

San Francisco:
crossing the iconic
Golden Gate Bridge

California drive

TAKE IT TO THE BRIDGE

Love driving, hate distances? San Francisco is the gateway to an epic circular roadtrip that's big on iconic West Coast moments — and nicely mini on the mileage front. **Anna Brooke** tries it *wheel slow*

Ugh, what's that smell?' We're on the edge of a cypress grove in the San Francisco Bay Area, looking onto sands the shade of gingerbread, and Pascal, my husband, is almost retching as he holds his breath. He's a Frenchman with, admittedly, a very sensitive nose, but I recoil, too, when it hits me — a miasma of rotting fish and wet dog. We scan the sands but there's only beach and rocks. Then one of the rocks yawns. A smaller one follows suit, and the mystery is solved: beached like boulders beneath the late-season sun is a mass of pungent harbour seals.

'How can something so cute give off such a stink?' Pascal wonders out loud.

'That's nothing,' interjects a passer-by. 'There are only about 60 of them today. Imagine when the whole colony's here.'

It's not the welcome we expected from Seal Cove Inn, our hotel overlooking Moss Beach, on California's San Mateo Coast. Then again, we did come to be bowled over by the wildlife — and it's certainly made an impression. So, too, has the hotel, luckily in a more fragrant way. It sits among landscaped grounds 30 minutes' drive west of the airport, in the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, a coastal habitat of outstanding natural beauty, where rock pools burst with purple urchins and paunchy starfish, great blue herons rule the skies.

In search of jet-lag-busting, lung-cleansing air we beat a retreat along the strand, following a waddling oystercatcher for half an hour or so, before ambling back, dodging the Pacific surf, towards the lodge. Indolent lumps, the seals have hardly moved. 'It's like they've read our plans for the next two weeks,' says Pascal — by which he means lots of laziness and as little moving from A to B as possible on this, our second great California roadtrip. ➤

FUEL GAUGE
We found petrol to be about 60 per cent less in the States than in the UK. We also got great detailed information on the latest, lowest prices locally by clicking on Automotive.com/gas-prices. Well worth a check if you are on a budget

Back in 2013, we embarked on our first big US drive, careering out of LA like Thelma and Louise (or Louis, it being Pascal), direction Las Vegas, via Big Sur, San Francisco, Yosemite and endless desert. We finished, 3,000km later, corpse-stiff and completely exhausted. The killer? The distances. If only we could have reduced the tarmac tedium while not stinting on the epic, widescreen diversity that America does so well, from mountains to city to sea. But just *how* do you fine-tune the great US roadtrip for all the iconic quality, just less of the quantity?

‘Try the Bay Area,’ a friend from San Francisco had advised. ‘Such a small stretch of water, such an amazing spread of scenery.’ The map showed promise: going anticlockwise from San Francisco, we could tick off wildlife and food (San Mateo County), techy modernity (Silicon Valley), boho culture (Oakland); wine (Sonoma County); and awesome Pacific (the spin back to SF).

The laziest road trip ever? That’s how things are shaping up at Seal Cove Inn, where we sleep deeply, waking to a fine mist capping the cypress. After breakfast in the garden, as wild rabbits and quail scamper, there’s plenty of time for more seal-watching before we pull out onto State Route 1, heading south. The view is classic roadtrip – the ocean chrome in sun, shallows laced with spittle-surf breaking on rusty rocks – and in little more than 10 easy minutes, we near the clapboard town of Half Moon Bay. It’s a quaint fishing settlement, settled by the Spanish in the 1840s where, today, sea otters lark between yachts and trawlers.

It’s lunchtime at the Half Moon Bay Brewing Company: beer-steamed prawns and sizzling fajitas, helped with glasses of citrusy West Coast IPA. Pudding is a kooky-but-delicious ‘beeramisu’, an ale-infused take on tiramisu – at this rate we’ll be as fat as seals in days! All the while the woody dining room buzzes with chatty regulars.

‘Where ya heading now?’ asks a big-bellied guy beside us, looking up from a steaming fisherman’s stew.

‘The capital of Silicon Valley – do you know the way to San Jose?’ We’ve been playing Dionne Warwick in the SUV. Clearly he’s heard that one a few times before.

‘Avoid the highway,’ is his expressionless reply, ‘and head south on scenic Route 35, “Skyline Boulevard”.’

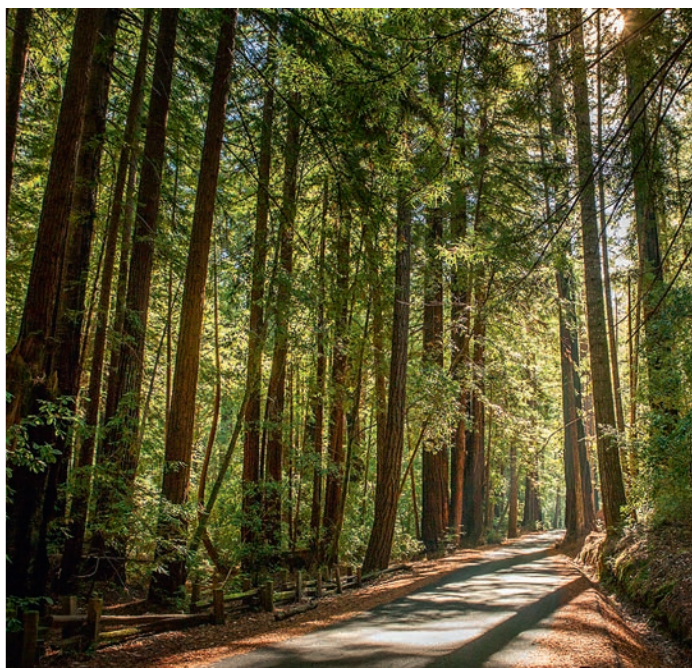
Effortlessly our lazy roadtrip shifts gear, as we float up into awesome scenery. In 25 scant minutes we’re on a road snaking over the Santa Cruz Mountains. We climb past sun-splashed pumpkin patches, spiked with lolling scarecrows, which yield to redwood forest – endless leafy canopies shattering sunlight into dancing kaleidoscopes. When the trees clear, the landscape below is so varied it could be a ‘Best Of’ West Coast Road Trip compilation. Ocean scenes worthy of Big Sur glitter distantly through the windscreen. Bungalows sprawl, LA-style, into the suburbs of Silicon Valley (Palo Alto, Mountain View).

Parched mountains circle, as if on loan from Death Valley. Skyline wears its name well. In 40 minutes it seems we’ve seen almost as much as we did in the entire last trip.

There’s plenty more. Pascal eases the SUV off into bungalow-lined Woodside, home of the Silicon Valley elite – high earners of the high-tech companies that give Santa Clara Valley its world-famous nickname. At first glance it could be any stretch of workaday suburban America. Atmospheric – but where’s the tech? We pull into a diner in a cabin that would be at home in the green hills of the Sierra Nevada – but Buck’s of Woodside has a secret. This bric-a-brac-wacky spot is where most of the world’s biggest technology deals were clinched.

On our last trip, ever-anxious to get right back on the road, we’d slurped endless scalding coffee from plastic cups at faceless service stations. Yet here we are, settled in amid model boats and accordions as our chipper waitress bring the mugs of joe. ‘You’re sittin’ right where PayPal

The living is easy: lunch on the terrace at Half Moon Bay Brewing Company. Opposite, clockwise from top left, Nob Hill district, SF; Big Basin Redwoods State Park, San Jose; the Hamon Tower observation level at the De Young Museum in Golden Gate Park; sea lions at San Francisco Pier



We join the harried freeway for 15 minutes into downtown San Jose, its glass high-rises shimmering magically into view

was funded,' she announces casually, 'just across from where Hotmail was founded.' The news gives tech-head Pascal a bigger jolt to the system than the caffeine, and an hour of Q&A with the waitress passes like seconds in this quirky-cool hive of Americana. The sun is low in the sky by the time we're joining the harried freeway for a 15-minute glide into downtown San Jose, its glass high-rises shimmering magically into view.

The fuel gauge has barely dipped since the airport, and yet another California is unfolding: tower-lined boulevards knitted with squares like college campuses – T-shirted trendies with fixed-wheel bicycles tote their flat whites in reusable flasks, glimpsed through our windscreen as the traffic slows for lights. 'This looks like laid-back city living on a stick,' says Pascal with the first inklings of a drawl – I think he's adjusted his dial to 'student', and something tells me we're going to be slacking here awhile...

That night, Silicon Valley twinkles below us like a sea of fairy-lights. The enchanted view is from our table, alfresco at Mountain Winery in Saratoga: the best place within a 20-minute radius of San Jose for a dinner with panorama-drama. Even better, it serves up live bands – tonight it's UB40! So we get red, red wine to go with our sea bass in chardonnay sauce. Next day, things get stranger still at San Jose's Winchester Mystery House, a cutesy/creepy slice of Queen Anne architecture, frowning under green-and-yellow gables. It was home to one Sarah Winchester, widow of gun magnate William Winchester, who believed the deaths of her child and husband were the work of ghosts of those killed by Winchester rifles. To appease them, she built the house according to the spirits' blueprints, communicated via a medium. The result is a gothic labyrinth of shady staircases and corridors going back on themselves. We wander and wander. And wander. Perhaps San Jose really doesn't want us to leave.

TIP-OFF FROM THE WRITER
The Mountain Winery is a great spot for concerts, hosting big-name bands (The Cult, B-52s, Chicago, Foreigner). You can book meal and music packages for under £50pp. For details, check the website – mountainwinery.com

But the road is calling: Interstate 880 will be taking us back north, almost hugging the Bay, to Oakland, 75km away. It's a cloudless morning of faded indigo sky. Road signs reverberate green over multi-lanes of fat-tyre pickup trucks, red articulated monsters in hot pursuit, straight out of Spielberg's *Duel*. Suddenly we hit it – a metallic wall of bumper-to-bumper traffic, seeming to wobble in the heat haze. Pascal taps his finger on the wheel. Tempers fray. Then, just as our Burt Bacharach soundtrack starts to grate, the mess evaporates and things flow lazily again. So – merely mild temple-throb, compared with our migraine in 2013, when snow forced us to skip Yosemite National Park with a nine-million-hour detour to Vegas. Today, in 30 minutes we're poolside at our base in Oakland, a city with quite a backstory...

Big in the '20s (shipbuilding, automobiles), the place slid into poverty after WWII, unemployment and racial strife. The Black Panther Party was born here in 1966. ▶

Road skills:
skateboarding
downhill in
San Francisco

Soon, busy Highway 80 dwindles to fadeout. Now it's just horizons of vines, spinning by like red-and-yellow abstract art against the biscuit-baked distant mountains of Napa Valley

By the '80s it had turned into Tarantino Town, all gang crime and crack. As we walk, it's hard to imagine the past: artists and young families, fleeing colossal rents in San Francisco, are moving into streets peppered with elegant Victorian commercial buildings evocative of Bloomsbury in London, as entrepreneurs convert industrial properties into smart hangouts. Architecture is quite head-spinning in places: take the Tribune Tower (a dead ringer for the red-brick campanile in Piazza San Marco, Venice), where Houdini the great escapologist once dangled from the 9th floor in a straitjacket.

We've certainly no plans to wriggle free for a while. Oakland is so textbook-American, so welcoming, we want to start life here anew. Joggers with dogs pant along the blocks to Lake Merritt. Here, at buzzy-trendy pub Lake Chalet, we're soon in with the regulars: tattooed, moustachio'd like Dalí, lounging with beers on the pontoon. Across shimmering water we see high-rises and blurred hills. We're getting lazier by the day. I mention this to Pascal, but he's in a reverie, mesmerised by a pair of piebald buffleheads, like ducks dressed as puffs – a reminder of the Pacific that will lure us back to the road.

Warm breezes eddy through the car windows, on the road north to penultimate stop Jenner, a coastal hamlet in

WHILE YOU'RE IN TOWN...
One such stylish conversion is the Mexican restaurant Calavera (calavera oakland.com), in old warehouses in Uptown Oakland. It's a loft-like space for moreish dishes such as birria de chivo (chilli-chocolate braised goat)

Sonoma Country. Soon busy Highway 80 dwindles to fadeout. Now it's just horizons of vines, spinning by like red-and-yellow abstract art against Napa Valley's biscuit-baked distant mountains. After 80km, Sonoma takes shape like a mirage: it's a cowboy-chic oasis with a tree-lined plaza of 19th-century buildings, boutiques – and home cooking after Pascal's heart at The Girl and The Fig. The French-style bistro proves that sometimes Americans just *do it better*, memorably that chocolate and salted-fig caramel trifle, which was light-years from the McDonald's panic-meals that bedevilled our last trip.

The Chardonnay's gone to my head. Pascal takes the wheel that afternoon, bowling along to meet Route 1, the Pacific Coast Highway. Stupor sets in as vines give way to pampas grasses that frame the ocean, like masses of candyfloss. At sunset Jenner appears, and with it the River's End inn: a gourmet restaurant with timber cabins.

Only this morning we were observing Oakland's suited crowds, rushing to work across Jack London Square. Not even half a tank of petrol later, here we are a world away, watching pelicans soar in synchronised lines over the great Russian River as it meets the Pacific. From our bed! Waves crash on a silver beach, spraying filigree foam. Hummingbirds zip over our terrace, charcoal silhouettes

against the sunset. We go the whole 'lazybones' hog: king salmon and crab in the woodsy-chic restaurant; no movement for days, except to the beach, a magnificent thunderous experience in the eerie morning haze.

Then, one morning, there it is again: San Francisco. Materialising in the windscreen as the tarmac unspools north. It's like a steampunk fortress floating on the mist of the Bay. Gliding dreamily across the Golden Gate Bridge, we reach the end of the road...

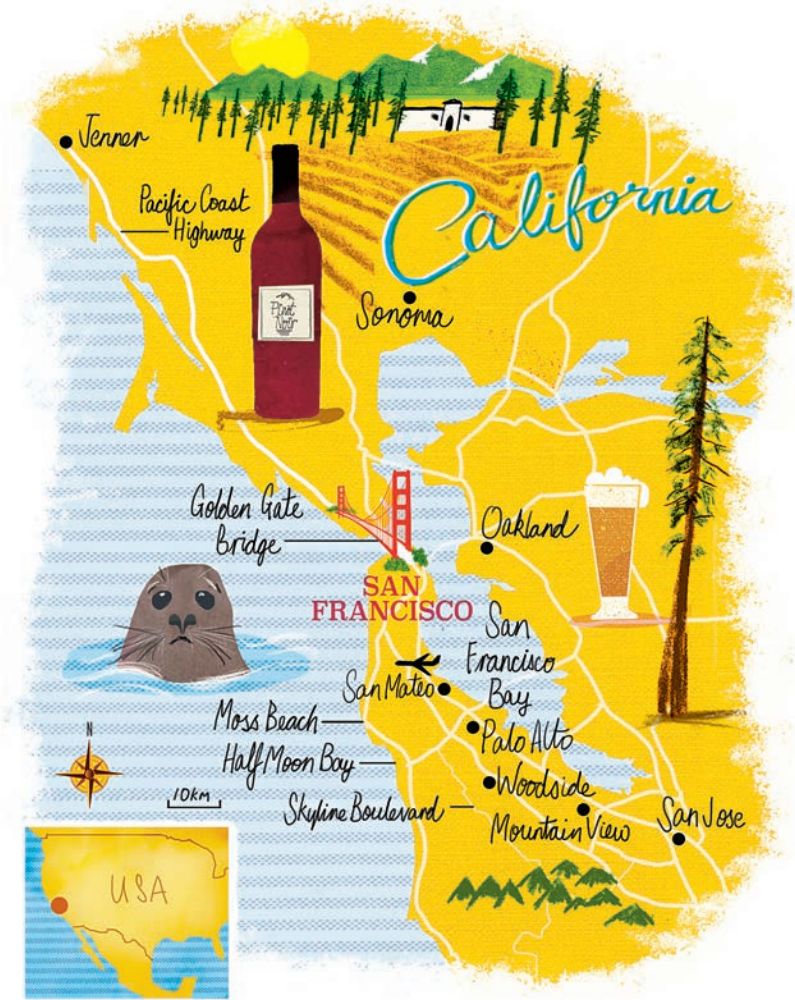
...only to find a world of stress! Confusing signs; bolshy drivers; wrong turns into a web of rollercoaster streets. The minute we step from our Nob Hill hotel, the Neo-Baroque Scarlet Huntington, our pulses throb with urban angst. We only just make it up Russian Hill, home to the (in)famous Lombard Street, dubbed 'the crookedest in the world' in honour of its eight hideously hairpin-sharp turns. Is this it? Are we destined to end the second trip wrung-out and knackered, just like we did the first? The city looks set to have the final angry word.

But the night before we fly we're dining at Alexander's Steakhouse (a good-looking place in redbrick-and-timber on a graffiti'd street in the up-and-coming SoMa district), when a calm satisfaction moves across Pascal's face.

'Can you believe we've driven just 500km since we were in San Mateo County Park with the smelly seals?'

'Only 500km – and not even £42 in petrol,' he adds, after a quick mental tot-up. 'It feels like an eternity.'

Two very good reasons to celebrate. So when the wagyu beef arrives, we ask for a Zinfandel from Sonoma Valley. It's spicy with a lingering finish: a perfect aromatic seal (!) upon our epic, but ever so easy, American road trip. ■



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

BA (ba.com) and **American Airlines** (americanairlines.co.uk) fly from Heathrow to San Francisco and San Jose, from £598 return. **Virgin Atlantic** (virgin-atlantic.com) has SF returns from £619. From Gatwick, **Wow Air** (wowair.co.uk) flies via Reykjavik from £363 return; or, from mid-May, **Norwegian** (norwegian.com) flies Oakland direct, returns from £310.

Go packaged

Trailfinders (020 7368 1200, trailfinders.com) has a 14-night fly-drive from £1,999pp, with Heathrow-SF flights, car hire, and hotels in stops including SF, Sonoma and Oakland. Try also **Audley Travel** (01993 838 000, audleytravel.com).

Where to stay

Seal Cove Inn (001800 884 4431, sealcoveinn.com), the writer's first stop, has doubles from £250, B&B. In San Jose, the **Dolce Hayes Mansion** (001866 9813300, hayesmansion.com), set in a Med-style villa, has

doubles from £125, room only. In Oakland, try the **Waterfront Hotel** (001 888 842 5333, jdvhoteles.com), doubles from £139, room only. **River's End** (001 707 865 2484, ilovesunsets.com) charges from £80 per cabin, room only. San Francisco's **Scarlet Huntington** spa hotel (001415 474 5400, thescarlet hotels.com) costs from £245, no meals.

Get around

Avis (avis.co.uk) has a fortnight's SUV hire (ie, a Ford Escape) from San Francisco International Airport from £438. Try also **Budget** (budget.co.uk).

Where to eat

Half Moon Bay Brewery, Half Moon Bay (hmbbrewingco.com; mains about £12). **The Girl and The Fig**, Sonoma (thegirlandthefig.com; about £17). **Alexander's Steakhouse**, SF (alexanderssteakhouse.com; about £35).

Further information

See sanfrancisco.travel, sanjose.org and visitoakland.org; for California, see visitcalifornia.com.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY GETTY



Purple haze: a quirky house in the quaint settlement of Half Moon Bay. Opposite, Goat Rock State Beach in Sonoma County

