

On the WATERFRONT

See Orange County from a different perspective by trying one of the region's many luxe boating options.

BY JOE YOGERST



THE HEROIC COURTESY OF SANTA CRUZ ISLAND CO.

Catalina Island offers numerous boating excursions.

With 42 miles of coastline and the Pacific Ocean as its backyard, Orange County is a boating paradise. Lagoons, harbors and a half-dozen bays between San Clemente and Seal Beach offer up numerous ways to glide across the water, from hourly rentals and weeklong bareboat charters to guided island tours, cruises on historic ships and even oceanographic expeditions.

Newport Beach has served as ground zero for Orange County's boating scene since 1876, when Capt. Samuel Sumner Dannelis navigated the steamer *Vaquero* into the bay with a cargo of lumber for the cattle ranches that occupied much of the coast in those days. By the early 20th century, Newport and its marvelous natural harbor had become the region's main hub for recreational boating.

Where nature didn't provide, residents created their own means of getting boats onto the water. Like Dana Point's man-made yacht harbor set below dramatic cliffs at the southern end of Orange County, and Huntington Harbour, which boasts five man-made islands.

With more than 52,000 private vessels based in its marinas, Orange County residents are clearly passionate about taking advantage of the nearby waters. But it's a hobby that's easily accessible to visitors, too.

"We can arrange all sorts of boating," says Taylor Alpert, the guest experience manager at Monarch Beach Resort. "All you have to do is ask one of our great concierge team (members). We like to recommend things with a real 'wow' factor, especially private charters that combine gear service, amusing boats and unforgettable adventures."

With that in mind, there is a plethora of options across the county's coastline for those looking for adventure, education or just some fun in the sun.



Luxury yachts are one boating option in Orange County.

whenever you're ready," Pasandi says of the experience, which fully caters to its participants.

OCEAN INSTITUTE OPTIONS

Located on a 2.4-acre campus at

the western end of Dana Point Harbor, the Ocean Institute offers to the public both whale watching excursions and nighttime bioluminescence cruises aboard the 65-foot research vessel R/V Sea Explorer



The Ocean Institute's R/V Sea Explorer.

for a totally unique view of the surrounding waters.

Another option is an adventure aboard the Spirit of Dana Point, a replica of an 18th-century privateer schooner circa the American Revolution. The institute also hosts a Tall Ships Festival each September, an event that attracts historic vessels from around the globe and provides more opportunities to sail beneath canvas off the shore.

HOMETOWN VESSELS

Duffy Boats are ubiquitous in Newport Bay. Marshall "Duffy" Duffield, a native of Newport, created the first Duffy Boat in 1970. Since then, Duffield has become one of the region's leading boat designers and his sleek, small-sized boats are as much a part of the Newport scene as surfing, sailing and sunset cocktails.

Ranging in size from the 16-foot Back Bay to the 22-foot Sun Cruiser, Duffy Boats are extremely easy to pilot yourself and a popular way for



Catalina Island promises fun activities like zip lining.

people without much skipping experience to explore the bay. Several outfits around the bay rent out the little electric boats, including the parent company on West Coast Highway and Newport Beach Boat Rentals on the Balboa Peninsula.

ROMANCE ON THE HIGH SEAS

The most romantic way to explore Newport Bay is via gondola, inspired by the thin, flat-bottomed wooden boats from Venice, Italy. Tucked away in the harbor's northwest corner, the Gondola Co. of Newport and its sister company, Gondola

Adventures, offer one of the largest fleets outside of Italy. With a skilled gondolier manning the single oar, the boats make a 30-minute circuit of the bay for both sightseers and couples alike.

Voted the "best place to take a date" in Orange County, the gondola experience is pretty romantic on its own. But couples can take it a step further with the option to add a dozen roses or a scattering of rose petals on the boat, Champagne or wine, chocolate, professional photography and even a message in a bottle for those looking for a creative way to propose. *by*



A gondola floating across Newport Bay.

A HOLIDAY TRADITION

Newport Beach's Christmas Boat Parade is a must-see Orange County institution.



There may not be sleigh bells in the snow, but Christmas in Newport Beach can be a truly holiday-inspired event when it comes to the annual boat parade. One of the region's oldest traditions, the first parade was staged in 1908 with just a dozen boats. Over the years, the procession has grown to include hundreds of vessels decorated with inflatable characters, full-size trees and millions of lights.

The boats make their way around Newport Bay on a circuit called the Ring of Lights. This year's events take place from Dec. 13-17, beginning at approximately 6:30 p.m. each night. Starting from Bay Island, the parade sails down to the bay entrance channel before circumnavigating Balboa Island, filling up near Pacific Coast Highway and looping around Sola Island before returning to Bay Island. Numerous patches along the shore, including waterfront bars and restaurants, offer great viewing points. Alternatively, you can participate in the parade itself by booking a place on a charter boat through Newport Landing.



Trips to Catalina Island are a popular choice for travelers in the area.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH WHALES

Named after author Richard Henry Dana Jr.—who penned the classic California seafaring memoir “Two Years Before the Mast” in 1840—Dana Point Harbor offers the country’s most diverse boating options. Maritime opportunities run the gamut from historic tall ships and oceanographic research vessels to the harbor’s Ocean Institute to boats for sport fishing, whale watching and sightseeing.

Top Tier Luxury Escursions and its partner, Dana Wharf Sportfishing & Whale Watching, specialize in private charters to see marine mammals in the waters off the coast. The broad channel between the mainland and Catalina Island is home to thousands of dolphins and is a superhighway for half a dozen whale species that

migrate up and down the coastline.

“What sets us apart is the privacy of a private charter and the ability to get up close and personal with our abundant sea life,” says Capt. Jori Maunel, founder and owner of Top Tier and the first female to skipper private charters for Dana Wharf in its 40-year history.

“My guests have had ... [the] pleasure of [seeing] breaching whales, megapods of playful dolphins, sea turtles, Mola mola [giant sunfish] and more,” she notes. “My most exciting moments included two occasions that I came upon orcas. They came over to my boat, curious and playful. It’s something I will never forget.”

FULL SPEED TO CATALINA

With so many things happening along the shore of Newport

Bay—including waterfront bars and restaurants, one-off shops and historic sights, interesting architecture and entertainment—it’s easy to forget that you can get out on the waves, too.

Recreational boating in the area traces its roots to 1922, when the Balboa Yacht Club (BYC) was founded to promote sailing opportunities for families. In the 1950s, the BYC forged a special relationship with the Catalina Island Co., a partnership that endures today between Newport Beach and the dreamy offshore island.

Based on the Lido Peninsula, Captain Newport luxury boat rental company maintains a fleet of seven different vessels that can be chartered for day trips to the island. “Our Catalina trips are eight hours



Dana Wharf Sportfishing & Whale Watching takes guests out to find whales.

and can start as early as 8 a.m.,” says Captain Newport CEO Rouben Pasand. “The captain takes them out to Catalina and drops them off. They can go snorkeling, they can

go swimming, they can do all the wonderful activities that Catalina has to offer.”

Passengers have about four hours to explore Catalina. “You often

see sea animals during the cruise,” Pasand notes. “Lots of dolphins, sea lions and—if you are lucky—whales. It’s just a beautiful ride, especially on a large boat.”

In addition to snorkeling and swimming, Catalina offers ample land-based adventures, including a zip line, rock-climbing wall, treetop adventure course, Jeep tours that explore the island’s rugged backcountry, and safaris on 4x4 vehicles to see and photograph Catalina’s wildlife.

Onboard food and drink—as well as outdoor activities on the island and restaurant reservations in Avalon—can all be arranged through the concierge at Monarch Beach Resort. At the end of the day, passengers can come back to Newport Beach or get dropped at Dana Point, which is closer to the resort. For those who want to stay longer on Catalina, Captain Newport offers an additional hourly rate. “The captain will wait for you and bring you back



The Spirit of Dana Point (left) and Pilgrim are replicas of historic ships.