

# California Dreamin'

## Explore the Pacific Coast Highway with a Road Trip



© Photo by SF Travel

### The Ultimate Pacific Coast Highway Road Trip

When you have a thirst for California-style exploration, only one departure point will do: John Wayne Airport in Santa Ana.

To paraphrase the Western icon, “Young fellas, if you’re looking for adventure, I’ll accommodate ya.”

We arrived in Santa Ana with backpacks hastily stuffed with t-shirts, flip-flops and what we hoped would be enough underwear. Since only two of us had jobs and the rest were still paying for grad degrees our parents assured us would only lead to bartending, we decided to backpack our way up the Pacific Coast Highway, staying in dorm-style hostels with free breakfasts and shared bathrooms.



© Photo by Kogi BBQ

### Day 1: La La Land

After renting a Toyota 4-Runner from the Los Angeles EZ Rent-A-Car counter, we set off for what would be a weeklong excursion up the PCH on the amazing scenic edge of California. Pulling out of the airport, we headed straight for our first stop for the night — Los Angeles. After getting lost in a traffic apocalypse that cannot be overstated, we finally made it to Koreatown. Just west of downtown and south of

Hollywood, this city-within-a-city is ground zero for good food, nightlife and midnight munchies.

It was at Roy Choi's Kogi BBQ Tacos, the original Korean taco truck, that we began our food frenzy. With so many cultures crammed into the densest neighborhood in L.A., the resulting mashup of food is as multilingual as the people. Our culinary conga line took us from Korean kimchi quesadillas and calamari tacos to Mexican meats slathered in the best mole sauce I'd ever eaten.

After we'd devoured dinner, we stumbled upon Koreatown's other main attraction: karaoke. At a club called the Brass Monkey, we embarrassed ourselves with sloppy covers of songs by Aerosmith, the Beastie Boys, Weezer and even Justin Timberlake until we were ready to head to our home for the night.



© Photo by Orange Drive Hostel

Where We Stayed: The Orange Drive Hostel in Hollywood offered a pub crawl that we were much too tired to take advantage of, a free all-you-can-eat breakfast and \$10 parking – a total of less than \$50 each (note: hostel prices are per person, per night and may fluctuate seasonally).

### Day 2: Santa Barbara to San Luis Obispo

After waking to a heaping plate of waffles, we headed north on Highway 101. As we drove, we made a game out of spotting the small historic markers that popped up at regular intervals along one of the state's busiest highways. Left by Franciscan monks, they are all that remains of El Camino Real, the King's Highway, a 700-mile stretch of road built to connect the 21 California missions. In Santa Barbara, considered the Queen of El Camino Real, we found the 10th mission in the chain.

While it was only a stop on our way to Mission Canyon, we were intrigued by the mission's history. We walked around a bit, then headed into the canyon to hike the Tunnel Trail to Seven Falls. A favorite trek of Santa Barbarans since the turn of the century, the Santa Barbara News-Press once wrote that "to reach the falls requires some active climbing, able-bodied sliding and skillful swinging."

### Mission accomplished.

That night we made our way to San Luis Obispo and the Thursday Farmer's Market. This foodie festival features awesome live music, an assorted bunch of local characters and some amazing grilled artichokes cooked on trucks in the middle of the street. If you can't make it on Thursdays, the Firestone Grill's tri-tip sandwich is a Food Network favorite and Bubble Gum Alley is a wonderfully weird place to visit in what's been called "the happiest place in America."

Where We Stayed: A favorite in this college town, HI (Hosteling International) San Luis Obispo Hostel offered a good night's sleep and free parking in a homey B&B that ran us just under \$30 each for the night.

### Day 3: Piedras Blancas Beach to Nepenthe to Big Sur

We got on the road early and pointed the 4-Runner north on the PCH. Just outside of San Luis Obispo, we came across Piedras Blancas Beach where a colony of elephant seals slept in the sun. Hundreds of the fat, barking animals sprawled across the beach and we stayed until the smell told us it was time to keep going. Following the curve of the beach, we passed Morro Rock where peregrine falcons nested in the cliffs until we came to Nepenthe.

"The House of No Sorrow" sits 800 feet above the Pacific Ocean overlooking the Santa Lucia Mountains and the wild southern coast of Monterey County. You could simply call it a restaurant but you'd be missing part of the story. Actor/director Orson Welles originally bought it for his bride, actress Rita Hayworth, in 1944 on a romantic whim. The Hollywood power couple divorced without ever living there. Bill and Lolly Fassett moved in with their five children in 1947. They renamed it Nepenthe – Greek for "isle of no care" – and opened a restaurant that became a cultural icon synonymous with Big Sur and its Bohemian lifestyle. The food is fantastic, but the nights spent 'round the fire pit, the cast of free-thinking characters who've played a part in its story and the amazing views of the Pacific are the real reasons you should come.

Where We Stayed: Despite our disorganization, we managed to do one thing right: book ahead in Big Sur. When we saw the distance from San Luis Obispo to San Francisco, we knew we'd never see all we wanted to in a single day and the

fancy Big Sur hotels were not in our paltry budgets. Good thing we brought along a couple of compact tents to pitch in a campground. Bottchers Gap sits on a 2,100-foot ridge overlooking the backcountry and for \$15 a night we were able to enjoy the forest and save some cash. However, with just 12 sites, reservations are essential.

#### Day 4: Big Sur to Santa Cruz

At Pfeiffer State Park, the Big Sur River twists around redwoods and sycamores high above the pounding surf. From here we traced Highway 1 out of the woods, past the beautiful people lunching in Carmel-by-the-Sea and alongside neon-colored t-shirt stands in John Steinbeck's Cannery Row to the other side of Monterey Bay.



© Photo by Beach Boardwalk

Stretched out across the sand is the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, California's oldest surviving amusement park and one of the few seaside parks left on the West Coast. Over the sounds of arcade games, you can hear the unmistakable clack-clack-clack of the Giant Dipper wooden coaster as it climbs toward the sky. We spent the day gorging ourselves on popcorn and cotton candy in a playland that seemed more 1940s than current day. With bumper cars, whack-a-mole and a 342-pipe organ that kept time with an ancient carousel, the boardwalk offered a classic California experience.

Where We Stayed: The HI-Santa Cruz is housed in the Carmelita Cottages on Beach Hill. For less than \$30 a night we stayed in dorm-style accommodations and spent time getting to know a group of cute German backpackers.

#### Days 5 and 6: San Francisco

Highway 1 meets Highway 101 at San Francisco's most iconic site, the Golden Gate Bridge. After taking the obligatory pics, we headed into the city. Our first day included stops at Chinatown, Golden Gate Park and a drive up to Lands End. We ended the night with cioppino, San Francisco's original fish stew, and warm sourdough bread at Fisherman's Wharf before catching an indie-rock band at the Mezzanine.

Where We Stayed: Our shrinking funds had us searching for an affordable hostel in the city when we stumbled across the HI San Francisco-Fisherman's Wharf. An in-town bargain at less than \$50, the best thing about the place was the free parking that was worth its weight in gold.

The next morning, we headed out for another day in the City by the Bay. After we'd eaten dim sum, ridden the cable cars and conquered the other tourist attractions, we wanted to see some of the local hangouts. Here are a few hidden San Francisco sites and amazingly weird places we checked out:

Musée Mécanique – This penny arcade features antique games from Playland at the Beach, an amusement park popular in the 1920s.

Wave Organ – The jetty uses cemetery stones with inlaid pipes to make an organ that gurgles and echoes when the waves crash at high tide.

Seward Street Slides – What could be better than 40 feet of steep sliding fun?

Sutro Baths – Once a large saltwater swimming complex in Lands End, all that remains of the once-glorious baths are the ruins that sit in the sea.

The Sixteenth Avenue Steps – Designed by local artists, these mosaic steps are based on the Escadaria Selaron in Brazil.

#### Day 7: Sacramento

So after seven days, four hostels and one very odd night in a tent, it was time to call it quits. Our backpacking journey up California's Pacific Coast Highway had run its course. After a short drive to Sacramento, we turned in the 4-Runner, grabbed our packs and headed for home. With less than \$10 between us, we had made it – even if our final meal consisted only of peanuts and all the free soda the airline would allow.

#### Drive Times:

Santa Ana to Los Angeles: 30 minutes  
Los Angeles to Santa Barbara: 1 hour, 45 minutes  
Santa Barbara to San Luis Obispo: 1 hour, 30 minutes  
San Luis Obispo to Big Sur: 3 hours  
Big Sur to Santa Cruz: 1 hour, 15 minutes  
Santa Cruz to San Francisco: 1 hour  
San Francisco to Sacramento: 1 hour, 30 minutes

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