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EXPLORER

Surfing and 'Roughing It' on Southern California Beaches



Ann Johansson for The New York Times

San Elijo State Beach in Encinitas, California. More Photos >>

By PORTER FOX Published: July 22, 2011

THE freeway was dark. Wisps of sea mist obscured the moon. At 2 a.m. there wasn't another car on Highway 101, the southern extension of the Pacific Coast Highway that traces the edge of the continent from Orange County in California almost to the Oregon border. On the left side of the road as I drove south, miles of tract housing reached into the hills. Somewhere on the right, between the guardrail and the great void of the Pacific, was the entrance to the San Elijo campground.

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I'd already missed the turn three times. The lights on my 1977 Volkswagen Westfalia camper van were so dim they barely illuminated the exit signs. Bill and Diane Staggs, the owners of Vintage Surfari Wagons in Costa Mesa, Calif., where I rented the van, grew up in Southern California and have squatted at many of the 80-odd state parks between San Diego and San Francisco.

"If you can't find a campsite," Bill told me as he handed me the keys to my van, "Diane and I usually park in a nice suburb and pull the curtains."

San Elijo State Beach in Encinitas is one of the most

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popular campgrounds in San Diego County, and when I finally found it, it overflowed with tents, RVs and campers. The campsites were van-size dirt parking spots, each with a fire ring and picnic table. I eventually found a vacant oceanside plot, shut the van off and walked to the bluff. The air was incredibly still and quiet and smelled like campfires. Diffuse moonlight illuminated the beach 100 feet below, the sand extending as far as I could see.

In the bluish light the scene looked like a soundstage for a black-and-white movie. In the 1930s it *was* a stage — for the first [surfers](#) in the [United States](#). From San Onofre and Corona del Mar to the [Santa Monica](#) Pier, pioneers like Duke Kahanamoku, Tom Blake and Doc Ball introduced the sport to the country.

Surfing's popularity grew at the same time California's newly founded State Park Commission was looking for [beaches](#) and waterfront property to protect, and many of the best surf breaks on the coast became parkland. Eighty years later, the network of state beaches and campgrounds is one of the largest in the country and covers a third of California's 840-mile coast.

Because most of the campgrounds between [Los Angeles](#) and San Diego are accessible by car (and surrounded by the sprawl that nearly connects the two cities), roughing it in Southern California isn't very rough. Parks provide showers and bathrooms, and most bring everything they can fit in the trunk and put up mini outdoor versions of their homes. My friends in California call it shmamping: a "fancy shmancy" alternative to a tent.

I had camped in the state parks in a Volkswagen pop-top for six months in 2001, when I worked for Surfer Publications in Orange County. As a lifelong Northeasterner, I found it transformative, waking up each morning practically on the beach, learning to surf at dawn and dusk. After hearing about Vintage Surfari Wagons from a friend, I wanted to recreate that experience. A few weeks later I packed my old wet suit, board shorts and a towel in a backpack, hopped a plane from New York to Santa Ana and, that night, headed out on a four-day, 300-mile tour of my old stamping grounds.

A group of children riding bicycles woke me that first morning in San Elijo. A middle-aged man with a dog leash attached to his waist wandered by while my neighbor polished a [golf](#) cart he had somehow packed inside his RV. I grabbed the surfboard I'd borrowed the night before from a friend in San Clemente, followed a father and son toting boards to the bluff. A storm swell had been pounding the coast for two days, and thick, green waves rolled in from the southwest. For miles in either direction, black specks bobbed in the surf. Every now and then one of them caught a wave and zipped along its face.

Surfing comes back like riding a [bike](#); unfortunately, paddling does not. By the time I had joined a dozen other surfers 100 yards offshore, my arms were so tired I could barely hold myself on the board. The waves were perfect, though: three-foot swells peaking in gentle A-frames. After a couple of nosedives, I finally caught one and rode it all the way to the beach.

After a quick breakfast at a local cafe I drove 40 minutes north to my next spot, past custom motorcycle shops, thrift stores, surf-themed businesses and about 300 cafes selling açai smoothies. Just beyond Camp Pendleton, a 125,000-acre Marine Corps base, I pulled into San Onofre State Beach. The beach and adjacent campground looked like a hybrid of refugee camp and a tailgate party, with a winding caravansary of tarp canopies, trailers, smoking grills, windmills, kites and ancient conversion vans.

San-O, as locals call it, was another surfing center in the 1930s, when the beach was a [fishing](#) camp and surfers had to pay 25 cents to get in. Back then the surf pioneers Hobie Alter, Dewey Weber and Dale Velzy would drive a Ford Model T truck to the

beach and ride giant redwood boards on the mellow waves.

My vintage camper looked at home on the edge of the beach, between a stand of palms and a tiki hut. Tawny old men wandered shirtless around the dirt lot, while just a few surfers rode long, slow waves at Old Man's break. Three generations of a family picnicked near a fire ring a few yards away, their table stacked with soda, chips, beach towels and children's toys. Every 100 feet along the beach, tall grass surrounded homemade showers local surfers had constructed from PVC pipe and two-by-fours, and surf racks with benches to sit on while pulling your wet suit off.

One of the many conveniences of shmamping is having the comforts of home an arm's reach away. After a quick surf session I hung up my wet suit, typed some notes on my laptop and fixed a quick dinner on the van's two-burner stove. Four college students from Los Angeles who had been paddle boarding all afternoon watched hungrily as I ate under the tiki hut. They didn't know about other beach campgrounds and scribbled on the back of a map as I ticked off the best ones: San Mateo Campground and Doheny State Beach near San Clemente, and Refugio State Beach near [Santa Barbara](#).

In 2001, most of my van days had been spent at San-O. That night, at the same campsite I'd parked in 10 years before, an old friend dropped by, and we reminisced about moonlight surf sessions and beachside luaus. Dim lights glowed from the surrounding sites occupied by monolithic RVs, trailer campers and one large tent housing a Ping-Pong table.

I had only a day to make it to my last stop, so I zipped north in the morning — past Corona del Mar, Huntington and Bolsa Chica State Beaches — to [Malibu](#) Lagoon State Beach. The Malibu Beach Motion Picture Colony, once home to Ronald Colman, Bing Crosby and Gary Cooper, put Malibu on the map when it broke ground in 1926. Duke Kahanamoku was friends with Colman and surfed Malibu Point with Tom Blake and others. The surf break is now called Surfrider, and when I pulled into a parking spot opposite it, more than 60 surfers mobbed the place.

After the secluded beaches of San Onofre, the crowd was too much, and I chose to watch the circus from the van. Perfect waist-high waves peeled off the point with four or five surfers riding each one. A self-described 50-something Surfrider local provided commentary from the curb, then began recounting Malibu's glory days, when you could live in a van alongside the highway and surf the waves with only a handful of others.

There are almost as many private campgrounds along California's coastline as public ones, and I decided to try one on my last night. The Malibu Beach RV Park was truly a home away from home with Wi-Fi, cable television hookups and a stunning view of the Pacific. As the sun dove for the horizon, I popped the top of the Volkswagen in a skinny site overlooking the water, made dinner and sat at a picnic table overlooking Paradise Cove and the great brown hump of Point Dume.

Falling asleep that night, I found it hard to believe I was just 15 miles from Los Angeles. Surf crashed on the beach below, and a cool ocean breeze blew through the screens. Three hundred feet above the Pacific, alongside gulls gliding on the updraft, the scene probably wasn't so different from the one that surfers who pioneered the California coast saw, nodding off for the night in the back of their Model T, hoping that the waves would be up again in the morning.

SURFING AND CAMPING

Along with Orange County, John Wayne Airport in Santa Ana, Calif., is growing. Flights from New York now average \$350. Bill Staggs from **Vintage Surfari Wagons** (1965 Harbor Boulevard in Costa Mesa; 949-716-3135; vwsurfari.com) will pick you up from John Wayne free and put you in one of nine refurbished vans; rates start at \$100 a day in low season, with a three-day minimum. Most come with a propane stove, refrigerator,

stereo and upper and lower twin-size bunks. Linens, camping chairs, grills and GPS cost extra.

All [California](#) state campgrounds take reservations through **Reserve America** (800-444-7275; [reserveamerica.com](#)). Nightly fees are \$20 to \$75, depending on location and electrical and water hookups.

Malibu Beach RV Park (25801 Pacific Coast Highway; 800-622-6052; [maliburv.com](#)) offers tent and RV sites, \$40 to \$90, as well as hot showers, laundry and table tennis.

Stewart Surfboards (2102 South El Camino Real; 949-492-1085; [stewartsurfboards.com](#)), in San Clemente, Calif., is a good central location to rent a board; \$30 for four hours, \$40 for 24 hours.

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