

## California Diving Tips

From Ann Geiger (former Blue Planet instructor)

### Southern California Must See: Catalina Island

Catalina is the only occupied one of the eight Channel Islands off southern California. Avalon is the primary community. An underwater park was created there in the early 1970s, at a location called Casino Point. (It is next to a building called the Casino, which in this case means gathering place rather than gambling). This is one of the easiest places to dive in California, and probably the most oriented to tourists. Don your gear, walk down the stairs, and in you go to a classic kelp forest.

I strongly recommend [Catalina Scuba Luv](#). They are owned by a wonderful husband and wife team (with several kids who by now are adults). They take very good care of their customers. They offer packages that include lodging and diving, as well as transportation on the Catalina Express (boat from LA to Avalon). I suggest a package that includes both shore diving at Casino Point and boat diving (request Ship Rock, Bird Rock, or Eagle Reef).

Avalon is a neat community, lots of cute restaurants and shops, right on the ocean. A Jeep tour of the back country is highly recommended. You could easily spend 3 or 4 days here just hitting the highlights. Definitely try to make an overnight trip.

### Other Southern California Options

Of the four northern Channel Islands, a trip to Anacapa is well worth it. This is the closest island to the coast and includes many different dive sites – underwater arch, cavern, wreck, and kelp forest. The newest and fastest boat there is [The Raptor](#). I've done two trips with them and they do a nice job.

Of the four southern Channel Islands, a trip to Santa Barbara is the best option. There is a sea lion rookery on the island and most of the time they will come and play with divers. Amazing. One of the nicer boats in LA is [Great Escape](#). Santa Barbara trips depart at 2 or 3 am, so you will spend the night on the boat. Great Escape has bunks and a couple of "staterooms" (basically bunks with a door). You'll need a sleeping bag. Sometimes ocean conditions require them to go to another island.

Beach diving is popular in Orange County. Crescent Bay in Laguna Beach has the easiest exit and entry. Sometimes beach dives can be amazing (I've seen sea lions and bat rays), other times they can be blah (poor visibility). The most commonly used dive shop in the area is [Laguna Sea Sports](#).

San Diego is home to "wreck alley." They have sunk a number of ships to serve as artificial reefs, the Yukon being the best known (300' plus Canadian destroyer). There is also amazing kelp forest off Point Loma (they harvest kelp there). Further off shore are the Coronados Islands, where you can occasionally see sea lions. The classic dive boat there is the [Lois Ann](#), which has always been well run. You can also shore dive at a variety of places, La Jolla Cove being the most frequented.

### Northern California Must See: [Point Lobos](#)

This area has been preserved for a long time and they limit the number of divers who access the area each day. I had one of my best dives ever here.

## Other Northern California Option: Monterey

There are both shore and boat diving options. Lots of pretty areas close to shore. Make sure to spend some time at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Not familiar enough with dive shops or boats to make any recommendations.

## Central Coast Options

There is beach diving all along the coast. It is not for the faint of heart and I never did much.

The most accessible beach diving is probably in the Malibu area. [Malibu Divers](#) is the classic dive shop and has been around forever.

There is some boat diving off the coast. [Truth Aquatics](#) is an established boat diving company. I went once and they were excellent. They also do trips to the Northern Channel Islands (see above). These are often overnight trips with people sleeping in bunks.

## General Tips

The dominant current in California comes from the Arctic, so the water is refreshing. It can be as low as 50 degrees and as high as 70. Warmest in August/September. Too warm makes the kelp go away, so June/July tend to be very good. Water in the LA basin is somewhat warmer because there is a large eddy due to the coast curving in. Divers need a 7 mm wetsuit with full foot fins, gloves, and a hood (3 mm hooded vest even better). Some divers wear 5 or 7 mm gloves but they restrict movement. I wore tropical gloves but my hands did get cold now and then. Remember to weight accordingly. Steel tanks with neutral or negative buoyancy are much more common than aluminum positive buoyancy because of the weight benefits.

Diving in California is much more of a locals activity than something for tourists. Boats do not automatically offer dive guides, so that is something to check into in advance. Some boats carry 3 divemasters so 2 can supervise diving at the surface while another is available to guide folks. Anyone new to beach diving there should hire a guide from a shop. As I've noted, some trips require overnight stays in bunks. It's a fun adventure! Nothing like waking up to the sound of the anchor chain spooling out.

Strongly recommend that anyone going to California get certified as Advanced Open Water and, if possible, complete an underwater navigation course. Some of those dives should include wearing hoods and gloves for practice.