



# beach diving

from bass rock to big sur

A helpful guide to  
the beaches of south  
Central California

By Beverly Dalby

People wonder about beach divers. What makes them want to swim out through crashing waves and kick several hundred yards to find questionable visibility? And how do they put up with all that sand? Some say it's a sickness. Others say it's therapy. But, whatever you call it, beach divers are indeed a diverse and dedicated lot. And those who dive along California's rugged south/central coast are as dedicated as they come.

From the LA/Ventura County Line all the way up to Big Sur, countless dozens of dedicated divers take the plunge each weekend. Those of the Santa Barbara/Ventura area often endure "below zero" visibility while those along the San Luis Obispo/Big Sur coast may be forced home by high winds and monster surf.

But, there are the good days! And when they're good, they're often excellent. Game diving is superb in both the Santa Barbara and San Luis

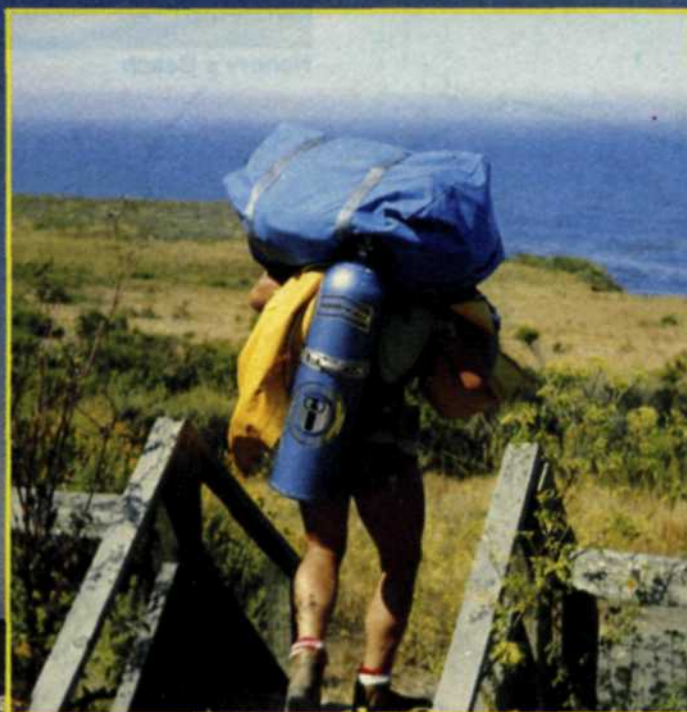
areas. Because these beaches are less heavily dived than the more popular spots to the north and south, game is found in greater abundance and freezers and friends are easily well fed. Red abs, lobsters, lingcod, and halibut abound off Santa Barbara while pismo clams and even larger numbers of game fish are found to the north.

There are also those optimistic souls who venture into U/W photography off the south/central beaches — and emerge with incredibly fine results. Spots such as Refugio Beach



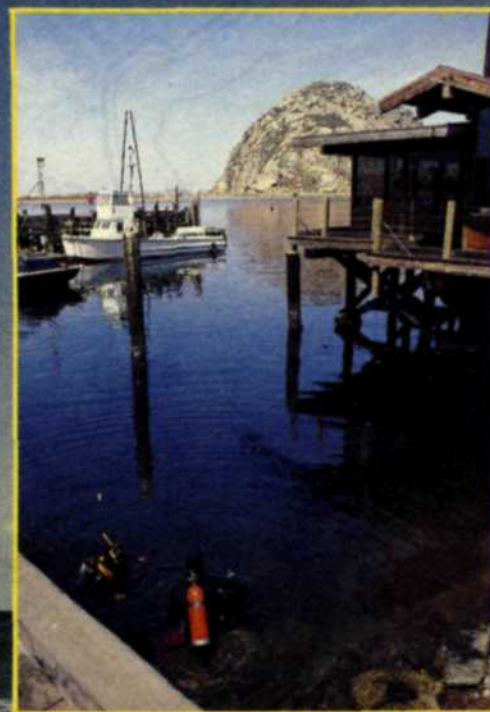
John Butler enters at Jade Cove

Beverly Dalby



Don Wobber hikes down to Jade Cove

Beverly Dalby



Tranquility at Morro Bay's T-pier

Sallie Francis



A photogenic blenny at Naples Reef

Jack Drafa



A rose nudibranch off Big Sur

Ron Russo



The arch at El Capitan (facing page) and a rugged beach in San Luis Obispo (above) both photographed by Jack Drafa.

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Jack Drafahl

El Capitan

Hendry's Beach

1000 Steps

photographs by Beverly Dalby

and Mohawk Reef off Santa Barbara and Piedras Blancas north of Morro Bay offer a wide range of colorful subjects and interesting U/W terrain. And, although the average visibility off these beaches is 6 to 10 feet, it may reach 30 to 40 feet during fall and winter months.

Point Conception is the great landmark which divides the waters of Central and Southern California. North of the famed "Cape Horn of the Pacific" temperatures are 10 to 20°F cooler and surf action is much rougher. The surface temperature north of the point ranges from the low to mid 40's in winter to the mid 50's in summer, while to the south they range from the low to mid 50's in winter to the mid 60's in summer. In addition to the cooler water and more violent surf found to the north, a somewhat different brand of marine life is also found there: Game fish are larger while marine plants are hardier and often more colorful.

Directly south of Point Conception is

the Santa Barbara Basin, a large bowl-shaped depression in the ocean floor which helps give Santa Barbara beaches their own unique personality. Bordered on the south by the Channel Islands, the basin is protected from the summer south swell. In the winter, Point Conception and the east/west attitude of the California coastline give protection from the northwest swell. The Santa Barbara beaches, then, experience much less surf action than those directly north or south. And even though visibility is often poor, you can nearly always get wet.

Diversity is indeed the word for beach diving along California's south/central coast. And, whether you're after the Big Bugs of Santa Barbara or the Big Fish of San Luis Obispo, you're bound to find yourself some exciting diving from Bass Rock to Big Sur.

Consult the following list for some of the most popular dive sites of South/Central California:

## SANTA BARBARA/VENTURA

**Bass Rock** — A narrow wash rock lying at a 45 degree angle to shore about three miles north of the LA/Ventura County Line. This is a good halibut spot with lots of spider crabs and related critters in the kelp bed. Park along the Pacific Coast Highway (Hwy 1) just north of Deer Creek Rd., across from Ventura County mile marker 3.17. Walk down a short steep dirt path to the beach. Overnight camping is permitted on the beach. No fees. No facilities.

**Sycamore Canyon** — A pleasant, grassy beach park located about two miles north of Bass Rock on Hwy 1. It's part of Point Mugu State Park and there is a \$1.50 day use fee. The U/W terrain consists of a sand bottom with a sand dollar bed and pismo clams. It's a good halibut spot in spring and summer. No kelp. Picnic tables, barbecue pits, and chemical toilets are located at the beach. Overnight camping is available across the