

Living life on the Big Sur

From Arnie to zebras, **David Malone** shares his A-Z of one of the great road trips, California's Pacific Coast Highway

THE Pacific Coast Highway, US State Route 101, is 450 miles of coastal road. But beyond the statistics, it is also one of the most spectacular, romantic and surprising drives anywhere in the world.

Running the length of the north California coast from Los Angeles to San Francisco, the road is winding and narrow, where each corner reveals a vista from a Hollywood film set.

We began the journey at one of my least favourite places, Los Angeles International Airport, and resolving to spend as short a time as possible there drove north to Santa Barbara, where the people are cool and the shops are quaint.

Deceptively small, the town's museum of modern art is a gem; thanks to a recently deceased local benefactor, it has an impressive collection of pieces including artworks by Matisse, Picasso and Henry Moore.

Further north, Hearst Castle, the folly of newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, is one of the region's most popular attractions.

High on a hillside overlooking the ocean, at its heyday the castle's visitors included playwright George Bernard Shaw and many from the Kennedy clan, its Irish links symbolised by the mace in the dining room, a copy of Dublin's ceremonial mace. Hearst's private zoo has long since closed down, though bizarrely around 60 zebra, escaped descendants of his 1930s' collection now roam the countryside. Two were recently shot by neighbours for straying on to their land.

While Google Maps states that the total journey takes just eight hours, to appreciate all it has to offer, I would recommend a minimum of five days to complete the route.

The road snakes through scenic villages including Cambria, Big Sur, Carmel – where Clint Eastwood was once mayor – all the way to Monterey, a large town where the former fish cannery district has been revitalised to become the lively happening part of town.

This is wine country, where a night out often begins with a tasting at a bar run by a local vineyard. Scheid Vineyards' bar offers

tastings of three reds and three white for just \$10.

Next door, The Sardine Factory is a fine spot for both for great local food and for celebrity spotting: Arnie and Clint are regulars – indeed they have their own lockers in the basement where their favourite wines are kept.

For families the Monterey aquarium – one of the best in the world – is a must see. Next stop was San Francisco. It is impossible to do justice to the city in just two days. The Pier 39/Fisherman's Wharf districts are popular with families; cheap eats, big crabs, cold beers, a commercialised tribute to the city's maritime past.

The famous trolley cars are ideal for getting around, and at \$2 a ride, not expensive. It is worth exploring trendy Nob Hill where solid wooden houses overlook the Golden Gate Bridge and Haight Ashbury, a hippie district somehow still trapped in Flower Power.

It was Mark Twain who reputedly said "The coldest winter I ever saw was the summer I spent in San Francisco." That is a little harsh, but visitors should be prepared for an Irish or a Californian summer. Either may happen.

A few miles inland is Oakland, not the prettiest town in the world, but we weren't there for the scenery. U2 were in town, and a good friend who works with the band had kindly given us a pair of premium tickets. This was stadium rock on a grand scale and pure theatre. A great show, though Bono's new accent, a south Bronx Italian-American drawl, caused some head scratching.

Leaving the coast, we headed north towards the Napa Valley, America's most famous wine producing region. What I love most about the United States is its diversity. The brashness of New York is a million miles from the mellow Deep South, while Napa is entirely different to the rest of California.

Distinctly European in character, the area boasts miles upon mile of vineyard drives, separated by wineries that are always willing to welcome visitors for a tasting. With a near perfect climate that leaves an indelible mark on the wine, the Napa Valley

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is one those 'see it before you die' places. And at its northern tip is Calistoga, a village of breathtaking beauty and vibrant artistic character. After checking out its Old Faithful geyser – not as impressive as its big brother in Yellowstone – we went for a bite in a local bistro.

Half-way through the main course, we were joined at the next table by The Foo Fighters. Fully expecting the evening to take a hedonistic turn, disappointingly the band ordered organic salad, green tea and sparkling water. They had impeccable manners, not one band member nipped out the back for a sneaky smoke, they spoke quietly to avoid disturbing the other diners and left a generous tip. How rock 'n' roll has changed...

Calistoga is also home to a Chateau Montelena, a winery that changed history. Until the seventies, France made the best wines in the world, without question. But a few New World pretenders were challenging the Gallic throne, so in 1976, the elite of the French wine aristocracy challenged the outside world to a blind tasting in Paris, where once and for all, French supremacy would be copper fastened.

But history was changed that day. In what became known as 'The Judgement of Paris', Chateau Montelena's Chardonnay was declared by the French to be the finest of all, and the world was never quite the same again. There are just eight priceless bottles of this award-winning wine left, but their reds, particularly the 2004 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon are very special indeed.



Journey's end was Sacramento, the state capital of California. Expecting a dull administrative city, I was proven quite wrong.

Old Sacramento is a perfectly preserved 28 acre historic district, where railroad and river meet. This was the centre of the great California gold rush of 1848, when a tiny village community was transformed into a wild and lawless boomtown.

Local museums recount those days in meticulous detail and are well worth a visit. If we were to do it again, would we do it differently? Just one thing. Americans drive on the right, so driving from north to south – from San Francisco to Los Angeles – would have been a smarter idea. That way, the view would have been of uninterrupted ocean, rather than of passing traffic.

Other than that, The Pacific Coast Highway was just road heaven.

Next week, David Malone travels to America's Deep South and Georgia



■ **CALIFORNIA DREAMIN':**
Route 101 in all its glory - New meets old in Sacramento (right) the Californian Chardonnay that won the 'judgement of Paris' in 1976 (below right)



■ **CALI CASTLE:** Hearst Castle, one of the must-sees on Route 101 and the vineyards which produce some of the best wines in the world (left)

James Stinson



SHORT HAUL

Blackpool's big attraction

BLACKPOOL'S bid to reinvent itself as a 21st century tourist destination is taking shape with the re-opening of the town's famous tower after a major refurbishment. The regeneration project, aimed at encouraging families to stay longer in the resort, is part of a \$250 million investment for the tower and promenade. The observation platform at the top of the Grade I-listed structure becomes the Blackpool Tower Eye and features a skywalk. It has floor-to-ceiling glass and overlooks the coastline. Other new features include a dungeon attraction, a new entrance and a '4D' cinema with a vibrating floor. Manager of the tower, Kate Shane, said: "We used to have a walk of faith, which was a metre square of glass which looked down the legs of the tower. Now the entire west elevation is glass. "It makes the back of your knees go, but on clear days you can see Cumbria and over to the Isle of Man."

All inclusive not so hot

HOLIDAYMAKERS hoping to keep a lid on the cost of overseas trips by choosing an all inclusive package could end up paying hundreds of unbudgeted extra pounds. Research by Post Office Travel Money found that four out of five all inclusive holidaymakers paid for items they expected to be covered as part of their package deal. For example, Post Office research found that a la carte dining, drinks, watersports and internet access could cost a couple 24 per cent extra – over £300 – on a week's all inclusive holiday in Egypt. While Post Office research revealed that 94 per cent of all inclusive holidaymakers expected all meals in all restaurants to be included, its survey of 54 hotels in 24 destinations worldwide found that 65 per cent charged extra or put restrictions on using their a la carte restaurants. Instead guests were generally limited to buffet meals in one restaurant. One in five of the holidaymakers surveyed admitted paying extra for a la carte meals during their all inclusive holiday. Worse still, instead of taking foreign currency to cover extras, the research showed that 48 per cent of people paid on plastic – potentially leaving them open to fees and commission charges. And 19 per cent withdrew cash at an ATM, another costly mistake. Sarah Munro, Post Office head of travel Money, said: "Although it is perfectly possible to stick to all inclusive deals, our research found that in practice only one in five holidaymakers actually spent nothing extra on their trip. "The best advice is to check the small print carefully before booking to see what is included and make sure you carry enough foreign cash to pay for extras. Avoid the expense of a debit card by loading cash for unforeseen costs onto a pre-paid card or use a credit card offering zero per cent commission."

Fact file

DRIVE:

Surprisingly cheap. A jeep for a week with satnav came to £240

SLEEP:

America has an impressive range of bed and breakfast inns. Usually competitively priced, they offer a personalised experience and uniformly high standards. Recommended inns along the Pacific Coast Highway include:

■ Simpson House Inn, Santa Barbara (Simpsonhouseinn.com)

■ Cambria Pines Lodge (Cambriapineslodge.com)

■ Spindrift Inn Monterey (Spindriftinn.com)

■ The Good Hotel, San Francisco (Thegoodhotel.com)

■ Cottage Grove Inn, Calistoga (Cottagetrove.com)

■ Amber House Bed & Breakfast Inn (Amberhouse.com)

TOP TIP:

On arrival buy a local sim card, or cheap throwaway mobile phone. Calls cost 10c/min to anywhere in the USA, so a \$15 top up would cover most travellers' needs.