

The Passage to Anacapa, Hardship or Pleasure?

by Joanne Schwartz

When I began to paddle, I never dreamed I could, or would ever want to make a crossing to the Channel Islands. Leave that to the strong and tough paddlers, the competitive types. I would be content with day trips down our gentle coastline, poking into coves and watching sea lions bask on guano covered rocks. I dreamed of paddling in coastal estuaries and marshes, marveling at the stealth of herons fishing and listening to the muffled wings of hundreds of shore birds passing overhead. Catalina, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, and the others were just islands sitting far out to sea, perfect backdrops for the sun to retreat behind at the end of each day.

The call of the islands has since joined the call of the sea. In each of the four seasons of the year, in October, early January, late March, and July, that call has been strong enough to compel me to Anacapa. This island is the closest to the mainland, only about 11 miles from Channel Islands Harbor. The National Park Service offers camping permits so paddlers need only make a one-way crossing each day. We load our kayak for the weekend at dawn on a clear Saturday morning and we're atop Anacapa for lunch after a 3-4 hour crossing. The lighthouse and foghorn perched on the bluffs at the East end of the island focus our attention during the last several miles, growing larger and louder stroke by stroke. After we haul our sea kayaks onto the 20 ft. high dock and climb the 152 stairs to the bluffs, the island spreads its welcome mat and becomes a most hospitable retreat.

If the seas are calm and the winds quiet, the passage is quite gentle. I have used this condition to perfect my paddling technique, to share long stories with paddling partners, and compose poetry spoken only to the sea. If dense fog settles down on the ocean's surface, a deck-mounted compass and knowledge of appropriate heading, with compensation for currents, swells, and paddling speed become critical. Faced with a decision to cross the heavy shipping lanes and thus blindly share the sea with 1000 ft. monsters traveling at 25 knots, we have easily concluded that waiting for the fog to lift was prudent, postponing our return on occasion. But if the seas kick up, white caps slapping our boats and bodies as each giant swell passes, the crossing becomes truly challenging. We came back one Sunday in 8-10 ft. swells with a 20 knot quartering wind, enough to slow our passage to over five hours. That Santa Barbara Channel can become wild in short order. Weather radios, sound interpretation of the forecast, and realistic evaluation of all paddlers' abilities are essential ingredients when considering an Anacapa passage.

What is the lure of Anacapa? It is a highly eroded set of three somewhat connected volcanic islets totaling a mere 700 acres and spanning 4.5 miles. Circumnavigating or making figure eights between the segments of Anacapa is an invigorating after lunch pastime, allowing close-up views of eroded rocky crags, dumping surf on sea worn boulders, and hundreds of bellowing and frolicking sea lions. The pinnipeds, especially seals, love to follow our boats, staying three or four yards behind and diving whenever we turn to look into their brown eyes. And perhaps best of all are the cavernous sea caves and one long, narrow tunnel which always seems to face into the approaching swells. With finesse, this tunnel is often passable and sometimes surfable. At low tide it affords glimpses of giant abalone along the walls, if you have the concentration to look aside as you shoot through to the cove on other side. As always, paddlers must study and tune into the dynamics of such a tunnel and caves before entering, since the consequences of capsize in this rock garden could spoil your whole day. Of course there are the additional attractions of Anacapa which sailors and other tourists always enjoy: the 80 ft. towering Arch Rock on the East end, the bizarre, thick stalked giant *Coreopsis* which sprouts brilliant yellow flowers in the spring and stands like naked elephant legs the rest of the year, and the cormorants which nest on tiny ledges on the vertical cliffs. Anacapa is certainly pure California beauty, now a jewel of the National Park system.

But what changed my perspective on attempting to reach those distant islands? I learned proper paddling technique, using the major latissimus muscles of my back and my abdominal muscles instead of merely my biceps to get maximum power from each stroke. I increased my endurance and strength on many trips between coastal harbors and beaches so that 30 mile days have become very doable. I learned to control the movement of my wrists to avoid tendonitis and other related overuse injuries. I became comfortable maneuvering my boat in breaking waves by surfing at San Onofre and other nearby breaks. And I learned safety techniques by practicing bracing strokes and rescues in

storm-driven winter seas, fully insulated in my diving-weight wet suit and hood. And, mostly, I came to feel at home with the sea, the marine weather, my craft, and the steady, powerful motion of off-shore paddling. Like most everything, the line between hardship and pleasure is thin ... and is all a matter of perspective. It's worth the effort to stay on the pleasure side.

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