

A GREAT AMERICAN ROAD TRIP

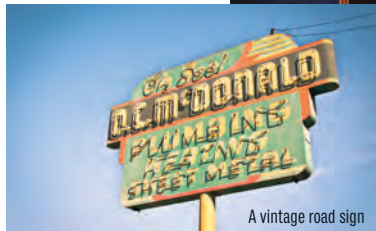
A Mustang, a few good friends, plenty of food and strong coffee, and mile after mile of Californian coastline add up to the ultimate American road trip, as Claire Nelson discovers



Cruising the coast near Big Sur



Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco



A vintage road sign



Wild poppies line the highway

The scene: three friends, a Mustang convertible and a long stretch of Californian highway. The Eagles playing on the stereo and my arm slung over the passenger door, dangling in the breeze. Here we were, on a Great American Road Trip, the kind of journey romanticised in so many movies, suddenly made real. “Take it easy,” crooned Glenn Frey, as if he could feel our rising giddiness, high on the possibilities of the road ahead, “we may lose and we may win, but we will never be here again”.

We were travelling from San Francisco to Los Angeles along Highway 1, a 442-mile (711km) route along the crest of the Pacific Ocean. We had four days to reach LA and no itinerary. All we’d established was our accommodation, our playlist, and our car.

In truth, it’s all about the car. It’s the car that distinguishes the Great American Road Trip from all other journeys — here, what

you drive has as much significance as where you’re driving. It was surprisingly easy to acquire our shiny black Mustang. Most rental car companies now accommodate this need for recreational scene-setting, and sure enough, Budget provided. One of my travelling companions, The Driver, turned the key in the ignition with a happy tear in his eye. The other, The Italian, stretched her arms across the comfortable leather of the back seat. We were about to create our own version of the American Dream.

San Francisco was still hiding under its morning duvet of fog as we made our way south, the air crisp against our bare arms. Before long we hit the coast, welcomed by the kind of Californian blue skies we’d fantasised about.

A couple of hours later we pulled up in the laidback beach town of Santa Cruz, famous for its seaside boardwalk, where a funfair has been in operation for more than a



The Santa Cruz boardwalk funfair

century. As hungry beach-goers queued for massive pink wads of cotton candy, deep-fried twinkies, ice-cream sandwiches and colossal glazed turkey legs, we meandered through the hubbub of the boardwalk, past the rise and sway of the pirate ship ride, the splash of the log flume and the rickety wooden roller-coaster, built in 1924 and still going strong. Above us, tourists hovered in brightly coloured booths, the aerial lift towing them the length of the boardwalk. My friends and I launched balls at the teeth of grinning clowns, utterly failing to win a coveted cuddly toy. Defeated, we claimed a space on the beach, dipping in the chilly water before drying off in the midday sun.

Back on the road the highway took us through pastoral scenes of pumpkin farms and hand-painted signs offering fresh cherries and homemade jam, before eventually leading us to our hostel in Monterey, just the place for a good kip and some insider tips. Admittedly, our Mustang looked slightly out of place in the hostel car-park, but I like to think anyone watching us pull in accepted that we were simply folks who had our priorities straight.

The waterfront seemed the most interesting place to find dinner. Cannery Row, named for John Steinbeck's novel of the same name, was the hub for the area's sardine-canning factories until the industry declined in the 1950s. Now, thankfully, the

seafood is here for the eating. We strolled down the wide road, and let ourselves be wooed by the warming cups of chowder waved under our noses outside each restaurant. Here you don't judge a book by its cover — you judge a joint by its chowder. Having swung for Louie Linguini, we went inside and tucked into bowls of it, fiddling with the requisite tiny packets of saltine crackers. These were followed by plates of blackened salmon, shellfish pasta and a chilled bottle of Californian riesling. Steinbeck had experienced Monterey in a different era, but there is still apt romance in his summary: "A poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream". We clinked our glasses and peered into the dark expanse of ocean, dotted with the tiny lights of fishing boats.

The morning arrived clear and blue, and we carried on south towards Monterey's pretty little sister, Carmel-by-the-Sea, just 40 minutes away. We cruised down to the beach, a stretch of sugary white sand fading into a thick blanket of haze, turning dog walkers into ghostly apparitions. The three of us wandered to the water's edge and stood barefoot in the shallows, sandals hooked around our wrists, each lost in our own thoughts. As it turns out we were all thinking the same thing. "Coffee?"

The centre of Carmel is quaint and well-manicured but still has the bohemian spirit of its heyday. The town was established as a beach resort at the end of the 19th century, when artists and writers moved in and formed a creative community with some specific guidelines. You won't find any chain stores here. There are also no addresses, so residents collect their mail from the post office. Illustrated maps



Cannery Row in Monterey, which takes its name from the John Steinbeck novel, is now full of restaurants



Carmel (below)



The Monterey seafont



From top: The coast of Carmel, downtown, and the view from above



outline the central grid of streets to help you locate the galleries, cafés and independent boutiques. And while dogs are welcome to roam unleashed, and pedestrians are encouraged, the boho lawmakers seemed keen to avoid being sued, so if you want to roam the cobbled streets in high heels, you'll need a permit (free from City Hall).

Heading south, don't miss the turn off to Point Lobos State Reserve. There's a toll to pay, which helps fund the precious parks on this stretch of coastline, and also gives you access to many of them. We took a walk around Whalers Cove, a stunning inlet where, back in the day, whales would be herded into the shallow waters to meet their fate. Despite this sad tale natural beauty abounds: a vivid palette of wild plants, turquoise coves and rare Monterey cypress trees. The watercolour painter Francis McComas called it "the greatest meeting of land and water in the world".

There was more beauty to come. We were heading into Big Sur, where the Santa Lucia Mountains plunge into the deep blues and greens of the Pacific, offering spectacular driving scenery. This is where a convertible really comes into its own — the view is even more panoramic. Stop at the turnouts as often as you can. You'll see the impressive concrete span of Bixby Bridge and understand why it's the second most photographed bridge in California after San Francisco's Golden Gate. There's little perspective offered by driving across it, so stop at Hurricane point to get the full effect.

We parked for lunch at the Big Sur River Inn, craving a light salad (in the US this means a salad the size of our heads) and pints of root beer, sweet and medicinal. Following a tip, we ventured to the river behind the Inn, where wooden chairs have been built in the middle of the water. We reclined under the canopy of trees, cooling our feet and letting our lunches settle.



Bixby Bridge



Hearst Castle, former home of publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst

In Big Sur, you rub shoulders with California's famous towering redwoods. If you're keen to get close to them, pull into Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park and take a hike. Mere moments after we'd yanked on our trainers and stepped onto the trail, the sky cracked with lightning and the heavens opened. Seems it does rain in California after all. Spirits and bodies dampened, we returned to the highway and by the time the rain had stopped we had too, at Nepenthe. This famous restaurant has been in the same family for 50 years, and although the food is pleasant enough, it's the view everybody comes for. The two-storey terrace offers a delicious vista of the Big Sur coastline that we soaked up from soggy benches, consoled by cups of coffee.

Many mountain turns and photo-stops later, we reached San Simeon. Perched on the hill is the grand Hearst Castle, former home of mega-rich publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst. This 165-room estate was his party pad, where Hollywood's elite made good with influential politicians during champagne-soaked dinners. Hearst was the Gatsby of his era, the host with the most. He had everything, including a zoo in the back yard. (The zebras are still there.) We poked around the cavernous visitors' centre but didn't have time for a tour. Instead we carried on to find some more accessible wildlife.

Piedras Blancas is home to a rookery of some 23,000 elephant seals, and you can park up and watch any number of them hanging out on the beach, like enormous brown slugs. 'Hanging out' largely involves being sprawled on the shore, unmoving, except when two males get into a scuffle, throwing their heads back and emitting a throaty rattle before head-smacking one another with inexplicable rage. Then just as suddenly they flop back onto the sand with a huff and a sigh. It's incredible to see them

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Elephant seals at Piedras Blancas



Catching a perfect Cali wave

so close in the wild, and it's not difficult to nab a good viewing spot — the stench keeps the visitors moving. Elephant seals are as fragrant as they are pretty.

Our stop for the night was in the town of San Luis Obispo, home to what are surely the world's kitschiest digs. The Madonna Inn opened in 1958 and remains famous for its themed lodgings, including a Safari room decked out with vines and faux-animal hides, and the cowboy-inspired Yahoo room, complete with wagon-wheel bed. Our abode was a three-bed cacophony of rich reds and golds, lavishly decorated in the style of 1850s San Francisco. We considered this place our own consenting Hotel California, insofar as we had checked in, and would quite happily never leave.

So we stayed in for the evening, gorging on two-toned reuben sandwiches at the elaborate bar and drinking bucket-sized piña colodas in the heated swimming pool. While reclining in the spa, we got talking to a resident couple. "There's a waterfall in our bathroom," said the husband, with the bewildered air of a man who had always wanted a waterfall in the bathroom, but now didn't know what to do with it.

The next morning we embraced the workout that is the American breakfast. At the Madonna's Copper Café we tucked into scrambled eggs, buttery pancakes, crispy bacon and copious coffee. Across the

room, the Madonna bakery was slicing up its famous bright pink champagne cake. If only we had room.

The drive from San Luis Obispo to Santa Barbara is relatively short, which means even after a leisurely breakfast, you'll arrive in time to make the most of the afternoon. The palm trees lining the road into Santa Barbara welcomed us as we passed cyclists on beach cruisers, our playlist throwing out 2Pac's *California Love*. We checked into the Agave Inn, one of those classic American roadside motels like you see in the movies, only ours was less Tarantino grit, more modern chic.

Santa Barbara's central district, known as the Funk Zone, is a hub of restaurants, urban wineries and art museums, a showcase of the city's creative soul. Tempting though it was to take a wine tour, the sun burned hot and so we made a beeline to the beach. That evening we went for dinner at nearby FisHouse, and shared meaty, mouthwatering bacon-wrapped scallops, zesty pineapple mahi mahi and sea bass encrusted with sweet macadamias. Afterwards we took a constitutional along Stearns Wharf, watching the fisherman at the end of the pier throwing out their lines as they settled in for a long night of peaceful repose. Looking back towards town, the silhouette of palm trees stood out against the fading pink sunset.



The Madonna Inn



Santa Barbara palms at sunset

On our last morning we grabbed coffees to go, fuelling us for the final stretch of highway to Los Angeles. On the playlist The Beach Boys harmonised about the charms of Californian girls as we passed by the surf town of Ventura and the sparse white beaches of Malibu. Just a little more than three hours after leaving Santa Barbara, we were in Los Angeles.

As our Mustang merged into six lanes of LA traffic, I felt bittersweet about our arrival. The Great American Road Trip was over. I wondered if Glenn Frey was right when he'd said we'd never be here again. This was a journey full of endless discoveries and I wished I could do it all once more. Then we saw it. "Look! The Hollywood sign!"

My spirits lifted immediately. Of course we'd be back. If Hollywood movies have taught me anything, it's that there's always room for a sequel. □

Santa Barbara

