



CALIFORNIA *road trippin'*

Carl Thompson drives the Pacific Coast Highway from San Francisco to Los Angeles

Our modern fast-paced lives generally have us looking for the fastest options to get from A to B when we're travelling. We just want to get there! And with such cheap flights available from San Francisco to Los Angeles, it's easy to overlook other options like driving.

Driving down the Californian west coast - the Pacific Coast Highway - has always been on my bucket list. It's a 200 kilometre journey through some of America's most stunning coastline. It's a long drive and most sensible people choose to stop overnight in Carmel. We, however, chose to cram it into one full-on adventure day.

We checked out of Hotel Diva, San Francisco, at about 7am and headed over the mountains towards our first stop, Santa Cruz. The drive over the mountains takes you through some beautifully lush natural forest, and with the number of deer warning signs I expected a deer or two to jump out in front of the car. That didn't happen. Could have been quite exciting.

Arriving into Santa Cruz had a very airy, surreal, 'American horror movie' feel about it. Most likely due to the thick, 'I can't see five metres in front of me' fog. Apparently not uncommon for early mornings in the area. The deserted seaside carnival, suffocating in fog, definitely added to the spooky atmosphere.

On the bright side, Santa Cruz has a great, very long, pier where we had a good old fashioned 'Merican breakfast and talked to the sea lions, who happen to be migrating through.

Santa Cruz, done. Next stop, Carmel.

After thirty minutes of driving through strawberry fields as far as the eye could

see, we arrive in Carmel, a beautiful quaint seaside town that was once mayored by Clint Eastwood. Carmel seemed to have avoided the American horror movie fog and the sun was beaming through the clouds. Carmel is where most coast drivers stay the night, and we recommend at least stopping here for lunch and a wander round.

After lunch we drove out of Carmel, weaving our way along the shoreline and then up through the gorgeous clifftops with stunning views on every corner. Big Sur Forest was next on our list and it didn't disappoint. Huge Sur trees stood like giants as clear fresh water rivers flowed beneath. It's a picturesque, Yogi Bear-style forest that features in many Hollywood movies.

After a long while driving onwards up the hills, around the winding coastal road, we stopped for an American coffee, or what I call 'stewed beans'. Whale Watch Cafe lived up to its name and we sipped our stewed beans while watching pods of whales as they made their way up the coast to their mating grounds.

Santa Barbara was our last stop, and by this time the sun was setting. Dinner was Mexican, again.. 'When in Rome' and all that. With car and bellies full we pushed on through the darkness to our final destination, The Chamberlain Hotel, Los Angeles.

It really was a great adventure that took us through some beautiful coastline. The scenery changed every hour, which makes for a really exciting journey. Next time you're planning a Californian holiday, consider slowing your travel plans for a day or two and appreciating the journey, not just the final destination.

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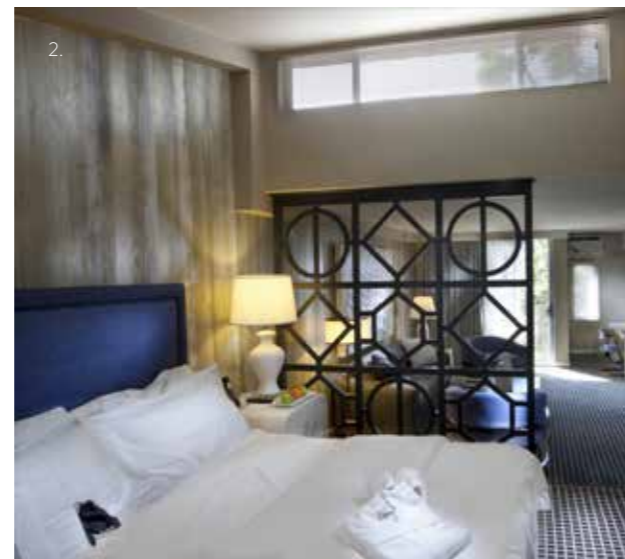
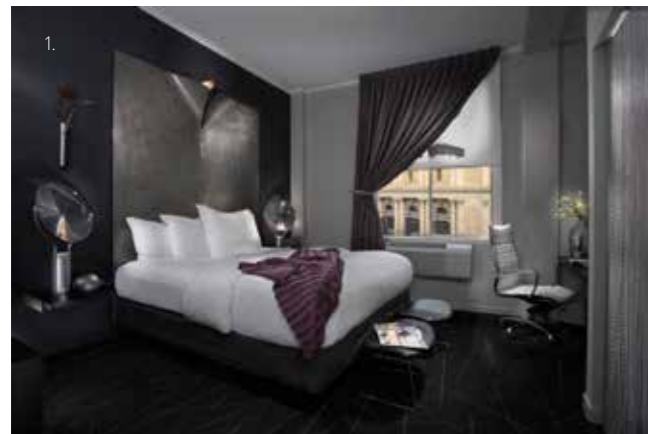
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WHERE TO STAY



1. DIVA HOTEL, SAN FRANCISCO: Situated downtown in San Francisco, at 440 Geary St, is Diva hotel. A modern and sexy boutique establishment with a lot of personality. Its modern yet quirky style has been crafted by local San Francisco artists to give it a very unique feel. Within a five minute walk from Diva you have everything uniquely San Fran - steep streets, cable cars, art galleries, great shopping and fantastic restaurants. Hotel Diva is a great option for anyone looking to truly experience San Francisco city and culture. hoteldiva.com

2. THE CHAMBERLAIN, LOS ANGELES: West Hollywood is the place to be in Los Angeles and you couldn't be more central than The Chamberlain Hotel. This renovated apartment block can be deceiving - with no grand entranceway you can easily drive past it. The exterior leaves no clue to the lavish modern interior, with more patterns than a magic eye book. The interior and atmosphere of The Chamberlain is fantastically fun and stylish. Sweat out those long nights at the Abby, which is just a two minute walk away in The Chamberlain's fully equipped gym, or recover by basking poolside on their amazing rooftop patio. chamberlainwesthollywood.com

WHERE TO EAT



1. ICHI, SAN FRANCISCO: ICHI is a Japanese restaurant on the far west side of San Francisco's Mission area. Its modern, slick interior is somewhat of a contrast to the more traditional style of sushi it is famous for. ICHI Sushi has been named one of America's top restaurants in the Zagat 2013 guide and was included in the 2013 San Francisco Louis Vuitton City Guide. The mouthwatering flavours of their nigiri sushi are simply outstanding, and the ginger marinated oysters are to die for. Choose the Omakase service and let their talented chefs craft and indulge you with some of the best sushi you will ever experience. ICHI Sushi is a must for anyone that enjoys raw fish! ichisushi.com

2. BAGATELLE, LOS ANGELES: Bagatelle is a loud and proud restaurant where dining meets night club. Whether in New York, Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, St. Barth, St. Tropez or Miami, Bagatelle is always an exciting culinary experience with mouthwatering modern European cuisine. Whole roast chicken, whole roast beef eye fillet and baked fish are some of our favourites. The atmosphere is party party, with a live DJ playing during dinner service as cute wait staff entertain you with cocktails and shots. This is no first date location nor is it a 'let's take grandma out to dinner' kind of place. Bagatelle is best enjoyed with groups of friends for dinner or Sunday lunch. bagatellelosangeles.com

3. M.A.K.E., SANTA MONICA: M.A.K.E. is a living foods restaurant which features cutting edge plant-based cuisine. The menu features innovative ideas inspired by seasonal, local produce, as well as many of Matthew Kenney's classic raw food dishes. The dining area has three main components: a communal omakase-style bar where guests can watch the chefs prepare a tasting menu and have a fresh juice or cocktail, an airy dining room accented with natural woods and fabrics, and a full service outdoor patio to take advantage of the beautiful Santa Monica weather. matthewkenneycuisine.com

4. VALENTINO, SANTA MONICA: Valentino has been on the scene since the 70s, a true mainstay of the Santa Monica dining scene. Founder and host Piero Selvaggio maintains a world-class dining experience that reflects both classic Italian traditions and the changing lifestyles and expectations of today's diner. Memorable antipasti, pasta and main dishes continue to dominate the menu alongside new, innovative options. valentinosantamonica.com