Sailing

THE BEAUTY OF SAIL

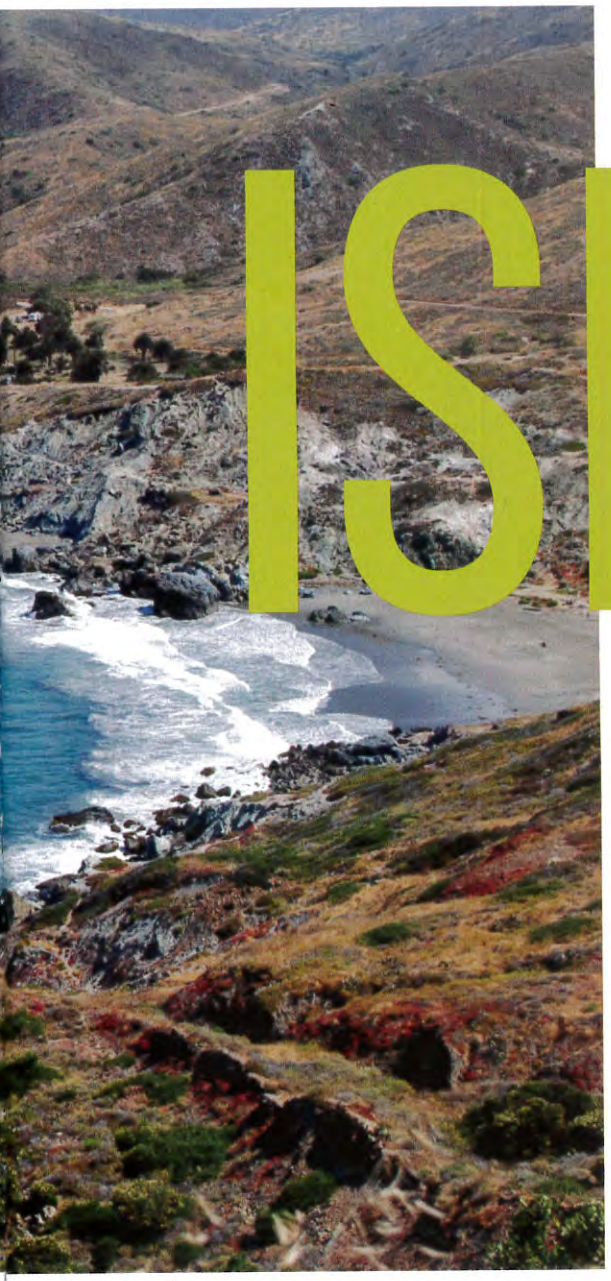
Best SAILING PHOTOS of the year

$6.99US/CAN

12>

0 71896 47213 4

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2019



ISLAND

Sailing to romance

Catalina Island is a short hop from Southern California, making it the perfect destination for a weekend getaway

Story and photography by Betsy Senescu

We were barely 20 minutes out of the harbor when the engine conked out. It was early in the day and the whisper of wind meant a motorsail to Santa Catalina Island was unavoidable, but the Yanmar would have none of it. We limped back to the dock, tied up and began the forensics.

Wedged in the entrails of the engine compartment, I wielded the flashlight while my husband attacked the engine. We examined this and that, until we diagnosed and repaired a clogged diesel intake. All the while, I marveled at how my sweetheart didn't cuss or throw things. He reveled in my steady flashlight-wielding abilities and how I didn't abandon him in the dark stinky bowels of the boat. Proving that, even if things don't go exactly as planned, a sail a deux' can prove a bonding experience.

Problem solved, we set off again; now with a breeze and a recharged admiration for each other.

Our destination was Catalina Island, a favorite haven for Southern Californians but familiar to folks worldwide thanks to a 1958 music hit that croons, 'Twenty-six miles across the sea, Santa Catalina is a-waitin' for me; Santa Catalina, the island of romance …'

A leisurely 37 nautical miles from our home port of Dana Point, California, the sail to Catalina was aboard our Antrim Class 40 *Yippee Kai Yay*. Designed for offshore racing, she rates durability and speed over comfort. She's hardly the Love Boat, but we have modest amenities and all the necessities: a Forespar burner to boil water, a small fridge; a head, positioned immodestly forward of the mast, with a holding tank the size of a thimble.

It was exactly for this reason that we headed ashore at our first destination. Avalon Harbor, on Catalina's east end, is a strict no-discharge zone. Upon arrival you're assigned a mooring and a dye tablet is placed in your head. If you pump overboard the water and your hull turn a telltale lime green. If found guilty, you're fined and expelled.

Cupped in a steep hillside, the tiny city of Avalon occupies one square mile of just 10 square miles of developed land on the island. The other 65-or-so square miles remain uninhabited and wild; strewn with hiking trails and about 120 bison. While the city is small in stature, it's large in history. A century ago William Wrigley Jr. of the Wrigley chewing gum family fell in love with the island and essentially purchased it. He bought the golf course and opened a spring training camp for his Chicago Cubs; building a baseball field comparable to Wrigley Field's dimensions, where the Cubs trained for 30 years. In 1972 the Wrigley family established the Catalina Island Conservancy to protect the island. While a small percentage of the island is still held by Wrigley's heirs in the form of the Catalina Island Company, the Conservancy owns the majority of the island.

That doesn't mean there hasn't been progress, which we realized strolling to Descanso Beach with a whizzing sound of a zipline overhead. The Catalina Island Company has kept abreast of the times, introducing properties and activities on land, sea and air. From the 300-foot-high zipline course, to Jeep safaris into the interior, to glass-bottom boat tours, there are plenty of activities to make Catalina a four-season destination.

Descanso Beach Club is a stylish resort tucked between steep cliffs and footed by a sandy beach where you can stroll with drink in hand, or swim to your mooring from the shore. We enjoyed snacks and cocktails beneath massive market umbrellas and watched a mammoth cruise ship weigh anchor and disappear for points south. Where cruise ships abound now, there were once steamships delivering merrymakers to Avalon, heady and high after drinking and dancing on the passage from Los Angeles. Sexy Chris-Craft shoreboats would zip them to the pier where mariachis, troubadours and townspeople would greet them. Millions of visitors traveled to Catalina this way, and with its proximity to Hollywood it became the playground of the stars. More than 500 movies and television shows have been produced on the island over the years, and remnants of films such as the palm trees from Mutiny on the Bounty and bison from The Vanishing American evoke those glory days.

We learned all this at the new Catalina Island Museum—a sophisticated 18,000-square-foot structure in the heart of Avalon.

The author and her husband head to Catalina Island from their home port in Dana Point, above. The couple race their Antrim-designed Class 40 *Yippee Kai Yay* off Southern California, above left. A hike reveals the vista of Little Harbor, a beach and small-boat anchorage on the windward side of the island, previous page.

This world-class museum features contemporary indoor-outdoor displays, programs in the 100-seat amphitheater and rooftop gazebo, along with engaging exhibits that convey the fascinating history of the island. Another historic must on our sightseeing tour was the Casino, a Catalina landmark since its construction in 1929. More than 11 stories high, its distinctive circular Moorish Art Deco design commands Avalon Harbor, and can be seen well out to sea.

The Casino has never been a gambling hall. Instead, it was the first theater built specifically to show talking movies. Its perfect acoustics provided a model for New York's Radio City Music Hall, and the original 1,240-pipe organ, plus frescos, gold leaf and other decor remain intact. Atop the theater is a stunning ballroom, one of the leading dance halls of the Golden Age of Swing where Benny Goodman, Jimmy Dorsey and the like would perform while guests cut a rug on the 15,000-square-foot expanse of glossy hardwood.

That night we enjoyed dinner at the Avalon Grille, owned by yet more Wrigleys and family, the Rusacks; so we selected the exceptional Rusack Vineyards Pinot Noir from the wine list. The island's El Rancho Escondido was previously an Arabian horse breeding facility but now chardonnay, pinot noir and zinfandel vines blanket the slopes where horses once loped. After an excellent dinner and moonlit promenade along Crescent Avenue, we retired to a comfortable night at the stylish Pavilion Hotel.

Pulling up anchor the next morning we headed northwest along the rugged coast. Twenty-two miles long and 8 miles at its widest point, it narrows to just a half-mile at the Isthmus. Formed by plate tectonics and volcanic activity, the shoreline is ragged, providing lots of nooks and crannies for anchorages, however its precipices descend deep into the ocean. The bonus is spectacular sea life, however anchoring can be dicey unless you have a lot of chain.

Luckily Catalina has more than 1,000 moorings, most of them along the eastern side of the island due to the prevailing westerly breeze. Traveling up the coast we passed many at Moonstone, White's Landing, Hen Rock and Buttonshell, plus several tiny anchorages. Because the island lies at a northwest to southeast slant, locations are referred to as being at the East End (Avalon) or West End (from Two Harbors to the western tip). Two Harbors is so named because of Cat Harbor on one side and Isthmus Cove on the other, which was our destination and we made fat tacks up

the coast, enjoying the breeze, until the desire for Buffalo Milk overtook us.

Nobody is brave enough to wrestle a bison and milk it. A Buffalo Milk is a mixed drink created more than 40 years ago by a bartender at the Harbor Reef bar and restaurant. This frothy, sweet, yet potent cocktail is so iconic, if you ask someone if they'd like a Buffalo Milk, it is akin to an invitation to Two Harbors.

Few communities could be as diverse as Avalon and Two Harbors. Whereas Avalon is charming and refined with fine dining and museums, Two Harbors is a flashback to the wild west. Dirt roads and rough-hewn buildings are cut into the primitive nip of terra firma, where visitors launch into adventure. You can mountain bike, hike, kayak, paddleboard, scuba and snorkel. Whatever gear you don't have onboard is available for rent for private or guided excursions. There's a tiny market ashore for basics and ice,

Isthmus Cove at Two Harbors, is a popular anchorage. Renting a kayak is a great way to explore the area, above, before plopping beneath a palapa at Harbor Sands for lunch, left.

plus heads and showers (bring your quarters). Next door the open-air Harbor Reef eatery switches on the live music at night, for a rompin' stompin' good time.

For a more upscale retreat, Harbor Sands offers a Nikki Beach-style vibe with cozy, furnished palapas nestled atop powdery white sand. After stretching our legs on a hike to Lion Head point, I lounged like Cleopatra on a cushioned chaise while servers brought Yellowtail tacos and fried calamari: delicacies we can only dream of aboard *Yippee Kai Yay*, where boiled water and Top Ramen are typical race boat fare. Gin-colored water lapped beyond the swaying palm trees and for a moment, we felt thousands (not dozens) of miles from home.

Visitors flock to Descanso Beach Resort.

There are hundreds more moorings up the coast at Cherry Cove, Fourth of July, Howland's Landing and Emerald Bay, so after soaking up the fun (and food) at Two Harbors, we took a quick jaunt to Howland's Landing. Like several mainland yacht clubs, Los Angeles Yacht Club has a private facility on Catalina where members can reserve a mooring and enjoy the tucked-away beach-side setting. Howland's is rustic for sure, but we were more than content with the barbecue pit, picnic table, shower and head. Thankfully there was a club member willing to shuttle us ashore in their dinghy, although in the past I've swum to the beach to borrow one of the club's loaner kayaks.

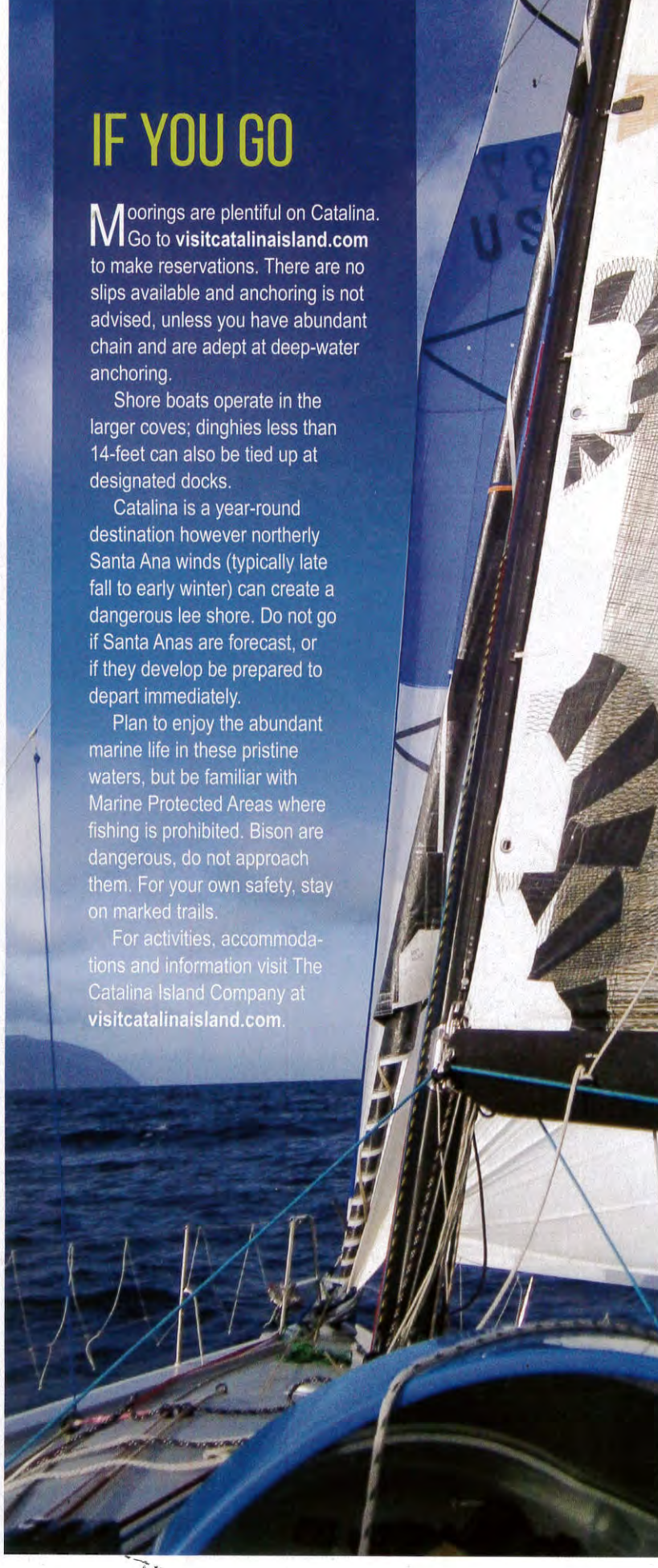
Heading home, we chose to continue circumnavigating the island, following a familiar race track around the west end and south. Beating into the westerly can be exciting, but it is made palatable by water ballast tanks in our Class 40. Then we ran south past Cat Harbor, a long, skinny, south-facing inlet that offers the only moorings and protected anchorage on the back side of Catalina. We had also decided to forgo Little Harbor, a gorgeous compact anchorage because it is a bit too exposed and possibly shallow for our race boat. Gliding past China Point along the barren windward side of the island, daylight began to dwindle, taking with it the breeze. We rounded Church Rock, turned on the engine and pointed toward home.

IF YOU GO

Moorings are plentiful on Catalina. Go to **visitcatalinaisland.com** to make reservations. There are no slips available and anchoring is not advised, unless you have abundant chain and are adept at deep-water anchoring.

Shore boats operate in the larger coves; dinghies less than 14-feet can also be tied up at designated docks.

Catalina is a year-round destination however northerly Santa Ana winds (typically late fall to early winter) can create a dangerous lee shore. Do not go if Santa Anas are forecast, or if they develop be prepared to depart immediately.

Plan to enjoy the abundant marine life in these pristine waters, but be familiar with Marine Protected Areas where fishing is prohibited. Bison are dangerous, do not approach them. For your own safety, stay on marked trails.

For activities, accommodations and information visit The Catalina Island Company at **visitcatalinaisland.com**.