

# ADVENTURE ON THE HIGH SEAS 'ROUND SANTA CRUZ ISLAND

by Matt Kettmann

**W**ithout man's mastery of the ways of the wind, the globe would likely have remained flat in the eyes of the people, for explorers could never have pushed toward the horizon in their multi-sailed crafts to determine that there was no edge and that exotic lands lay beyond. These days, for the lot of us who get around by driving cars and taking the occasional jet plane, the dynamics of wind only hit our radar screens when it comes to whether it's too windy outside or not breezy enough.

Still, there are modern-day humans finding the adventurous thrills that fueled the explorers of yesteryear by mastering the wind. For those of us in Santa Barbara, such quests for exploratory excitement can be found in our front yard—a sailboat cruise to the Channel Islands combines big waves, bigger winds, and pristine landscapes to create a truly authentic adventure.

To be part of such a voyage, my friend Joanna and I joined Dave and Cheryl, a couple from Naples, Florida, on an overnight, springtime jaunt to Santa Cruz Island. It was to be Dave and Cheryl's bareboat charter class, offered by the Santa Barbara Sailing Center and taught by a salty dog named Captain Rob Bollay. If they passed—which entailed getting us there and back alive—the Florida couple would be licensed to rent sailboats anywhere in the world, a valuable opportunity that has made the bareboat class one of the center's most popular.

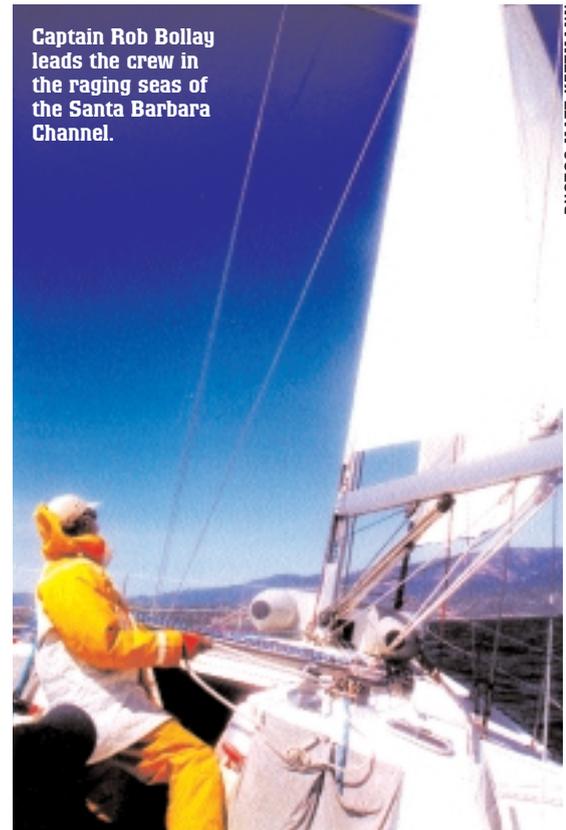
## Island Bound

Early one Thursday morning in mid March, Joanna and I met Dave, Cheryl, and Captain Rob on deck of the 42-foot *Calafia* as they went through the preparations for the four-hour voyage to Santa Cruz Island. As they checked the bilge, tested the steering wheel, filled in the log book, and made sure all the necessary "sheets"—boat talk for ropes—were on board, Rob, a sailing teacher for 20-plus years, calmed any worries we had about the two relative newcomers to sailboating, taking us across the sometimes dangerous Santa Barbara Channel. More or less, the students are at the helm the whole time—and capable of making a learning mistake or two—but, Rob explained, "I don't let them get into trouble."

Soon we were adrift in the harbor, Dave at the helm and Cheryl readying the boat to go under wind power when the weather was right. As we cruised past Leadbetter Beach, Cheryl went about "taking fixes," or plotting navigational points on a big map. With Stearns Wharf and the Mesa lighthouse as reference points, Cheryl used a GPS-aided compass to triangulate our position. When such points aren't visible (which happened later that day) an old-school technique called "dead reckoning"—which was employed by Columbus—is the fallback method, whereby math and previously known

locations are combined to estimate relative location.

As we got deeper into the channel the wind picked up to about 15 knots, causing the two-man crew to "reef" (or shrink) the sails. Our heads were a-swivel, checking north and south, as we entered the perilous shipping lanes. Right about the time I



Captain Rob Bollay leads the crew in the raging seas of the Santa Barbara Channel.

PHOTOS MATT KETTMANN

asked if accidents between small boats and huge freighters ever happened, the Coast Guard announced over the radio that a small boat from San Pedro on its way to Cabo San Lucas had gone missing. So the threat of danger is quite real, even though that particular boater was later found okay, wasting his day away off San Clemente Island.

As the wind moved us along, it became clear that sailing isn't for everyone. Joanna had turned quite green; her sickness peaked a couple times, and she went into a slumber, hiding in the bunks below after saying, "I think I like looking at boats more than being on them." The *Calafia* kept on—toward a "w" atop Santa Cruz Island—but then caught word from the boat *Rhapsody* that Painted Cave, our destination, was too rough. We changed direction slightly, ate lunch, and we arrived within the four hours it typically takes to reach the island.

## Isle of Enchantment

It was the heart of spring, and the normally brownish mountains and hillsides of Santa Cruz Island were a dazzling green, pockmarked with yellow wildflowers and buttressed by craggy, orange- and ash-colored sea cliffs. Our redirection brought us near the shore at Cueva Valdez, a rough anchorage with a nice beach. We cruised east from there into Lady's Harbor, whose protected beach was filled with basking seals and sea lions. Due to the turbidity of the sea that afternoon, we only got to peek in Baby's Harbor, which is next door to Lady's, but through the lush trees we could see exactly where a deep freshwater swimming hole sat. Next was Fry's, home to a couple dozen cruisers in the summertime. The scarped cliffs

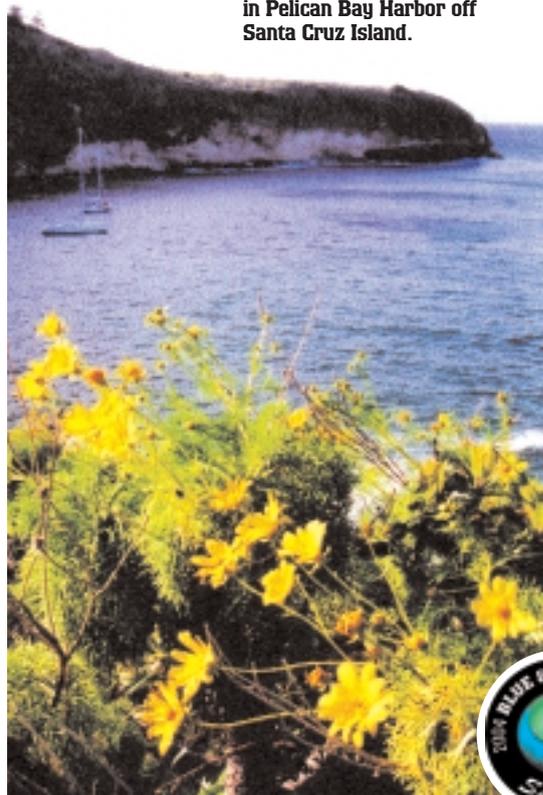
there still echo the past—the big boulder used on the Santa Barbara Breakwater actually came from Fry’s. There’s even an old railroad track there and a few holds where rock barges tied down.

From Fry’s, we passed Diablo Point, the most important and prominent point on the north side of the island. The waters were confusing, swirling every which way, and the winds alternated from offshore to onshore.

Around the next corner was Pelican Bay, a safe cove surrounded by a beautiful landscape of a thick oak forest, out-of-place pine trees, and countless coreopsis bushes. This was our home for the evening. *Rhapsody* was already there—with my former sailing instructor John Paine on board—as was another boat, which, as we went through the not-so-easy task of anchoring, we learned was having engine trouble. Once anchored, Rob went off to help the other boat; I donned some swim trunks and jumped into the cold waters.

Refreshed from the plunge, I was ready to go toward the shore when Rob returned with the inflatable dinghy. Joanna was looking less green now, and having never set foot on the island, was game for a landing attempt on the rough, rock-banked shore. I was oaring toward the shelf and trying to come up with some landing plan when,

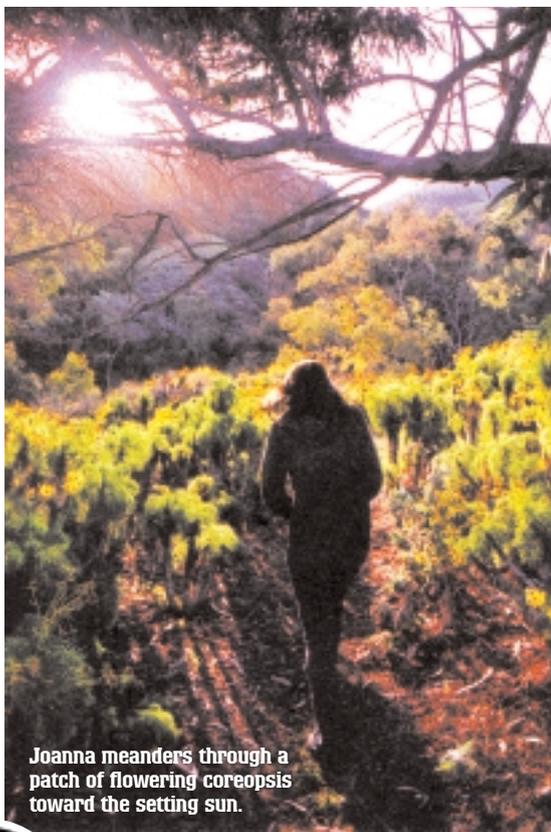
**The *Calafia* anchored overnight in Pelican Bay Harbor off Santa Cruz Island.**



actually once the site of a speakeasy and, possibly, a brothel. During Prohibition times, Pelican Bay was a hotspot for Hollywood types who wanted a bite to eat and a drink or two—and maybe more—during a night in one of the old cabins. We had our wine and a nice spaghetti dinner, but a big steak and a few cocktails at some seaside speakeasy wouldn’t have hurt either.

## Homecoming

Our night of deep sleep was only broken by a few big rockin’ swells, harbingers of the wild winds and waves that occurred the next day. After a quick breakfast, a timid Cheryl and Dave looked out across the channel, where white caps as far as the eye could see indicated raging seas. Rob smiled, and I was positive that after this day, these two students would be ready to tackle just about anything in the Gulf of Mexico when they went back to west Florida. But before crossing, we sailed by Prisoner’s Harbor, so named for the group of miscreants left there to form a penal colony and



**Joanna meanders through a patch of flowering coreopsis toward the setting sun.**



all of a sudden, we were there. Somewhat panicked, I yelled, “Get out!” to Joanna, who hesitated, then went just as the receding wave pulled us back out. Half of her fell in the ocean, and I imagined the next wave pushing the boat over her, crushing her between the rocks and the bottom of the dinghy. So I grabbed her arm and yanked her now wet body into the boat. We briefly contemplated just going back to the *Calafia*, but then decided to give it another go. This time, we were successful, and after pulling the boat to a safe spot, checked out the blood dribbling down her ankle.

We spent the next hour or so walking around the island, checking out agaves on a magical point, going up a creek bed filled with rainbow-colored rocks, and finding a surreal site of dwarffish, blooming coreopsis plants fading into a dense oak forest. Evidence of the nonnative pigs that ravage the island was everywhere, from grunts and snorts in the bushes to entire fields torn to pieces by their curious snouts. Luckily, we didn’t have a run-in with the piggies and the ride back to the sailboat was uneventful.

Over dinner that night, Rob told us that where we hiked and the foundations we saw were

instructed to build themselves houses. (They built a boat instead and sailed back to the mainland.)

Cheryl turned the boat back toward Santa Barbara as Dave got the sails ready for some serious cruising. Sure enough, the 25-knot winds grabbed hold and we jammed through 10-foot swells, homeward bound. I scurried about with my hands on deck, ducking the surges of water that came over the bow and snapping the occasional picture. Suddenly, Cheryl noticed a rip in the mainsail, and drastic measures were employed to reef in the sail to the correct point. “Good pick-up,” offered Rob, dressed head-to-toe in yellow “foulies,” a k a foul-weather gear.

With such a strong wind, the selected angle of attack rarely needed to be altered, and Cheryl and Dave learned the subtleties of letting the boat sail itself while holding it in line as waves crashed over the bow. We passed a few massive tankers with no incident and, after quite a few more thrilling splashes, were switched to motor power as we entered the safe and tranquil Santa Barbara Harbor. We were alive, Cheryl and Dave had passed their class, and our modern-day adventure had come to a close.

**To get your bareboat charter license or just learn the basics, call the Santa Barbara Sailing Center at 962-2826 or visit [www.sbsail.com](http://www.sbsail.com).**

# ROCK CLIMBING: LIVIN' ON THE LEDGE

by Matt Kettmann

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**T**he thoughts raced through my head faster than the blood coursed through my quivering muscles. “I can’t do it. I can’t go any farther. It’s . . . just . . . impossible. No, wait! I can do it! Just one more grab, one more step up.” “Okay,” my mind continued, “I’m gonna go for it.” And with that, my foot found another tiny toehold, my fingers another cherry-sized crevice.

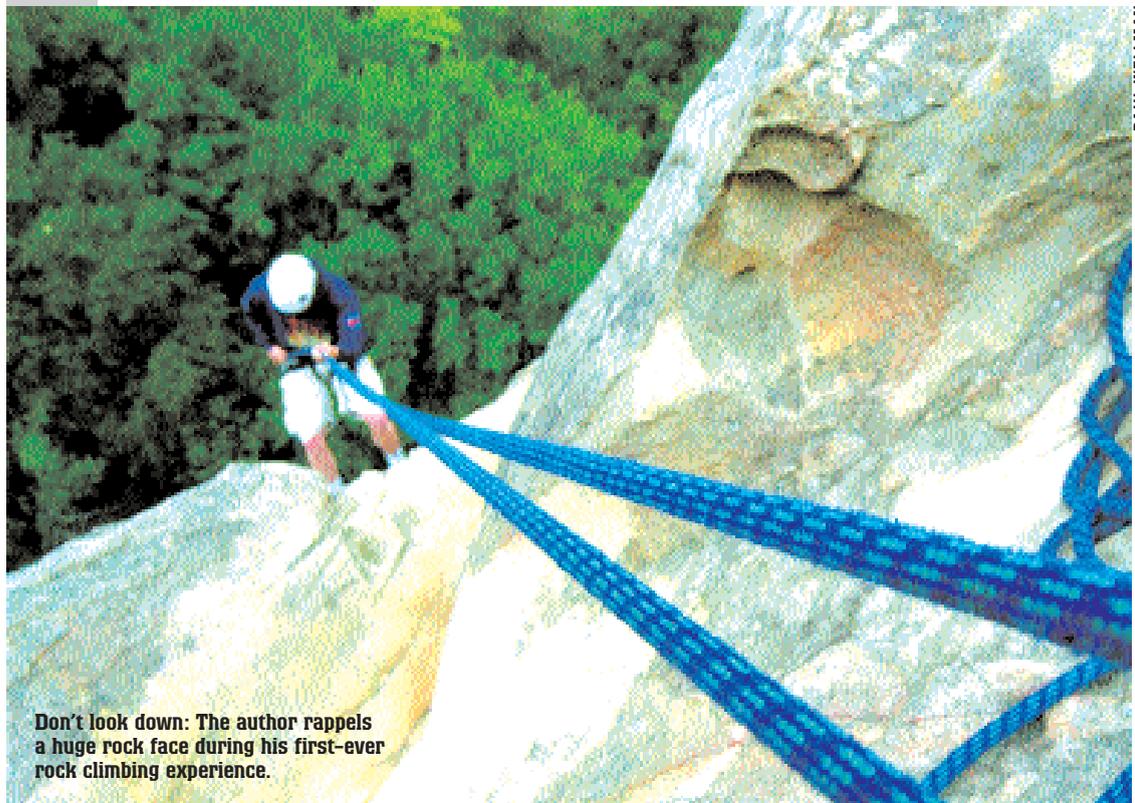
Those who’ve done it can tell by my description that I was rock climbing; it was my first-ever experience with the increasingly popular sport that’s swept over Santa Barbara’s sheer faces, rounded boulders, and precarious peaks. Just by noticing how muscular most climbers are, I knew that an afternoon of ascents would be physically tough, but the psychological challenge was wholly unexpected. In just two climbs up routes off of Montecito’s San Ysidro Trail, I quickly learned that rock climbing—which also confronts the naked fear of falling—is the epitome of conquering the wilds inside and out.

where a father and his kids honed their skills together—Fineup strapped us into climbing harnesses, which are designed to save lives and feel comfortable at the same time. We then scrambled up a gully toward the top, using the rope twice at potentially perilous parts. From the peak, Fineup tied in his ropes and taught us the finer points of carabiners as we took in the views of green mountainsides and a lush canyon that ran all the way up to Camino Cielo.

Our first challenge—and the one that even by the end of day we all remembered as the most frightful—was to lean back on the rope, hang over a 100-foot cliff, and rappel down. Fineup starts with the rappel for good reason: It allows climbers to gain confidence in the strength of the rope and quickly get over that nagging fear of falling.

Next was my first climb, up a face called “Peels of Laughter.” (Climbers have an uncanny knack for coming up with the quirkiest names for routes.) It’s listed with a difficulty of 5.7, which makes it an intermediate-level climb. I made it to the top after some self-doubts and muscle give-outs, only once or twice relying on the rope to save my life. When I got down, I was happy to be done, but then Fineup questioned if my arms were shaking. “Not quite,” I stupidly replied. “Well then, I guess you’ve got to do something harder,” he said.

We moved a bit to the left, toward a crack—yes, just a crack—christened many years ago as



**Don't look down: The author rappels a huge rock face during his first-ever rock climbing experience.**

For my introductory lesson, photographer Paul Wellman and I joined Matthew Fineup, who leads climbs for the Santa Barbara Adventure Company. After meeting at the trailhead and trying on some super-tight climbing shoes, we grabbed a bunch of gear and headed up the canyon. Along the way, Fineup—who also owns and operates a guide company called Earthworks Climbing—showed his naturalist side, pointing out invasive and native plant species while also urging us to smell and taste.

At the bottom of the 100-foot-high rock face—

“Applied Magnetism” by Patagonia founder and avid climber Yvon Chouinard. This one was a 5.8, though parts of it might be a bit harder. On this route, my mind almost went crazy; I assured myself that I could not proceed. But, with the encouraging words of Fineup, I made it all the way to the top. My body was exhausted, my mind was over-spent, but my spirits were high.

*Call Santa Barbara Adventure Company at 452-1942 or visit [www.sbadventureco.com](http://www.sbadventureco.com).*