Lost island treasure of Catalina rediscovered

Before overspending at Rodeo Drive or Disneyland, why not try something different in California, suggests JAMES GRAHAM.

If you're planning a winter escape to Los Angeles, there is no shortage of brochure attractions to drool over.

For many, goofing it up at Disneyland is a must, then there's Hollywood's Walk of Fame and the high-tech rides at nearby Universal Studios. And let's not forget an afternoon of star-gazing and shopping along Beverly Hills' swanky Rodeo Drive.

Before you go spending all that hard-earned cash, however, consider adding something to the itinerary that's a little off the beaten tourist track.

One of LA's best-kept holiday secrets is Catalina Island, an ecological paradise just over an hour away by ferry from the mainland, but a world away from the movie premieres and clogged freeways.

Independent filmmaker Greg Reitman for one, the creative force behind film production company Blue Water Entertainment, is sold on the allure of California's lost treasure.

With his documentary, Catalina Island: The Magic Isle, due for international release at the end of this year, Reitman hopes to put the spotlight back on the hidden grandeur of the former playground to the rich and famous. "Catalina is one of the most beautiful places in the world — people should be going there," Reitman says.

"It's a lost treasure and really should be a destination, but instead they come to LA and get caught up in the entertainment world."

Reitman's hour-long probe, the first of its kind on Catalina, chronicles the birth of the island as a resort for Hollywood's elite, its economic downturn, and finally its rebirth late last century as haven for wildlife.

Holiday-makers first discovered Catalina in the 1880s when tents and sailboats dotted the island's quiet coves and coastline. Word of its unspoiled beauty spread quickly and the island was heavily promoted as a fisherman's paradise until a devastating fire destroyed a large chunk of the main town, Avalon, in 1915.

Four years later chewing-gum magnate William Wrigley jun bought the controlling interest in the Santa Catalina Island Company and moulded the hideaway 42km off the Californian coast into one of the country's most unique holiday spots.

The Avalon Tuna Club, the oldest fishing club in the US, attracted the likes of novelist Zane Grey, Cecil B. De Mille, John Wayne, and even Winston Churchill to its rich sport-fishing waters.

Hollywood studios were also hooked, using Catalina as the base for classics like Mutiny on the Bounty, Old Ironsides, Hurricane, Moby Dick, Chinatown, and parts of Jaws. More than 300 features have been shot there.

Zane Grey, the western writer, built a 30-metre-long home with architecture inspired by Arizona desert buildings. Today it operates as a hotel with stunning views of the Avalon harbour below and rooms decorated in themes from Grey's best-sellers. His legacy also lives on through the island's many wild buffalo that were introduced to Catalina during the filming of his book, The Vanishing American. Ironically, that would have been a good title to describe the relative popularity of Catalina post World War 2.

Catalina was a casualty of a worldwide technological explosion. Passenger planes flew holiday makers to more far flung spots, and for those who couldn't afford tickets, television transported the viewer to exotic locales without having to leave the couch.

After weathering its rollercoaster ride of popularity, Reitman says there is now a new wave of interest in Catalina thanks mostly to the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy created in the 1970s as a non-profit foundation to preserve the island's scenic beauty, native plants, and wildlife.

"I think there was a time there when Catalina forgot what it meant to be Catalina," says Reitman. "I called it a lost paradise but it wasn't really lost, it was forgotten. They've realised now that if you just be yourself then greatness can occur."

■ James Graham flew to Los Angeles courtesy of Air New Zealand.

Catalina beaches are not far from the island's imposing casino.