

Atlas

January 2019

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Wellness unwound

*Our complete guide
to the spas worth
travelling for in 2019*

Home bass
The musicians
making it big in
Johannesburg

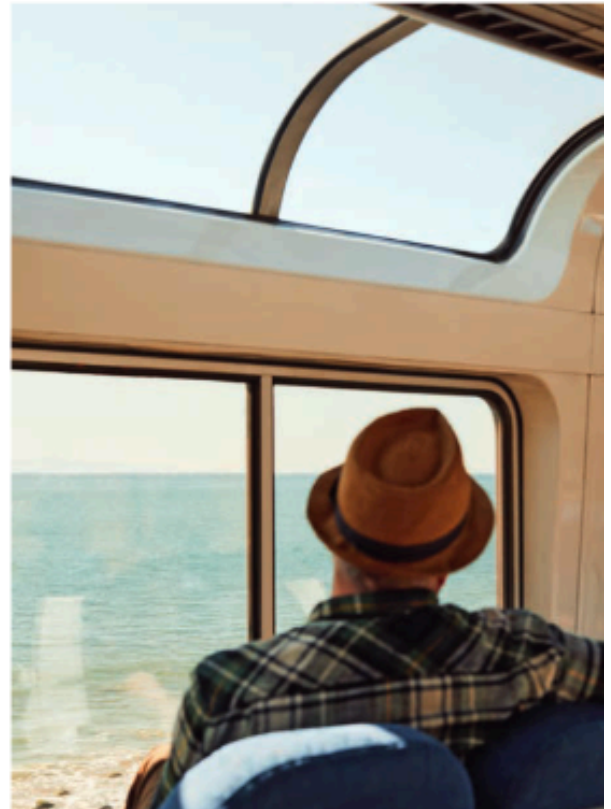
Not so fast
Take the slow
train from
LA to Seattle

**New York,
new Björk**
The pop icon's
most theatrical
show yet

**Glowing
down fighting**
The battle to
save Hong
Kong's neon

34.0522° N, 118.2437°
COAST STARLIGHT

**We're
somewhere
between
Oxnard and
Santa Barbara
when the
Pacific Ocean
suddenly comes
into view.**





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COAST STARLIGHT



It's what we've all been waiting for. And we immediately fall silent, mesmerised, it seems, by the scene unfolding outside the window: the waves crashing, the surfers turning between the breaks, the dogs pelt-ing across the sun-speckled sand. I'm travelling on the Coast Starlight, an Amtrak rail line that connects LA to Seattle, stopping at some of the West Coast's most famous cities: Santa Barbara, Monterey, San Francisco, Portland. From start to finish, the route takes 35 hours. That's twice as long as it would take to drive and more than 10 times longer than flying. But how long it takes isn't the point. Or, perhaps, it's pre-cisely the point. Because in our speed-obsessed soci-ety, where everything is about the now, is there any greater luxury than simply giving yourself time? Only train people, I soon gather, understand that joy.

Still, I'm not doing the mammoth two-day journey up north. Instead, I'm hopping off at a few stops between LA and San Francisco, seeing the best bits of the Pacific Coast Highway road trip with only a frac-tion of the driving. I board the 10.10am train on a sunny mid-November morning at LA's Union Station and head for the train's famous Sightseer Lounge Car, which has enormous windows that stretch up into the ceiling and chairs that face outwards – all the better to take in those eye-popping views. This is where I've been waiting patiently for the last couple of hours, speeding through the arid hills of Greater Los Angeles until the Big Blue fills the windows.

There's always been something mysterious and romantic about train travel: it's maybe no coincidence that some of our most treasured books and films take place on trains: from Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* to Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* via ➤



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Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited*. There's something liberating about hopping on a train at an unfamiliar station; a sense of spontaneity and adventure that somehow brings out our best travel selves. I sense my fellow passengers feel it, too: there's a convivial atmosphere in the carriage, with people taking turns to look out for whales and dolphins or swap stories about where they're going. I chat to a pair of brothers in their 60s who take the train to Santa Barbara every year for a weekend catching up by the sea. A young woman with a sketchpad tells me she takes the train as often as she can, drawing whatever she sees from the window. One man has travelled from Arkansas to L.A. and is carrying on to Chicago – all in all, the trip will take him over a week. A train enthusiast, he spends most of the time taking notes. He's trying to capture the sheer joy of the journey, he says, so he can convince his wife that they should spend their next holiday riding the rails. Really, I wonder, how could she say no to this?

My first stop is Santa Barbara, where the train pulls into the station in the city's Funk Zone, one block from the beach. Five years ago this area was home to nothing but fish canneries, but now these warehouses have been transformed into independent wineries. I make a start along their Urban Wine Trail, sampling local Pinot Noir, before stopping at Oreana Winery, where there's a blues band playing outside. The place is packed with cool twenty-somethings sipping wine, swaying to the music. It's about as far away as I could get from the stuffy, self-serious vision I had of Santa Barbara as one of California's snootiest cities.

The next morning I'm up early to catch the quaint Santa Barbara Trolley, which I'm reliably told is the best way to see the city's sights. First up is the Santa Barbara County Courthouse, a Spanish colonial >





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building with a sunken garden and a clock tower offering panoramic views of the city. Inside it's like something out of a storybook: there are hand-painted murals on every wall, wrought-iron chandeliers and wooden signs dangling from the walls with things like "case file review" and "legal forms" written in curling, archaic script. So beautiful, it's hard to believe this is a real, working courthouse. Next stop is the Santa Barbara Mission, known as the Queen of the Missions for its size and beauty. The 18th-century building, decked out in a very 21st-century millennial pink, is still home to a community of Franciscan friars, as well as 12 acres of manicured gardens.

After a mad dash I make it back onto the train. The Coast Starlight only runs once a day; miss it and you're scuppered. It's four hours until my next stop, Paso Robles, but the time flashes by as I watch the scenery change, shifting from the golden sands of Santa Barbara to the fiery orange and emerald green shrubs on the cliffs outside San Luis Obispo, which looks more like the untamed coast of Ireland than a Californian surfers' paradise. The lady in the seat next to me, who takes the train to Seattle several times a year, tells me that in spring these hills are covered in bright wildflowers. As the sun sets, the sky turns a brilliant pink as we pull into our next stop.

Paso is a wine region having something of a renaissance: in the past few years, a new crowd has come for its excellent wineries, charming inns and old-school charm. I step off the train and into Cypher Winery, a delightful winery housed in the original 1886 train depot on the platform. At 5pm on a Wednesday, it's packed with locals propping up the bar, watching the trains whistle past as they sample the local Syrah. The next day I'm up early to visit one of the city's most prestigious wineries, Niner Wine Estates, set in the beautiful Heart Hill (so named for its heart-shaped grove of oak trees). Here, they make wine across three vineyards as well as their own olive oil. By 11am, I've already tasted four reds and a dessert wine. Maybe, I think, I could miss the train after all.

By the time I get back to the station it's already dark, the observation carriage is empty, with everyone snoozing in their seats instead. Two hours later and I'm in sleepy Salinas, the closest the train takes us to the Pacific Coast Highway's coastline. I hop in a car and wind my way an hour south to Ventana, one of Big Sur's only luxury hotels. Carved into the hills above the dramatic coast, with edge-of-the-earth views over the Pacific and surrounded by 243 acres of forests, it feels like your own private woodland retreat. The following morning I watch the sun rise over the Santa Lucia Mountains from the hammock on my balcony before driving to McWay Falls, one of Big Sur's



most photographed spots. Underneath the 25m waterfall, the ocean is an unreal aquamarine, like something you'd see in a tropical paradise. As I zig-zag through hairpin turns to my next stop, Carmel-by-the-Sea, I have to pull over several times just to take it all in: the mist clinging to the cliffs, lined with pine trees, dropping straight into the roiling sea below.

I make it to Carmel in time to lunch in one of its cute bakeries (famous for their giant pretzels). The stretch of beach here is just as picturesque, with baby powder-fine sand and views of swanky Pebble Beach to the north. The city of Monterey is just a 15-minute drive away, where I stop to take a walk along Cannery Row, home to the city's now-defunct sardine canning factories. After a visit to the Old Fisherman's Wharf, home to mountains of fresh crab, oysters and lobster and Paluca Trattoria (Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman's favourite cafe in *Big Little Lies*), I'm back on the train north to Oakland's Jack London Square, a short ferry ride from San Francisco. As I make the 12-hour journey back down to LA the following morning, watching the landscape shift from impossibly green hills of lettuce, spinach and artichoke to the golden sands and sparkling surf, I get chatting to a couple making their way to LA. Why did you choose to spend two days on the train? Why not take a three-hour flight, I ask. "Simple," says the man, smiling. "If you have the time, why wouldn't you?" ■

Amtrak's Coast Starlight train runs daily in both directions between Los Angeles and Seattle. For more information, see amtrak.com/coast-starlight-train



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Where to stay

The best sleeps for
California dreamin'

Hotel Californian is Santa Barbara's buzziest new spot, situated in a sprawling Spanish colonial-style building just steps from the ocean. **Paso Robles Inn**, with its lovely gardens and soaking tubs on the porches, is in the heart of Paso's action. Still, for Big Sur beauty, it doesn't get more sensational than the delightful **Ventana**, (pictured) which overlooks the Pacific and the Santa Lucia Mountains. Its just-as-dreamy sister property, **Carmel Valley Ranch**, by the Carmel River, is set in 500 acres of pristine vineyards, olive groves and lavender fields. And in Monterey, the ace **Monterey Plaza Hotel** is a stunning waterfront property with unparalleled views over the bay.



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