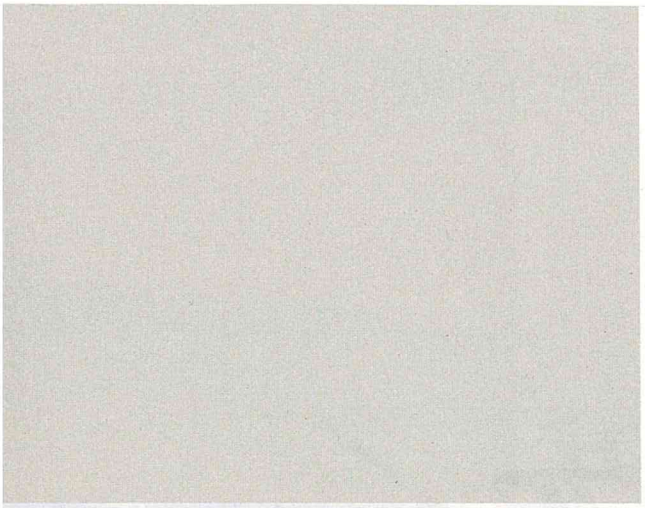


# VENTURING CLOSE TO HOME

**Venture's visit to the Channel Islands proves you don't have to go far afield to find excitement.**

BY TONY FLEMING





Hauling the anchor in gales that reached 60 knots is not an easy task, but necessary when dragging into a reef is the alternative.



**I**t is just past midnight and a change in motion awakens me. The gentle rolling caused by the ocean swells has ceased and is replaced by the sound of water rushing past the hull. I can hear the shriek of the wind. I am pulling on my jeans when I hear the engines start — the predetermined signal for all hands on deck. The expected Santa Ana winds are here with a vengeance, several hours in advance of their forecast arrival. The anchor is beginning to drag through the kelp. Chris Conklin, Christine Edwards and Peter Janssen go on deck to handle the anchor while I attempt to maneuver *Venture* in the strong winds now blowing between 30 and 40 knots.

We are on a visit to the Channel Islands, and they are living up to their reputation for rough and unpredictable weather. Although they lie a mere 20 miles off the coast of Ventura county, the uninhabited islands are as remote as many we have visited in *Venture*, my Fleming 65.



WE STARTED OUR TRIP from Newport Beach four days earlier. After an overnight stop at the more southerly island of Catalina, we took a quick look at the natural rock arch on Anacapa Island before continuing to Ventura Harbor, where we had time to visit the informative Channel Islands Visitor Center before meeting our guest who had flown in from Connecticut. A gale warning was in the forecast, but the following morning we headed out, figuring we had about 24 hours before we needed to scuttle back to the protection of Ventura Harbor.

We passed by the sliver of Anacapa — really three islands divided from each other by narrow rock-strewn gaps — before going on to circumnavigate the largest island, Santa Cruz. The sea was boisterous, so we were not able to come close to the Painted Cave — billed as one of the largest sea caves in the world and large enough to accommodate *Venture* in calm weather. One of the difficulties in cruising these islands is the lack of protected anchorages. Most are open bays and subject to ocean swells and wind waves,



## VENTURING CLOSE TO HOME

*Venture* enjoys a rare moment of calm during a wind-blown adventure off Santa Rosa and catches a glimpse of seals on San Miguel (right), but wildlife viewing and calm were not the norm getting to the Channel Islands (below), when waves sent sheets of spray onto and over the boat.



which are often in opposition to one another. We spent the night in Smugglers Cove and left in good time the following morning to return to Ventura to sit out the gale. The weather was still fine, although the radio continued to broadcast dire warnings.

The onshore winds finally arrived during the afternoon and reached 30 knots even within the harbor. We rented a car and drove to the center of town where there was a street market in progress. The winds had subsided by the following

morning, but we delayed our departure until noon in hopes of giving the waves time to subside. The weather forecast had grown to include warnings of strong Santa Ana conditions, a local phenomenon where inland winds — from an altitude of 5,000 feet — scream down and rush offshore, reaching speeds of 70 mph. They were forecast to arrive the following afternoon, so we figured we had ample time to reach an anchorage that could provide protection from the northeasterly winds.

Outside Ventura Harbor, the waves still had plenty of muscle and were right on the nose, so we had a rough trip with sheets of spray deluging the boat. It was a relief to tuck into Forney Cove at the northwest corner of Santa Cruz Island just as the sun was setting. An offshore reef with rocky outcrops provided some relief from the ocean swells, and we figured the island would provide good protection from the Santa Ana winds when they arrived. The cove was thick with kelp, which can interfere with anchoring, but we dropped the hook in a spot that appeared clear.



CONKLIN, *Venture's* captain since 2007, decides to sleep in the salon to keep an eye on the situation; he tells us that the engines starting will be a call to action. Our prudent precautions prove to be vital in the middle of the night with the anchor dragging across the bottom. Using our FLIR thermal imaging camera, I can clearly see the crew on the foredeck as I watch for Conklin's hand signals indicating the direction of the anchor chain. In tempestuous conditions, we are able to re-anchor without problem, and this time the anchor really holds. We set about unzipping the Bimini cover from its frame. It is like a wild beast, and it takes the full effort of all four of us to tame it and bring it under control.

The wind continues to gain strength until it reaches 60 knots. The sea surface is whipped into a froth with streaks across its surface. Spume fills the air with glints of rainbows from



the emerging sun. A couple of small fishing boats come in to seek shelter. One of them looks like a shadowy silhouette barely visible through plumes of spray that envelop the boat and stream downwind from its stern like the tail of a comet.

The anchor holds steadfast, but suddenly, with a loud

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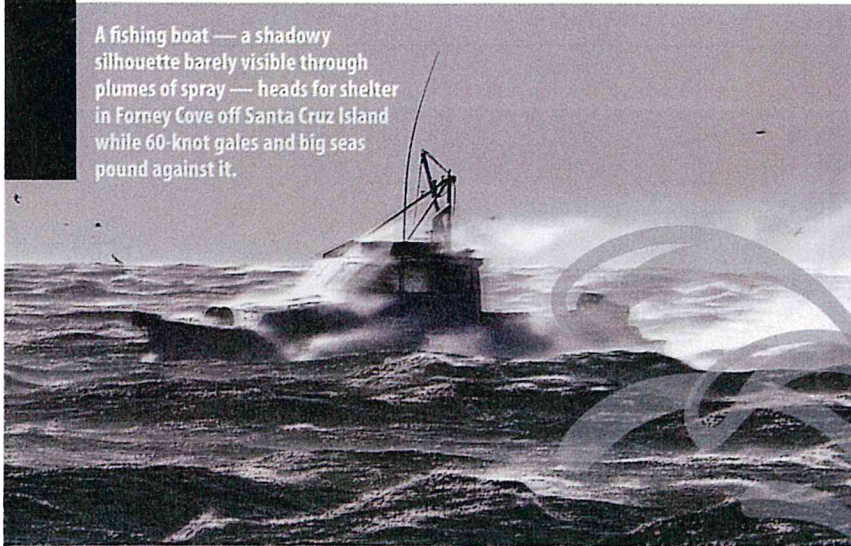
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## VENTURING CLOSE TO HOME

A fishing boat — a shadowy silhouette barely visible through plumes of spray — heads for shelter in Forney Cove off Santa Cruz Island while 60-knot gales and big seas pound against it.



bang, one of the lines from the bridle snaps. The reef, which has protected us from the ocean swells, is now a lee shore too close for comfort, and it's time to move. With the other three crew members out on the foredeck, I try to follow Conklin's hand signals and keep the boat in line with the anchor chain, but even with the combined efforts of the engines, rudders and the bow thruster, keeping the chain and boat

in line is impossible given the wind strength. The well-bedded anchor finally wrenches free with the chain at an acute angle, bending the anchor shank, but we are clear and head out of the bay. Surprisingly, once we are away from the island, wind speeds drop to 20 knots, so instead of providing a lee, the island acted as a scoop to grab the winds and funnel them right at us.

We are heading to San Miguel, the outermost of the islands. It normally bears the brunt of the weather, but in the case of a Santa Ana, the offshore winds are mostly a spent force by the time they reach its rocky shores. Despite the reduced winds, the ocean swells remain a factor, and it is not easy to find a calm anchorage.

With its bent shank, the main anchor is useless, and after lowering it into the tender, we disconnect it from the chain and move it aft into the cockpit. We are obliged to use our secondary anchor, which is lighter and has a combination of rope and chain, so we are in for a rolling night.

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THE FOLLOWING MORNING dawned bright and clear with little wind, and we rounded the northwest corner of San Miguel Island to Adams Anchorage and Tyler Bight where thousands of seals — elephant and others — were lolling on the beach and hanging out in the water. We made sure not to go too close, as we didn't want to disturb them. In glorious weather, we continued on to Santa Rosa where we anchored for the night in Becher's Bay.

Unfortunately, it was time for us to return. Janssen had never visited Catalina Island, so we headed directly for it, accompanied en route by several groups of Pacific white-sided dolphins, which frolicked in amazing numbers within inches of the bow. We pulled into the charming town of Avalon, which, as always, looked as if it belongs in the south of France rather than off the coast of California. We went ashore for an excellent dinner and found the streets almost deserted during the off-season.

The following morning, we were fortunate that a longtime local loaned us a golf cart to tour the twisty roads above and behind the town, whose houses scramble up the steep hills surrounding the delightful harbor. Regular vehicles are allowed on the island only by special permit, and they are few in number.

At noon we were underway for Newport Beach, 20



miles distant over calm seas. We had added another 440 nautical miles to our summer total of more than the 5,000 — accumulated during our return trip to distant Prince William Sound. But, when it comes to furious weather, the nearby Channel Islands have demonstrated that you do not need to go so far afield to find adventure. It was not exactly the trip we had planned but one replete with surprise and interest. 🐦

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