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California Dreaming: Catalina Island

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Divers are explorers by nature. The desire to find new adventure, experience new environments, and explore new destinations touches us all. Sometimes this leads us to travel hours, and days, to exotic and remote locations...places our friends and families have never heard of!



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Articles and photos by Eco-Photo Explorers Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver (www.ecophotoexplorers.com)

But to explore the underwater world doesn't always require us to cross multiple time zones and accumulate colorful stamps in our passports. Located just 22 miles off the southern California coast, within sight of the metropolis of Los Angeles, and just 1-hour by ferryboat is Catalina Island.

Catalina is geologically part of the Channel Islands and although it is so close it feels so very far away. Visitors to the island are immediately immersed in the unique "island feel" of Catalina. There are only two "towns" on the entire island: Two Harbors and the more prominent Avalon. Even though Avalon is the center of activity, it is merely 1 square mile in size and everything is reachable by foot. Indeed, Avalon is the only city in California that is authorized to restrict the number and size of vehicles owned by residents here; most people own golf carts and there is a 14 year waiting list to own a car.

For non-divers and divers alike, there is a rich menu of activities available on this island. Camping, hiking, touring, boating, fishing and even a zip line fill out the itineraries of visitors and residents alike.

But for divers, Catalina presents a unique and exciting experience.

Dive sites on Catalina range from terrific shore dives to exhilarating boat dives. Virtually all involve exploring lush kelp forests, and therein lies the primary appeal of these waters. Dense stands of kelp, filtering the sunlight and harboring myriad fascinating creatures, make for memorable dives regardless of where you are diving.

Let's start our underwater adventure at Catalina's Casino Point Marine Park located on the north side of Avalon next to the distinctive Casino building. Established in 1965 as a marine reserve, divers here can enter the water using a convenient staircase and immediately find themselves swimming through a dense kelp forest teeming with life. Descending to 25 feet or so, divers can then begin to follow the downward slope into waters deeper than 100 feet, although the kelp forest is located primarily in 65 feet of water or shallower. A few small boats have been sunk in the park to provide additional places for marine life to grow, and a plaque honoring the late Jacques Cousteau can also be found on a rock in about 45 feet of water.

Divers who explore to the north will find lush gardens of marine vegetation, while the south side of the park boasts large boulders and a more varied landscape. Throughout the park, divers will encounter the brilliant red Garibaldi, various species of Rockfish, the two-toned California Sheepshead, Senorita fish and the Giant Kelpfish to name a few. Macro photographers can find colorful nudibranchs, starfish, crabs, tubeworms, shellfish and brilliantly colored blennies and gobies to occupy their underwater camera's memory card.

Catalina sports a host of unique underwater critters and many aren't shy to tag along a scuba adventure! Check out this review of Catalina Island Dive Buddies and discover a scaly aquatic companion of your own.

Besides the usual array of southern California marine life, there are often surprises awaiting divers at the Casino Point Marine Park. California Sea Lions are often seen cavorting in these waters and they sometimes will buzz unsuspecting divers. Occasionally, divers will encounter California Barracuda and Mackerel in the kelp forest. Sharp-eyed divers may find the weird looking Sea Hare making its way along the rocky bottom. Keep your eyes peeled...you never know what you might find here.

Catalina Divers Supply has a small equipment rental and air fill station located right in the parking lot at the marine park so divers can spend the entire day here without having to worry about tanks, weights and other heavy equipment. The Casino Point Marine Park is a very popular spot for dive classes and dive clubs and on summer weekends the number of divers here can make it feel a bit like a massive scuba party! Don't be deceived...this is a world-class dive location that is appropriate for divers of all skill levels.

To get to some of Catalina's other special locations, a dive boat is required. There are several operations on the island, including the *Scuba Cat*, which is operated by Catalina Divers Supply, and the *Scuba Luv*, operated by the Catalina Scuba Luv dive shop. Rounding out the offerings in Avalon is Ron Moore's Scuba Diving, who's storefront is located nearby to the ferry terminal.

Bird Rock is another popular dive spot on the island. In addition to a healthy kelp forest, this site features a wall of boulders with large undercuts in the rocks. These are home to octopus, horn sharks and other unusual denizens. Divers can find lobster amidst the crevices and the rocks are adorned with colorful gorgonians. The depths here range from 20-80 feet, and the visibility is generally 40-60 feet.

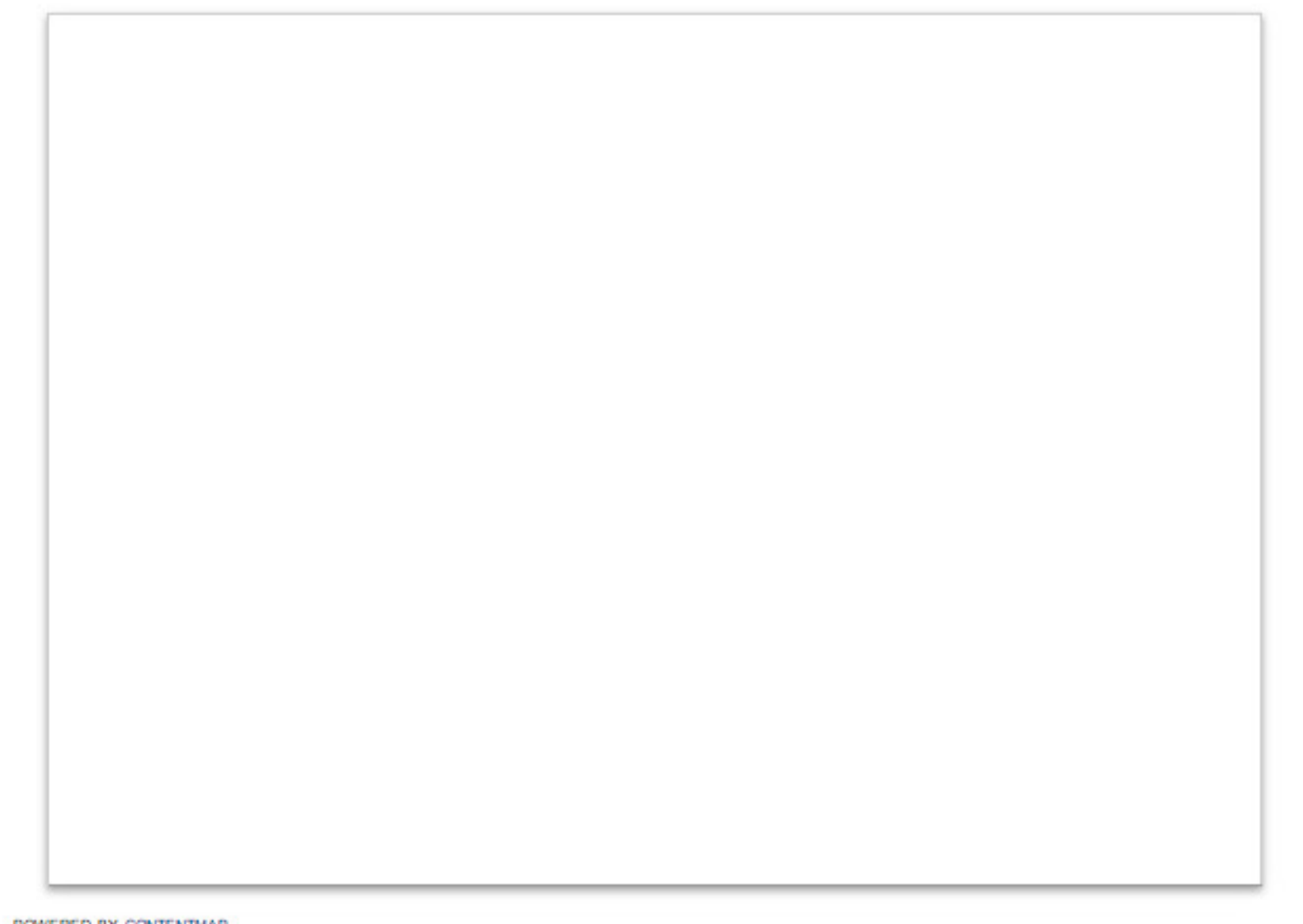
When the winds blow and make diving difficult at other Catalina dive locations, Hen Rock is a good alternative. Here divers will find a lush kelp forest covering a rocky bottom of jumbled boulders. There are small caves, cutouts and deep crevices to entertain divers and provide shelter for lobsters, octopus and other natives to these waters. The brilliant Blue-Banded Goby can be found all along these rocks but photographing them can be tricky! Of course, when you dive Hen Rock with your macro set up, be prepared to see the Giant Sea Bass swimming by...they somehow have learned how to mock divers this way!

Doctor's Cove, Ship Rock, Eagle Reef and Isthmus Reef are some of the other high quality dive sites in and around Catalina. The dive operators will know which site is best given the conditions of the day.

The waters of Catalina beckon divers year round. In the summer, water temperatures reach into the low 70s F, although thermoclines do exist and waters below 60 feet will turn sharply colder even in the middle of summer. In the winter, the water temperatures drop to as low as 52 F. Throughout the year, a 5mm or 7mm wetsuit will suffice, although divers using dry suits will find themselves toasty warm even in the coldest months. Visibility is often best in the winter, extending to around 80 feet, and dropping to between 30 and 60 feet in the summer months.

When you are done exploring the underwater world of Catalina, make sure you take a tour into the interior of the island. Here, in an environment emblematic of the Channel Islands, you will find fascinating wildlife, beautiful vistas and learn about the colorful history of the Island. Keep your eyes out for the North American Bison, the descendants of animals brought here in the 1920s as part of a film production. Seeing these massive mammals wandering the hills of this island is quite an odd experience! If you are lucky you may also spot the Island Fox, which is making a recovery from near extinction. Chances are, however, as you gaze upon the waters from the hills of Catalina, your thoughts will turn immediately to the beguiling kelp forests and wonderful dive sites of the island...and you will immediately begin planning your next dive here!

Dive Operators		
Catalina Divers Supply Green Pleasure Pier Avalon, CA (310) 510-0330 catalinadiverssupply.com	Catalina Scuba Luv 126 Catalina Ave Avalon, CA (310) 510-2350 www.scubaluv.biz	Dive Catalina With Ron Moore 107 Pebbly Beach Rd Avalon, CA (310) 510-3175 snorkelingcatalina.com
Getting There	Where to Stay	
Catalina Express Catalinaexpress.com	The Pavilion Hotel www.visitcatalinaisland.com/avalon/hote_pavilionHotel.php	



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"We're no strangers to pelagiatics! You know the taxonomy and so do I!" Today the DNN office is filled with synthesizers, polka dots, and plenty of hairspray as we jam (and sway) out to 80s music. As such, we're pleased to share our latest NW Regional piece written by the one and only Selenel! "Too Shy to Dive:"

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