

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Catherine Sylvester and her family escaped the Kiwi winter for a scenic coastal road trip in sunny California, hitting up the best the Golden State has to offer along the way.



The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.



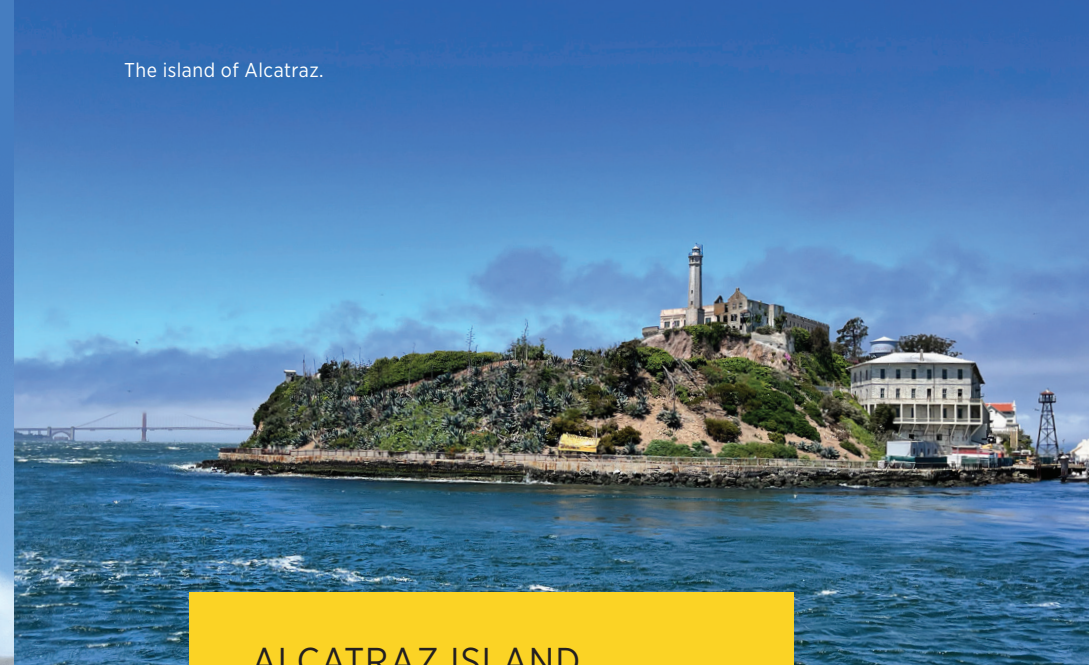
GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE

Hiring bikes in town, we cycled along the waterfront in beautiful sunshine, pulling off jumpers and reapplying sunscreen. Upon reaching the bridge, we entered a low-hanging, chilly cloud, causing the rapid redonning of clothing. Such is San Francisco. To the accompaniment of harbour fog horns, we made our way across the bridge and onto the adorable tourist town of Sausalito for burgers and ice creams back in the sunshine before the ferry ride home.

Four weeks, one state, multiple Costco lunches with mostly fabulous weather, and I can safely say we love California. Flying into San Francisco and departing from Los Angeles meant renting the biggest car I've ever seen, and hundreds of miles covered in between.

First stop: San Francisco. Steep streets, *Mrs Doubtfire*, the Summer of Love and the painted lady houses of *Full House* fame. The presence of two iconic structures looms large over this northern California city – the Golden Gate Bridge and former prison Alcatraz. Both are situated over the harbour – one a conduit of movement and travel, the other an insurance against it. We tackled both with equal enthusiasm.

The island of Alcatraz.



ALCATRAZ ISLAND

Make sure you book well in advance for Alcatraz as tickets sell out fast. We took the first ferry of the day, which was wise, as the island fills up steadily with tourists. A self-guided tour through the former maximum security federal prison allows you to move at your own pace and get all the photos you like. A fascinating look at a self-contained island and penitentiary that was home not only to some of America's most notorious criminals, like Al Capone and The Birdman of Alcatraz, but hundreds of guards, employees and their families.

The gift shop at the end of the tour meant books for the road for me, written by those who grew up on the island, detailing their quite normal lives in a quite unusual setting.



California Tunnel Tree, Mariposa Grove, with a hole cut in 1895 to allow horses and buggies to pass through.



Bridalveil Fall, Yosemite Valley.

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

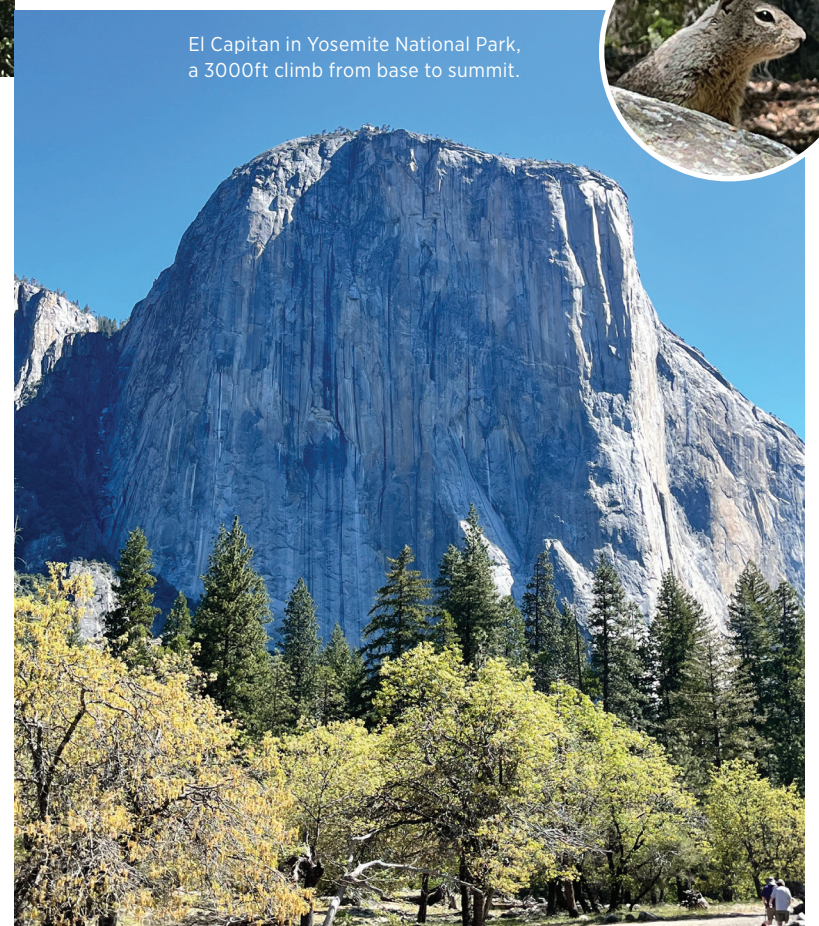
Depending on road conditions, the drive to Yosemite takes around four hours from San Francisco, and the scenery is stunning.

We stayed in cabins at Thousand Trails Yosemite Lakes and felt very Bear Grylls as we roasted marshmallows for s'mores over an open fire. Although there was no foraging for bear droppings or whatever it is Grylls dines on, we still felt quite rustic.

Squirrel, chipmunk and deer sightings were big winners with our kids, though I did face a conundrum when a cute skunk sidled up to the campfire. How to move it on without alarm, thereby causing the release of its bespoke odour? Thankfully, a quiet "Shoo!" and soft clap of the hands did the trick.

Emerging from Tunnel View into Yosemite National Park itself is breathtaking. Heavy snows last winter meant waterfalls were the fullest and most powerful they'd been in 50 years. We were fortunate to be there, as only weeks prior to our trip the park was closed due to flooding caused by the melting snow.

Mariposa Grove is worth the hike for the enormous sequoia, and a gentle ride on hired bikes to the Mirror Lake is also very manageable. Due to the change in the volume of the waterfalls, the Misty Trail hike up to Vernal Falls was more like the Torrential Trail, but quite spectacular and well worth the effort.



El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, a 3000ft climb from base to summit.



Horse riding at Madonna Inn, San Luis Obispo.



Clint Eastwood was once Mayor of Carmel, a town famous for its quirky, storybook buildings.



Carmel-by-the-Sea, an artist colony.



World famous Steak House at the Madonna Inn in San Luis Obispo.



The Danish-style village of Solvang.



At a Dodgers baseball game.

PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY

On down the coast to the old fishing town of Monterey, then the exquisite artist colony of Carmel-by-the-Sea, and on to San Luis Obispo – home of the bubble-gum wall (exactly what it sounds like), and the one-of-a-kind Madonna Inn (nothing to do with either the virgin or the singer).

Individually themed rooms with names like Caveman, Fabulous 50s, and Hearts and Flowers make the Inn a unique experience, and while we didn't stay there this trip, a housekeeper was kind enough to let us take a peek. Definitely on our list of future accommodations.

A leisurely meander across picturesque hills on horses from the Inn's Trail Rides

tested my courage. Snakes, spiders and the most nauseating of roller coasters I'm up for, but I am a little nervy around our equine friends. Thankfully I was gifted the docile Cherokee, to whom I softly whispered, "Please be nice!" all the way up the hill, and "Thank you for being nice!" all the way down.

Even if you're not staying at the inn, you must grab a stool at the restaurant counter and order an American-sized slab of pink champagne cake and a soda. Look around the Barbie-pink explosion of finery that is the Steak House, and sneak into the world-famous men's washroom with waterfall urinal – but best have a male friend check the coast is clear first!

MALIBU AND LOS ANGELES

Other highlights of a jam-packed trip were dinner on the sand at Paradise Cove in Malibu, watching Clueless by the pool and under the stars engulfed in the heady scent of jasmine at The Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, dining on wiener schnitzel and cabbage in the Danish-style village of Solvang, Dodgers baseball games, and a mandatory marathon two days exploring Disneyland and California Adventure Park.

Saying goodbye to California is always hard, so as we crammed our shopping into the extra fit-for-purpose bags we'd bought and shared one more fabulous Mexican meal at Pancho's in Manhattan Beach, plans were already well under way for our next trip to The Golden State. 📍



CALIFORNIA TRAVEL TIPS

- School summer holidays run from the beginning of June through August. Tourist spots fill up then. Yosemite in May was perfect, but by mid-June it was apparently packed.
- Prices often look good, but always consider the exchange rate. Most goods will cost more than the price tag indicates due to state taxes that don't appear until you're at the checkout.
- When you've finished dining, your server will "bring you the check", and you pay while seated, rather than at the till. It's not warmly received if you bypass this process.
- Hollywood Boulevard itself is fun and a bit crazy, but you might want to keep the kids close and avoid after dark.
- What we call entrées, Americans call starters. What we call mains, they call entrées. Knowing this can avoid accidental over-ordering of food.
- If you hanker for some simple food, try the slightly fancy supermarket Whole Foods, as they have a self-serve smorgasbord arrangement. It's not the cheapest, but by week three I was grateful for some plain salads and vegetables.
- We love LA but locals don't refer to June weather as "June gloom" for nothing. Be prepared you may have a few overcast days.
- If visiting Disneyland or California Adventure Park, it is worth the extra investment of the Lightning Lane Pass, as it significantly cuts down wait times for rides.

“ORDER AN AMERICAN-SIZED SLAB OF PINK CHAMPAGNE CAKE AND A SODA. LOOK AROUND THE BARBIE-PINK EXPLOSION OF FINERY THAT IS THE STEAK HOUSE.”