



# Pacific Bliss

Just off the Southern California coast, Island Spa Catalina serves as a welcome wellness respite. *By Rachel Kossman*

A charming, Spanish-style, 1920s complex sits tucked at the north end of Crescent Drive—the singular oceanfront boulevard in the town of Avalon on Santa Catalina Island, part of the Channel Islands chain off the Pacific coast of California. Home to Island Spa Catalina, the structure makes an earthy statement with its off-white walls, terracotta roof and warm brown tile flooring, all punctuated by turquoise-trim windows and hand-painted tiling in bright cobalt and marigold hues—an homage to the building’s rich, century-long history.

Once known as El Encanto (Spanish for “the charm”), the original compound served as the Band Box Theatre and housed a Chinese restaurant. In 1933, the Santa Catalina Island Company (SCICO) purchased it, via the William Wrigley Junior estate, and converted the lot into an authentic Mexican-style village populated with artisans, candle makers and food vendors. A full-service

restaurant was added in the 1970s. But by 2013, the building was beginning to show its age, and the island’s salty air had taken its toll on the structure’s foundation. In November 2014, SCICO helped to fill one of the island’s noticeable wellness voids and opened the doors to Island Spa Catalina.

Inhabited for nearly 8,000 years, Catalina Island is a mere 22 miles southwest of the humming, smoggy city of Los Angeles, yet the 21-by-8-mile landmass is remote enough, and the vibe quaint and relaxed enough, to serve as an ideal getaway or day-cation destination for Southern Californians. “Can you think of a better place to spend a few relaxing days away from home, focused on yourself, than on an island that’s merely an hour boat ride from L.A., but somehow feels worlds apart?” asks Island Spa Catalina spa director Zach Thomas. The answer, of course, is no—and that’s why the spa has found a perfect niche.

## SNAPSHOT



Island Spa's Starlight Suite features a signature, heated quartz sand massage table.

## IDEAL ESCAPE

Developing tourism clientele has been a no-brainer for Island Spa Catalina, notes Maureen Fletcher Bankson, executive vice president of spa development and operations for American Leisure, the property's management and consulting company. "When the tourist season was in full swing last summer, many of the hotels and vacation rentals on the island were sold out, which was great for us!" she explains. "Booking spa appointments has been a cinch, thanks to our island-inspired treatments and beautiful amenities."

By the latter, Bankson is referring to the spa's 15,000 square feet of elegantly decorated relaxation areas, treatment rooms and hydrotherapy options. Island Spa is the only spa on Catalina to provide men's and women's locker rooms, which feature turquoise-tiled steam rooms and cedar saunas, plus indoor quiet rooms. An outdoor soaking pool and Jacuzzi are surrounded by

inviting lounge chairs, tempting sunbathing spa-goers to enjoy poolside service from the Encanto Café, which serves up a range of Sunrise and Mid-day healthful bites. A modular, pool-adjacent staircase leads to a wooden deck that functions as the spa's relaxation and treatment waiting area. Here, heat lamps hover over cozy wicker couches and armchairs, and guests nestle in to read or gaze out on Avalon's harbor.

The facility boasts nine treatment rooms, including the Starlight Suite, where visitors can take in a view of Catalina's shoreline and experience the spa's Catalina Classic Massage (50 min./\$125, 80 min./\$180) or Island Deep Massage (50 min./\$150, 80 min./\$200) on a heated quartz sand table (additional \$30/50 min. or \$55/80 min.), which ergonomically envelops the body to relieve muscle and joint pain. A tower at the front of the complex is home to the El Encanto and Silver Peaks treatment suites, ideal for couples or intimate groups seeking



Details in the women's locker room include hand-laid turquoise tiling and subtle decor that speaks to Catalina's ocean-centric culture.

## SNAPSHOT



## Fit for Locals

Independent of its hotel partnership, Island Spa Catalina is doing its part to lure the island's 4,000 residents. The staff devised Avalon Advantage, a free membership program that offers island locals a 20% discount on services Monday through Thursday, plus seasonal specials and birthday promotions.

"Avalon is a small community, and we wanted to create an offering that would provide its residents with something special," says Maureen Fletcher Bankson, executive vice president of spa at marketing and management company American Leisure. A year after opening its doors, the program already had 160 members.

The spa also hosts a slew of fitness classes, including yoga and Zumba, in its Wellness Studio, which overlooks the Avalon harbor. Spa director Zach Thomas hopes to soon add dance, meditation and Pilates offerings. "I realized early on that Avalon lacked fitness options," explains Thomas. "I'm so excited that we're going to be leading the way to change that." At the end of 2015, spa staff introduced Fitness on Demand, a virtual group fitness kiosk that offers more than 200 group classes. "This is a great addition and unique offering for Island Spa that would normally be almost impossible to deliver to our guests, simply because of the logistics," explains Thomas, referring to the dearth of fitness instructors on the island.

The next step in attracting wellness guests will be the incorporation of fitness and yoga retreats, which appeal greatly to Southern California residents, notes Thomas, who himself moved from the mainland to Catalina when he landed his job at Island Spa. "I'm working to make sure that we have a wide range of offerings that can be combined to create a truly unique retreat experience."



Above: Island Spa's relaxation deck lets guests waiting for treatments take in Catalina's Pacific harbor. Below: The spa's retail area boasts aquatic-inspired skin care, apparel and accessories.

an especially exclusive escape—with a killer ocean view.

Although standout facilities certainly please spa guests, luring them there in the first place has called for additional help in the form of a partnership with SCICO's Pavilion Hotel, which enabled the property to bill itself as the island's only resort spa. All hotel guests enjoy Island Spa Catalina shower amenities, and a treatment menu is placed prominently in each room. Furthermore, SCICO has driven an expansive marketing campaign across a myriad of outlets, both on the mainland and the island, to ensure the new spa gets noticed.

"On the island, our goals are centered mainly on building awareness of the spa," explains Bankson. "Word of mouth is key, and we are aiming to foster relationships with partner organizations on the island, as well as with other property operators." By creating hotel-plus-spa packages for easy booking, SCICO is successfully bringing guests ashore and into Island Spa. Take the current Escape package, which includes two-way boat transportation, two nights of accommodations, and dining and spa credits, affording guests the full, flexible Catalina experience that they crave. ■

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