

Avalon

Romance Twenty-Six Miles Away



A Photo Essay By
Jim Witkowski

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*To see other portfolios, visit Jim's
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Introduction

Since Queen Anne and I have retired, we've had the fortune to get small tax returns from the IRS. We treat it as unexpected vacation money, but we always seem to spend it on tires, garage doors, or new cameras. This year, we didn't have any incidental expenses, so I asked Queen Anne, "Where would you like to go on vacation." At first, she squinted and gave me her famous *eat-shit-and-die* look, but when she realized I was serious, she answered, "Catalina Island is next on my bucket list." So, we agreed to blow all our tax returns for a week on the island.

Historically, Catalina was the home of the Tongva tribe, a group of Native Americans who settled along the coast and the Channel Islands. Like the rest of America, the natives were pushed off their land, first by the Spanish, followed by the Americans. There were a series of land occupants—mostly ranchers—before the Wrigley family visited in 1919. They fell in love with Catalina and eventually bought the island lock, stock, and barrel. Even though the chewing gum tycoon enjoyed the island's solitude, he realized that he could make money if he promoted tourism. So he established the Santa

Catalina Island Company to handle the infrastructure and promotion. Before I get too far, let me clarify a point. Unless you swim, own a yacht, are into backpacking, or your family name is Wrigley, you don't visit Catalina; you go to Avalon. They don't have rental cars on the island, but you can rent a bike, golf cart, or steal a local's Smart Car, but you're mostly going to walk around town. We didn't mind because that was enough to keep us entertained for the week.

Although Avalon is still in Los Angeles County, its atmosphere makes you feel like you need a passport to travel there. First, the air is free of LA smog, so you can see the mainland's San Gabriel Mountains through the fog. As you walk past the shops and bars on Crescent Avenue, a perfume of aroma of sea air, mixed with those of waffle cones, fish, beer, and pizza, follows you down the street. The businesses along the strand are the same mix of souvenir shops, restaurants, hotels, ice cream, and adventure tours that you'd expect in any popular tourist attraction. In this book's photo essay, I want to share the fun we had that week in May. So, I hope you'll enjoy the photos from our week in Catalina.

Avalon

The small harbor town of Avalon is where 90% of the island's residents live, and most tourists visit. Like the tides, its population swells over the weekends and recedes for the work week. Most visitors come from LA on a day trip or spend a night in a local hotel. Fridays, the surge begins. Weekenders crowd the beaches, pack the shops, and crowd the promenade. By dinner-time on Sunday, most of the crowds sail home, leaving Avalon's streets empty for us to explore thoroughly.

When you're on an extended stay at a resort town, there's only so much time you can shop for T-shirts, scarf down Scoops gelato, or inhale pastrami hoagies under Antonio's umbrellas. You need to break the routine—we crave adventure. Tour operators know this, and that's why they do well in high-traffic places like Avalon. They're the carnival rides at the State Fair. Instead of riding grease-stained high-speed Merry-go-rounds, these carnival barkers use parachutes, steel cables, and bungee cords to take money from your pocket. I don't trust those contraptions being the big fella I am.

When Queen Anne and I planned our week in Avalon, we

poured over the adventures the town offered. Given our dementia, physical fitness, and risk of cardiac arrest, we chose to ride a glass bottom boat and tour the outback riding in a Hummer. The only exertion we made was finding our place to sit.

The boat was less exciting than we had hoped. We went on the submarine tour where you climb into a tube, sit, and look through dirty windows on each side. Since it's dark inside you see better through the foggy windows. The sub (ours was painted yellow, of course) motors to a small bay south of the harbor, where the crew attracts fish by tossing food into the water. It's cool, except I hoped to see marine mammals, sharks, or mermaids. Maybe next time we will.

The ridgeline jeep tour was our chance to see other parts of the island. Six of us boarded the back of an open Hummer and drove the dirt roads along the mountain ridges. It was foggy during our trip, so we didn't enjoy any spectacular vistas possible from the mountain tops. At times we spied the city below and briefly caught a glimpse of an empty west-coast bay. Our guide did find a bison for us to shoot—with our cameras.



Avalon Casino



Casino Windows and Agave



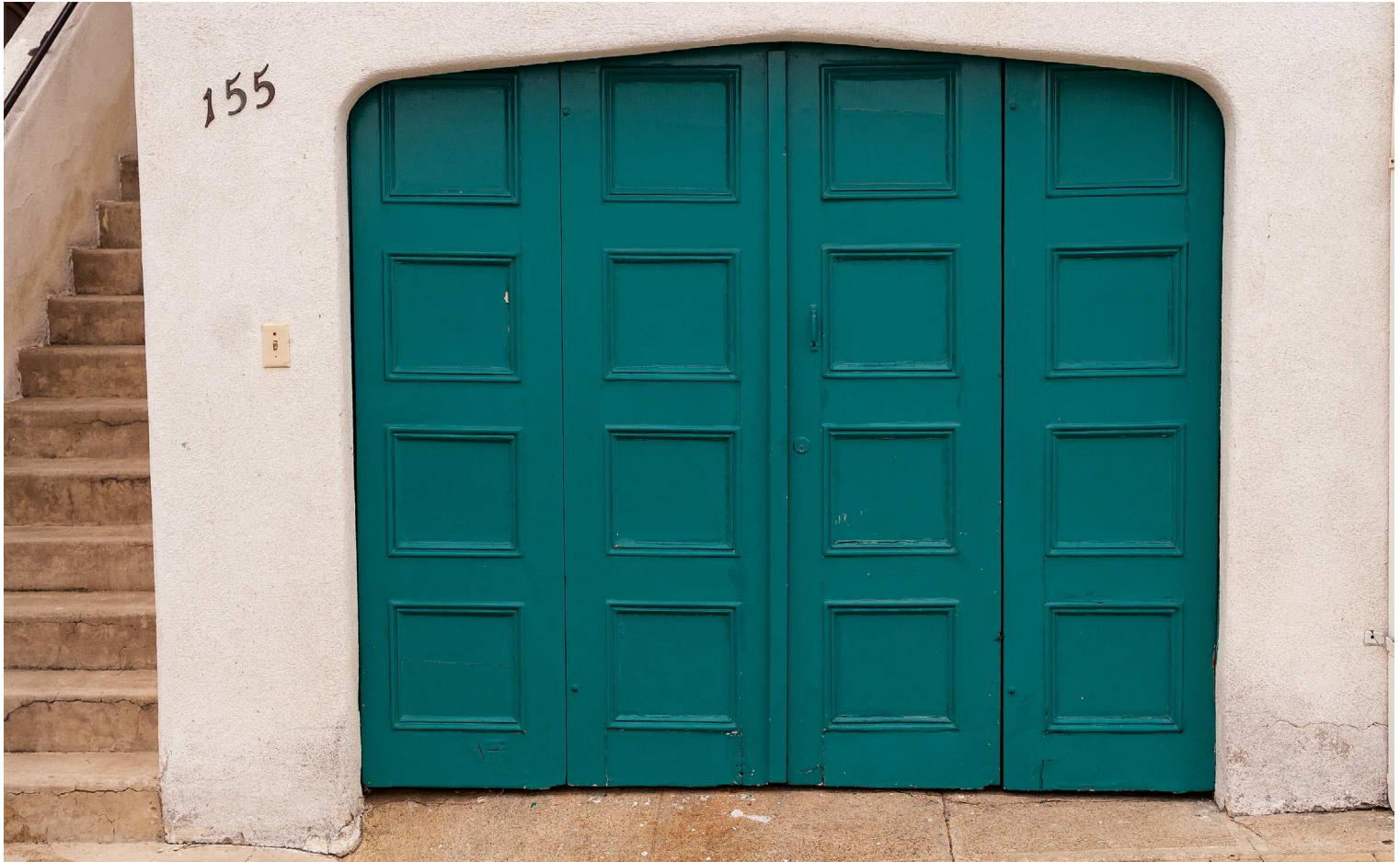
Casino Entry



Pete



Harbor Fog



Garage Door



Then, There's The Wriglys

The Gala

Since Avalon is a compact town, it's easy to walk everywhere. So, when noon rolled around on Friday, we decided to stroll down to Avalon Grill for lunch. Crescent Avenue is the main street along the beach. The city could have squeezed four lanes of traffic with parking meters down each side, but instead, they closed it to traffic, so it's filled with pedestrians all day long. By the end of our stay, our evening pastime was sitting in the window of the El Galleon bar, sipping cheap chardonnay and people-watching.

The morning was bright but hazy as the sun ate most of the fog, but he couldn't finish because he got indigestion. The perfume of cooked food filled the air. If they could bottle that smell, it would be called American Carnival. Because it was Friday, more people were on the street than usual—the week-enders were arriving. They stood out dragging their luggage in tow, clickety-clack across the bricks.

That's when we spotted the most bazaar couple. Well, the pair weren't odd; they wore old clothes. I don't mean Good-will old; these were costumes you'd see in a 30's movie. He

wore linen pants, a coral shirt with a loud paisley tie under a honey-colored jacket. Her dress was knee-length white and blue diamond chiffon. She had on seamed stockings and Minnie Mouse shoes. As our lunch ended, the 'thirties-couple' returned. They sat down on the patio with a large group of friends.

As the day passed, we spotted a second, then a third couple dressed in Gatsby-inspired clothing. I told Anne, "I'm going to find out what's up." I approached the third couple and asked, "Why are you dressed like that?" The answer shocked me. **Architecture has groupies!** They were members of the *Art Deco Society of Los Angeles* and were in Avalon to attend their annual ball. I asked so many questions I must have sounded like an eight-year-old. Anne and I made plans for an exciting Saturday evening when we learned more about their shindig.

That evening, we put on clean T-shirts, and parked our butts on the casino stairs. Soon the parade of attendees began. I picked out the most colorful couples, and photographed them. I hope you enjoy seeing my *Belles of the Ball*.



Kilt Lifter



Stewart



Scarlet

Got Your Back





Fancy Gangstaws



On the Prowl



Mona Lisa Smile



Fresh Off the Boat



Plantation Owners

The Glitter

Unless you're oblivious to the world, one of the first things you notice when you step off the boat in Avalon is all the ceramic tiles. They're everywhere. They're on the buildings, walls, and stairs, covering the central fountain on Crescent Street. It makes one wonder how they became a significant player in the island's charm. To help explain, here's a very brief history of the Catalina Tiles.

Southern California—which includes Catalina—has abundant clay deposits, which is a good thing if you work with pottery or want a red tile roof that is so prevalent there. As a part of his plan to entice tourists to visit Catalina, William Wrigley established the Catalina Pottery and Tile Company in 1923. His vision was to spice the place up—make it look more like the Medeterain. He wanted to turn the rather drab Spanish Revival buildings into a glamorous vacation paradise. Most of the tiles his factory made had traditional Moorish designs but they started making pictorial tiles featuring exotic birds, fish, and large-scale murals. They were a hit.

The tile company soon began shipping the famous ceramic

squares to the mainland. Architects and designers wanted to use them in their projects. Their popularity spread like wildfire, and in the '20s and '30s, the Catalina Tile Company shipped products worldwide. Sadly, fashion is fleeting, and the demand for Catalina tiles declined in the late '30s early '40s. Eventually, the Wrigleys shut down the factory.

Years of weather, vandalism, and neglect damaged the historic, colorful tiles. After the turn of the millennium, Avalon's city council hired a local artist to restore the town's central fountain. Unfortunately, I couldn't discover her name, but the legend says that once she began the tile work, she didn't have time for other projects, and she spent the remainder of her life caring for Avalon's history.

During our May visit, one of the tasks that I enjoyed was getting up early and scouring Avalon for unique tiles. Most of the ceramic pieces on the central square have Moorish patterns, but along the backstreets, I found some unusual ones. My camera captured many of them, and I believe the collection included in this book may even be some of the oldest tiles in Avalon.



Plaza Fountain



Crosses



Herron



Spanish Galleon



Catilina Clipper



Love Birds

Avalon

In May 2022, my wife—Queen Anne—and I crossed off one of the items on her bucket list; a trip to Catalina. I hadn't been in decades, and this was her first trip. We were surprised how much an island only twenty-six miles offshore could seem like part of the Mediterranean. During the trip, I tried photographing things that show Catalina's charm: the architecture, the visitors, and the island's famous tiles. I hope you enjoy viewing my photographs as much as I did making them.