

The landscape of the Big Sur coast, where the Santa Lucia mountains meet the Pacific Ocean, boasts some stunning views and has become a popular tourist destination



## California dreaming

Ben Connor pulls down the top of his (rented) Chrysler convertible and goes on the road, from Venice Beach to San Francisco

The car rental clerk has me sussed. 'Of course, for only an extra US\$100 you can have this.' Turning the page of his display book, he taps invitingly on the upper corner of a photograph. There, glistening in the Californian sunlight, is a Chrysler Convertible—curvaceous, silver and black and oh, so beautiful. Too much of a victim of contemporary life to resist its lure, I virtually get down on my knees and beg my partner to agree that, yes, it is reasonable that we rent this thing. Amazingly, it works.

It is a gorgeous day, the sky is blue and having soaked up the carnival atmosphere of Venice Beach (all synchronised rollerbladers, hippie drum fests and bohemian street stalls), and woven through the Hollywood hills, we drive north with the top down, bound for San Francisco. The California we're coming to know is everything I've imagined and more: there are few places in the world where such gorgeous geography combines with such a phenomenal concentration of wealth. Making occasional side trips off Highway 101, a fresh breeze on our faces, we cruise down tree-lined roads, past cliff-side mansions overlooking the

vast blue of the Pacific Ocean. Everything is just too perfect: the physiques of the sauntering surfers and beach babes, the glossy, exotic cars lining the roadside and the mansions themselves, where a fresh coat of paint must be a monthly obligation. Entropy, it seems, just has no place here.

Our first stop is Jalama Bay, an idyllic camping site where lush green hills meet a white sand beach. We are soon befriended by Keith, an amiable, middle-aged, gay Californian, who invites us for dinner in his massive mobile home—a very Californian phenomenon.

**GARY COOPER, CHARLIE CHAPLIN AND GRETA GARBO WERE REGULAR GUESTS AT HEARST'S CELEBRATIONS OF ROMANESQUE DECADENCE**

There are buttons that make it expand and contract, and everywhere we look there are mod cons. He offers us sandwiches with a choice of five different meats and ten different sauces. I feel like a culinary dyslexic. Soon, with beers in our hands, we while away the hours talking economics, culture and travel. Later that night, after setting up our little yellow tent beside his behemoth, we fall asleep to the sound of waves crashing in the bay.

William Randolph Hearst, a Californian and the inspiration for Citizen Kane, was one of the most powerful newspaper magnates of all time. At his zenith, in the mid to late 1920s, his empire spanned 28 newspapers, a publishing company, a movie studio and multiple periodicals. But, not content with merely wielding influence over the hearts and minds of the American people, Hearst decided to build a really, really big castle.

Continuing northward, up Highway 1, we turn inland and there it is, the most extraordinary mishmash of aristocratic architectural decadence, a kitsch Californian boyhood dream, perched on the top of coastal hillside. Walking around Hearst's 127 acres of gardens, Roman pillared pools, terraces, walkways and 165 rooms, all constructed from the imported remains of exotic, ancient structures and filled with the finest in European art and every possible indulgence of the rich and powerful throughout history, is a truly bizarre experience. The overall effect is frequently jarring, but thoroughly entertaining. In its heyday, this pleasure dome housed the biggest private zoo in the world, and was a notorious playground for the rich and famous. Gary Cooper, Charlie Chaplin and Greta Garbo, to name a few, were regular gallivanting guests at Hearst's celebrations of Romanesque decadence.

With a brief look back at the castle, framed by blue skies and a palm tree halo, we put the top down and accelerate northward. Passing over San Carpoforo Creek we begin the 145km stretch of coastline that is Big Sur. This is one of the most scenic drives in the world. The Santa Lucia mountain range clings to the coast here, plummeting dramatically into the ocean. And





Highway 1, cut into the cliffside, rises and falls to great effect. We stop regularly to admire the scenery, pop into rustic galleries and nautically-themed diners, and go on short walks to view waterfalls falling from coastal cliffs or take in the preserved frontier wilderness of Los Padres national forest. There are less than 300 hotel rooms in the whole of Big Sur, so we camp – beside a group of all-American teenage goths on the first night; by a river under redwoods in Big Sur river valley on the second.

The beachside fairground at Santa Cruz, the setting of 80s teen movie, *The Lost Boys*, offers us a brief frolic before we begin the climbs and majestic descents of hilly San Francisco. Here we stay around the corner from bustling Chinatown and the City Lights bookstore – the place where all that beatnik jazz talk started. Although City Lights feels just like any other independent bookstore, the prospect of Jack Kerouac leaning against the counter, rapping on some arcane matter gives me a buzz.

We return that night for a reading by Reverend Billy, Minister of the Church of Stop Shopping. Billy is an activist turned performance artist, well-read and undeniably brilliant. His comic anti-corporate gospel preaching (I now have it as fact that Mickey Mouse is the



devil) has us screaming 'Amen!' and laughing hysterically.

Our time is up. After admiring the Golden Gate Bridge and stopping off in Berkeley, we scream down the speedy Highway 5, arriving in LA just in time to drop off the car and fly out that evening. Admittedly, there has been a lot of driving, but really, as four-wheeled adventures go, you just can't beat sunny California.

### DRIVING THROUGH CALIFORNIA

#### Getting there and around

Standard return flights from Glasgow or Edinburgh to LA average around £650. Car hire is a relatively simple affair with major companies like Thrifty, Hertz and Avis providing shuttle services from LA airport to nearby offices. Pricing/car comparisons and bookings are available online: [www.compare.carrentals.co.uk](http://www.compare.carrentals.co.uk) is a good starting point.

#### Advice

Public phones rarely function in California so buying or renting a US mobile (or compatible US Sim card) is worth consideration. Bring (or rent) a tent and perhaps a small cooker, as there are very few lodgings in Big Sur and certain parts of national and state parks.

#### Useful websites:

[www.visitcalifornia.com](http://www.visitcalifornia.com)  
[www.tripadvisor.com/Tourism-g28926-California-Vacations.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/Tourism-g28926-California-Vacations.html)

## Excess Baggage



*Boldly going where no one else wants to*

■ The seventh World Travel and Tourism summit, which took place in Lisbon this month, was the first such event to address the impact the travel industry is having on the environment. Chairman Jean-Claude Baumgarten said, 'It is time to ask ourselves "Has the industry fulfilled its promises? Are we all exemplary world citizens?"' Speakers included this column's current hero, José Sócrates, Prime Minister of Portugal, socialist, eco-warrior and all-round good egg, and, er, billionaire Stelios of easyJet fame. EasyJet, incidentally, has just entered into a price cutting war with rivals Ryanair, with both companies promising to slash some European flights to as little as £10 including tax.

■ In completely unrelated news, the list-fanatics on the Forbes Traveler website this month announced the top 50 most-visited tourist attractions in the world for 2006. Times Square in New York topped the list of attractions, of which nearly 40% were in America. Almost everything you'd expect to see represented was present and correct – Sydney Opera House, the Great Wall of China and an awful lot of Disney. Seven of the attractions were in Paris, six in London. There was not a Kelvingrove Museum nor an Edinburgh Castle in sight, though – in fact the only non-London UK location on the list was number 21, Blackpool Pleasure Beach. Just to put that in perspective, number 18 on the list was the Eiffel Tower. Blackpool Pleasure Beach attracts 5.7 million visitors a year – we're not entirely sure from where, but that's a lot of Kiss Me Quick hats. Perhaps you'd like a little more perspective? Last year, more people rode depressed donkeys and screamed that they wanted to go faster than visited the Grand Canyon, the Pyramids of Giza, the Empire State Building, the Taj Mahal or the Vatican. Almost makes you proud to be British, doesn't it? (Kirstin Innes)

Sea Eagles are one of Britain's rarest birds as well as being its largest. And there's nowhere better to appreciate their soaring 8ft wingspan than on the coasts of Mull.

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