



How I Lost Bucket Bay

Bucket Bay was an incredibly special place in my life. I first discovered it when I was eighteen years old with my mom and dad aboard their thirty-five-foot sailboat. Also along for the cruise to Santa Cruz Island were my two best friends. My friends and I thought of ourselves as tough guys who played together on our high school football team.

Bucket Bay provides some protection from the strong westerly winds that pick up every summer afternoon in the Santa Barbara Channel but only if you tuck way back into the inner cove with a stern anchor on the rocky shore so that the rudder remains just above the bottom at low tide. This is why few boats anchor here unless the conditions are very calm. The water is clear, and you can see the bottom under the boat where it turns from sand to gravel to rocks along the shore.

The cove is extraordinarily beautiful. On the western side is a cave that dries at low tide and is partly under water at high tide. Above the cave is a rocky precipice that rolls over into steep hills. On the eastern side is a cliff that rises from the ocean several hundred feet high and then sweeps away from the inner cove forming an outer bay. There is about one hundred feet of shoreline in the inner cove covered with smooth rocks about the size of your fist. The west and east cliffs meet one thousand yards back from the shore where they form a deep canyon. The west cliffs and hills are red colored and the east cliffs are a mixture of browns and grays. Above both cliffs grass, trees, and cactus cover hills that rise to a height of 2,400 feet.

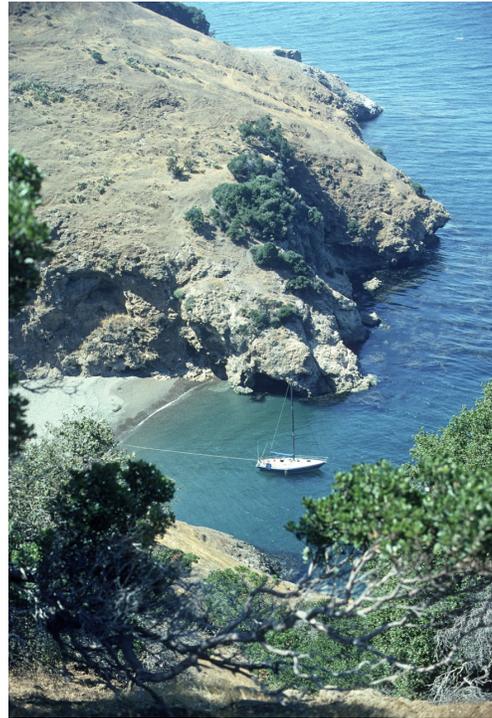
These surroundings are inviting to curious teenagers. The steep hills and the jagged peaks begged us to climb them. We discovered that the canyon has a small freshwater

stream with several pools deep enough for swimming. Near the beach the stream disappears beneath the porous rocks and enters undetected into the cove. Huge boulders and rocks fill the canyon and appear as if they had rolled down from the hills above. The fresh water provides nourishment to large sycamores and oaks and fern grottos thrive under their shade. It was easy to get carried away thinking that we were the first to explore the place.

We scrambled up the rocky canyon and tackled the 2,400 foot summit. Circling around to the east we were compelled to look over the cliffs at the water below. It did not disappoint us. We looked down on birds flying below us and seals sunning on the rocks and frolicking in the water.

A swim was in order once we returned to the boat. I was experienced at snorkeling around kelp beds, my friends were not. They stayed close to me as we dove down to get a close look at the sea life. Later, they both confessed that they stayed so close that they mostly just saw the bubbles from my fins.

There is a place to climb out of the water on the east cliff that leads to a narrow ledge angling up about twenty feet above the cove. Below it, the water is deep. We could not resist daring each other to jump from there into the water. We jumped over and over until the amusement wore off when it no longer felt scary.



In the late afternoon, we watched a parade of pelicans heading east, soaring along the high cliffs. After dinner my dad went up on deck to perform the nightly ritual of filling a bucket with seawater to rinse the dinner dishes. This was necessary because the boat had precious little fresh water which was won at the galley sink using a hand pump. Up on deck he started to thrash around and mumble words that expressed some distress. We went to see what the problem was, and he was standing there with just the boat hook in hand and a sheepish expression on his face. We asked, "Where is the bucket?" "Well," he said, "anyone can see it is right there," pointing down into the water. We all looked over the side and sure enough, there was the bucket lying on the bottom of the cove. It was easy enough to dive for but we had to give him the business for dropping the bucket. That was the night our cove became Bucket Bay. Dad wrote the name on the chart.

The weather was mild and my friends decided that they wanted to sleep on deck so we made them comfortable with cushions in the cockpit. At night many miles from Los Angeles, millions of stars shine brightly. The Milky Way is a bold brush stroke across the

sky. The water makes a rhythmic murmur as it laps against the rocks and breaks in small wavelets against the shore just behind the boat. My friends were enchanted.

The next morning I asked them how they slept. They confessed that they had difficulty sleeping after they convinced themselves that the Kelp Man might crawl out of the sea and snatch them away.

For several days we explored Bucket Bay and the nearby coast in the dinghy. We discovered several caves, some large enough to row into. They were dark and cool and somewhat intimidating the first time in. The vivid colors of the water and the reflections of sunlight on the cave walls were unforgettable. One afternoon we rounded the point to windward to explore more of the island. The winds had churned up steep chop and the ride in the dinghy was wet and wild. That part of the coast we named "The Straights of Washing Machine."

The outer bay towards the east was large and shallow enough to see the bottom. The sun reflects a light blue color off the white sandy bottom. Looking down we saw many large stingrays. We discovered more caves to explore and then continued on to the point where the bottom turns rocky and a large kelp bed thrives.

After dinner Dad, who had by now earned a well-deserved reputation among my friends as a funny guy, was offered a Hostess Ding-Dong cookie for dessert. He gave the cookie a quizzical look, lifted it to his ear and gave it a little shake. My friends were beside themselves with laughter and dubbed him Captain Ding-Dong. That name stuck with him from then on. All my friends and even some of the family affectionately called him Captain Ding-Dong for the rest of his life.

This was the start of collecting a lifetime of memories of the place we called Bucket Bay. I revisited it many times over the years with my parents. As I grew older, I had the privilege of taking my friends there solo. On one trip I invited a girl I had recently met to come along. She loved it and I married her.

We swam, fished, hiked, and laid on our backs on the shore at night to count the satellites. My daughter learned to fish and snorkel there. When my wife and I bought our own boat, a stink pot according to Dad, we returned to Bucket Bay often. I took my daughter out fishing in our dinghy as I had done with Dad. Our daughter invited her friends to introduce them to the wonders of Bucket Bay and to jump from the same cliff and climb the same rocks that I had climbed when I was a kid.

I took a photograph early one morning as we were leaving. The view is up the canyon from the back deck of the boat. It shows the gray fog, common in the Santa Barbara Channel, clinging low over the water. A little way up the canyon, the sun warmed the hills and cleared away the fog revealing blue sky and the pink glow of the sun reflecting off the hills.



Now, many years later, we are on our boat in Maine and Santa Cruz Island and Bucket Bay are fond memories that lure us to return to California. This morning we were jolted with the news that a dive boat named Conception caught fire at approximately 3:15 a.m. local time on the north side of Santa Cruz Island. Conception is a familiar boat we had often seen around the Channel Islands. Thirty-three passengers and one crew member were trapped below deck unable to escape. When details were reported that Conception had been anchored at Platts Harbor my heart sank. You see, Platts is the original name given to our Bucket Bay.

The horror that the passengers and crew endured as they died, and the grief of their friends and families has ruined my happy memories of that special place. My distress is compounded by my lifetime of experience aboard boats, including a summer as a deckhand on a similar thirty-three passenger long range sport fishing boat, that cause me to know that they all should have, could have, survived if the boat was built and operated correctly. After the incident investigation is completed and the report issued, we will learn what happened but today, I lost Bucket Bay.

Eric Bradley
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