

ON THE ROAD

An epic adventure in America's Golden State

There can be few places in the world more iconic for a road trip than California. A state that has it all - sublime coastal stretches of monumental scale, pristine natural parks boasting some of the world's most famous views, cities rich in cultural and historical sites, varied flora and fauna and acres of pristine farmland, visible for miles in all directions. Katie Thomson headed on the road...

Flying into San Francisco International gives you the perfect launchpad from which to explore and in such a rich and varied state there are untold numbers of routes to discover. Some will head straight on Highway One, which can be followed all the way down the coastline to Los Angeles and beyond, taking in some of the most spectacular scenery on earth on the Big Sur. Or, those seeking dense forests can head north to see the mighty sequoia in the Avenue of Giants in Humboldt Redwoods State Park or visit the land of the Ewoks in Redwood National & State Park. Heading Eastward you'll find the monolithic titans of Yosemite and snow capped peaks of the Sierra Nevada, scales of landscape that feel other-worldly. My own route took in some places I had been fortunate to see before and some new discoveries, using San Francisco as the centre for exploration.

Starting out from San Francisco, we picked up the car and headed straight onto the road, following Highway One from the earliest intersection point. We were heading for Monterey

and it is only a two hour drive from the City. Along the way you'll find some glorious stretches of coast - rugged panoramas blooming in a riot of colour, with the oceans of yellow Coastal Lupins, burnt-orange Californian Poppies and tufts of candy floss coloured Sea Pinks clinging to rocky outcrops. The hardest part will be limiting the number of times you stop for photo-ops, each new bend revealing a different perspective on the crystalline sea. On the way, grab a bite to eat in Pescadero - a blink-and-you'll-miss-it town straight out of a Western.

Monterey is one of my favourite Californian cities - even without it's world-famous marine life, the city itself is home to a chambering mix of vistas, from the awe-inspiring coastal views to classic American street scenes - think Victorian-style inns and porches with swing seats with elderly couples enjoying the night air together. It's not quite sleepy, but certainly not raucous either, and as such is just a joy to wander through, window shopping on the wide avenues and grazing in the many cafés that line the streets. Home for the night in Monterey was equally charming - the Gosby House Inn. The inn is everything you yearn for in a boutique night's stay. Quaintly decorated with a whole host of antiques, comfort is at the centre of life in this little haven and all guest rooms are equipped with a fire - perfect for enjoying a night cap and one of the complimentary homemade cookies, baked fresh everyday.

Part of the Four Sisters Inn group, the Gosby House has that home-away-from-home feel and is ideally located to explore Monterey - it's an easy 10 minute car ride to Fisherman's Wharf and there are lots of restaurants, bars and a pub just steps from the door. The Four Sisters Inns also offer what was to become a favourite fixture in my day when we stayed with them, the nightly wine and hors d'oeuvre hour - a chance to sample some delicious local wines and some fabulous home cooking by the team. It was enough to keep the hunger at bay long enough for a quick dash to Lover's Point to see a glorious sunset make way for salmon-pink sky.

Monterey's unique topography means it is a world-famous destination for oceanic adventures, with its submarine canyon system filled with nutrient-dense water, attracting larger predators. It's on the migration route for many species of whales and depending on the time of year, you are almost guaranteed sightings of grey whales, humpbacks, orcas and even blue whales off its coast. If you're like me, proximity to wildlife like that is too much to resist, and I wanted to get out on the water to see these majestic creatures a little closer up. There are a bevy of whale watch tours available at the wharf but I opted for Discovery Whale Watch, namely because they

"ALONG THE WAY YOU'LL FIND SOME GLORIOUS STRETCHES OF COAST - RUGGED PANORAMAS BLOOMING IN A RIOT OF COLOUR."

guarantee sightings and small passenger numbers - no jostling on the deck for a view! In our three hours on the water we saw a spectacular feeding frenzy of eight hump backs, diving, slapping the water and even vertically lunging at the school of anchovies from below and breaking through the surface. We also caught glimpses of sea birds, sea lions and rare harbour porpoises. Back on dry land, if you still want more aquatic action, then the Monterey Bay Aquarium is world-famous and rightly so - it's one of the most amazing places to develop your understanding of marine life and see creatures in ways you never thought possible - the jellyfish room and open sea tanks are not to be missed, nor the impossibly adorable sea otters.

After exploring all of Monterey's sights, it was time to motor down the highway a little further to Carmel-by-the-Sea,

Left: Yosemite
Below: Point Lobos Park

"THE DRIVE IS AN INTERESTING ONE, TAKING YOU THROUGH AN INCREDIBLE RANGE OF LANDSCAPES"

an oceanic hideaway, as quaint as Monterey but with fewer crowds and a small-town feel. The city is primarily known for its beautiful Mission building and for the cottages of its small and village-like centre. It's a great pit stop if you want to explore further down the coast toward the world-famous Big Sur, and as a base it has an incredible number of parks just moments away - including the Scenic Bluff Park and the beautiful Point Lobos park, where you can find an abundance of marine life visible just off the coast. After exploring these parks and seeing groups of sea otters and migrating whales off the coast, we made out for Big Sur - however, the weather had other ideas and as we drove a huge weather front moved in, eclipsing the coastal roads and shrouding us in an immense fog - we hightailed it back to The Coachman's Inn, another in the Four Sister's group, to huddle with a glass of wine in front of an open fire. The Inn has a wonderful feel - like a luxury motel, with the rooms grouped around a central, enveloping courtyard and the cosy lodge reception as the hub.

The next day had a big cross country drive ahead, so we filled our boots at the ample breakfast table (think some amazing fluffy frittatas, freshly baked breads and lots of fresh fruit) and hit the road for Yosemite. The drive is an interesting one, taking you through an incredible range of landscapes - you see the farming heart of California in the wide open fields of Salinas, with their never-ending expanses of sky. Then you happen, almost without incident, upon the San Luis Reservoir, an extraordinary man-made lake flanked by steep green hills. Finally, you have the procession of American roadside towns, with their straight highways and quaint store names and fluorescent-lit corner Seven-Elevens. Of course you can sense Yosemite is not far away as you begin to climb through hills on more precarious country roads. By this point it was fairly dark and I can't comment on the landscape, but I was certainly

pleased when we found home for the next three nights - the Evergreen Lodge Hotel.

The Evergreen Lodge is an extraordinary base camp to explore Yosemite - it's a short forty minute hop to the park entrance (because of the scale of the park, that is a short distance!) and is itself such a fantastic base - the lodges are all perfectly appointed, with woodburners and cosy soft furnishings and the site is filled with activities for kids (and the inner child - I had to take a turn on the zip wire), has a lovely heated pool and games area. The hotel also has a fantastic bar and restaurant, perfect for those tasty American classics you're craving after a day of hiking, and a nightly free s'mores hour, where you can embrace your inner kid once more and roast a marshmallow on the campfire.

The guides within the hotel can help advise you on how to make the most of your time in Yosemite, helping you plan waypoints for the best viewpoints for classic sights like El Capitan, Yosemite Falls and the Half Dome, alongside some hikes for all levels of ability. The park is on a monumental scale, truly there are few places so vast and wild that can be explored so easily, so definitely set aside at least three days to make sure you see as much as possible. During our visit, the last of the spring snows were still melting so some trails were closed, but we still got to see the most spectacular views in



Left: Gosby House Inn
Above: The Coachman's Inn



Big Sur

"HUGE MOSSY BOULDERS FROM PRE-HISTORIC LANDSLIDES LINE THE PATHS AND THE TRAIL IS PUNCTUATED BY POSTCARD-PERFECT LOG CABINS SPRING FORTH FROM THE TREES."

that soft spring light - some parts of the park were still so quiet that we could observe a Yosemite Fox trying to catch its prey in the snow. If you find the time, there's also lots to explore just out of the park, including Hetch Hetchy which is only 20 minutes along a spectacular, and spectacularly narrow, valley road from the hotel. Hetch Hetchy is a glacial valley and man-made reservoir and has some fantastic trails around it of various lengths, perfect for any fitness level and is utterly beautiful.

One of our favourite hikes in Yosemite was a short, flat loop trail to the Mirror Lakes. The walk is something out of a fairytale - huge mossy boulders from pre-historic landslides line the paths and the trail is punctuated by postcard-perfect log cabins springing forth from the trees. Eventually the canopy opens up and you step out into a clearing, before you the image of a mountain reflected perfectly in the pool below.

After hiding in the forests for a few days, it was time to return to reality and head toward another classic Californian destination - wine country. Seeing the sun-drenched vineyards of Napa and Sonoma were a must and so we set forth on the 3.5 hour drive north to Sonoma. Unfortunately, my visions of golden fields and verdant vines was shattered by a passing storm and driving rain, so the warm embrace of another Four Sister's Inn property was most welcome - especially as we had timed our arrival for wine hour - we seemed to have a knack for this! The Inn at Sonoma is perfectly located if you are looking to explore the city itself - you can park up and forget about the car, wandering into town to visit the many



Mirror Lake, Yosemite



Evergreen Lodge

wineries right on the doorstep. The choice can be a little overwhelming, so the hotel staff are on hand with some great recommendations for both tasting and dining locally. After the long drive, we decided to enjoy the local wines available at the hotel before heading to their hot tub. That evening we ventured out for dinner, soaking up (thankfully not literally as the rain had stopped) the atmosphere of the pretty high street. Most of the wine tastings are during the day, but the many eateries of Sonoma often serve local tipples, so you can still get your Californian wine fix with your dinner. The day is best used visiting the wine shops and following any recommendations given there out into the vineyards themselves. You can also stay in Sonoma city, walking between shops and not having to worry about moderating what you drink on your little walking tour - cheers!

After so many days of hiking and then a day of wining, it was time to head back to the City, where we had started a week before. San Francisco alone has an embarrassment of riches, both iconic and touristy and more cultural entities a little more off the beaten track. We were determined to stay in the heart of the action and opted for The Marker Hotel. Just minutes walk from



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Images, clockwise from left: Rooms at the Inn at Sonoma, views of the Golden Gate Bridge from the state park, sea lions at Pier 39 and rooms at the Marker San Francisco

Union Square, The Marker oozes style and personality, with opulent suites decorated in jewel tones and some playful elements. The building dates from 1910 in the Beaux-Arts style and effortlessly combines old and new. Within the hotel is Tratto restaurant - a foodie destination worthy of a visit in itself. The restaurant menu is Italian themed, with trattoria style dishes made to be shared and oozing with robust, fresh flavours. There's definitely the feel of an upscale neighbourhood bar - perfect for enjoying happy hour before heading into the night.

There are certain places that need to be ticked off here and seeing the Golden Gate Bridge in the flesh is absolutely worthwhile - we even took a longer route on the journey to SF from Sonoma so we could drive over it. Alongside that you have the classic Pier 39, home of the sea lions (you'll hear, and smell them, before you see them), Alcatraz, the famously steep Lombard Street and my favourite, the Golden Gate State Park, which affords its own beautiful views of the sweeping bay area. You're never far from great food in San Francisco either, so make time to head to the Mission district for the best burrito of your life, the LGBT Castro district for great cafés and people watching and brunch havens in Fillmore and Tenderloin. China Town shouldn't be missed either, nor the neighbouring Little Italy and just down the road you'll find City Lights Bookstore, hot spot for the Beat Generation, and the inspiration for the title of this piece.

After eight days of exploration, it was time to call a close to the road trip, coming to the conclusion as I do with so many trips - the more places I visit, the more places I add to my list. Clichés aside, California really does have it all, and it could take a decade to explore fully. Whether you have an epoch or a week, make sure you get out there and see what you can discover.

BOOKING DETAILS:

- Gosby House Inn: gosbyhouseinn.com
- Discovery Whale Watch: discoverywhalewatch.com
- Coachman's Inn: coachmansinn.com
- Evergreen Lodge: evergreenlodge.com
- Inn at Sonoma: innatsonoma.com
- The Marker: jdvhoteles.com