

San Miguel Island

by Peter M. Praed

There were two "firsts" achieved on this trip. It was the first time I had been sea sick, and it was the first kayak trip that I got blisters on my feet instead of my hands. But first, a brief description and history of San Miguel. It is the most northwesterly of the Channel Islands and is in a direct line to the ocean swells and winds that continually sweep down the Pacific coast. Point Conception offers some shelter for all the other islands, but San Miguel hangs out there, exposed to the elements. The island is about 8 miles long by 4 miles wide; basically a long 500 foot high plateau with one rounded hill at an elevation of 831 feet. Being constantly swept by winds averaging 20 knots, all vegetation is low to the ground. Other than a willow tree that is hidden in a canyon, nothing projects much higher than about 4 foot. The animal population consists of mice and a large population of island foxes – similar to the ones on Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz. Bird population appeared to be song sparrows and red tailed hawks. Of course, there are the usual sea birds on the perimeter of the island. Large numbers of pinnipeds make it their home, some permanently, others to haul out and breed on its isolated, rugged shoreline.

At one time it was the home of woolly mammoths, and giant rats, but these had gone by the time the Chumash Indians appeared on the scene approximately 10,000 years ago. In 1543, the Spaniard, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo wintered on the island and died at Cuyler Harbor the same year. Actually he wasn't a Spaniard, but a Portuguese navigator named Joao Rodrigues Cabrilho – but the Spanish didn't want to admit that it was not one of their guys who discovered California, so they changed the spelling of his name and altered history! After a few years, the Chumash were liberated by the Spaniards and resettled on the mainland. Starting in the 1850's the island was used as a cattle ranch, and then a sheep ranch. The last permanent inhabitants were the Lester family. Herbert Lester who was known as the "King of San Miguel" committed suicide in 1942 and the rest of the family left shortly after. Wise decision to leave, as the Navy started using the island as a shelling and bombing range until the mid 50's.

Now this is where the story really begins. Six Southwind paddlers and Doug met at the Island Packers dock early Friday morning. I had been monitoring the National Weather Service marine forecast for the previous two months, and in that time had only heard the small craft advisory lifted three times, unfortunately, it was in force for this weekend. The kayaks and gear were loaded on board the Jeffrey Arvid and we headed out for the islands. The captain made a wise decision to go around the south side of Santa Cruz that allowed us to have relatively calm seas for part of the trip. However, once the ship rounded West Point, we ran into the 8 to 10 foot swell, 30 knot winds and 3 to 4 foot wind waves that were in the forecast. We unloaded several people on Santa Rosa, and then headed out through increasing weather to San Miguel. I believe that most people, except me, had taken some motion sickness medication. I regretted that I had not done the same, as my head and stomach soon felt the effects of the rolling, pitching, lurching vessel. I found out later that even those who had taken medication still succumbed to the conditions. We reached Cuyler Harbor just after noon, and I have never seen seven people so glad to get into kayaks and paddle, or actually let the wind sweep us to the sand beach.

We relaxed on to beach, had lunch, then proceeded to lug out gear 1.5 miles up a steep, narrow canyon trail to the campsite. The campsite was located on a windswept plateau that had 9 wooden windbreaks set up to afford some shelter from the constant wind. We each selected our site, got the tents up, unpacked our gear and relaxed in our flapping tents. In spite of the wind noise, we all got to sleep about 9 o'clock, hoping that Saturday would be a little calmer. Saturday dawned about the same as Friday, winds maybe down a little, but whitecaps were still very visible in the harbor. After a brief discussion, our genial Park Ranger, Ian Williams offered to lead a hike to Point Bennett with a stop the caliche forest. Point Bennett is the major area for the elephant seals, sea lions and fur seals, reaching populations in excess of 100,000 in breeding season. Ian set off at a blistering (good choice of word) pace – there were a couple of gung ho hikers amongst us, but the rest were more adept at paddling than hiking. We stopped at the caliche forest – one of the few areas in the world where there are mineral sand castings of petrified trees. I found it a bit disappointing, more a collection of 2 foot caliche stumps than trees. Onward to Point Bennett where we enjoyed our lunch at the N.O.A.A. research station building that provided welcome shelter from the constant wind. We all scrambled down to the beach to view the seals and sea lions. Ian set up a spotting telescope and answered our many questions. After climbing back to the research station it dawned on me that it was a long hike back – about 8 miles.

The gung ho group set off with Doug, while the rest of us started to amble back towards camp. Ian remained at the research station to check up on some things, but I think it was more to check that the slow group was able to make it back to camp. About 6 o'clock we reached camp where I collapsed in my tent, nursed my blistered feet, tuned my Walkman to KDP Santa Barbara and listened to Prokofievs Classical Symphony. That evening we had our traditional pot-luck dinner and all "porked" out on the excess of food that is normal for that event.

Sunday dawned about the same as Saturday. The winds might have decreased by a couple of knots, but nothing too noticeable. After breakfast we all headed to the beach to check the possibility of either kayaking, or hiking. After a brief review, half the group decided to paddle, the other half to explore the tide pools and then accompany Ian Williams on another hike, this time to Harris Point – the most northerly and the stormiest part of the island. That evening we joined Ian at the Ranger station, where he put on a slide show about the history of the island. As we headed back to camp, the wind appeared to have picked back up, but at least the sky was clear.

We awoke Monday to greatly decreased winds, so hurriedly had breakfast, packed up camp, and headed down the canyon to the beach. The wind was still gusting between 15 to 20 knots, but at least it wasn't the constant force that had existed for the previous days. We launched about 9 o'clock and paddle into the wind, passing by the fishing boat Suzie that had been washed up on the beach during one of the earlier storms. We headed for Harris Point and landed for lunch in a sheltered cove just beyond Hare Rock. It was the only beach that wasn't full of seals and sea lions. After lunch we continued towards Harris Point, but when we rounded Nifty Rock, we ran into stronger headwinds and the heavy swell that we had previously been sheltered from. We decided it was time to head back to meet the Island Packers ship that was now due at 1:30. With the wind behind us, and a following sea, we made it back in about half an hour. Perfect timing, as the Jeffrey Arvid was just rounding Prince Island as we landed. Our gear was loaded on their skiff as we paddled out and boarded the ship ready for the trip home. A smooth trip even though the winds had picked up. A following sea gave the ship a constant, but comfortably steady roll. I personally felt very satisfied with the weekend. Ever since I kayaked to Anacapa several years earlier, I had always wanted to visit the other three islands in the chain – San Miguel was the final one.

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