

# CALIFORNIA CALLING

*Road-tripping doesn't come any better than this, says Stephanie Plentl*

**T**he San Francisco to Los Angeles coastal route has a well-established checklist of sights, and we have ten days to achieve it. But with a family of four decisive individuals onboard – my parents and sister – and a raft of tempting diversions, it's going to be hard to stay focused. At least I'm in the driving seat. Literally.

After picking up a Dodge SUV at the airport, we head into San Francisco. Not into the city's heart, but to the Presidio – the former army barracks (now a residential area), set in a lush forest overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge. We check into The Inn at the Presidio – a very distinguished guesthouse where single officers once lived – and we are immediately cocooned by comfortable furnishings and bend-over-backwards staff.

After navigating San Francisco's vertical streets that evening, we settle our stomachs with a glass of Italian red in director Francis Ford Coppola's Cafe Zoetrope. Set in an historic slice of flat-iron architecture known as the Sentinel Building, it's a classic café, lousy with film posters and rustic Italian dishes. But my mother had a craving for garlicky Dungeness crab at the Crab House at Pier 39. It's touristy but undeniably delicious. I order Cioppino, a hearty tomato fish stew that originated in San Francisco.

It's time to tick off the essentials, so we start in the morning with Alcatraz Island, the infamous prison that closed in 1963. Looking back at the tantalisingly close city skyline beyond the choppy waters, my sister becomes

mildly obsessed with the fate of the three men who escaped without trace, clinging to prison-issued raincoats as life rafts.

I'm determined to deviate north for an hour to the Napa Valley vineyards.

The bonus is traversing the Golden Gate Bridge and passing through the picturesque community of Sausalito, but my burning desire to see the redwood trees at Muir Woods – which can grow as high as 258ft – is doused by torrential rain and fog.

The weather's no better in Napa, but

Big Sur



Andaz hotel



Alcatraz Island



Andrew and Mary 'T' of Verve Tours bring their own brand of sunshine. They meet us at the Andaz Napa, a cosmopolitan Hyatt hotel in the centre of town that evokes the locale with woody design touches. When the giant Mercedes limousine arrives, replete with blacked out windows and champagne bar, we look for the nearest hen party. But 'T', as she is known, comes bounding up to us and we're all bundled inside.

At my father's request, we're on their wine tour (although art, cheese and plein air painting are also in their repertoire) and a questionnaire that he completed helps Verve choose from Napa's 460 wineries. T is an exuberant hostess (it feels more like a party than a tour) and is dedicated to unearthing Napa's hidden treasures. At Silverado, owned by a member of the Disney family, we get a crash course in viticulture by Nick, the assistant manager. Two vineyards later and we're practically sommeliers.

Before a very sophisticated dinner at the Michelin-starred étoile restaurant in the Domaine Chandon winery – an outpost of Moët et Chandon – we irresponsibly accept an abundant sparkling wine 'tasting'. Tasting implies restraint, which none of us employed.

Back on the road after a restorative sleep, we head to Carmel – a captivating Hobbit-like village that's stuffed with fairytale cottages. The Carmel Country Inn is perfectly on theme with its cosy rooms and sumptuous kitchen breakfast. Clint Eastwood, once Carmel's mayor, owns nearby Mission Ranch: it's so popular for dinner we have to arrive for sunset drinks to nab a table. The menu is much like Clint himself – no nonsense and all-American – and the place is packed with people hoping he'll roll in (he often does).

Big Sur is renowned to be the most spectacular section of the California coastal road, where the road carves its way through the Santa Lucia Mountains before they plunge into the ocean. The glamorous Post Ranch Inn is perched on a cliff and famed for its thrilling views. With fully



San Ysidro Ranch



Carmel Country Inn



Redwood trees at Muir Woods



The Golden Gate Bridge



San Francisco homes

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booked rooms, we settle for lunch in its glass-fronted restaurant. Thwarted by the weather once more – with a view of pure fog – we're comforted by a roaring open fire and the most silken onion soup imaginable.

From our simple lodgings at the Fogcatcher Inn, I drive to Hearst Castle in San Simeon under sufferance, expecting a caricature of faux château architecture. WR Hearst, the formidable and filthy rich owner of the Hearst Corporation, threw flamboyant parties here in the 50s, entertaining the likes of Clark Gable, Charlie Chaplin and Jean Harlow.

The newspaper magnate had this vast Mediterranean revival edifice built on the tip of an empty hill with panoramic Pacific views. With a private cinema, enormous colonnaded swimming pool and a clutter of European antiques, it's dazzlingly ostentatious – yet undeniably impressive.

These days, Hollywood stars flock to enduringly elegant Santa Barbara for clandestine weekend escapes. Only an hour and a half from LA, it made residents of Oprah Winfrey and actor Rob Lowe. The idyllic San Ysidro Ranch has a dazzling heritage as both the wedding venue for Sir Laurence Olivier to Vivien Leigh and the honeymoon hideaway for Jackie Kennedy and JFK. We coo over its utterly private, clapperboard cottages, studded across romantic gardens.

Winding through Malibu on the home stretch to LA, we tick off one last cultural treat: the art and sculptures at the Getty Villa, a museum architecturally inspired by Ancient Rome. The road trip essentials are complete.