Catalina Island's Airport in the Sky

POCONOS Pennsylvania Mountain Adventure
Catalina Island
California’s Island Playground

by Cristina V. Worthy
aerial photos by George A. Kounis

The most popular $100 hamburger stop for Southern California pilots is probably the Airport in the Sky on Santa Catalina Island. But most pilots simply leave after lunch and miss out on unique experiences available year-round. It’s an easy shuttle ride down from the airport to the town of Avalon, set into a cove on the island’s southeast corner. You can relive the swinging Big Band Era as you dance and dine at a black-tie ball, see colorful fish in a pristine kelp habitat via scuba, kayak, or submersible, or stroll the quaint streets. The famous Casino dominates the boardwalk; there you can take a historic tour, catch a movie, or enjoy a concert. Most of the island is undeveloped and looks as it has for thousands of years, especially due to the restoration efforts of the Catalina Island Conservancy. Backpackers or even casual walkers can enjoy a peaceful natural setting just 26 miles away from bustling Los Angeles.

Flying There
The shortest overwater distance to Catalina is 18 nmi from San Pedro, southeast of Torrance Airport (TGA). It’s best to cross the channel as high as possible; from an altitude of 7,500 ft, a Cessna 172 can glide for nearly 9 nmi if an engine fails, nearly assuring that you can get to one shore or the other. It’s a good idea to bring life jackets too (they’re required on flights for hire).
Maine Bill Cox and Don Hauk fly a Columbia 400 over Catalina Island near the lighthouse.
Inset: Wild bison roam free over the landscape.
The airport is atop a mountain in the center of the island and is often clear of clouds even when low-hanging fog obscures mainland or island coastlines. Call the ASOS before canceling a flight due to weather; you may be pleasantly surprised, (310) 510-5641. Although the LAX Class B flight between Catalina and Long Beach is 8,000 ft., jets sometimes use the area lower than that. Consider contacting SoCal Approach at 127.4 MHz for advisories.

Arriving from the Los Angeles area, aim for the islets, the narrow spot between the two prominent landmasses of the island, and get the current winds and altimeter setting from the ASOS on 120.67 MHz. From the islets, a turn toward the island will put you on a 45-degree entry for right-traffic, Runway 22, which prevailing winds usually favor. Announce on CTAF 122.7 MHz; tower will ask you to report downwind. Approaching the airport, you’ll see why it’s called ‘Airport in the Sky’! The mountaintop was leveled to create a runway at 1,602 ft. MSL with steep drop-offs at both ends. After turning basic for Runway 22, you’ll be more than 2,000 feet above the ocean and the topography can make the runway seem small as you turn final, but it’s plenty long for most aircraft at more than 3,000 feet long. Use your altimeter to assist as you approach the steep cliffs, but don’t cut it too close and keep your hand on the throttle: Prepare for a brisk downwind on short final if you have headwinds since they’ll spill over the cliff like a waterfall.

Upon touchdown, the asphalt can be a bit rough. Don’t panic when you lose sight of the runway end due to a hump in the middle. As you near the halfway point, the rest of the runway will come into view. Climb the stairs to the tower to pay the landing fee, $25, or buy a card with three landing fees for $60; overnight taxicab fees are $5. The private airport is owned and operated by the Catalina Island Conservancy; the fees support airport maintenance and staff costs. The Unicom personnel are not controllers. Technically, permission to land is required, but this permission is routinely granted on the radio. Opened to the public in 1959, the airport recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, open 8 a.m.–5 p.m. (Oct 16–Apr 14), until 7 p.m. (Apr 15–Oct 15), no fuel or maintenance, (310) 510-6143 or (800) 255-8790, www.catalina.com/airport.html

History
Native Islanders, known as Tongva or Gabrielleño, occupied Catalina until the early 1800s. In 1542, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, the first European explorer to land here, named the island San Salvador. Sixty years later, Sebastián Vizcaíno arrived on the eve of the feast of St. Catherine of Alexandria, and renamed the island in her honor. The first otter hunters, Aleutian Indians, arrived in 1809; they killed most otters and spread disease to the natives. American and Russian
Considerably higher resale value

Reputation and integrity are Kara Swensen's two highest priorities as CEO of Alaris Aviation, specialists in Cirrus pre-owned aircraft.

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South Dakota, lowering the population to an ecologically sustainable 150-200, www.catalinaconservancy.org.

Photo by author

Catalina Island Conservancy protects 42135 acres, 88% of Catalina. It is restoring bald eagles to Catalina; about 25 now live and breed here. Biologists also helped save the beautiful Catalina Island fox after most of the 1,300 tiny native foxes died from a distemper outbreak. The few remaining foxes were captured, vaccinated, and released. They breed well in captivity and were later released; they now number over 800. Feral pigs and goats that consumed native vegetation and destroyed native archaeological sites have been removed, and a hunting season controls the deer population. Excess bison were deported to their native

Photo by author

Recruitment started visiting Catalina in the 1880s, and the island changed hands several times. Finally, William Wrigley, Jr. (of chewing gum fame) bought out all investors in 1919 to become the sole owner. A copy of Wrigley Field was built, and the Chicago Cubs held spring training here from 1921 to 1951, except during World War II. In 1924, 14 bison were brought for filming Zane Grey's latest Western; they later multiplied to more than 600. The island came into its own in the 1930s; the Casino hosted the most popular big bands, and Hollywood celebrities made it the place to be 'seen.' Elegant steamers and flying boats brought in thousands of tourists.

Wrigley's son Philip assumed leadership upon his father's death in 1932. He helped found the Catalina Island Conservancy (CIC) in 1972. Three years later, he deeded his Catalina Island Company shares to the
What to Do

Your stay can be lazy and luxurious, rugged and rustic, or anything in between. After landing, you can venture into the wilderness on an extended hike or backpacking trip, or catch the shuttle for an array of activities in Avalon. The town is small enough to walk and home to very few cars, as most of the 3,500 residents opt for golf carts instead.

More than 200 miles of trails make Catalina a great place to hike. From the airport, you can simply follow the road ten miles down to Avalon. But the island’s showpiece is the 37-mile Trans-Catalina Trail that opened in April 2008. It takes about four days to hike the whole thing, but you can hike just part of it. Designed to showcase Catalina’s dramatic changes in elevation, it begins near Avalon and then climbs the steep Hermits Gulch Trail to the Divide Road at 1,505 ft. where hikers enjoy bird’s-eye views of Avalon, and Silver and Grand canyons. The trail climbs and descends a few times across the island before ending at Starlight Beach. Along the way, you’ll pass Haypress Reservoir, which is a good place to spot hikers, descend down Slosh Chute Canyon with expansive views of pale turquoise waters below, and pass through Two Harbors Campground at the lighthouse, where you can eat at a restaurant or pick up supplies at the general store. Recent winter rains should produce plentiful wildflowers this spring. Free permits are required for day-hiking, available at the airport, botanical garden, and other locations, (310) 510-2595, www.catalina.com/hiking.html. For overnight camping permits, see Where to Stay.


Discovery Tours operates more interesting tours than we have space for. It offers discounts if you buy at least two. View photos and videos, (310) 510-8687, www.discoverytours.com/a catalina/tours.php. We loved the new, one-hour Behind the Scenes Casino Tour that celebrates the 80th anniversary of Catalina’s most recognizable landmark, John G. Beckman, designer of the famed Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, did the interior and exterior artwork. Walk out onto the stage of the Avalon Theatre with the floodlights on and organ playing, test the amazing acoustics, and explore the projection room with its original and current equipment. See the Wrigley’s private booth and dressing rooms where stars practiced. The original black walnut lining the hallway walls is worth an estimated 4 million. Everything is more interesting when you know the back story, and the guided help transport you to the past. Upstairs, the elegant ballroom with a dance floor capacity of 6,000 hosted Benny Goodman, Stan Kenton, and Gene Autry (who brought Trigger into his dressing room); tour 12:30 p.m., $20.50—$27.50. Your tour ticket gets you in to the Catalina Island Museum on the ground floor. A visit here will fill you in on the fascinating details of Catalina’s history, 10 a.m.—4 p.m. (closed Thu–Sat), $1–$4, (310) 510 2014, www.catalinamuseum.org.

How can you scuba without getting wet? Try the 45-minute Undersea Tour, where you’ll sit five feet under water in front of a large window as hundreds of colorful fish, eels, and many other marine animals in the shallows, visit the seal colony, and the underwater movie.
kelp beds and along your window inches away from your nose. The tour departs from the green pier at 12 & 1 p.m. (more on weekends), $28.25—$37.75. At night, when the fish sleep, another tour showcases lobsters and other nocturnal animals, 8 p.m., $23—$30.50.

From June to mid-September, the five-hour Sundown Isthmus Cruise will get you to Two Harbors without even breaking a sweat aboard the Blanche W., an open-deck wooden boat built in 1924. Explore Two Harbors and enjoy dinner at the Harbor Reef Restaurant. On the way back, the World War I-era 40-million-candlepower spotlights will shine onto the ocean, causing nocturnal flying fish to jump in response. The fish burst out of the water and extend their long pectoral fins to glide above the waves for over 150 feet, much longer if they hit updrafts, 4 p.m., $59.75—$79.50.

Watch for a new Zip Line Eco Tour, opening in spring 2010. Traveling 3/4 mile over five zip lines with a total drop of nearly 600 feet, you’ll begin high on the island’s interior, traveling down through Descanso Canyon to end, two hours later, at Descanso Beach, just north of the Casino. At each station, guides will give presentations of the island’s unique history and wildlife. Also coming soon is a new Sea Trek Undersea Adventure, where you actually walk along the ocean bottom in a special helmet and suit, surrounded by giant kelp and curious fish.

Catalina’s protected waters with abundant fish and kelp make for great diving. A variety of snorkeling or scuba options are available through Catalina Ocean Rafting, (310) 510-0211 or (800) 990-RAFT, www.catalinooceanrafting.com; Catalina Divers Supply, (800) 555-0530, www.catalinadiverssupply.com; and Catalina Scuba Luv, (310) 510-2350 or (800) 1KUB-51UV, www.scubaluv.net.

Kayaking is a fun and easy way to enjoy Catalina’s natural beauty, steep cliffs, and secluded caves. Descanso Beach Ocean Sports has kayak and snorkel tours and rentals, (310) 510-1226, www.kayakcatalinaisland.com; Wet Spot Rentals has kayaks at $50 for 24 hrs, (310) 510-2229, www.catulinakayaks.com, or try Joe’s Rent-A-Boat on
Clockwise from above: Guests at The Inn at Mt. Ada stay high above the town; The Hotel St. Lauren is located in town; On right downwind to Hwy 27, you will be 2,402 ft. over the water; A beachside stroll in Avalon is lovely day or night.

The charming, pink, Victorian-style Hotel St. Lauren is just up the hill from the beach in Avalon. You can somnambulate or read and enjoy a panoramic view on the large sixth-floor patio or look out your room window to watch the town come to life as the morning as locals strolling about in their golf carts, coffee cups in hand. Some rooms have a whirlpool tub, balconies, and ocean views; all feature rosewood furniture and Victorian décor. Coffee is available in the lobby 8-10 a.m., and they'll serve your bag as you arrive before check-in. Ask about seasonal discounts and packages, rooms $76-$399, 231 Beacon St., (310) 510-2299 or (800) 675-2496, www.stlauren.com.

At The Inn at Mt. Ada, the only thing you'll likely hear in the morning are the crows woodpeckers and other birds budding about, because it is 500 feet above Avalon with a commanding view of the town, surrounding hills, and the ocean. Presidents and a prince have slept here. Truly the island's premier inn, the Colonial-style home was built in 1920-21 by William Wrigley, Jr. and named for his wife. Decided for the University of Southern California in the 1970s by his son Philip, it was used as a conference center until two dedicated women with no inn experience signed a 30-year lease 27 years ago. They painstakingly restored and improved the building, and were awarded the Mobil Four-star rating 18 years in a row. The six rooms of varying sizes have balconies, a porch, or fireplace. A van picks you up from Avalon; you have your own golf cart to come and go as you please during your stay. The public rooms invite you to feel at home, read, and relax. The butler's pantry is always open; help yourself to soft drinks, beer or wine, fresh fruit, coffee, tea, or cocoa, fabulous scratch-baked cookies, popcorn or all the ingredients for a frothy mix; beer or wine or banana split. Hors d'oeuvres and wine bar are set out in the den each evening 6-7:30 p.m., with hot and cold dips, Mexican pizza, tacos, or a casserole. A full breakfast and lunch are also included (see Where to Eat), so you won't need to eat anywhere else. $375-$725, (310) 510-2030 or (800) 688-7685, www.innatmtada.com.

Where to Eat

You'll find plenty of dining options along Avalon's waterfront, but we'll focus on two of local secrets. You don't have to stay at The Inn at Mt. Ada to dine there, you can join the guests for breakfast or lunch in the sumptuous dining room. Breakfast includes a rotating hot dish like an egg omelet, banana-pecan French toast, or Mexican egg casserole along with fresh fruit and yogurt, cereals, bagels, croissants, or muffins, and another fruit dish like cherry cobbler, baked apples, or spicy pears on cornbread bagels. The daily lunch menu includes items like tuna and chef's salads, specially prepared (one has...
pastas and grilled onion), open-faced hot grilled vegetable sandwiches, wraps, or hot Mexican dishes, and come with sides like coleslaw, three-bean salad, sweet potato or French fries and beer, wine, or champagne. Breakfast is served 9-10 a.m. $25, lunch 12-2 p.m. $25, reservations required 24 hours in advance, (310) 510-2030 or (800) 609-7669, www.luaountades.com.

A local tipped us off to the Buffalo Nickel, and in a town dominated by tourism, we were the only non-locals in the restaurant. It’s simply good food and the best value around. The location south of Avalon past Lover’s Cove is quiet, except for the rare helicopter at the adjacent helipad. Sit under the massive buffalo head (the started chasing tourists around the golf course) or out on the large patio with its bubbling fountain and mountain backdrop. The tap is that service can be slow during summer, but it certainly wasn’t during our October visit. The kitchen prepares several completely different genres of food well: Mexican, pizza, and American steaks and ribs. Those BBQ ribs are popular at $15 for a half rack, $18 for a whole, as is the New York steak, $15, or the prime rib served Fri & Sat, $17, all with soup or salad. We loved the crispy combo steak and chicken fajitas, $17 for two. Also popular are the chili rellenos with steak, rice, and beans, $12. Pizzas can be delivered, too, for $20, or try the Mexican pizza with green tomatillo sauce, beans, jalapeño, avocado, and carnitas, $11-$19. Cap it off with a Buffalo Milk: vodka, light & dark crème de cacao, fresh banana, banana liqueur, and half-and-half, blended, poured into a tall glass, and topped with whipped cream and nutmeg—it tastes like a grown-up chocolate-dipped frozen banana, $6. Weekend-only breakfast items include carne asada, waffles, pancakes, French toast, huevos rancheros, burritos, and omelettes served 10 a.m.–1 p.m., open until 8:30 or 9 p.m., 57 Pebble Beach Rd., free shuttle van will pick you up at Crescent & Clarissa, (210) 510-1323, www.buffalonickelrestaurant.com.

The airport restaurant, DC-3 Gifts & Grill, serves breakfast and lunch daily. The buffalo burgers are the biggest draw, along with giant, hot, gooey chocolate chip cookies that I never could resist. You’ll also find salads, sandwiches, and Mexican dishes, as well as eggs, burritos, and hot coffee for breakfast. $5-$10, 8 a.m.–5 p.m. Scheduled summer BBQs (see website) bring in many pilots, $25, 5 p.m. (310) 510-2896, www.catalinadc3.com.

Transportation

The Airport shuttle at Avalon departs at 9:30, 11:30, 1:30, 3:30, and 5, with a 7 p.m. bus in summer. The bus departs Avalon for the airport at 7:30, 10:30, 12, 2, and 4, with a 5:30 p.m. bus in summer, $25 round-trip. You’ll get a good glimpse of the island interior, (310) 510-0126. The Catalina Safari Bus can take you to Avalon and some of the campsites if you want short hikes, $10-$20 round-trip, (310) 510-2890, www.visitcatalinaisland.com/bus/safariBus.php.

The Inn at Mt. Ada has a free guest pick-up at Avalon’s Plaza where the shuttle drops you off. For non-guest meals, they suggest calling a taxi, about $12, (310) 510-0025. Golf cart rentals run about $40/hr, try Cartopia, (310) 510-2403, or Island Rentals, (310) 510-1256.

Catalina’s island ambiance makes 26 miles seem a world away. You could find yourself tripping through the wilderness past a wild buffalo, then camping on a secluded beach. In Avalon, spend some time in the iconic casino. Touring backroads, watching an evening movie, or dancing to a Big Band. Soak in a little history, then peer into turquoise waters populated by bright orange fish. It’s all here, all year round, if you just venture down off the hill from Airport in the Sky.