Take a Rare Tour of Catalina Island's Outback

Catalina Island Outback, Catalina Island

If you haven't visited Southern California's very own island paradise, Catalina Island, lately, no problem — it hasn't changed much. Of course, that is the charm of this island gem, located just 21 miles offshore.The beauty of Catalina never ceases to amaze — the sparkling blue water that meets with the tiny Mediterranean-style village of Avalon is further enhanced by the island's green, towering hills that embrace the onesquare- mile town. But beyond Avalon lies the unspoiled beauty of the island, one of the few places in Southern California that is virtually the same as it was when the Spanish explorers landed in 1542. The beaches, sunshine and shops are enough to lure most visitors to Catalina, but it is the fortunate tourist who also takes time to explore the island's rich history, which is integrally linked to its off-the-beaten-path territory, preserved in its natural state for all posterity. The island's brand new "Cape Canyon Tour" gives visitors a rare chance to experience the "wild side" of the island and do it in style. An open-air Mercedes Benz Unimog vehicle has been specially outfitted to take a dozen lucky adventurers on a route that no other tour can venture.The tour features a scenic drive along the ridge line overlooking coves west of Avalon, as well as a guided tour of the American Bald Eagle Habitat at famed Middle Ranch, where passengers learn about the Catalina Island Conservancy's restoration projects and conservation efforts around the island. The tour continues up Cape Canyon for a unique and stunning view of Catalina's outback, then on to lunch at the Airport-in-the-Sky. The intimate, up-close look also includes several photo stops with breathtaking vistas of the ocean and Avalon. The approximately four-hour tour departs from Avalon each morning at 9 a.m., making it a day trip possibility.The price is $89 per person and includes lunch; the very personalized tour is limited to 12 passengers, so reserve early. How to Get There: Take the I-10 west to the 60 freeway; merge onto the 91 west toward Riverside/Beach cities. Merge onto the I-710 south toward Long Beach; follow signs to downtown to Golden Shore and turn right to the terminal for the Catalina Express. Travel time to Long Beach is approximately 2 hours. Take the Catalina Express from the Long Beach Terminal. For schedule information and reservations, call 310-519-1212; early-day arrival and late-day return cruises are available for day-trippers. The pleasant, comfortable trip takes less than an hour; inquire about Commodore Lounge seating for extra-cushy travel privileges. Round-trip fares begin at $49 per person. Where to Stay: Hotel Villa Portofino 111 Crescent Ave. P.O. Box 127 Avalon, CA 90704 310-510-0555 or 888-510-0555 Inn on Mount Ada P.O. Box 2560 Avalon, CA 90704 310-510-2030 The Avalon Hotel Avalon, CA 90704 310-510-7070 www.theavalonhotel.com Tour Information/ Reservations: Discovery Tours 310- 510-TOUR More Information: Catalina Island Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau 310-510-1520 www.CatalinaChamber.com

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