

California revisited – and this time with the kids in tow
Spectator 13 September 2017



Mark Piggott and his family head off on an epic journey in search of spectacular beaches, a total eclipse and free wi-fi

In 1982, aged 15 I boarded my first plane and flew to meet my father and step family in Los Angeles. I never forgot that trip: sleeping in a car in Death Valley, smuggled into motels in LA, walking through Tijuana street markets and squatting in San Francisco when Freddie Laker went bust.

Now my wife Lynda and I have decided to take our children – Daughter, 13, and Son, 10 – on an even more epic journey. Already we've taken in Toronto and Niagara Falls, watched the Yankees with hot dogs, eaten at 'Cake Boss' Carlo's Hoboken bakery, farted in the UN security council, melted in Vegas, hunted aliens at Area 51 and been dumbstruck by the Grand Canyon before reaching San Diego where we spend 10 days relaxing in a villa in a smart outer suburb.

'When you were at the Grand Canyon,' says Jenny, the septuagenarian cabbie driving us from the villa to the airport, "Did you get the urge to throw yourself off the edge like I did?" This information is unwelcome, as Jenny is hurtling along a 20-lane freeway with me in the passenger seat, Lynda and the children in the back biting lips and clenching cheeks. At the airport I ask to be dropped at the car hire office.

'Where you heading?' asks Jenny.

'Up the coast,' I say proudly. 'LA, Carmel, San-' 'I'd rather hang myself than drive in LA,' says Jenny, screeching off.

In our hired Renegade we take Route 1-5N towards Los Angeles. This stretch of coast is heavily developed, the Pacific obscured by condos and billboards: hard to tell where one city ends and the next begins. The kids are more excited by the In-N-Out burger joint in a Hispanic industrial park where we lunch than the fact we're Hollywood-bound.



Having driven through desert, braving Vegas at night, and using a tank-like Jeep to traverse San Diego, we are acclimatised to 20-lane highways and driving in Hollywood is a doddle compared to Holloway; we park for \$2 in the subterranean depths of the Dolby Theatre and avoid pan-handlers dressed as superheroes as we peruse the star-studded sidewalk. Next morning we navigate winding streets to the base of the Hollywood sign but the LAPD have blocked the road: apparently the well-to-do locals resent sharing this rarefied air. We head to Santa Monica, where in 2001 Lynda and I spent a sweaty few nights in a sleazy backpacker place near Muscle Beach, and after eating burritos from a Korean van stroll along the packed pier with ice cream.

Route 101-N takes us through smart Malibu and scruffy, cheerful townships huddled between highway and ocean. Then our eccentric satnav directs us onto windy back-roads through surprisingly steep mountains: on a particularly lonely stretch near Ventura a makeshift stall sells bonsai trees to impulse buyers.

In 1982 I recall waking in the car in Death Valley and climbing the rocks to take in the stunning sunrise, but our children would revolt if deprived of Wi-Fi so we head for San Simeon, 240 miles north of LA, where we eat Italian in a Mexican roadhouse before flopping at a cheerful motel. Next morning we watch elephant seals lumber and snore on the beach, their lifestyle somehow enviable when you have another 250-mile drive ahead.

Our plan is to carry on to Big Sur and Carmel, but huge landslides have closed the road for months and we are forced inland to rejoin 101-N. In places the road is tedious: flat wide agri-zones where migrants pick crops beneath the scorching sun, faraway mountains are vague silhouettes dancing in heat-haze. As we near San Francisco we pass Silicon Valley, where HQs of the various tech conglomerates attempt to outdo each other in taste and scale, and reach our hotel: a multi-storey Red Roof in the barren airport zone. The hotel has no obvious security, its walkways infested by scowling hoodies smoking skunk and its lifts by booticious ladies of the night in tiny shorts accompanied by sheepish drunks. When we dip in the pool revellers on a nearby balcony watch,

scowling, as they knock back bourbon. A man sits outside his room drinking beer, which is fine, except next morning at 6am he's still there. It's 20 miles to the centre of town, and after contemplating patchy public transport options opt to drive: our route takes us over flyovers beneath which vagrants duel with shopping trolleys. In 1982, on my first visit, we stayed with dad's friends in a neighbourhood perched on the hill. Freddie Laker and his airline's demise meant we outstayed our welcome: my stepbrother and I sneaked into an empty apartment downstairs where we slept on the floor and woke covered in ants. 'Squatting in Frisco' sounds so much more glam. Returning with Lynda in 2001, we stayed in a smart hotel, where I had my hair cut in a Chinese man's front room as his wife watched TV. Lost, we enter a dodgy neighbourhood and pass a group of cops handcuffing a suspect. As the prisoner is placed in the car my wife taps the arresting officer on the shoulder. 'Excuse me,' she enquires politely, all the Kirkby mysteriously missing from her accent, 'Could you give us directions to Fisherman's Wharf?' The cop is happy to show us the way – even the arrestee seems keen to help – and we reach Pier 39, more touristy than ever now, a salty Camden Lock, then walk up wiggly Lombard Street to take in views of Alcatraz and the Golden Gate. Daughter has 'lost' her iPhone charger, which means locating the Apple store, a giant cube of glass and smugness in Union Square where the bearded assistants wear kilts and there are no tills – presumably you have to conduct transactions via brain-App. The urge to projectile-vomit overwhelming, we leave. Back in Chinatown, we eat Oriental delicacies in the unassuming A-1 cafe run by a terrifying matriarch and her amiable husband. Then back to the Red Roof, where our fellow guest still drinks Bud Light outside his room. Next morning at six as we enter the lift one of the prostitutes exits with her shambolic client: by now we are on nodding terms and smile hello.



At San Jose airport there's a terrifying moment as we lose our passports, but soon we are on the short hop to Portland over vast sierras and snow-capped Mount Hood. We hired a car months ago, but on arrival at the car hire place we are offered any

vehicle we like for the same charge: Daughter insists on a gigantic 4x4 pickup which we navigate nervously through verdant Oregon country 100 miles to the coast. Near the beach, where we are due to witness the much-anticipated full solar eclipse, a thick sea fog rolls in: U-turning in panic we roar up a side road into bear-infested woods where we lie on blankets in the back of the truck and through special glasses watch the moon boss the sun. For a few minutes it grows dark and cold: we shiver in the silent woods, imagining wolves. Lynda and I witnessed a full solar eclipse in Cornwall in 1999, three months after we met – as with so many things, it's even better this time round. Travelling with kids, we have learned, helps you see the world through fresh eyes – eyes forever searching for free Wi-Fi.

Then the sun creeps out and we head to nearby Lincoln Beach for a fish and chip lunch. Our holiday is almost over: all that remains is the train to Vancouver. Fate has one last surprise in store: from Seattle, we learn, there's a replacement bus service – all the way to Canada.

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