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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIAN CHANNEL ISLANDS

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FRANCIS HAWKINGS



The RCC Pilotage Foundation is grateful to Francis Hawkings for allowing us to publish his notes, arising from his extensive knowledge of the area.

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Caution

These notes have been prepared by the author on the basis of the information he has been able to obtain in the course of his visit to the areas described. In particular, soundings shown reflect the routes taken by the author and the absence of soundings does not indicate that depths are necessarily safe. The notes are in no way comprehensive and refer only to the conditions encountered at the time of the visits. The plans are simply sketches and do not represent the results of a survey of the places referred to. They should be used with extreme caution. The RCC Pilotage Foundation and the author has published these notes in the hope that they may be of some help to mariners but the safety of a vessel depends ultimately on the judgment of the skipper who should assess all information, published or unpublished.

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INTRODUCTION

The Channel Islands of Southern California break into two groups. To the north are four islands running east to west from Point Magu on the mainland: Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel. These are all easily accessible from Channel Islands Harbor (part of the town of Oxnard), Ventura or Santa Barbara. Further south lie Santa Barbara Island, Santa Catalina, San Nicolas and San Clemente. These lie closer to the Los Angeles and Long Beach/San Pedro mainland harbours.

Only Catalina is developed. San Nicolas and San Clemente are under the control of the military and not open to yachts. The remaining islands are either National Park or Nature Conservancy. This puts some constraints on hiking on the islands, in particular San Miguel (NPS) and the western half of Santa Cruz, W of Prisoner's Harbor (NC). Information is available at

- National Park Service: <http://www.nps.gov/chis/>
- Nature Conservancy: <http://nature.org/>

Details on applying for hiking permits for western Santa Cruz and San Miguel are in the respective island sections below.

The islands make a lovely cruising ground in all seasons. I recommend them as a stopping point on a cruise down from Alaska to Mexico. The islands are enjoyable and the mainland towns have all the facilities you can imagine. Los Angeles is an excellent place for transportation, flights, crew change, etc.

The mainland harbors also make a good place to lay a boat up for a winter season. These notes cover the islands and towns I know best, and are not intended to be comprehensive. Since there is an excellent cruising guide for the area and good charts (see below), the notes are more of a cruise planning guide than detailed navigational notes. Over the years I hope I will be able to add more.

BOOKS AND CHARTS

The book I use for the Channel Islands is by Brian M. Fagan (a Brit who teaches at a California university), which is excellent;

- *Cruising Guide to California's Channel Islands*, 1979, revised edition 1988, ISBN 0-930030-32-X.

This is now out of print, but you can buy used copies on the American Amazon site, www.amazon.com. Fagan has also written two more recent books on the same subject, which I would imagine are even better, and also available on Amazon:

- *Cruising Guide to Southern California's Offshore Islands: With Sailing Directions for the Santa Barbara Channel's Mainland Coast*, revised edition 1992, ISBN-13: 978-0963463500
- *The Cruising Guide to Central and Southern California: Golden Gate to Ensenada, Mexico, Including the Offshore Islands*, 2001, ISBN-13: 978-0071374644.

The US charts are good. The main NOAA charts are:

- Passage Charts
 - 18720 Point Dume to Purisima Point
 - 18740 San Diego to Santa Rosa Island

- Coastal Passage Charts
 - 18721 Santa Cruz Island to Purisima Point
 - 18746 San Pedro Channel; Dana Point Harbor
 - 18774 Gulf of Santa Catalina; Delmar Boat Basin Camp Pendleton
 - 18765 Approaches to San Diego Bay; Mission Bay
- Island, Coastal and Harbour Charts
 - 18724 Port Hueneme and Approaches; Port Hueneme
 - 18725 Port Hueneme to Santa Barbara
 - 18727 San Miguel Passage
 - 18728 Santa Cruz Channel
 - 18729 Anacapa Passage
 - 18744 Santa Monica Bay
 - 18756 Santa Barbara Island
 - 18757 Santa Catalina Island; Avalon Bay; Catalina Harbor; Isthmus Cove
 - 18749 San Pedro Bay; Anaheim Bay—Huntington Harbor
 - 18751 Los Angeles and Long Beach Harbors
 - 18772 Approaches to San Diego Bay
 - 18773 San Diego Bay

In chandlers like West Marine you will find annual almanacs for the west coast (Reed's) which include lights, radio beacons and tide tables, as well as good marina information. You can find small tide tables in local boat stores. There is no tidal/current atlas that I know of, which is a sad gap; it would be very useful.

WEATHER AND CONDITIONS

The weather is reasonably benign. You can sail all year round – indeed we leave our boats in the water 365 days a year.

Summer weather is hot onshore and cool offshore. A sea breeze builds around lunchtime as the land heats up, blowing 15 knots or so from the west in the afternoon and then fading away in the early evening. Nights are usually calm, as are the mornings.

Summer temperatures are in the 70s F by day at sea, down into perhaps the 50s at night. On land 80s are fairly usual, especially as you move away from the coast. But it is not humid.

Winter weather is not dissimilar, except when a Santa Ana wind is blowing. This is a dry offshore wind produced by high pressure over the inland high desert. It brings strong winds that blow down through the canyons from the east and out over the sea towards the islands, sometimes very strongly. The danger is that you get caught on the north side of the islands on a lee shore.

However, the weather forecasts are good and Santa Ana conditions are usually pretty obvious: very dry, unseasonably hot and easterly wind. So it is not that hard to avoid. The solutions are to go round to the south side of the islands (though beware that the Santa Ana can blow down off the tops of the islands too) or head for the mainland where the harbours are all perfectly sheltered marinas.

Winter temperatures are in the 60s F by day at sea, sometimes cooler, and perhaps the 40s at night.

Spring tends to be foggy, especially morning and night before the sun burns it off. May through July are worst for this. A cruise as late as July can be surprisingly grey.

Weather forecasts are good. There are continuous weather broadcasts on two VHF channels:

- WX1 162.55 MHz Los Angeles
- WX2 162.40 MHz Santa Barbara.

There is pretty much always a westerly swell, which is what eventually makes the surf for the Southern California beaches. This can make many of the Channel Islands anchorages rolly, even if the wind has dropped completely at night.

Partly to keep themselves aligned with the swell and partly because some anchorages get crowded on summer weekends, a lot of boats in Southern California put down a stern anchor. If you are in a crowded anchorage where others are doing so you pretty much have to as well. Although rather tedious, at least if you are expecting it you can have the proper gear ready. I use a 20lb Fisherman as a stern anchor.

Bottoms are mainly mud and sand. Kelp and sea grass on the bottom is an occasional problem, but in general the holding is pretty good.

All boats in the Channel Islands use holding tanks; in fact it is a legal requirement. A cruising yacht in transit without a holding tank should avoid Avalon, on Catalina, where the law is strictly policed, and probably Catalina's Two Harbors as well. There are pump-out facilities in the mainland marinas and you can pump out beyond the six-mile limit also.

MAINLAND HARBORS

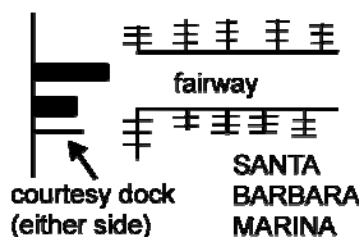
For the northern Channel Islands, the jumping off points are Channel Islands Harbor (CIH), Ventura or Santa Barbara. All are relatively small towns, but all have marinas and many facilities.

Channel Islands Harbor is the largest, with two boat yards, a chandler, a West Marine and all services.

Ventura is smaller but also has two yards and another West Marine.

Santa Barbara is the most picturesque of the three – it is a really lovely little town, and very pedestrian-friendly – but has a relatively small and crowded harbor. Short visits are fine and recommended; but I imagine that staying for any length of time might get difficult (and more expensive than CIH or Ventura).

As you enter Santa Barbara marina, steer for the head of the main channel where there is a temporary visitor dock to which you can moor alongside while you visit the marina office. The office assigns short-stay slips belonging to yachts that are away.



For the southern Channel Islands, and especially Catalina, Los Angeles or Long Beach/San Pedro are closer. LA is about an hour and a half south of CIH by road.

If you are making a passage S towards Los Angeles, **Paradise Cove** (34° 00'.8N, 118° 47'.1W) is a nice little final stopping point. This is just NE of Point Dume, off one of the Malibu Beaches. Nose your way in through the kelp to a suitable spot. There is some traffic noise from the Pacific Coast Highway which makes this anchorage a suitable transition point as you prepare yourself for the traffic of Los Angeles.

The harbor for LA is **Marina del Rey**, a huge basin with many marinas, a yard, West Marine and all facilities. There are visitor docks on the S side of the main fairway in front of a grassy park (33° 58'.6N, 118° 26'.8W). Visits are restricted to seven days and I believe you can reserve in advance.

Long Beach and **San Pedro** form another huge basin with many marinas inside. It is fine, though I cannot see a compelling reason to go to this area rather than Marina del Rey, except perhaps for a long stay.

To complete the picture, **San Diego** is the other medium-size city – further south than the Channel Islands, bigger than CIH/Ventura/SB but not as big as MDR/Los Angeles. It has excellent facilities for yachts. If I were picking somewhere for a jumping off point for an ocean voyage, I would actually chose San Diego over Marina del Rey, although transportation to San Diego is not quite as convenient as Los Angeles (two to three hours apart by road).

THE NORTHERN ISLANDS

Anacapa

Anacapa is the smallest and easternmost of the northern group, only 12 miles or so offshore from CIH and picturesque.

The only real anchorage is **Frenchy's Cove** in the middle of the north coast; 34° 00'.5N, 119° 24'.7W. It is pretty and offers surprising shelter from the prevailing westerly swell. But it is still more of a fair weather anchorage than a refuge for a windy night; depths of <30'.

The westerly swell tends to turn SW on the south side of the island, so the anchorages on the S side of Anacapa tend to be uncomfortable and not snug. I have contemplated spending a night in these, but have always ended up going round to Frenchy's.

Santa Cruz

A big and lovely island. Fagan lists some two dozen possible anchorages, though some of these are more like fair weather lunch stops than real anchorages.

The western portion of the island, west of Prisoner's, is owned by the Nature Conservancy. To hike on this part of the island, you need a permit. Contact scilandingspermit@tnc.org or <http://nature.org/> for a permit; allow at least 15 business days, apparently. You do not need a permit to walk on the eastern, National Park portion of Santa Cruz.

Santa Cruz: East End

The eastern end of the island is more crowded than the west end. At the extreme eastern end are two rather open roadsteads, **Smugglers** (34° 01'.2N 119° 32'.4W) and **Yellowbanks**, about half a mile south at 34° 00'.7N 119° 32'.6W. Both are easily accessible day and night and provide good shelter from westerly winds, but not such good protection from surge – the swell bends round the corners of the island and makes them roly.

Smugglers is perhaps the prettier of the two because it is a deeper bay. I prefer Yellowbanks, at least in good weather, because it is less crowded (one weekend, for example, I counted nine boats in Yellowbanks and more than twenty in Smugglers) and it is pretty enough. Depths 25-30'. Surge tends to increase if you go shallower than 25'.

You won't find solitude in these anchorages but they are useful and pleasant. Hiking ashore at Smugglers.

Santa Cruz: North Coast

Sailing west on the north side of Santa Cruz, the next anchorage is **Little Scorpion** (34° 02'.7N 119° 32'.7W). I am very fond of Little Scorpion, though it tends to be too popular on weekends. The shelter is formed by a small island that separates Little Scorpion from Scorpion to the west. You want to tuck yourself as far in the west as possible, typically in depths of <35'. If there are no other boats there and you can get shallower than 30' the shelter is excellent. If the anchorage is crowded you will find yourself in the outer half in depths as much as 60' and more roly. People put down stern anchors here. Easy access at night. Tide sets SE→NW on the flood. The only drawback is the smell of pelican guano sometimes.

Scorpion, half a mile to the west, is not so attractive – more open, not such good shelter, not so pretty, and used by daytrip boats from the mainland to bring in parties of kayakers. I have never spent a night here; unless Little Scorpion was very full you wouldn't need to.

West of Scorpion, to Cavern Point, there are lovely caves in the cliffs, which is what the kayakers come for. They are pretty interesting and can be explored by dinghy from the Scorpions.

The next, intriguing place west of Cavern Point is **Potato Bay**, a circular anchorage carved in the cliff with a narrow entrance. I have never spent a night here because it feels vulnerable to the west and because it is small; so if there are other boats there already it feels crowded. It is an interesting place to visit, though, especially on a weekday, and if the swell was slight and the weather was settled would be a fun place to spend the night.

West of Potato Bay is **Chinese Harbor**. I spent a night here once but the term 'harbor' is generous – I don't recommend it (exposed).

At more or less the mid-point of the north side of Santa Cruz is **Prisoners** (34° 01'.4N 119° 41'.2W). It is not the prettiest but it is an excellent utility anchorage – easy access day or night, reasonable depths (25-30', mud), surprisingly good shelter from the west and you don't need a stern anchor.

West of Prisoners there is a string of lovely anchorages, perhaps the best on Santa Cruz: **Pelican** and **Fry's** are the best known, with **Twin Harbors**, **Orizaba** and **Platt's** in between. But they are small and there are always other boats there on weekends, so it is years since I have stopped in any of them. So you can't really count on them as stops, but if you are lucky and you find them uncrowded, they are well worth a stop. Fagan has good descriptions.

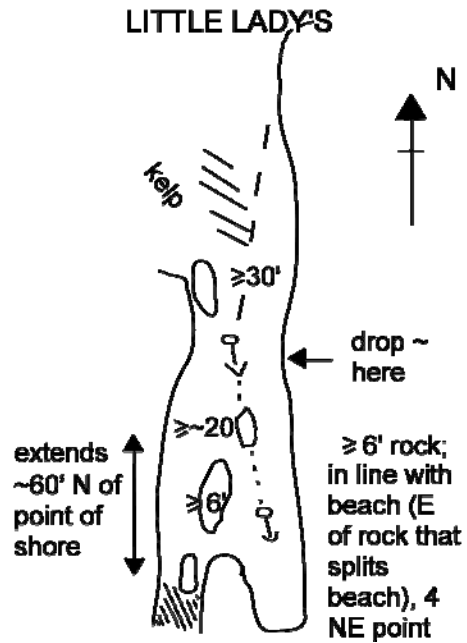
To me, Diablo Point is where the fun really starts on Santa Cruz. There are far fewer boats west of Diablo and you start to find the solitude of a real cruising ground.

Immediately west of the point is **Diablo** (34° 03'.4N 119° 45'.9W), one of my favorite anchorages in the Channel Islands. You enter east of an easily identifiable white rock (guano) and find yourself in a narrow slit of a canyon. There is really only room for one boat in the inner harbour, though a second can lie out towards the mouth. The shelter is excellent, except from due N, and little or no surge.

I put down a second anchor in Diablo even when alone here because the cove is too narrow to swing. The W wind outside tends to bounce off the E wall of the canyon and blow over the anchorage from approx NE, so a stern anchor also keeps you off the rocks on the W side. Drop the anchor level with the cave on the west side and fall back level with a semi-detached fish-like rock on the west rock face (you will see what I mean), about 25'. Great atmosphere and interesting sea lions and pelicans.

Next along the rugged coast to west is another pair of terrific anchorages, **Lady's and Little Lady's** (34° 03'.3N 119° 47'.3W). Lady's is rather like Diablo, snug with good shelter from W wind and swell. It too is a tight fit and ideally you want it to yourself. Holding is OK, 20-25', though there is kelp. Use a stern anchor as the wind also tends to bounce off the E cliff or even blow down the canyon from the S.

In the entrance to Lady's there is another tiny anchorage running almost N-S, Little Lady's. It is very intriguing and I have taken Plainsong in there but never anchored for the night. You would want settled weather and little swell, and it must be empty – there would not be enough room to turn if there were another boat inside.



The entrance is deep but encumbered with kelp; the W side is slightly better. The pool is well sheltered, with not much surge, at least in settled conditions. You would want drop your anchor only just inside the entrance, to fall back into the middle of the pool.

Beware going too far S and lay out a stern anchor down the E side of the pool to keep the boat away from a rock, minimum depth 6' or so, on the W side of the anchorage one to two boat lengths N of the shore in the SW corner. The rock lies on a line between the SW beach, E of the rock that splits the beach, and the point to the NE of the entrance, at the top right of the sketch above at the 'D' in the word 'LADY'S'.

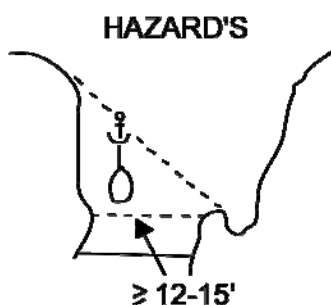
West of Lady's there are two other useable anchorages on the N coast of Santa Cruz.

Cueva Valdaze (as it is spelt on the chart; Fagan says Cueva Valdez; 34° 03'.2N 119° 49'.1W) is easy of access and spacious. You don't need a stern anchor if you are there alone. Pleasant; sandy beach with shingle at the top and interesting rock formations and caves. But: it is roly. The W swell and wind curve so that they blow straight into the anchorage. I found it OK in 15-20 knots of wind outside and 2-3' waves, though it wasn't very comfortable, and it calms down at night if/as the wind drops. So best in fair weather and not as good as Diablo or Lady's, but a useful alternative if they are full.



Fagan says: "...a huge rock (least depth 5 feet) ... lies just below the surface about 150 feet from the mouth of the cave approximately the same distance from the beach."

I prefer **Hazard's** (34° 03'.6N 119° 49'.8W) to Cueva Valdaze. It has surprisingly good shelter from the W wind, though it too is sloppy. Good depths, 20-25', good holding, though kelp. Pleasant.



Santa Cruz: West End

At the west end of Santa Cruz there is an anchorage called **Forney's Cove** (34° 03'.4N 119° 55'.1W). Actually, I have only been there once, in thick fog, but it captivated me. The anchorage is formed by a cluster of rocks that break the swell from the west. If there were a very big swell running, it might not be enough protection; but it was OK in 3-5' W swell.

In the approach, beware of the Potato Patch, a shallow patch offshore from Fraser Point, well marked on the chart – short breaking seas. Entrance to Forney's itself is relatively straightforward: due north on 119° 55'W, picking your way through the kelp. Anchor in 25-30' feet or so.

Santa Cruz: South Coast

The south coast of Santa Cruz has a rather different feel to the north. It is still rugged, but the anchorages lose the sun in the late afternoon, so by the time you are anchoring it can seem a bit gloomy. You would think that this side would give good protection, which it generally does, but the swell curls along the south side and the anchorages can be rolly.

Several anchorages on the south coast are popular enough to be off-putting. The prettiest is **Coches Prietos** (outer anchorage: 33° 57'.9N 119° 42'.6W), which has a lovely inner pool. I've not anchored in this pool, but I went in to take a look once and it seemed as if you could anchor in about 30' off the beach. Of course, the pool gets crowded on the weekends and if you can get in you would definitely need a stern anchor. The outer anchorage is deep (~50') but surprisingly comfortable; most boats use only a single anchor. E stream on the flood.

Just east of Coches Prietos is **Albert's** (33° 58'.2N 119° 41'.9W). This is preferable to the outer anchorage at Coches Prietos, with less swell and better protection from SW (they both give shelter from points W through NE or so). It is comfortable in gusty W-NW. Fairly deep to stay out of the surge – 35'+. The sun goes behind the hill early, but it is pretty in the morning.

Further west the other well known anchorage is **Willow's**. I haven't spent a night here, but it is attractive. There are two central islands and you can anchor on either side. The west side looked the better of the two, though it is not very big.

Santa Rosa

I've only partially explored Santa Rosa. The main anchorage is **Becher's Bay** at the east end of the island (northwest anchorage: $34^{\circ} 00'.6N$ $120^{\circ} 02'.7W$). This is a long open bay with a nice sandy shore. The NW anchorage is quite good, with little swell. The wind may blow hard off the island, but the holding appears to be good (sand, I believe). Off the pier, amongst the kelp, is fine in about 25', but not very picturesque.

You could move further S along the beach and pick your spot pretty much anywhere, according to conditions.

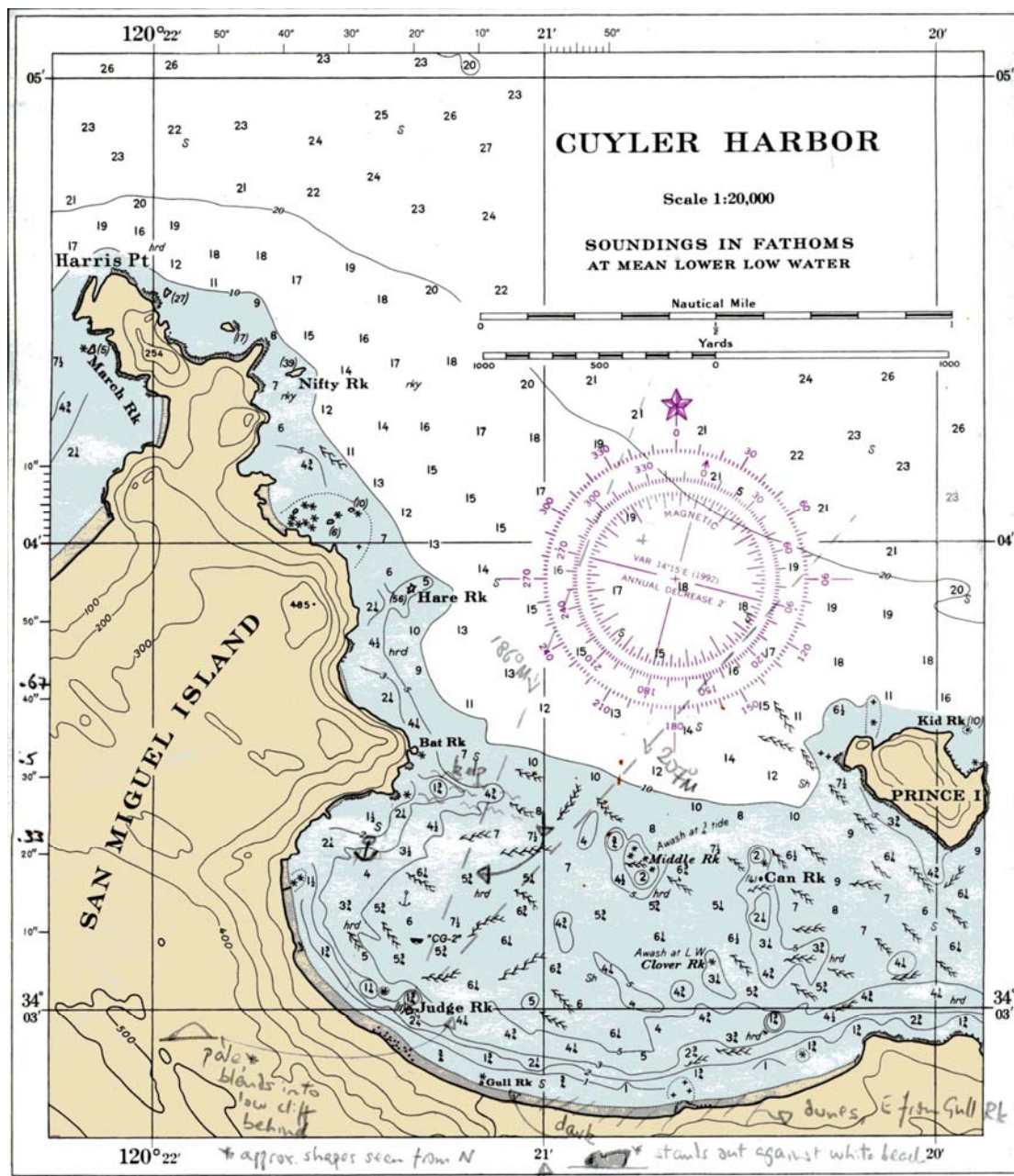
The SE anchorage is the pretty corner in this bay – a little nick in the shoreline before it runs out eastwards to Skunk Point. But it is shallow, so you cannot tuck yourself very far in. In low swell conditions, this is the place in Becher's Bay to be; but in significant swell I think it would be roly. Kelp extends SE from the N point of the bay.

There are some anchorages on the S side of the island, but the only one I have looked at so far is **Eagle Rock**. This is more of a roadstead than a bay. Like the S coast of Santa Cruz it is subject to surge, and there were strong gusts off the cliffs on a windy W'ly day. Neither the bay nor Eagle Rock itself – low and white on top from guano – are very conspicuous as you approach. Best for settled weather, I think.

San Miguel

My favorite of all the islands – isolated, bracing, a little challenging by Southern California standards. The main anchorage is **Cuyler Harbor** ($34^{\circ} 03'.3N$ $120^{\circ} 21'.4W$). It provides good shelter and very good holding (sand) in 25-35'. Can be entered day or night, steering due S on $120^{\circ} 21'.0W$. Kelp extends ESE from Bat Rock; turn W into anchorage once you are clear S of this kelp, then tuck up into NW corner for an anchoring spot. At night, turn W at $34^{\circ} 03'.3N$.

Gull Rock is dark against the white sand where the dunes begin, a slightly jagged, square-ish shape. Judge Rock is rounded in shape and pale; it tends to blend into the rocks on the beach and the pale, low cliff behind. See sketches on accompanying chart, extracted from NOAA chart 18727.



View at 200% for full detail.

The wind tends to blow harder in the anchorage, down off the cliffs, than outside, but the bay does a good job of killing the swell. No need for a stern anchor.

Land on the beach near the two palm trees. If you walk S along the beach you will find a trail leading up the canyon to the plateau on top of the island. Forking left at the top of the steps takes you to the ranger station and the Cabrillo lookout point (the Portuguese explorer Cabrillo, sailing for Spain, is alleged to have died here in 1543).



You cannot hike on the island beyond the beach and the ranger station without a permit. Hiking permits can be obtained by calling the National Park Service on (805) 658-5711 – have a pencil ready because you are asked to leave a message with a whole list of things, including a mailing address. The Park Service then communicates with the ranger by radio.

I was not asked to show my permit in 2007, so I imagine that the absence of a mailing address would not be an obstacle for a yacht in transit. Even with a permit, you can only hike in the company of a ranger. Full information at <http://www.nps.gov/chis/>

This may all seem like a hassle, but it is worth it. The island is lovely, the rangers are very interesting and knowledgeable and they add a lot to the hike. I have not yet done it, but there is a 15-mile hike to Point Bennett at the W end of San Miguel where elephant seals and sea lions breed.

SOUTHERN ISLANDS

The southern islands of note are really Santa Barbara Island and Santa Catalina Island, since San Nicolas and San Clemente are closed to yachts.

Santa Barbara Island

Another little gem, also a National Park Service island.



The anchorage is on the E side of the island. It is deep, 30-45'+. Some swell comes round Arch Point, so the S end of the anchorage is favoured, but it is comfortable with the typical 3-5' swell outside.

Approaching from N there is a large path of kelp 0.5-1 cable E of Arch Point with clear passage, ~50', between it and the point.

You can land by ladder (beware of the sea lions) and climb up to the top of the island where there is a ranger station.

Santa Catalina Island

This is the Channel Islands' party place. Avalon, at the SE end, is a nice little town. You can get provisions there, but you would choose the mainland over Avalon for a big shop. It is much frequented by boats from the mainland. I have never taken *Plainsong* there. Apparently the harbor master puts dye pellets in each yacht's head to enforce the holding tank requirement.

Two Harbors is the other main anchorage. There are two anchorages, in fact, one either side of a narrow isthmus that almost cuts Catalina in two. The northern anchorage, called Isthmus Cove, gets very crowded and is rolly. The southern anchorage, known locally as Cat Harbor, is also very crowded but I like it better. Either side you may be able to get a mooring from the harbor master; if not you just have to anchor as best you can.

It is a short walk from one side of the isthmus to the other. There is a bar and restaurant on the Isthmus Cove side.

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