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PRIMITIVE PREVAILS  
**ON SANTA CRUZ**

by Eileen Holm Matthew



Eileen Matthew



Eileen Matthew

*Little Scorpion (left) is a favorite anchorage for all cruisers and a great place to make friends with the California brown pelican population. Little Lady's (top) is treacherous when the wind is up, but early in the day you may have time to hike up the canyon under tree ferns and oaks. Arch Rock is just around the corner from Lady's and a classic Santa Cruz landmark.*

**M**ore than 400 years have passed since Cabrillo discovered the Channel Islands, but as you near towering Santa Cruz you'll find little has changed. Exploring the rugged shoreline is like going back into time to taste what California must have been like before it was scarred by civilization. You feel the thrill of sailing waters with no public docks or moorings and no hotels or highways, to mar the beauty of a cruising wilderness.

Yet, Santa Cruz Island is less than 23 miles south of Santa Barbara. With a length of 25 miles and an average width of seven miles, it is the largest of the eight Channel Islands which are sprinkled along 130 miles of the California coast from San Diego to Point Conception. Golden hills, dotted with gnarled black-green trees, rise to more than 2000 feet in the interior, while clear, Mediterranean blue water lies deep close to shore. Aboard our Santa Barbara-based *Rogue*, a Columbia-36, we are frequent visitors to the numerous coves and bays on the north side of the island providing yachts shelter from the prevailing winds.

One thing we always look forward to, when crossing the Santa Barbara Channel, is the abundant wildlife we see on the way. No matter how many times we make this crossing, we're likely to sight something we've never seen before, and may never find again.

The sea may be covered by tiny, translucent jellyfish aiming their dorsal fins at the wind, or we may spot the fins of basking sharks or the "spouting" of gray whales. Mischievous dolphin may swim a slalom across our bow, or zoom in circles around the boat before charging off to some new playfield. A seal, snoozing on a raft of kelp, may blink a sleepy eye at our passing. As we near the island, seabirds increase in numbers. Once we saw a line of rare California brown pelicans, extending to infinity, barely skimming the waves in their follow-the-leader game.

The island is a priceless museum of plants and wildlife; among them are the endangered Channel Island fox, at least nine rare or endangered plants and 31 species of plant life said to be found nowhere else in the world.

The caves and grottos of north Santa Cruz, chisled out of sheer cliffs by water-driven mallets, are even more fascinating to boatmen than the wildlife. The most outstanding of these, of course, is the Painted Cave, located near the northwestern end of the island. Within the first chamber, readily accessible by boat unless the surge is excessive, you'll find murals of red, green, white, brown, and gray composed of lichens and salts which have formed on the walls. At the end of this chamber is a hole just large enough for a dinghy to squeeze through. Inside are surrounded by blackness (take a bright lantern) and the roaring of a sea lions' den. Since there are no safe anchorages in the Painted Cave area explorers must be put

## SANTA CRUZ

off in a dinghy while the larger vessel stands off to wait for them.

A mile or so west of here is a group of three uncharted caves which are considered by some yachtsmen to be even more beautiful than the Painted Cave. The mouths of all three caves are large, lights are not needed, and it's fun to swim into the caves because there is calm water inside. An active blowhole adds interest to one of these caverns and all display brightly colored rock, emerald green water and incredible rock formations. Several other caves are accessible from the various north shore anchorages. Low tide is the best time to enter them by dinghy, because colorful sea life is exposed.

### Scorpion Anchorage

Beginning near San Pedro Point and working westward, the Scorpion/Little Scorpion combination is the first anchorage one encounters. Little Scorpion, which is protected to the west and northwest by two large bird-covered rocks, is the most popular of the two. The wind may be strong here in the afternoon and the water lumpy during a heavy westerly, but the sandy bottom offers good holding. We like to inch close to the inner rock to drop our bow hook then fall back parallel to shore to set our stern anchor. Kelp is not a problem, except close to shore.

One may also row across to Scorpion, which is easily identified by the wooden pier which serves the Gherini ranch. Big Scorpion is not a favorite of ours because we've found rock and kelp on the bottom, and we've had sudden winds whip down the hill and catch us abeam.

### Potato Bay

The entrance to Potato Bay is narrow and the cove inside is shaped roughly like a potato. The harbor opening may be hard to spot because of a double entrance effect. Avoid the bay to the east to enter. Potato has an excellent sand bottom inside, but the bay is open to the prevailing weather and it is used mainly as a morning-to-lunch-time anchorage by most visitors. If the afternoon westerly doesn't come up it can be a good place to stay overnight.

Potato has a personality of its own, entirely different from other island anchorages. The sheer cliffs make shore hikes impossible, but dinking is superb. There are small caves to explore and it's fun to row back to talk to the seals that are almost always barking on the west side of the entrance.

### Chinese Harbor

Chinese Harbor is fine during a flat calm but most of it gives little shelter when protection is needed. If you look carefully though you'll find a small bight at the western end that is surprisingly well protected from the usual westerly. In spite of what various cruising guides promise, Chinese is probably not safe in northeasterly weather as the wind tends to bend around the island. Look for the smoke on shore

that comes from a natural subterranean sulphur fire. A lovely beach borders Chinese Harbor and the land comes down gently in contrast to the bluffs or cliffs more common to the island.

### Prisoners' Harbor

Prisoners' Harbor was named for a group of criminals who were shipped to Santa Barbara in 1830 to provide free labor for the presidio. When the commandante refused their services most were taken to Santa Cruz and put ashore at what we now call "Prisoners' Harbor." Today this anchorage is easy to find by looking for the wharf and the shore buildings behind it which serve the Santa Cruz Island Co.

Although Prisoners' is large, it provides a respectable degree of shelter from westerly conditions. This is a popular destination for yacht club cruises, when most of the fleets anchor west of the pier. The water is relatively calm and shallow here—12 to 15 feet, not fathoms as reported. Thick sea grass on the bottom makes anchoring tricky. We drop our stern hook towards shore and our bow anchor outwards, and we set them both under power, sometimes several times before we're sure they've taken hold. A friend likes to anchor near the pier, running about halfway down before turning and placing his stern anchor where he can see that the bottom is free of grass.

### Pelican Bay

Pelican Bay is loved by cruising folk for its scenery, and because it is one of the best large harbors on the island. When crossing from Santa Barbara we make our landfall by aiming at the first big notch in the ridge, west of Prisoners' Harbor, marked by the lowest saddle in the ridge on the east end of the island.

Santa Cruz Island pines, which grow nowhere else in the world, and twisted oak trees cover the hill behind the bay making Pelican easy to spot from offshore. Since dinghy landings must be made on a rock at the back of the bay, rubber rafts are preferred to hard dinghies. Anchor out from the kelp beds which border the anchorage. The bottom is generally sandy but the kelp seems to be increasing so don't fail to set your hooks under power. You'll find traces of an old resort hotel not far from the dinghy landing and the view from the bluffs around the harbor makes the hike worthwhile.

### Twin Harbors

When you see an arch rock between two coves about a mile west of Pelican you'll know you've arrived at Twin Harbors. Although both are small the easterly cove is the more popular of the two and it makes a fine four- or five-boat anchorage. Much of the bottom is a combination of sand and small pebbles which make it tough for an anchor to take hold. Set your hooks under power in the usual manner and enjoy the quiet beauty you'll find here.

### Platt's Anchorage

Under most conditions Platt's is too open for overnighting, even though the

bottom is the expected good-holding sand. It is popular as a lunch stop because after a hike of a mile or so up the canyon there are waterfalls, swimming holes and wild flowers.

### Fry's Harbor

Fry's Harbor can be warm and sunny when the rest of the island is chilled with fog. And, snuggled behind Diablo Point, it gives the best protection from the westerly. We've found shelter here more than once when nearby coves were untenable.

Fry's is large and easy to enter. We like the center of the cove, well away from waves bouncing off the cliffs which may rock the boat uncomfortably. We've never had trouble setting our hooks in the sandy bottom. The trick is to lie bow-to-beach to be ready for strong winds that may blow offshore late in the day. Fry's is particularly interesting because the eastern side of this cove supplied the rock for the breakwater at Santa Barbara. It's fun to explore this rock work, to hike up the stream-washed canyon and to row the dinghy into a colorful cave which lies 300 yards or so to the west.

### Diablo Anchorage

Diablo Anchorage lies around Diablo Point from Fry's Harbor. You'll know it by a bird-covered rock off the western side of the cove which blocks the prevailing swell. This is a favored small cove with three to five fathoms over sand. A cave is gouged into the western cliff about halfway to the beach. You'll avoid excessive wave action by staying 20 feet or so away from the side walls and well beyond the low-tide surf line off the beach.

### Lady's Harbor

West of Diablo, Lady's Harbor is a scenic but small anchorage consisting of two coves. The one to the west with the beach behind it is the better one. Both coves have sandy bottoms, but the eastern finger, called Little Lady's, can have a rough water entrance and is more open to the westerly swell. The canyons behind these coves are definitely worth exploring. They have streams, ferns and wild flowers. The canyon behind Little Lady's has rock "bathtubs" filled with sun-warmed fresh water.

And, Lady's, like Scorpion, provides some of the best dinghy gunkholing on the island. There's a cave in the cliff between Lady's and Little Lady's and another cave west of the anchorage. After visiting these one morning, I rowed west as far as the arch rock. I paddled my dinghy through the arch, and found a seal rookery on the back side. Baby seals splashed and played in shallow pools, while the stern eyes of watchful parents were focused on the intruder. The rays of the early morning sun bathed the cliffs above, spotting birds at rest, while brilliant Garibaldi lazed beneath me.

### Cueva Valdez

Cueva Valdez is a short distance past the arch rock. It should be used in fair weather

(Continued on page 73)

## SANTA CRUZ

(Continued from page 30)

only because the island curves to the southwest here leaving Valdez open to the prevailing weather. Boats anchor bow and stern, with bow into the swell. There's a constant surge, depending upon weather, but the sandy bottom holds securely and the motion is not uncomfortable under normal conditions. Valdez is fun because the best dinghy landing is inside a cave. Once inside, there are two "land" ways out of the cave—one to some rocks to the west where you may see seals and the other to the main beach behind the anchorage. Valdez has two canyons worth visiting. The main canyon behind the beach is rugged and wooded, while a smaller canyon to the east is unique because you have to crawl under a low-rock arch in order to enter it.

Past Valdez, between the Painted Cave and the western end of Santa Cruz, are several miniature "fjords" which make fabulous lunch stops. They are hard to spot from more than 50 feet or so offshore, but the water here is extremely deep close in. Once hidden inside one of these crevasses you'll be surrounded with colorful rocks, cliffs, flowers, mosses and hanging plants.

As you've gathered by now we usually set bow and stern anchors, with adequate scope, to hold the bow into the swell. Most coves have five or six fathoms over sand, but be prepared for nine or ten fathoms


upon occasion, especially on holiday weekends when you may have to anchor farther out. We carry several 350- to 400-ft. nylon rodes, with thimbles spliced into both ends, so that two can be shackled together to make a longer rode if needed. Island anchorages can be rolling at times so we like to set a flopper-stopper from the end of our spinnaker pole. If you don't have one, you can improvise by filling a bucket with rocks or by shackling about a 10-ft. length of chain to the point of your sea anchor.

There are no boating facilities of any kind at Santa Cruz. Yachts must be provisioned with food, water, fuel and ice, and be otherwise equipped for self-sufficient cruising. The north shore has few navigation hazards. We make our usual landfalls by dead reckoning, although certain RDF beacons and radio stations can be helpful in fog: Anacapa Island beacon—AN 323 kHz; Santa Barbara marine beacon—SB 294 kHz; Santa Barbara airport beacon—BA 338 kHz; and Pt. Arguello sequenced beacon—0 302 kHz can usually be received, as can commercial stations KIST Santa Barbara—1340; KDB Santa Barbara—1490; KACY Oxnard—1520 and KBBQ Ventura—1590.

Encountering "Windy Alley" is hardly a danger, but it is a condition you should be aware of. Many times we leave Santa Barbara under calm conditions then hit strong winds and choppy seas a little more than

halfway across the channel. This begins when we leave the shadow of Pt. Conception. Watch for this, because if Windy Alley is kicking up, you'll want to don foul weather gear and reef down ahead of time. Unfortunately the canned weather forecasts seldom cover Windy Alley. Many times we have fought twice the wind and wave conditions that are reported on the radio.

Since the island is privately owned, landing permits are required. The eastern tip, about 6000 acres, is owned by the Gherini family. The remainder is held by the Santa Cruz Island Co. If you plan to land from Coche Point clockwise to Sandstone Point, write to Pier Gherini, 1114 State St., Suite 230, Santa Barbara, CA 93101, for a permit and enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Permits for the rest of the island may be obtained from the Santa Cruz Island Co., 515 S. Flower St., Los Angeles, CA. 90071, (213) 485-9208.

In Sept. 1977, a national conservation organization called the Nature Conservancy announced its intention to acquire 55,000 acres from the Santa Cruz Island Co. to create a natural preserve. The Conservancy intends to protect the ecosystem of the island, but it also intends to allow public use under the existing permit system. This is good news for all of us who enjoy island cruising and hope that Santa Cruz will retain its wilderness feeling for many years to come. 

## The sport fisherman's boat - a Nor Wester 260

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