino** means it's a short walk to the beach, shops and restaurants, but it's just off the busy main strip so it's quiet, too. The pastel-tone, family-size rooms (with coffee makers) start at \$100 through September; I recommend the ocean view rooms, \$180 to \$275 per night. Call (800) 34-OCEAN (62326).

We also stopped by **Hermit Gulch Campground**, and now I know where we're staying next visit. I remember camping as sleeping on damp, soggy ground—but this place has a microwave, hot showers and cabin tents with wooden floors (\$30 a night for 4 to 8 people). Or try a brightly painted teepee (\$35 to \$55). Stoves, sleeping bags, lanterns and ground pads also available for rent. Camping fees are \$7.50 per person, per night. Call (310) 510-TENT (8368).

Getting There

We were teased about taking "the slow boat" **Catalina Cruises**. But the 700-passenger vessel (with snack bar) was a smooth, just under two-hour ride. Choose from three decks to enjoy the ocean view. Half the fun of Catalina is getting there, so what's the hurry? Also, boat fares dropped (until September 1) to \$21 roundtrip



Avalon's accommodations range from utilitarian hotel rooms to quaint cottages, like this one.

for adults, \$19 for 2 to 11 year olds. Leaves from Long Beach. Call (800) CATALINA (228-2546).

Type A personalities—and those who prefer more luxury—might try **Catalina Express**. One hour to paradise. These smaller vessels offer airline-style seats inside or outdoor on-deck seating. Cocktail and snack bar. \$34.50 for adults, \$25.50 kids departing from San Pedro, \$1 more from Long Beach. Call (800) 9954386.

For more information and brochures, call the Catalina Island Chamber of Commerce and Visitors' Bureau, (310) 510-1520.

—Jack Bierman, David Jamieson, Vivien Santana Hughes, V. Ruth Entwistle, Lisa Hallett, Cliff Hodgins, Nancy Rand Riordan and Mimi A. Slawoff contributed to this story.

Two Harbours—The Wild Side

While the rest of the staff was playing in the relative hustle and bustle of Avalon, we were destined for **Two Harbors** on the "undomesticated" west end of the island.

After we disembarked the Catalina Express boat, *Cezanne*, the helpful young assistant from the **Banning House Lodge B & B**, gave us a 60-second tour: "There's the snack bar and **Doug's Harbor Reef**, the only restaurant in town, and the general store across the walkway. "By the time we took the 20 or so steps to the complimentary van, we had already walked out of town. Then we drove the quarter mile up to the Lodge, a turn-of-the-century bed and breakfast, and were presented with a spectacular sight: Under the bouganvillea-covered trellises was the blue sea dotted with small white vessels, a scene from the South of France. Our room was sparse yet quaint. (Rates: \$105 to \$180—I'd pay the extra for either room 7 or 8, which have large picture windows overlooking the

bay). Step outside and you can see at least three inviting hiking trails that explore the bays and hills of this island of adventure.

Catalina Safari Tours will help you discover hidden Catalina by kayak, foot, or van: we took the latter to **Little Harbour**, about 15 minutes away. We hiked over a promontory to a cove, explored tidepools and found a live crab, something I've never seen outside of a fish market or a marine museum. On the way back to Two Harbours, we passed the teepees and tents, similar to those in Avalon, an option for the more adventurous.

The next day we went to the **Dive Center** and rented kayaks, (reserve the two seater to take your child). We paddled out to the point, where a baby seal was sunning itself. Snorkeling by the reef and scuba diving were available also.

On the drive home, my 7 year old, Michael—who originally wanted to stay home playing video games—said, "Mom, I was wrong about Catalina being boring, I had a really great time!"

