

# A Visit to Old California

## Kayaking Catalina Island

by Joanne Schwartz

As you paddle along this rugged coastline, be sure to sing the old lyrics, "Twenty six miles across the sea, Catalina's the island for me, romance, romance ..." Stroke past the Art Deco Casino and imagine 6,200 dancers enjoying big band music in 1940. Listen to the sea lions bark from the rocks off the east end of the island and notice the extensive mining effort on the cliffs. Yes, the quarried rock has formed several breakwaters on the mainland. Catalina is certainly interesting enough to be a perfect destination for Southern California kayakers.

Catalina's coastline has two faces. The North side is generally quite calm, with wind peaking between 10am and noon, usually blowing from the North West at 10-15 knots. Plan to head West in the morning and East in the afternoon, whenever possible. The least winds are experienced between Avalon and Long Point, to the West. On much of the North side between Avalon and the Isthmus, Scout and church camps, as well as yacht club outposts, dot the shoreline. Avoid this area on holiday weekends when the protected anchorages are filled to capacity with sail boats. Lots of smaller coves have sandy beaches with beautiful canyon access and are available to kayak camping.

The Southern coast is much less developed, but there are fewer beaches for landing, the surf is larger during the summer, and the beaches are usually rocky. Little Harbor and Catalina Harbor offer protected landings, but you'll share space with lots of friendly sail boat folks. For paddlers who are comfortable with doing twenty-five miles in a day, paddle down-wind from Little Harbor around the East end to Avalon is very rewarding. Alternatively, a paddle from the Isthmus around the West end, back to the Isthmus can be exciting for stronger paddlers. The West end is often rough and subject to strong swells. With two exceptions on the Northern coast, there are no places to land. The treat for experienced paddlers is a playful rock garden on the Southern side of the West end, the first of several along the South coast.

Hiking and Snorkeling are two favorite activities for kayakers. The canyons behind most sandy beach coves offer fine hiking, often with steep climbs. Views of the coastline from hilltop lookouts are picture perfect. You'll see the erosion from wild boar diggings under tree roots and will often be rewarded by watching native quail, bison and perhaps the friendly, tiny Channel Island fox. Eight plants grow only on Catalina, several of which are easy to find if you know what to look for. East of Avalon the coast is quite rocky and at the tip of the island sea lions often hang out on offshore rocks. The tip is usually protected from swells and wind, but the return to Avalon can take three times the time and effort as the Eastward, downwind trip. Exploring tide pools at low tides is also fascinating, with little octopus and crabs scurrying for cover under the rocks.

Snorkeling from a kayak (both open top and touring kayaks with cockpits are fine) or the beach is one of Catalina's finest experiences. The kelp beds are particularly dense at several points along the North shore, especially in protected coves near rocky cliffs. In addition to lots of kelp fish and bright orange Garibaldi, you're likely to find rays, skates and leopard sharks. This underwater wonder world is cold, except in the late summer, and requires paddlers to wear a wet suit to enjoy it fully.

Perhaps the most common question I hear about kayaking on Catalina is, "Can you paddle over to Catalina?" For my birthday one July, Doug and I left San Pedro early one morning, paddled over, paddled around the 54 mile coastline, then paddled back. This took us four days, with a bit of time available for hiking and snorkeling at the end of each day. Our only difficulty was landing through the four foot summer surf dumping on the backside. Ordinarily that wouldn't cause a problem for paddlers who love to surf, but very steep beaches covered with two- to four-inch round-as-ball-bearing rocks proved a major challenge. I don't care much for open ocean crossings, with so little to see, but exploring every inch of Catalina's coast was an extraordinary way to celebrate a birthday.

### Suggested Trips for Beginners on Their Own

Those with little experience and training will be well rewarded and most comfortable with one of these self-guided trips: Paddle West from Avalon to anywhere before Long point and back. Paddle West from Two Harbors at the Isthmus to Arrow Point and back or on to Parson's Landing, for an overnight camp, and back the next day, if everyone in your party is in good shape and has lots of energy. Or paddle East from Two Harbors for an hour or two, have lunch and paddle back. Make sure you have plenty of food, water, sun protection and a dry change of clothing in a dry bag with you in your kayaks for everyone in your group. Be dressed to stay warm in case of capsize and swim in the water. If you go without a guide, get enough instruction first to know basic paddling techniques and get some in-water practice for getting on and off your boat in the water, in case you capsize. Be conservative in your miles so you'll have the energy to return when the winds come up at mid day.

### Camping

The Santa Catalina Island Conservancy owns most of the island and is opening more beaches each year to kayakers and other boaters. Camping reservations are a must and can be arranged through the Conservancy. Several beaches will accommodate multiple parties, so inquire whether you'll have the beach to yourself, if that matters.

### Guided Trips

Several outfitters offer guided trips along the shores of Catalina. Some of these trips are appropriate for first time paddlers, while others require basic or advanced skills. Be sure to inquire about the orientation of the trip (to cover a specific distance, to learn about the wildlife and marine life, to focus on skills, or just a party-paddle), the amount of energy required (2-4 miles is very easy, 5-8 miles requires active effort and a bit of a push, 9-15 miles requires skill, persistence and some determination, but is very possible). Also ask about the experience and qualifications of the professional guides and the maximum number of guests for each guide.

### Kayak Rentals

Kayaks are available for rent, both at Avalon and at the Isthmus. Check with the Visitors Bureau for current offerings.

### Transportation

To reach Catalina, most paddlers take the ferries from San Pedro, Long Beach, Newport or San Diego County. Kayakers who would like to use their own kayaks can ship them on the Catalina Freight Line, regularly. The Freight Line charges only about \$20 round trip, but logistics are time consuming.

### Ferries

- Catalina Express 800-995-4386 or 310-519-1212, from Long Beach or San Pedro
- Catalina Passenger Service 949-673-5245, from Newport Beach
- Catalina Freight Line 310-510-0248, from Wilmington

### Information Resources

- Catalina Island Conservancy 310-510-1421
- Chamber of Commerce 310-510-1520
- Visitor's Information Center 310-510-2500

***We would like to hear from you...***

Submit your kayaking tales to [info@southwindkayaks.com](mailto:info@southwindkayaks.com), with "Story for Website Kayak Library" in the subject line!

[Back to the Kayak Library](#)

[Back Home](#)

**Southwind Kayak Center**

17855 Sky Park Circle #A, Irvine, California 92614  
949-261-0200 or 800-SOUTHWIND (800-768-8494)

<http://www.southwindkayaks.com>

[info@southwindkayaks.com](mailto:info@southwindkayaks.com)