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# A Voyage to the Island of Santa Rosa

by Peter M. Praed

Santa Rosa is the second largest island in the Channel Island group that is off the California coast by Santa Barbara, and had been inhabited since long before the Spanish era. Several archeological sites have been mapped and are currently being researched showing evidence of man's presence as far back as 10,000 years. Digs under way have revealed fossil remains of prehistoric woolly mammoths and giant rats. Following early man, the Chumash Indians had well-established villages and traded up and down the west coast using their plank boats called tomols. They remained as well organized communities until the arrival of the Spaniards who decided to convert them and integrate them into the mission system. The island has been a ranching operation since Spanish times; first cattle, then sheep who grazed much of the native vegetation into near extinction, and then back to cattle with the Vail and Vickers Company. They bought it in 1902, and are now wrapping up their operation ready for the final take over by the National Park Service. Santa Rosa has been likened to the Galapagos, as there are several animals and plant species that are endemic to the island; among them, the small island fox (which we saw several times) and the spotted skunk (which luckily we didn't see). The trip was originally planned as having a base camp and paddling out to explore from there each day. Luckily we were able to get permission to circumnavigate the island, and camp at different locations after each day's paddle.

Our trip started with a 6 a.m. gathering of twelve paddlers, including Doug Schwartz and Joanne Turner, owners of Southwind, at the Island Packers dock in Ventura Harbor. The motor vessel Jeffrey Arvid took about an hour to load all our gear and kayaks. At 7 a.m. we headed out for Santa Rosa with the weather overcast, windy, and with a moderate ocean swell from the northwest. The trip took just over three hours, and by the time we arrived at the northeast anchorage of Bechers Bay I was feeling close to being seasick, and looking around me, several others looked how I felt. We tied up to the pier, unloaded all the kayaks first and then formed a chain line and passed the gear from the cargo hold to half way down the pier. The next task was to get the kayaks from the pier to the beach, about 30 ft below. Four of us went down to the beach, and the rest lowered the kayaks down with the aid of ropes and pulleys. In the meantime, all our gear was loaded on a truck and taken to a footpath near the official campground. Our first paddle of the weekend was about 1 mile to a small beach at the base of the canyon that led to the camp side. After landing and pulling the kayaks above high tide mark, we proceeded up the footpath to collect our gear and then continue a quarter mile over a steep rise to the canyon campground. There were seven two sided structures with slat roofs for protection from the strong winds that constantly sweep across the island. We had a brief talk from the head park ranger regarding where we could hike, and a few other rules and regulations that he had to cover. Several of us then hiked about 2 miles west of the campsite to a beautiful stand of Torrey pines. Other than those trees north of San Diego, these are the only others in existence, and in good health, unlike the San Diego stand, which are likely to disappear within the next few years. The trees covered a large area and were indeed in excellent condition. We spent over an hour exploring, collecting the huge fir cones and shaking out the pine nuts. While we were by the trees we saw three of the small foxes that are indigenous to the island. We returned to camp, and by nine that evening were all asleep, ready for the long paddle the following day.

Saturday dawned cloudy and extremely windy, approximately 10 knots, with a forecast of the possibility of increasing to 25. The decision was made to modify our plans, and start around the island in a clockwise direction instead of the planned anti clockwise direction. It took about an hour to pack all our gear in the kayaks and launch. It was soon obvious that a wise choice had been made, as the strong wind and current sent us swiftly westward towards Skunk Point. Once we rounded the point and headed south, the wind calmed a little and we received some respite from the strong currents. The coastline was very flat with sand dunes and low grasslands stretching about four miles inland before the hills rose up. We landed at a small bay about two miles from East Point on a wide, soft beach alongside a marshland. After a rest and lunch we went on a tour with the Park Service people. They gave us a general description of the area, pointing out interesting plants and talking about the migratory birds that visit at various seasons. We took trash bags with us, and collected items that had washed up into the marshlands during the winter storms. These items ranged from remains of fishing nets, to the usual plastic bottles. Metal items and wood were left to rust and decay. We set off after lunch, paddling around East Point and headed southwest with the anticipation that we would have to deal with a southeast current and gusty winds blowing down the canyons. What a pleasant surprise, the current was heading west, and the anticipated winds turned into gentle zephyrs, pushing us the same directions as the current, towards our

destination. We headed past Ford Point and explored a wide arch that was a delight to paddle through, but kept a wary eye out for any large swells that could push us against the back wall. It was easy to imagine what this area must be like normally with large swells and winds making it impossible to venture in. We passed Wreck Canyon, Jolla Vieja Canyon, then headed towards Johnson's Lee and the remnants of an Air Force radar installation that in its time had been complete with a movie house and bowling alley! We landed well, no one having any spills, or getting anything wet other than feet. This beach was an idyllic spot, with space to pull the kayaks above high tide mark and put our tents along side them. After a long day's paddle – about 15 miles – we were soon relaxing inside our tents and preparing the evening pot luck dinner. Like other trips, this event was resplendent with food and drink of every imaginable variety. By 8:30 everyone was "porked out" and ready for a good night's sleep. The sound of the surf, no more than 40 ft. away, quickly lulled everyone off to sleep.

The following morning was calm, and totally overcast. Was yesterday's weather a fluke, and were we now going to experience the usual cloudy, overcast conditions that this island was well known for? With Doug's guidance, everyone launched easily through the surf; within an hour the sun had started to disperse the cloud cover, and we were blessed with sunny warm weather; the currents still gently pushing us in our westerly direction. We paddled past the wreck of the freighter S.S. Chicksaw, once a proud ship, and now after less than thirty years, a rusting hulk, some of it even tossed up on the beach. A grim reminder of what destructive power the ocean can produce. As we neared an outcrop of rocks about a mile east of Cluster Point, the currents produced some choppy conditions, nothing of any consequence, but a variation from the smooth ocean we were getting used to. Doug and Joanne made the decision to explore the beach at Cluster Point, and it was selected as the campsite for that evening. Again, it was a superb camping site, and once we had set the tents up, the wind died down and it turned into a warm evening.

Following a brief rest, we all set off with the Park Rangers to clean up a section of beach just west of Stony Point as part of an annual, nationwide survey of human trash on beaches. Everything from the water's edge, up to the high tide mark was collected and catalogued. The Rangers divided everything into various groups and checked the items off on their data sheets. Most items fitted in to obvious categories, like plastic, glass, nets and rope, etc. but a couple of items like the tail section of a Northrup drone target plane and a doll's arm were exceptions. Once all the listing was done, everything was put back into bags and we headed inland to place them on the road that led to "Camp Snoopy". This was the name given to the area where the archaeologists stayed when working on their digs for the woolly mammoths, giant rats and other interesting prehistoric creatures. Our next excursion was east of the campsite to explore tide pools, which with the help and wisdom of the botanists and zoologists amongst us, proved to be an educational adventure. Joanne found a strange ten inch high mushroom which only grows in arid areas and Doug found an old weight stone for a stone hammer. After the Park staff and paddlers examined these, we left them behind. Such strange treasures!

That evening several of us had brief encounters with the island foxes; small cat sized creatures that haven't had much experience with humans to be too scared. I personally did not see any until in the middle of the night when I was disturbed by rustling sounds outside my tent. On investigation I saw one of them peeking in at me. About an hour later a pair of them were looking into the tent, both curious as to what I was. Another member of the group who slept in the open, found fox prints around his head when he awoke the following morning.

Monday's weather started the same as the previous two days – calm, but totally cloudy. This was a lazy morning, and everyone seemed to take their time packing. We only had a half day's paddle back to Johnson's Lee where we were to rendezvous with the Island Packers ship for the trip back to Ventura Harbor. Once packed, we launched by sliding down a steep sand slope. Again, everyone had a perfect launch – the whole trip hadn't seen one spill, either on landing or launching. We headed into the current and wind, but both were gentle, such unusual conditions for this island. The sun broke through about 10:30 and once again it was a perfect paddling day. We had our lunch break at the S.S. Chicksaw. This time the ocean was even calmer, so we were able to get closer and see parts of the engine room. About 1:15 we rounded South Point and arrived at Johnson's Lee just as the Island Packers ship appeared to meet us. We pulled alongside, removed our hatch covers, and unloaded our gear into the skiff then boarded the ship. The ocean was as smooth as glass. Had the conditions been windy and choppy it could have been a very unpleasant task getting our gear, kayaks and selves aboard. What a perfect end to a perfect long weekend. We all felt tired, looking forward to our docking around 6 p.m. in Ventura. Unfortunately, half way back, the engines had a fuel injection problem, and for about 30 minutes we were stopped, with the crew frantically working on restarting them. They managed to get one fired up, but the other just wasn't going to make it. We cruised back at half speed and eventually arrived at the harbor around 7:20. Unpacking the gear and trying to sort it out in the dark was not the easiest task, but the weekend had been so

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incredible that even this minor inconvenience was easy to take. Having kayaked Anacapa, Santa Cruz, and now Santa Rosa, I am looking forward to a visit to the fourth island in the chain -- San Miguel. Maybe next year?

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**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)