

A real hot spot in summer, Catalina still has lots to offer during rest of year; from submarine tours to posh rooms

By **ROBIN RAUZI**
Los Angeles Times

AVALON —

It was impossible to secure even a towel-sized plot of sand on Santa Catalina Island the first time I visited on a Labor Day weekend some years back. Avalon's visitors were shoulder-to-shoulder on the beach. The main drag was a golf-cart traffic jam.

It was a festive end-of-summer scene, but like any crowded party, it was more exhausting than rejuvenating.

The Catalina I discovered in mid-November hardly seemed like the same island. Even on a warm and clear Sunday afternoon, there was room to breathe — deeply. The long shadows of palm trees stretched uninterrupted across the beach toward Avalon Bay. It was so quiet that you could hear the webbed feet of seagulls slapping against wood as they paced the empty Green Pleasure Pier.

My mother and I needed an emotional recharge by the time we climbed aboard a Catalina Express ferry on Friday morning. Mom had spent the last months as a full-time volunteer for John Kerry's presidential campaign in Ohio; she had emerged from the election wringer a little frayed. I had just finished remodeling much of my house but still had no furniture. I'd been sitting on the floor for two months. So when Mom came to Los Angeles, I knew we needed a relaxing weekend away. And a comfortable place to sit.

We checked into the Avalon Hotel, newly opened in July after four years of remodeling. The building, formerly the far less fashionable Bay View Hotel, received a from-the-studs-up makeover.

The sunny yellow exterior is trimmed with slate green and Catalina-style tiles. Inside, the 15 rooms have been done in California Craftsman style, with mica-shaded lamps, African mahogany wainscoting and



On Catalina Adventure Tours' submarine, passengers can see swaying forests of laddler kelp and California's "state marine fish," the garibaldi. Catalina Adventure Tours offers a new view of the harbor.

richly colored bed linens.

Our south-facing room on the second floor had a view of Avalon Bay and a queen-size bed so high off the floor that we could have used a stepladder. Although none of the rooms is particularly large, the owners have incorporated some luxuries in support of their boutique-hotel aspirations. DVD play-

ers are connected to flat-screen LCD televisions; a small library of movies is at the front desk. Also available for overnight loan: laptop computers to take advantage of the Ethernet ports in each room.

The technology was nice, but it was the Supple-Pedic memory foam mattresses and pillows swathed in silky

350-thread-count sheets that made the Avalon feel like a splurge, which it was. We had chosen our room, which cost \$295 a night, because it was one of three that had an additional drop-down Murphy bed. Pricey, yes, but a bargain compared with the high-season \$495 rack rate. Rooms without balconies or ocean views start at \$195 for weekend nights in the winter, comparable to the 48-room Hotel Metropole next door.

Similar discounts were to be found on the Pleasure Pier, where tour companies sell tickets. Around lunchtime, Catalina Adventure Tours was hawkking tickets for its afternoon submarine tour, usually \$35 for adults, at the kids' rate of \$18.

Below deck on the bright yellow Nautilus, a video monitor showed high-tech graphics, as if we'd boarded the USS Enterprise. The "Star Trek"-esque recorded spiel, clearly created for the youngest, most enthusiastic passengers, was out of step with our sedate crowd. But after "Dive! Dive! Dive!" we slipped "one-point-six feet" under the surface, and the Pacific offered up its own quieter special effects. Swaying forests of laddler kelp — which can grow up to 2 feet a day — glowed yellow in the sunlight filtering through the clear water. Kelp bass darted between the flat leaves. Hundreds of well-trained opaleye fish crowded the sides of the

Please turn to CATALINA / G2

IF YOU GO

EXPENSES FOR THIS TRIP

- **Transportation:** Catalina Express round-trip and port parking: \$128.00
 - **Lodging:** Avalon Hotel, two nights with breakfast, tax: \$660.00
 - **Dinner:** The Landing: \$54.00
Ristorante Villa Portofino: \$68.00
 - **Submarine tour:** Catalina Adventure Tours: \$36.00
 - **Casino tour and museum:** Discovery Tours: \$25.00
 - **Movie:** Avalon Theatre: \$16.00
 - **Admission:** Botanical garden: \$10.00
 - **Other meals:** \$92.00
 - **Final tab:** \$1,089.00
- CONTACT INFORMATION:**
- **Avalon Hotel**
124 Whitley Ave., P.O. Box 706, Avalon, CA 90704; (310) 510-7070, www.threavalonhotel.com.
 - **Catalina Adventure Tours**
Green Pleasure Pier, P.O. Box 797, Avalon, CA 90704; (310) 510-2888, www.catalinaadventuretours.com.
 - **Discovery Tours**
Santa Catalina Island Co., P.O. Box 737, Avalon, CA 90704; (800) 626-1496, www.scico.com.
 - **Avalon Theatre**
(310) 510-0179.