Islands have always excited peoples’ imaginations. To early explorers sailing hostile seas, islands offered haven and refuge—places to acquaint oneself with a world of basic serenity and to escape for a while an all-too-familiar environment of congestion, noise, and pressure.

ISLANDS IN THE SEA

Just off the coast of southern California, the eight Channel Islands have long been sources of attraction to those on the mainland. On March 5, 1980, five of these islands, Anacapa, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and Santa Rosa, were set aside as Channel Islands National Park. The two largest islands, Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa, although within the park boundary, remain private property. In the future certain portions of Santa Cruz, and all of Santa Rosa, will be purchased by the Federal Government. But right now you share ownership of Anacapa, Santa Barbara, and San Miguel Islands and are invited to land here and explore, swim, dive, fish, picnic, and, on the Anacapa and Santa Barbara Islands, camp.

Your ownership means, however, that you must also share in the responsibility for these islands’ welfare. Always keep in mind that park features are to be preserved for future generations; please help protect them.

After you’ve fished, dive, or swum from your boat, climb aboard and just sit. Maybe you’ll notice the beauty of that single gull soaring overhead, the deep blue of the water around, the lapping of the water against the hull, or the silence of a sleek sea lion surfacing next to you and staring before passing on. Then let sensations drift to you. The smell of the sage, the song of the meadow-lark, a slight breeze, the clear blue of the sky, the now-and-again almost complete silence might be among them. Give yourself a few quiet moments—it’s these that you will remember.

VISITING THE ISLANDS

Commercial Boat Service: Public transportation to the islands is available from many southern California ports, though presently there is only one charter operation running on a regular basis. Contact Park Headquarters in Ventura for up-to-date transportation information.

Using Personally-Owned Boats: Visitors planning to take their own boats should study U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey Charts 18720, 18729, and 18756. The Santa Barbara Channel is subject to sudden rising sea and wind conditions, especially in the afternoons. Anchorage off Santa Barbara Island is usually confined to the Landing Cove area; Anacapa anchorages include East Fish Camp and Frenchy’s Cove. Anchoring at either island can be hazardous; be sure to have adequate tackle aboard. There are loading docks at the landing coves on both East Anacapa and Santa Barbara Islands, but neither is acceptable for docking boats. Persons wishing to go ashore will need a skiff or small boat.

Access to San Miguel Island (by permit only) is by private boat and is limited to Cayler Harbor, usually safe anchorage under normal weather conditions. Another safe anchorage on the south side of the island is Tyler’s Bight. Sea conditions around the island are usually rough; only experienced boaters with sturdy vessels should contemplate the trip.
THE ISLANDS: A SHARED HERITAGE

THE INTERTIDAL ZONE

The zone where the land meets the sea is one of the most exciting for inquiring visitors. Because its rocks and depressions are exposed to air and drowned by water twice daily, its life forms are those which can live in both worlds. At low tide, you can see a microcosm of animal and plant relationships in tidepools that include prey and predator, camouflage and interaction, birth and death. The action can be as fast as a stranded rock crab scuttling sideways from rock to rock, or a slug darting from its hiding place in the sea grass. Or it can be as slow as a limpet clinging to a rock as though its entire life has been spent on that spot. It can be as deliberate as the action of a starfish gripping the two shells of a mussel and pulling the shells apart or it can be as casual as the sea anemone drifting with the water.

Tidepools are here to explore and enjoy, but please keep in mind that many tidepools on the mainland are biological decay because people gave no thought at all to the organisms which lived in them. To make sure that future generations can have the same sense of discovery you are enjoying, do not disturb tidepools excessively. If you turn a rock over, turn it back; if you pick up a starfish, put it back where you found it.

Remember: On Anacapa, Santa Barbara, and San Miguel Islands, the most accessible tidepools are protected by law, and nothing can be taken.

THE SURROUNDING WATER

The ocean is often very shallow next to the islands, but falls off hundreds of meters even within a relatively short distance. Malnourished, warning, challenges the unseen and comforts the wary. Then there are the sounds of the water, easily enough heard when wave and swell stress the islands against the island’s cliffs but scarcely perceptible when the ocean gently laps the rocks. The sea is an all-pervading force; it isolates the islands and excites the imagination. Without it, the island would not belong, as it does, to the realm of the spirit, the eye of the mind.

In 1980 an area 11.1 kilometers (6 nautical miles) around each of the islands within the park was designated Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary. Approximately 250,000 hectares (625,000 acres), including the submerged areas of the park, were thus recognized as significant to marine mammals, marine birds, fish, and kelp and to people. This is a major stride toward protecting a valuable marine environment.

THE ISLANDS AND MAN

The Channel Islands have been inhabited since prehistoric times. The Chumash Indians had villages on the largest islands and traveled to mainland communities in sturdy wood plank canoes. The islanders hunted, fished, and gathered food, and traded with the mainland for goods. The bountiful coastal waters supported one of the highest population densities in the new world as the time of first European contact.

On his northern odyssey of discovery, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, in October 1542, became the first European to drop anchor off the Channel Islands. Cabrillo is said to be buried on San Miguel Island but his grave has never been found.

By the mid-1800s, all the Island Indians had been removed to coastal missions. Fur hunters, whalers, and adventurers combed the island waters and rocky shores while seeking furs and blubber oil, and hunted the area’s sea mammals to brink of extinction. In the 1850s, sheepherders and cattle ranchers grazed their stock on several islands. Early in the century, farmers unsuccessfully attempted to raise forage crops on Santa Barbara Island. In 1898 President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed Santa Barbara and Anacapa Islands a national monument.

Periodically there have been military navigational aids on the islands. Several years after the side-wheeler steamer Winifred Scott, with 250 persons aboard, grounded and sank on Anacapa Island in 1903, the U.S. Lighthouse Service constructed an unattended acetylene beacon on East Anacapa Island. From 1930 to 1960, several Coast Guard stations were established on the island and operated the light and horn. Like Anacapa, Santa Barbara and San Miguel Islands were sites of military installations. During World War II, the United States Navy used Santa Barbara Island as an aircraft early warning outpost, and during the 1960s a missile photostatic station was constructed. The Navy took control of San Miguel Island in the 1930s, removed the last ranchers, and used the island as an aerial bombing range and missile target area. In May 1963 this activity ended as the Navy and the National Park Service signed an agreement to preserve and manage the island’s national and cultural resources.

The seasons change with the time of day and the time of year.

In spring, they receive a gift of beauty during the March blooming of the giant coreopsis. In May, bird migrations add new life to the scene. In early spring the seas are occasionally rough, but by May, fog and calm prevail.

Summer is the season when most people visit the islands. Days are usually sunny, though there is still a chance of fog. The ocean is at its warmest, about 20°C (68°F) and swimming is possible. Air temperatures seldom exceed 23°C (70°F) — a reflection of the sea’s year-round climatic dominance. Warm, sunny days often extend through October.

Winter is a paradoxical time in southern California, and the islands are no exception. This is the season of the roughest seas, the highest winds, and the most of the 40-or-so centimeters (12 inches) of rain that the islands receive. Overnight these rains may transform the dry, dull-brown islands into a lush, bright green. The rains and the wind together cleanse the air to allow spectacular views around the islands. On the other hand, any day may be hazy, sunny, warm, and calm. Temperatures average a mild 15°C (59°F) in winter seldom get below 4°C (40°F). From January through March, gray whales migrate past Anacapa Island. On a good day the careful observer may count close to 100 whales moving south to their calving grounds in Baja California.

The Chumash Indians, of course, had time to engage in their own traditions. During the summer, they would gather at the cove named for him. A hermit, Velz proclaimed Santa Barbara Island his home and operated the island as an aerial bombing range and missile target area. In May 1963 this activity ended as the Navy and the National Park Service signed an agreement to preserve and manage the island’s national and cultural resources.

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ANACAPA ISLAND

This is the closest island to the mainland, being approxi­mately 18 kilometers (11 miles) south of Oxnard. In reality, it is a chain of three separate islands, almost 8 kilometers (5 miles) long and about 285 hectares (710 acres) in area. West Anacapa rose out of the sea directly to two small peaks, the highest of which is approximately 282 meters (926 feet). East Anacapa and Anacapa Islands are smaller and consist of rolling plateaus almost entirely sur­rounded by high cliffs. There are no beaches on Anacapa Island; only one, at Frenchy’s Cove, is not regularly protected at high tide.

For much of the year, Anacapa looks brown and lifeless, but some 15 miles south of the winter rains, the island’s plants emerge from their winter dormancy and again turn green.

The vegetation on Anacapa Island is short and mostly scrubby, though there are some native trees growing in the canyons on the slope of West Island, and some intro­duced eucalyptus trees on the other two islands. The most unusual plant on Anacapa also grows on the other Channel Islands. This grotesque-looking plant, called palmetto cor­nflower, is not a shellflower, but a member of the daisy family 10 feet high in some protected canyons. In early spring, each plant grows several large yellow flowers. On a clear day, Anacapa can look like a green and yellow table from a distance.

Sea mammals are often observed around Anacapa’s shores. Though the sea otter has nearly been exterminated from these waters, the California sea lion and the harbor seal are found in park waters. From January through March migrating gray whales pass close to Anacapa.

The most easily noticed animals around Anacapa are the birds. Around the cliffs and in the caves, western gulls, cormorants, scoter ducks, black oystercatchers, and brown pelicans can be seen. The pelicans, nearly exterminated along the California coast just a few years ago, use the

The old buildings on Anacapa are protected by law. Please take only pictures.

SAN MIGUEL ISLAND

See Miguel, the westernmost of the Channel Islands, is an island of extremes. Unprotected by the mainland, the wind and weather sweep across the North Pacific battering her shores and creating an environment both harsh and yet uniquely beautiful.

The islands has the most dramatic coast of all the Channel Islands, as the many shipwrecks that have occurred on the outlying rocks and reefs show. The island’s isolation allows three of the five major sea bird colonies in southern California to live relatively undisturbed. Auks, cormorants, gulls, guillemots, and snow geese, as well as all others, breed on San Miguel and nearby Prince Island. Twenty species of sea birds breed here as they have nowhere else found here. At Point Bennett, five species including elephant seals and Northern Fur seals “haul out” on the beach to breed.

The San Miguel Island fox is the largest land mammal. Barn owls, Peregrine falcons, and red-tailed hawks are among the birds of prey sometimes seen here.

Several rare plant species, including fire-loving, wild buckwheat, and rose mallow, are found on the island. Springtime can be most colorful. And preserved beneath the surface; usually a current

The waters for one nautical mile around each of the park’s islands are a California State Ecological Reserve. State fish and game laws are those game fish and shellfish which are caught within the one nautical mile of the State ecological reserve. Stay on the trails and do not walk along the cliff edges. Please take your trash back with you. Marine sanctuary and State laws prohibit aircraft from flying at less than 300 meters (1,000 feet) over the islands within the park. Report accidents or incidents, to the National Park Service immediately.

BIRDS

The native vegetation of Santa Barbara Island has suffered greatly due to such former practices as farming, grazing, and periodic Island hunting. Even now the giant coreopsis (giant sunflower), which was famous on Santa Barbara for its size and the density of its growth is limited to several isolated stands. The present vegetation consists mainly of introduced grasses and Iceland, though, with protection, native plants are making a comeback.

Because of Santa Barbara’s isolation, sea mammals are abundant around the island. Present in large numbers are California sea lions and harbor seals. During winter ele­phant seals breed here. These are noted for the huge size of the bulls—up to 3,000 kilograms (6,600 pounds)—one large, proboscis-like noses are inflated during the mating

SANTA BARBARA ISLAND

Santa Barbara Island is a small, 259-hectare (approximately 640-acre) triangular island about 61 kilometers (38 miles) south of San Pedro Harbor in Los Angeles. Like Anacapa, it is almost entirely surrounded by cliffs, some rising to more than 150 meters (500 feet). From the cliffs, giant elephant seals can be seen even on the highest being Signal Peak at 194 meters (635 feet). Numerous species of land birds are also found on Anacapa. The native vegetation of Santa Barbara Island has suffered greatly due to such former practices as farming, grazing, and periodic Island hunting. Even now the giant coreopsis (giant sunflower), which was famous on Santa Barbara for its size and the density of its growth is limited to several isolated stands. The present vegetation consists mainly of introduced grasses and Iceland, though, with protection, native plants are making a comeback.

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