

MY SANTA BARBARA



Fred Benko (left) and friends
aboard the Condor, 1979.

Fred Benko

Master of the Open Waters BY LESLIE DINABERG

FRED BENKO has made his home away from home in the “fishy little sleeping village” of Santa Barbara Harbor for 36 years, first as the founder of Sea Landing and owner of Condor and now Condor Express boat charters.

“Winter in the channel is a busy place,” says Benko. One of his favorite things to do is take professional big wave surfers, along with their jet skis and camera crews, out to Cortez Bank (120 miles south of Santa Barbara) and Shark Park at San Miguel Island. “That’s always exciting stuff....It’s awesome the talent these guys have,” says Benko, noting that their pictures will frequently end up in surfing magazines. The Channel Islands also see another kind of exciting action: both San Miguel Island and San Nicholas Island are large elephant seal rookeries. Benko laughs, “I can’t stop taking pictures of elephant seals because they have such unique faces. Each one is different.”

In addition of course, are lots of whales. “There are 25,000 whales in that herd this year, and they’ll all come through here—it’s just a freeway out there.”



Benko grins when asked if he still gets excited to see the first whales of the day. “Oh yeah, the whole crew. We’re always enthusiastic and it’s not a made-up enthusiasm—it’s just really neat to see them. We’re out there every day so the whales become used to us. The Humpbacks will seek us out—we call it getting mugged. Frequently a blue whale will come up and surface right next to the boat. Scares the hell out of everybody. It’s a huge blow, but it’s always exciting.”*

Condor Express, 805/882-0088, www.condorcruises.com.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FRED BENKO