
Stop 29. Channel Islands

Arrival datetime: Thursday, May 23, 4:30PM
Sites visited: Channel Islands National Park, Santa Barbara, CA
Accommodations: The Pierpont Inn, Ventura, CA
States traveled: California

The drive up from San Diego was mostly highway and very low brown “mountains” in the distance. We stopped early for lunch, in Oceanside, on a pier. A tourist friendly pelican posed with Jennifer.



The Pier at Oceanside.

Like the staff on Imperial Beach Pier, the staff on the Oceanside Pier was enthusiastic. The waiter congratulated us on our order of the Peanut Butter Cup malt, the Coffee Malt, Turkey Ruben, and fries, even congratulating us on our decision to share. The place was filled with Coke Ads from the 1920s. Looking at them we could not help remembering that these ads were from a time when Coca-Cola contained real cocaine.

LA slowed our progress, but we derived entertainment value from the skyline and the “Hollywood” sign on a mountainside.

We arrived in Ventura in late afternoon, but got lost looking for the hotel and ended up taking a 10-yard stroll in a quarter acre marine park before calling for directions. We excitedly asked for information on our Channel Islands tour only to find out that the hotel that sold us the tour package did not actually book a tour for us. We were to call the tour boat company and book it ourselves. They were sold out for the next day, so we had to book one for the day after. Luckily, our itinerary had us in town for more than one day.

We got to our room and found the toilet had a problem. It would not stop flushing and so Jennifer called for an engineer. By the time he arrived, we figured out that if one exercised superhuman strength in lifting the handle back up manually after each flush, one could temporarily fix the problem. When the engineer arrived, he congratulated us on fixing it and could not be persuaded to recognize the need for a longer-term solution.

We sat at the bar and ordered a bottle of wine to console ourselves. The bartender suggested we spend the day in downtown Ventura, but the guy from LA next to us told us to spend the day in Santa Barbara. “Go to the Biltmore Hotel,” he said, “order a drink at the bar, then approach



Sunset from the beach at Ventura.

the concierge and ask him what he suggests you do.” A few minutes after this conversation, the bartender was back with a ton of brochures on Santa Barbara. She also told us the best place in Ventura to view the sunset.

We went off in search of the sunset. There was a nice uncrowded bike path along the beach and we walked a few miles to what we thought was the most southern point on what was basically an east west coastline. We sat on some rocks and watched cold and insane surfers, the waves that would not support them were pounding the rocks near us. We got splashed, but not drenched. We saw the sunset through some scraggly trees.

The Pierpont Inn has a Racquet Club, so we played Tennis in the morning. We had a leisurely breakfast and drove into Santa Barbara. We had forgotten the brochures our bartender had given us, but followed a tourist information sign to a little Chamber of Commerce booth where two friendly women advised us to see the Courthouse and the Mission. It was lunchtime by then and we were right near Stearn’s Wharf, so we decided to go there for lunch, then decide what to do. It would be our third Wharf lunch in a row, and we decided that the wharves in California get progressively upscale the further north you go. Our sandwich came with Caesar salad and the onion rings were made from Maui onions.

Our favorite part of the wharf was underneath it. Michael had always joked that anywhere you see water, you see people throwing money into it. Someone had set up a blanket under the pier with a little champagne glass of water in the middle and a handwritten cardboard sign at the top that said "Make a Wish." And people had thrown money. Mostly pennies, but a few dimes and quarters littered the blanket as well.



Make a Wish.

We were a few minutes late for a tour of the Courthouse, but went anyway. The Courthouse was a strange building. Its windows were not set symmetrically in it. Ceiling shapes were all different. There was one borrowed from a Spanish synagogue in one room and there were Persian arches in another. A few murals depicted the history of the city. Brightly tiled floors clashed oddly with dark heavy wooden doors. It was built in the 1920s but had doors large enough for people to enter in horse and carriage, with smaller doors opening at the base of the large ones for people. As we missed the very beginning of the tour, we do not know how the architect got away with all this. But it was truly the most unusual building we are ever likely to see. An observation tower at the top gave a great view of the

rest of the city, as far as the haze would allow us to see.

We saw the Museum of Art. Its permanent collection was very impressive for such a small city. We got out of Santa Barbara before rush hour and went shopping in downtown Ventura. Jennifer was on a quest for a nice looking sweat suit, maybe silk, like ones we all had in the eighties when aerobics classes first became popular. She wanted something comfortable yet stylish to wear on our boat trip to the Channel Islands. But, although it is seventy degrees all year round in this part of Southern California, they nonsensically adhere to fashion schedules. The clerks chided us for shopping out of season, saying they had no such type of warm clothing for sale since March. But it was cold and not many stores were open. We had an early dinner at an Italian Restaurant that would not have lasted an hour in New York. Back at the car, we found we had serendipitously parked under a local landmark, a giant fig tree.

The next morning, we were up and out by seven to make our tour. Our hotel package had included breakfast, yet they were not serving at that hour. The front desk clerk foraged in the kitchen and came back with a day old bagel and a fresh apple pastry. We got to the tour place and found a 60-foot powerboat with a center salon that seated about 20, a bow with a standing room for 1 and a few benches, and a second level with a center bench as well as benches along the edge. The crew loaded the kayaks and assorted camping gear in the stern. This continued for 45 minutes and the tour left a half and hour late. It was damp and cold and we slept on the boat, huddled in a corner of



Approaching Anacapa Island at Channel Islands National Park.

the salon, trying to ignore two or three children who were standing on the seats next to us. As we approached East Anacapa Island, we moved to the bow with the camera.

We were fairly disappointed that we planned a year in advance, but somehow ended up only being able to visit the smallest of the Channel Islands. And the closest we could get to the water was the dock, from which led 153 steps to bring visitors to the level of the island. There was no shoreline, just tall cliffs. There were two hiking trails, and all side trails that seemed to lead to overlooks were blocked off. There was a lighthouse that you could approach only to within 50 feet. There was an unmanned Visitor Center, two rooms of posters and

information on how you could donate for park preservation. The bathrooms were composting pits with no running water. There was one nice overlook of a sea lion rookery, and one of the western islands that we could not reach. The most famous view of the Island, the Arch at the east side, was completely blocked from every accessible spot.

Moreover, East Anacapa was covered with nesting seagulls. Without exaggeration, we can say that on an island two miles long and less than a half mile wide, there was a nesting seagull on every five square feet. They squawked incessantly, raising their volume as you passed by them on the hiking trails. In one area, they swooped down low over us so threateningly that we put on our

hats and Michael took off his jacket in case he should need to use it in self-defense.



A seagull guarding its nest (green eggs).

There was not even much variety in the fauna. The island was almost completely overrun with iceplant, an inch-tall thick-leaved red-flowered non-endemic species brought by light station residents in the 1930s. The only trees were dead-looking coreopsis, two foot tall brown stalks of 2 or 3 inches in diameter with short branches of the diameter as the trunk. We read in our nature guide that they look alive for only a few weeks a year in March and April.

We had hiked the length of all the hiking trails and oohed and ahned at all overlooks by 11:15AM. We hiked back to the rookery overlook to eat our lunch. The bench was taken by campers, so we sat on a railroad tie marking the furthest

one was supposed to walk. We had booked a full day, which meant we would be on the island until 5:00PM, but we had heard an announcement that there was a boat going back at noon. We wondered what the campers were going to do with their time. There seemed to be far too many of them for the quarter acre site set aside for their use. Surveying the seagulls and lack of facilities, we decided to take the noon boat back.

The boat trip was pleasant. It had warmed considerably and we sat on the top deck, looking out for dolphins that of course never materialized, though they had supposedly seen a thousand the day before. We did see some jellyfish and an oil pumping station.

Back at the hotel, we lounged at the pool, reading and swimming. Then we celebrated Jennifer's birthday by breaking open a bottle of the Gruet Pink Champagne we had bought in Sante Fe. It had a very rich taste for champagne and we were happy with the recommendation. We had dinner at the Pierpont, at first sitting behind the place at the bar where we had sat our first night. But some bar patrons got too close, knocking us with their elbows, so the hostess moved us to a table by the window. It was early and we could still see the water, and dinner was excellent.

Miles traveled: 201
Departure datetime: Sunday, May 26, 11:00AM
Departure weather: 68° Sunny