



FUN DESTINATIONS NRI Flying Club

Flying to Catalina Island June 2022
Ben Ginsberg

Greetings fellow NRI members!

At some point very early in my flying career, I became aware of Catalina Island's (KAVX) "Airport in the Sky" and saw pictures of the famous mountaintop runway. As someone who got into general aviation flying purely for the recreation of short trips around the West Coast to beautiful places, I immediately put it near the top of my bucket list where it had remained for several years. I've been blessed to be able to check a lot of airports off my bucket list over the last several years – Shelter Cove (0Q5), Mammoth (KMMH), Sedona (KSEZ), Grand Canyon (KGCN), Kern Valley (L05), and Weaverville (O54) are some examples – but I just hadn't been able to get a trip to Catalina planned. I was finally able to knock that airport off my list this past weekend when I went on a fairly last minute trip with a good friend – and I recommend you knock it off your list too!



Catalina Island used to be owned by the Wrigley family and now is run by a conservancy that the family started. The airport is privately owned/operated by the Conservancy as well. General information about the airport is available here - [KAVX](#) – and links on that page will give you a lot of information to plan a visit.

On Catalina, visitors have the option of staying in two towns – Avalon (larger) or Two Harbors (smaller). Outside of those two towns, the island is undeveloped and you can camp in several campgrounds. Because of the last minute nature of this trip, the hotel rooms in the towns were expensive and the campgrounds were mostly filled up. There is also camping available for pilots right next to the runway and I like to camp, so I decided to go this route.

Trip planning was relatively easy. I called the number on the website and spoke to the two airport managers, who provided a bunch of good information. Normally the airport camping is only available to members of their Aero Club, but membership costs \$200 annually and since we were coming from the Bay Area it didn't make sense to join. Instead of joining Aero Club, we agreed I would join the Catalina Island Conservancy instead in order to still support the island. There are landing fees – although the Aero Club normally covers unlimited landings for a whole year. In total, the fees I paid were:

\$35 piston single landing fee
\$40 overnight fee for 2 nights @ \$20/night
\$65 Explorer membership

Now originally I was planning on flying direct KCCR-VTU-KAVX. However, I was invited a few days prior to swing by KSNA to see my friend's new Cirrus Vision Jet – and I couldn't say no to that! My planned VFR route ended up being KCCR-PIRRO-OLLIE-KSNA. I chose PIRRO and OLLIE to bring me under the 10,000/7,000 Class Bravo LAX shelf and around the Disneyland TFR – and it would also line me up for an extended straight in for the 28 runways at KSNA. Having flown to LA a few times before, I was confident yet knew I had to be focused. Descending through LA on Flight Following, I was given several altitude restrictions and traffic advisories. Then about halfway between PIRRO and OLLIE, I was told to “go direct to Mile Square Park.” The controller was super busy and I was descending and going fast and flying single pilot – and I knew I shouldn't be head down trying to find something on a map. So I simply said “unfamiliar” and the controller immediately slowed down, gave me a 190 initial heading, asked if I had GPS onboard, and when I replied that I did – asked when I was ready to copy down the visual reporting point “Mile Square Park – VPLMS.” It was a good reminder to speak up and let controllers know what you need! Going direct to VPLMS was interesting because it brought me straight through the Disneyland TFR at 1,500 feet, and we could see people on Splash Mountain and all the rides. It took two attempts to get a response from Tower as they were busy as well, but they cleared me over the tower mid-field at 1,200 feet to immediately join left traffic for the shorter runway, 28L. It wasn't the approach I was expecting as a first-timer into KSNA and sharing it just in case others in the Club head there, they can mentally prep for the possibility. The fun wasn't over as on the nice Friday afternoon, there were a ton of 737s, business jets, and general aviation planes around – so I asked for progressive taxi to my destination. No shame in that! At one point when told to turn right into an oncoming Cirrus SR22, I queried if he meant for me to wait until after the Cirrus passed.

He said nope, they expect general aviation planes to move over and pass each other side-by-side on those big taxiways. Good to know!

After lunch and long look at the Vision Jet, I went back to N23148 at 2:15pm for what I thought was going to be an easy 15 minute flight out to KAVX before the real work began with that somewhat intimidating landing. Nope! It turned out the KSNA tower was NOTAM closed from 2-4pm – on a Friday afternoon! My local pilot friend, who has been flying there for years, commented that he'd never seen that, even during the pandemic. Self-announcing my taxi on TWR/CTAF, I ended up behind a Southwest jet, an Air Canada jet, and a King Air – all waiting to depart to RWY 28R. I should have taken a picture from the cockpit while looking up at those jets but missed my chance. Digital ATIS and the AF/D both stated RWY 28L was closed with ATCT closed, but several GA pilots were landing and departing on it, before someone came over the TWR/CTAF frequency to remind everyone it was closed. Another good reminder – don't do something just because someone else is! With everyone bouncing back and forth between self-announcing on TWR/CTAF and SoCal Approach to get IFR releases and flight following, it was a fairly chaotic scene. I finally was able to punch out of there for the short flight to KAVX.

In preparation for the trip, I watched several videos of landings on Catalina Airport and read a few message boards. It was very helpful, as I felt very prepared for the optical illusions of the surrounding cliffs and the sloped runway. I'd recommend anyone flying there to KAVX do your research beforehand as well! Given that preferred RWY 22 is sloping upward for the first half to two-thirds, many pilots think they are running out of runway when they are not and force mistakes. Others try to land right on the numbers and get close to ending up in the face of the cliff at the approach end as the downdrafts caused by the prevailing southwesterly winds cause altitude loss at the end. There were recommendations to remember it's a 3,000 ft runway and to aim for the 2nd or 3rd runway stripe and that worked out real well for me. The weather was typical for that time of year, with the cloud cover (marine layer) actually UNDERcast, well below the airport elevation.

With regards to the airport camping, this was my second experience after going on a camping/rafting trip to Kern Valley (L05) a few years ago with fellow NRI member Aaron Doyle. On that trip, the campground area was very hot and exposed – and I remember thinking I would need to watch forecast temperatures in the future on similar trips. Well like a novice, I was searching for Catalina Island weather on the internet without realizing the comfortable sounding mid-60s forecast temperatures were likely for the sea level towns down below the marine layer, and not for the airport plateau 1,600 ft higher. One of the airport managers later told me that in order to know the temperature at the airport, add 10 degrees to the sea level temperature in summer, and subtract 10 degrees from the sea level temperature in winter. I would say the difference was more like 15 degrees during our time there. The campground did not have any shade (turns out a bunch of tall trees next to a runway isn't popular), but it did have close proximity to a yummy restaurant open 830am-4pm daily, as well as bathrooms that are left open overnight for campers.

The restaurant had a shaded patio area that was great when looking to cool down. The airport also has a gas BBQ for airplane campers so we brought a bunch of food to cook ourselves dinner. The runway campground also had spectacular sunsets both evenings out over the island/sea. The first night we had campground to ourselves and the second night there was a single camper who flew a beautiful, polished Cessna 150 over from LA.

The airport is only open 8am-5pm, except for local residents and commercial cargo operations (it was cool to see their Cessna Caravans continually arrive/depart as they shuttled supplies for the island population back and forth from KLGB.) There is a commercial van shuttle service to/from the airport and the town of Avalon. It's about a ~30 minute drive between the two and the shuttle leaves a few times a day. The shuttle costs money and usually tourists will come up from Avalon to have lunch at the airport and then go back. Or pilots will fly in for the weekend and take the shuttle down to Avalon to stay in a hotel. To get between Avalon and Two Harbors, people will take a ferry. Most Catalina visitors will take a ferry or motorboat/sailboat over from LA. The above website link for the airport has a full list of things to do on Catalina so I won't bore you all with that information here. My friend and I did a bunch of hiking over our days there, and while the views of LA and the Pacific are cool, the island landscape itself wasn't as dramatic or as interesting as our coastal or mountainous hiking closer to home.

The flight home was pretty uneventful. We flew low at 1,500 feet from KAVX to Camarillo (KCMA) to refuel. And then home to KCCR.

Overall, it was a fun weekend. I'll remember the landing and takeoff on KAVX for a long time. I personally probably wouldn't go back for the camping and hiking, but would fly over for lunch at the airport restaurant if I was in LA or fly in and stay in a hotel down in Avalon. Let me know if you have any questions!







