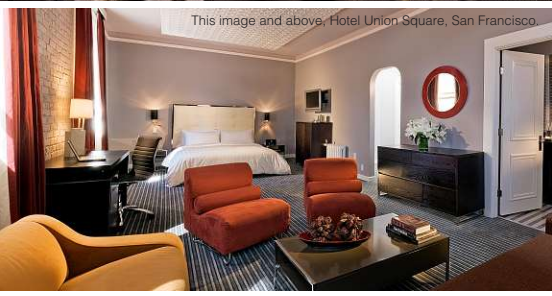
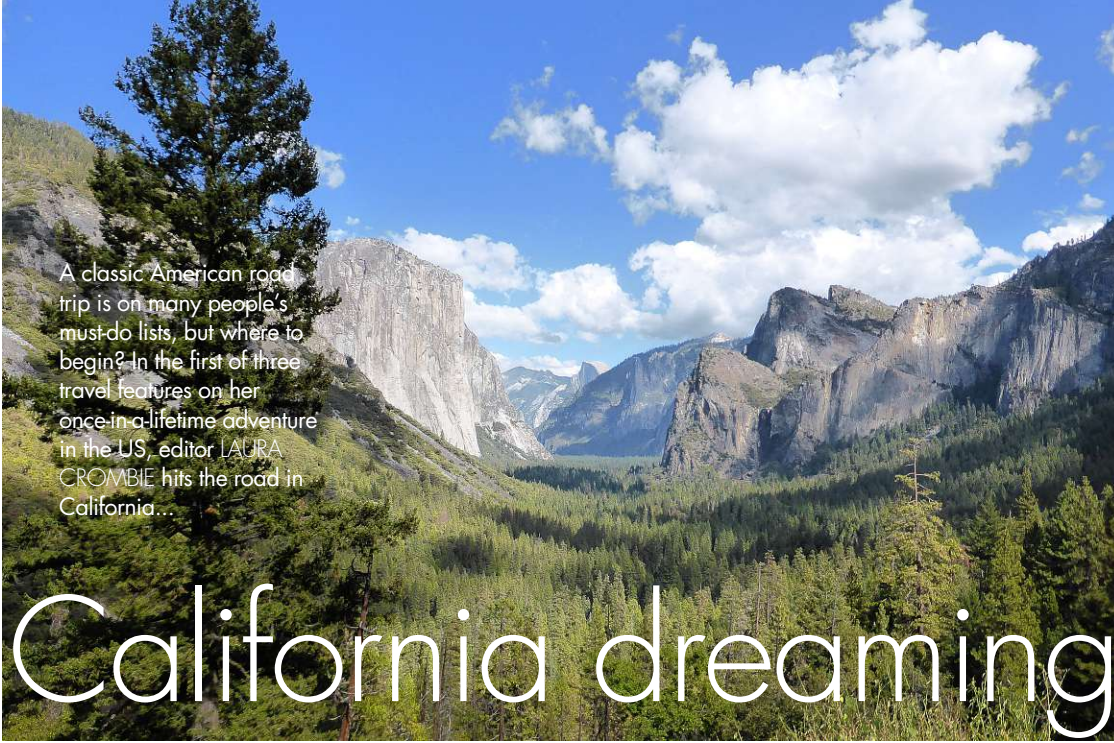




This image and above, Hotel Union Square, San Francisco.



This image and above, The Landing Resort & Spa, Lake Tahoe.



A classic American road trip is on many people's must-do lists, but where to begin? In the first of three travel features on her once-in-a-lifetime adventure in the US, editor LAURA CROMBIE hits the road in California...

California dreaming

Everybody I know who has had the pleasure of visiting California has found a corner of the West Coast US state that is among their favourite places on earth.

Whether it's the sun-drenched cities of LA and San Francisco, with their stunning architecture, world-class shopping and tourist hotspots; the national parks with their thousands of acres of natural wonders; or the small coastal villages where the freshest seafood is devoured by sun-tanned locals who sit and dine while watching whales and dolphins frolic in the surf of the Pacific.

After hours of online research, my husband and I decided to begin our once-in-a-lifetime road trip in San Francisco, which lures millions of tourists each year thanks to renowned attractions such as the Golden Gate Bridge, Pier 39 and the historic cable cars.

Our base for the first four days of our trip was Hotel Union Square (www.hotelunion-square.com), located steps away from the city's exclusive shopping centre at Union Square and within easy reach of all the major sites.

The first boutique hotel in the city, it is part of the Personality Hotels chain and, as such, combines the building's imposing soaring ceilings and period features, with modern art and bold decor.

Our executive king room was spacious with great views of the cable cars rattling along Powell Street below. The colour scheme of grey and burnt umber added to

its contemporary charm, while complimentary tea and coffee each morning and wine each evening were a welcome bonus.

A visit to the island of Alcatraz – once home to some of America's most notorious criminals, including Al "Scarface" Capone, and the "Birdman" Robert Stroud – is a must-do when visiting San Francisco and proved one of the highlights of our trip.

The boat trip, which is included in the admission price, provides stunning views of the city (www.alcatrazcruises.com) and iconic red bridge, while exploring the island itself reveals there is far more to Alcatraz than infamy.

Less than three hours' drive north east of the buzz of the city, we arrived at South Lake Tahoe – where utter relaxation was our sole priority.

The luxury Landing Resort & Spa (www.thelandingtahoe.com) has been open for less than 12 months but has established a deserved reputation for excellence that is apparent everywhere from the superb leisure facilities and complimentary valet parking to the perfectly-equipped bedrooms.

Our premium lake front suite not only had the most incredible views of the crystal-clear waters of the lake, but also a huge terrace for the summer months and a roaring fireplace for the winter, when The Landing is perfectly placed for accessing the Heavenly ski resort.

Other five-star flourishes included the in-shower steam room, whirlpool bath with lake views and even a heated toilet seat with its own night light inside!

Downstairs, Jimmy's Restaurant serves wood-fired Greek and regional Californian cuisine prepared to perfection by classically-trained British chef, Maria Elia.

Highlights of our dinner, which was accompanied by a bottle of perfect Californian rose, included wood grilled peach with prosciutto, truffle honey and kefalotyri, and an exquisite Wagyu rib eye steak with green garlic potato purée, wild mushrooms and asparagus – divine.

From Tahoe we took one of the most scenic drives our lives – the winding Tioga Pass, which climbs to an incredible 10,000ft, into the outstanding natural beauty of Yosemite National Park.

After an incredible meal in the historic dining room at The Ahwahnee, the only hotel located in the Valley itself and fully booked months in advance, we headed to our lodgings – the award-winning, four diamond-rated Tenaya Lodge, located just two miles from the park's south entrance.

Tenaya (www.tenayalodge.com) currently has 302 rooms, ranging from charming woodland cottages to super-chic contemporary spa suites, but is in the process of a multi-million dollar development which will add to the offering.

As well as a choice of swimming pools and four restaurants offering everything from fine dining to gourmet burgers, Tenaya offers dozens of activities to keep guests occupied, from nature walks to archery, climbing and even ice skating and sledding in the winter.

We opted for a two-hour Western-style horse riding trek, which was simply awe-inspiring, taking us to locations we

would never have reached on foot, including passing through a number of mountain streams. Once you've had enough of the great outdoors, the soothing Ascent spa is the perfect place to revive those weary limbs.

Having enjoyed the best that inland California had to offer, it was time to hit the highway – more specifically, the Pacific Coast Highway, which teeters along the beautiful coastline from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

Half-way along the route is beautiful Pismo Beach, home to the luxury beach-front Dolphin Bay Resort & Spa (www.thedolphinbay.com). The perfect road trip stop-off, the resort offers one and two bedroom suites, which all include fully-equipped kitchens (the washer/dryer was a life-saver), spacious living rooms and balconies. As well as complimentary bicycle rental, the hotel has a large swimming pool, spa, restaurant and DVD library with free hot cocoa and popcorn.

Having recharged our batteries with a cocktail of ocean views and fresh seafood, it was time to hit the road. Next stop, LA.

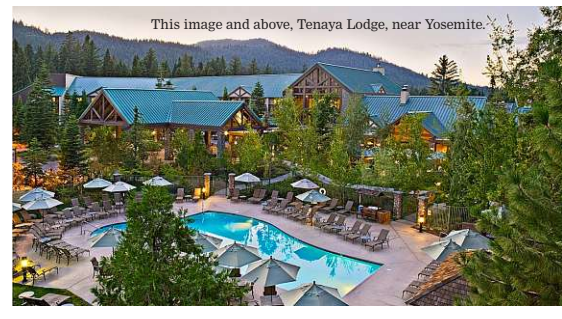
British Airways flies daily from London Heathrow to San Francisco, returning from Las Vegas, visit www.britishairways.co.uk

For long-stay parking at Heathrow Terminal 5, visit <http://airportparking.heathrowairport.com>

Rhino car hire (www.rhinocarhire.com) offers the cheapest rentals in 25,000 locations worldwide, with pick-up in San Francisco and drop-off in Las Vegas.



This image and above, Tenaya Lodge, near Yosemite.



This image and above, Dolphin Bay Resort & Spa, Pismo Beach.

