

USA: Road trip »



La Playa Carmel, a historic boutique hotel, exudes charm with its cosy rooms, period features, and breathtaking sea views; below, Chez Noir in Carmel is a Michelin-starred gem, serving seafood-centric delights. Photos / Supplied

Rollin’ you down the highway

Planning a road trip can be overwhelming, especially when it’s as extensive as California’s coastal Route 1. This is Joel Porter’s ultimate guide to tackling a mammoth journey, including best stops, driving times, hotel stops and places to eat.

There’s something enduringly romantic about the great American road trip — the wide open roads, the spectacular scenery, and the pure sense of adventure it brings. At the top of the road trip wish list for many is California’s Pacific Coast Highway, a 1050km route that hugs the rugged west coast from Mendocino County in the north to Orange County in the south. The most popular stretch is between San Francisco and Los Angeles, which winds along some of the most beautiful coastline in the world, bookended by stops in two of America’s greatest cities. Allow at least four days for the drive itself plus however long you’d like to spend in each city at either end. This itinerary goes from north to south, but you can just as easily start in LA and do it in reverse. NOTE: Check road conditions before you travel as adverse weather can often lead to road closures, particularly in the Big Sur area.

Day 1 — San Francisco to Carmel

After a couple of days exploring San Francisco, it’s time to jump in the car and head south. There are plenty of car hire companies downtown, but you’ll get more choice at the airport, particularly if you are dropping the car in LA at the end. From the airport, it’s a two-hour drive to Carmel-by-the-Sea; not the prettiest part of the journey by any stretch but once you hit the coast, the stunning scenery begins.



Laid-back, well-heeled Carmel has the feel of a little village, with rows of pretty houses and shops arranged neatly on the hill above the beach — walk along Ocean Ave to discover boutiques, galleries and cafes, including popular brunch spot Stationery. Beautiful white-sand Carmel Beach is a must visit for a swim or surf, and it’s well worth taking a stroll along the scenic bluff path where you’ll likely spot sea otters swimming among the kelp. For dinner, book a table at the superb Chez Noir, a relaxed Michelin-starred spot run by chef Jonny Black and his wife, Monique, serving a seafood-centric menu using ingredients sourced from the Monterey Peninsula. Only open since 2022, Chez Noir has quickly become the standout dining option in Carmel, so it’s well worth booking ahead.

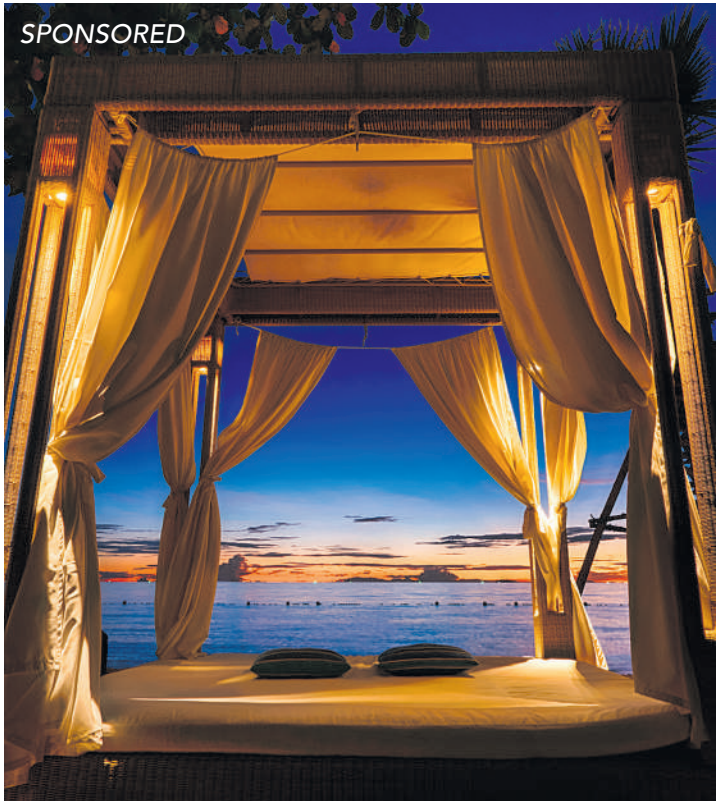
Stay the night at La Playa Carmel, a historic boutique hotel in a luxurious mansion originally built in 1905 by an artist as a gift to his wife. Recently refurbished, the hotel has a charming, intimate feel with cosy rooms, period features, sea views, and an outdoor pool.

Day 2 — Carmel to Big Sur

It’s less than an hour’s drive to Big Sur, but plan for a stop at Point Lobos, which is just a few kilometres south of Carmel. This protected natural reserve is famous for the seals and sea lions that can be spotted

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ULTIMATE TRIP NOTES: THAILAND’S LUXURY RESORTS

Why you need to go: Thailand offers luxury at a more budget-friendly rate than some popular islands, among its beautiful beaches, magnificent tropical scenery, delicious food and fascinating culture.

Good to know: Choosing your own kind of luxury comes down to personal preference. Here are some key points about 10 of Thailand’s best resorts.

- The Banyan Tree Samui on Koh Samui takes its wellness and relaxation seriously with 10 spa treatment pavilions, plus a Michelin-mentioned restaurant
- InterContinental Phuket is perfectly located for both Kamala Beach and the charms of Phuket Old Town
- Rayavadee on Krabi is near beautiful Railay Beach with its famous limestone cliffs
- The Siam in Bangkok is a place of peaceful respite in the midst of the busy streets and fascinating culture of the capital
- Four Seasons Resort in Chiang Mai is a wellness haven set near picturesque rice fields
- The romance of Six Senses Yao Noi at Phang Nga Bay is a short boat ride away from Khao Phing Kan aka ‘James Bond Island’
- Pimalai Resort & Spa in Koh Lanta is set in a quiet tropical forest paradise
- Mandarava Resort and Spa on Karon Beach is all soft white sand and turquoise sea
- Beachside JW Marriott Resort and Spa at Khao Lak has a stunning granite and waterfall backdrop
- Kalima Resort & Spa on Patong Beach is a lively destination for those who like to party in style.

Be prepared: Moped accidents, coral cuts and unexpected illnesses are some of the common claims SCTI sees in Thailand. Make sure you book travel insurance, and ensure you’ve included any optional add-ons that are relevant to your holiday.

Relax: Rest easy knowing Southern Cross Travel Insurance has you covered so you can just get on with the business of lapping up luxury, Thai-style.

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The drive to Big Sur offers some spectacular scenery and windy roads, passing over the landmark Bixby Bridge.

Rollin' you down the highway

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from the network of hiking trails that wind along the rocky coast — the whole loop takes a couple of hours or simply drive to a handful of specific viewpoints if you're short on time. The remainder of the drive to Big Sur offers some of the most spectacular scenery (and windy roads) of the trip, passing over the iconic Bixby Bridge while waves crash against the rugged rocks just below the highway.

Big Sur is famed for its beautiful setting, beaches, forested hikes, and literary connections to the likes of Henry Miller, who lived and worked in Big Sur for many years — his old house is open to the public as the Henry Miller Memorial Library. Experience another slice of Big Sur history by checking into Deetjen's Inn, a collection of simple wood cabin accommodations (plus an excellent restaurant) that's been hosting travellers since 1937. There's no Wi-Fi and no phone signal so it's a particularly good choice for those seeking true peace and quiet.

Day 3 — Big Sur to Cayucos

Heading south along the Big Sur coast, you'll be treated to 80km of unspoilt wild coastline so it's best to take it slow and admire the views at various points along the way. One of the best stops is Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park, which has a lovely beach and hiking trails. Just before you reach San Simeon, pull over at Elephant Seal Point, where gigantic elephant seals bask on the beach in huge numbers, grunting and fighting for space on the sand.

A bit further on, and the high, dramatic cliffs begin to wind down towards Cayucos, a quintessential chilled-out California beach town that draws relatively few tourists compared to nearby Cambria and Morro Bay. With a relaxed, local feel, the town comprises little more than a couple of surfshacks and restaurants and has barely changed in the 25 years since I first visited in 1999. One welcome new arrival is the Pacific



Once an old 50s roadside motor lodge, the Pacific Motel in Cayucos has had a stylish refurbishment. Photo / Supplied

Motel, an old 50s roadside motor lodge recently refurbished by local couple Ryan and Marisa Fortini, who have transformed it into a chic boutique motel with modern, minimalist rooms and fun touches like outdoor fire pits and a table tennis table.

Day 4 — Cayucos to Santa Barbara

In the morning, head down the street to The Hidden Kitchen for its famous blue corn waffles, topped with everything from pulled pork to peanut butter and banana. It's a two-hour drive to Santa Barbara and, just past Morro Bay, the road starts to route inland away from the coast and the scenery flattens out. Make a stop in the tiny town of Los Alamos for lunch at Bell's, an excellent modern French bistro from chef Daisy Ryan, a recipient of *Food & Wine's* prestigious Best New Chef award. Fans of the movie *Sideways* can make a small detour to the town of Buellton,

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where much of it was filmed, and check out the Windmill Motel, now rebranded as the Sideways Motel.

Save your wine tasting for Santa Barbara, however, where there are a multitude of great tasting rooms packed into the pretty grid of streets near the beach. One of the best is Au Bon Climat, which offers tasting flights of its signature chardonnays and pinot noirs.

After a walk along the palm tree-lined beach head out for a taco tour along S. Milpas St, with stops at La Super-Rica, El Bajio, and East Beach Tacos. Check in for the night at the five-star Hotel Californian, which has an unbeatable location in the heart of Santa Barbara's lively Funk Zone and offers luxurious rooms, a spa, outdoor pool, and several bars and restaurants.

Day 5 — Santa Barbara to Los Angeles

It's just one more two-hour drive into Los Angeles, with the road mostly following the coast

The Georgian Hotel in Santa Monica has been restored to its art deco glory; Santa Barbara ocean front walk. Photos / 123rf, supplied

Checklist

SAN FRANCISCO

GETTING THERE

Fly non-stop from Auckland to San Francisco with Air NZ and United Airlines.

DETAILS

visitcalifornia.com

again for this final stretch. All of LA is your oyster but I prefer to stick by the sea, and for this trip, I checked into the Georgian Hotel in Santa Monica for the final two nights. Originally opened in 1933 when it was known as the Grand Dame of Santa Monica, the hotel was a magnet for Hollywood A-listers in its heyday but fell into disrepair in later years. New owner BLVD Hospitality has given it a stunning makeover with bright art deco interiors and a buzzy, speakeasy-style restaurant that has bought the Georgian back to its former glory.

Just down the road from the hotel is the iconic Santa Monica Pier, with its fairground rides and amusement arcades; it's also the official start/end point of America's most famous historic highway, Route 66, commemorated by a sign at the end of the pier.

Our California road trip ends here, but if you had the time, it could easily be the start of another big adventure.

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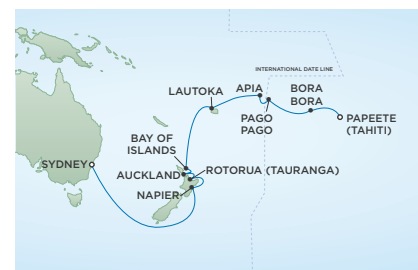
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