

11 micro-itineraries for Long Beach, San Pedro and Catalina Island

By Christopher Reynolds, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer, July 3, 2011

Did somebody order fish and ships?

The harbor area of southwest Los Angeles County -- the closest thing we have to a blue-collar coast -- is where the cruise ships call, where global cargo gets loaded and unloaded, where ton upon ton of maritime machinery hums and looms. It's where the Queen Mary passes her awkward retirement. Close at hand, the Pacific pounds the bluffs and pebbles of the Palos Verdes peninsula and 22 miles off the mainland, the island of Santa Catalina primps and sparkles for weekend admirers.

This territory "to me, is like a secret," confides Anthony Geich, who works the desk at Hostelling International's LA/South Bay hostel in San Pedro. "You're in L.A., but you're away from all the bull..."

Here's the sixth installment of our yearlong series of Southern California Close-ups -- 11 beach, peninsula and island micro-itineraries that cover Long Beach, San Pedro, the Palos Verdes area and Catalina.

1. A bottle of vino, a little boat, and thou.



Naples canal (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

Just before Los Angeles County runs out and Orange County begins, a southbound traveler comes across the watery neighborhood known as Naples. It's a cluster of three upscale residential islands, with waterways in between. And those waterways are a fine place to float, perhaps in a kayak from Kayaks on the Water (5411 E. Ocean Blvd) or maybe by Venetian gondola. For \$85 a couple, Gondola Getaway offers 50-minute floating adventures just about every day, complete with gondolieri in striped shirts and straw hats. Bring a refreshment (no corkage fee). Or a crowd -- the 10-vessel gondola fleet offers various options for larger groups (including a "pizza cruise" for 6-10 people at \$35 per person). Some of the guys sing -- a nice effect under the echoing bridges -- and many play mood music. Especially around sunset, it's a memorable float, to drift past snazzy homes under the darkening sky. Ignacio Villanueva, a veteran gondolier, says he's seen many a marriage proposal, and only one turn-down. Excellent odds, gentlemen. And if your proposal doesn't pan out -- well, you can jump ship and swim for Tantalum restaurant (6272 E. Pacific Coast Highway, Suite J), which overlooks one of the marinas on Alamitos Bay and gets some serious happy-hour traffic.

2. This way to the bat ray.



Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

Aquarium of the Pacific (Wally

You've gone as far south as the 710 freeway goes, to the damp heart of Long Beach. You've stepped into the Aquarium of the Pacific, a big and bright attraction that opened in 1998 near the city's convention center. Now find the Touch Pool. Reach into the shallows. And tickle the gray skin of the first flat, triangular creature that slithers by. That's a bat ray, its venomous spine clipped (painlessly) to prevent venomous stings. Its skin, you must agree, is surprisingly soft. And Long Beach, for all its heavy metal maritime machinery and antiseptic waterfront redevelopment, can be downright cuddly here and there. This aquarium includes about 11,000 sea creatures and a see-through tunnel that surrounds you with sea life. Along the Rainbow Harbor waterfront outside, whale-watching boats, harbor cruises and dinner-cruise vessels will vie for your attention, as will Bubba Gump, P.F. Chang and a bevy of the usual national-brand restaurant characters in The Pike dining and entertainment district. If it's a weekday, you might grab a drink and happy hour snack at the three-story, red-roofed Parker's Lighthouse in Shoreline Village, before the higher dinner prices kick in. But for more serious meat (and less view), you'll head about a mile east to 555 East, an old-school steakhouse on Ocean Boulevard. The walls are wood-paneled, and the meat loaf will brighten your day. As for the rest of your night, of course, Hilton and Hyatt and Westin are company are all huddled near the convention hall, but why not some place on a smaller scale? Flop at the 138-room Avia Hotel, which opened in 2009, a few blocks from the aquarium with a pool on the roof. Or, out on Queensway Drive by the Queen Mary, check out the Hotel Maya, a Doubletree by Hilton that in 2009 was jazzed up with modern Mexican design. Bold colors, nice ocean views.

3. Big ships.



Angeles Times)

The Queen Mary (Wally Skalij / Los

In a slightly different universe, the Long Beach waterfront would still be dominated by the old Long Beach Pike, a massive amusement park that went up in the early 20th century, a cousin to similar set-ups in San Diego, Santa Monica and Santa Cruz. But The Pike did not age well, and city leaders were scrambling for a new way to seduce tourists. Enter the Queen Mary, a British ocean liner built in the 1930s, retired in 1967, recast here as a floating hotel. The ship does cut a striking figure when seen from land or sea, especially if you're about to board a contemporary cruise ship from the embarkation center next door, where many Carnival Mexican cruises begin. But up close, the Queen Mary is tired. Red ink and management changes have been frequent. Many of its historical features have been removed or remodeled. Think hard beyond you hand over \$24.95 to tour the ship (or \$139 to stay overnight). And if you really love old ships and you're going to the Aquarium of the Pacific anyway, buy the combo ticket. That way, instead of paying \$24.95 adult admission for the aquarium along, you get the Queen Mary, too, for \$36. By the way, that pass won't get you aboard the remarkably small old Russian submarine that's moored next to the Queen Mary, but the gift shop is free and entertaining (need a vodka flask?) and you can roughly replicate the \$10.95 self-guided tour by imagining yourself wedged inside a vacuum cleaner with torpedo tubes.

4. Going retro.



Angeles Times)

The Collective (Wally Skalij / Los

Just when you think you're beginning to figure Long Beach out, up pops bohemian Retro Row, a medley of funky vintage and design shops on Fourth Street, to show how little you know. About three-dozen shops are concentrated between Cherry and Junipero avenues. Near St. Louis Ave., check out the dinette sets and Dean Martin albums in Elan Collection (408 St. Louis Ave.), the lanais and lamps at j-2 Design (402 St. Louis Ave.), the hipster hats at Imonni (2106 E. Fourth), the wines at 4th St. Vine shop (2142 E. Fourth), the written words of {open} books (2226 E. Fourth). Or settle in at The Collective (2122 E. Fourth) with its art prints and Viewmaster reels of Mexico City in 1957 and Anchorage in 1973. When hunger rises up, stroll over to Lola's Mexican restaurant, (2030 E. Fourth; don't miss the patio in back) or sink into the calm, white corridor that is noodle house Number Nine (2118 E. fourth). Or duck into Portfolio (2300 E. Fourth) for coffee. If there's time, top off your day's artsy excursion with a visit to the nearby Museum of Latin American Art (628 Alamitos Ave.), which is housed in a boldly colored Mexican modern building; or the Long Beach Museum of Art (2300 E. Ocean Blvd.) , which has grown from a 1912 brick-and-timber home to include a later expansion.

5. Eat drink shop stroll.



Angeles Times)

Open Sesame (Wally Skalij / Los

The commercial spine of Long Beach's Belmont Shores area is a 15-block stretch of Second Street, three blocks from the beach. Tuck into a mound of Lebanese kebabs at one of Open Sesame's two busy locations (5201 and 5215 E. Second St.) and rest assured that next time, you could try crepes, pasta, cupcakes, tacos, Thai., whatever. Require a pint? Choose among Murphy's, Quinn's and Shannon's pubs, or head to Legends, a sports bar with dozens of TVs. Then, to give your legs and elbow a little more exercise, hike half a mile to Belmont Brewing Co (on 39th Place), which serves lunches, dinners and craft beer on a beach-view patio next to the Belmont Pier. Look north beyond the bike path and you'll see a horizon full of maritime machinery. Look south on a windy day and you'll see the billowing sails of wind-surfers at play.

6. When Catalina calls.



Los Angeles Times)

Catalina Express (Jay L. Clendenin /

Between Dana Point to the south and Marina del Rey to the north, there are five places to catch a ferry for Catalina. But you probably want the shortest boat ride possible, and that means starting in Long Beach with the Catalina Express. It's an hourlong voyage (usually about \$70 per adult, round-trip) and it ends in sleepy Avalon Bay. Catalina, you'll soon find, is a strange and charming land where golf carts far outnumber cars, where tourists often outnumber the island's roughly 3,700 residents, where buffalo (imported for a movie shoot in the 1920s) roam the back-country. You need to know that you'll run out of town to explore pretty quickly, you'll see some steep prices summer weekends, and you may not want your kids splashing in the shallows around Avalon's green pier. (That beach ranked among the state's ten most polluted beaches in a 2011 study by Santa Monica-based Heal the Bay.) But the island is fetching, from its distinctive tilework to its signature 1929 casino building (which houses a little museum and big movie screen)s, and there's just enough here to fill a family weekend, or a romantic one. And the history is hard to resist, beginning with 1919, when chewing-gum mogul William Wrigley Jr. bought a controlling interest in the Santa Catalina Island Co. Western author and sportsman Zane Grey (whose old house is a hotel now) summered here in the '20s and '30s. Actress Natalie Wood drowned here on a 1981 boat trip with husband Robert Wagner and friend Christopher Walken. And teen bride Norma Jean Dougherty lived here briefly in the 1940s before divorcing and renaming herself Marilyn Monroe.

7. The island, new and improved.



Pavilion Hotel (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

To impress the adults in your traveling party, book a room at the renewed Pavilion Hotel, right on bayfront Crescent Avenue. Formerly known the Pavilion Lodge, the place was redone and reopened in 2010 with lush landscaping in its courtyard, an inviting fire ring and hints of mid-century modernism here and there. (And go in spring or fall, preferably on a weekday, when you can often get in for less than \$180 nightly. On summer weekends the same room can cost more than twice that.) For dinner, head to the sleek dining room of the Avalon Grille, which opened in 2010 a few doors away at 423 Crescent Ave. (Both of these places are run by the Santa Catalina Island Company, as are many other island businesses.) The next morning, browse or snack in tile-fronted CC Gallagher (523 Crescent Ave.; 310-510-1278) which sells sandwiches, coffee, landscape paintings, wine and sushi. That's right: CC sells sushi down by the seashore.

8. Taking flight.



Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Catalina Zipline Eco Tour (Jay L.

If your Catalina trip is a family venture, look into renting a house or condo from Catalina Island Vacation Rentals, so you can defray costs by doing some of your own cooking. Also, between bike rentals, glass-bottom boat rides and miniature golf tournaments at Golf Gardens, you'll want to line up at Big Olaf's ice cream shop (220 Crescent Ave.) along the waterfront, where \$4.50 buys a single scoop of Dreyer's ice cream with topping. Then – if nobody's afraid of heights – walk south past the casino to the Descanso Beach Club, where the Catalina Zipline Eco Tour opened in 2010. It's a series of five lines that take you slope to slope in Descanso Canyon, skittering along at up to 40 mph, up to 300 feet high, while the scrub and eucalyptus trees flash past below. (To ride alone, participants must be at least age 10, weighing 80-245 pounds. Children aged 5-9 may ride tandem with an adult.) With instruction beforehand and pauses between zips, it takes about two hours. You wind up back at the Descanso Beach Club again, where there are many other sports on offer, along with a beachfront bar and restaurant where you can agree on how much to exaggerate how high and fast you went.

9. High ground and chain link.



(Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)

San Pedro is a sleeper. Wedged between the docks of Long Beach and the mansions of the Palos Verdes peninsula, it has a throwback look (lots of 50-year-old signage) and a Croatian accent, because so many local families came from Croatia to work seafaring or waterfront jobs. Along Sixth Street and Pacific Avenue you'll notice businesses like Slavko's Harbor Poultry and Ante's Restaurant. You begin by climbing to high ground: Angels Gate Park (3601 S. Gaffey St.), where a 17-ton Korean Bell of Friendship towers over the grass (and the neighboring L.A./South Bay Hostel) with wraparound views of the Pacific, Catalina Island and the occasional passing whale. In all L.A. County, there can't be a better place to fly a kite. Well, except perhaps the lawn at nearly Point Fermin Park and Lighthouse (807 West Paseo Del Mar), where the ocean views are augmented by a lighthouse that goes back to 1874. Next, you may or may not be tempted to try a beer at Walker's Café, a tiny, rumpiled throwback bar-and-grill across the street that draws a close-knit crew of grizzled locals and bikers. For wider selection and a far kid-friendlier scene, head instead to The Corner Store (1118 W. 37th St.), which isn't on a corner but welcomes families with pb&j sandwiches (\$2.75) and sells more kinds of pop than you've ever imagined. Now, having bought your picnic lunch, bring it down to sea level at Cabrillo Beach Park, where you'll find picnic tables, tide pools facing the open ocean and Cabrillo Marine Aquarium, a facility that goes back to the 1930s and now plays David to the Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific's Goliath. The Cabrillo building, startlingly wrapped in chain-link fencing and rugged metal accessories, was designed by star architect Frank O. Gehry in the early 1980s, before his name was a global brand. Inside, there's plenty to keep a family absorbed (sea stars, jellyfish, leopard sharks) and a homespun feel to the exhibits. Best of all, the recommended donation is just \$5 for adults, \$1 for kids -- about one-fifth of what the Long Beach aquarium costs. (But stay out of the shallows inside the breakwater —this spot, too, is on Heal the Bay's most-polluted list.)

10. Of golf, God and coastal redwoods.



Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Trump National Golf Club (Jay L.

Venture north of San Pedro and boom -- you're out of blue-collar territory and onto the genteel slopes of Rancho Palos Verdes, snaking along the not-at-all-smooth blacktop of Palos Verdes Drive. First, you exit at Trump National Golf Club and park in the free lot on the left. Alongside this ritzy golf course and restaurant is a network of public trails. You can follow one down to the water's edge, where wave action has smoothed the many-colored pebbles almost halfway to becoming glass. Of course you could play golf here, too, if you don't mind green fees of \$215-\$275 for morning starts. Your second stop, father north and west on Palos Verdes Drive, is the Wayfarers Chapel. This is a small but remarkable church – almost all glass walls and skylights, with light filtering in through flanking coastal redwoods. Lloyd Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright, designed it in 1951 for followers of the 18th-century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, but all are welcome, donations requested but not required. From just about everywhere on the grounds, the views are stupendous, the tranquility considerable.

11. Does that name ring a diving bell?



Angeles Times)

Terranea resort (Jay L. Clendenin / Los

A little farther north on Palos Verdes Drive, you'll reach a grand blufftop chunk of land that longtime Angelenos will remember as site of the Marineland theme park from 1954-1987. Since 2009, these 102 acres have been the site of Terranea, a luxury resort that opened just in time to get kicked in the teeth by the recession. It has 582 hotel rooms (each at least 450 square feet) and rates that begin around \$360, with a nine-hole golf course, spa, three pools, multiple restaurants and views of the Point Vicente lighthouse (next to which is the Point Vicente Interpretive Center, a prime whale-watching spot). Terranea is not a beach hotel – it's all about bluffs, rocks and pebbles. And if you're splurging, it's worth a thought. If you're not splurging, come anyway and grab a free parking spot (first lot on the left as you enter). Make the rounds on the well-appointed clifftop public trails and wind up around sunset at the casual resort restaurant that looks out toward the lighthouse. It's called Nelson's—an homage to Mike Nelson, the heroic SCUBA diver portrayed by Lloyd Bridges on television's "Sea Hunt" from 1958-61. The show was shot around here, in glorious black and white, and the restaurant walls are filled with posters (in jarring color) promoting ancient episodes. Give them a look. Then glance again to the sea, take a bite of seared ahi, and be glad. To be any more immersed in SoCal culture, you'd have to strap on air tanks and flip overboard backwards.

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