



Highway: clockwise from left, Bixby Creek Bridge, Big Sur; Santa Barbara Mission; giant redwoods in Big Sur



A rail of a time

A classic California trip without the drudge of driving? Let the train take the strain! **Adam Edwards** has a hoot on a week aboard the *Coast Starlight*, as it snakes from LA to San Fran



Sunset reach: clockwise from top left, tall palm trees on the Santa Barbara coast; killer whale in Monterey Bay; McWay Cove, Big Sur; view from the rails near Lompoc; paella at Loquita, in Santa Barbara



Fish tale: Cannery Row, in Monterey; Paso Robles vineyards; sea otter and pups in Monterey Bay

I'm racing against a vintage Mustang on Highway 1. The sun is shining, palm trees are swaying and there are a couple of cyclists riding on a beautiful beachfront boardwalk. It's everything a Californian road trip should be. Except I don't have a car.

I'm sitting, drink in hand, in an observation carriage, watching the scenery roll by from a plush Amtrak lounge chair. This is road-tripping the stress-free way. While the Mustang probably spent its morning battling LA's traffic, mine began beneath the hammer-beam ceiling of the city's Union Station, listening to a pianist tinkle *Come Fly with Me*, as porters ferried luggage to waiting trains.

If you've always dreamt of a big American road trip, but like me, are less turned on by the effort and cost it entails (we're talking more than £300 for a fortnight's 'gas' and car hire), this might be the alternative you've been looking for. I'm travelling on the *Coast Starlight*, a gleaming snake of a train that connects all of California's best bits – and leaves you change from £100.

It's the perfect LA-San Fran itinerary. The train runs every day and I plan to follow the route north, but instead of completing the full 12-hour ride between the two cities in one go, I'll take two weeks hopping on and off, spending a day or two getting to grips with some of California's surprisingly walkable towns. I'll stop in Santa Barbara (for the Spanish history), San Luis Obispo (the food scene), Paso Robles (wine) and Monterey (to see whales and Big Sur). The train carries on to Seattle, but I'll end my journey in Oakland, just across the bay from Alcatraz and San Francisco's tram-tracked hills.

My Californian adventure began in West Hollywood, where I spent two nights in a suitably glam apartment-hotel, halfway between the movie lots and the beaches. It was the full LA experience. I brunchoned on coconut 'bacon' and plantain 'chorizo' at trendy, vegan eateries. I papped my way along the Walk of Fame and cruised down Sunset to Rodeo Drive on LA's equivalent of London's Boris Bike. I even had a real-life celebrity encounter: standing in-line

behind David Beckham and his daughter Harper at Bellissimo coffee shop, in touristy Venice Beach.

Now, here I am, with my nose pressed against the *Coast Starlight's* carriage-length windows, watching girls play volleyball and guys surf as Santa Barbara's pier slides into sight. Known as the American Riviera, this is where great East Coast dynasties of yore – the Vanderbilts, the Kennedys – came to escape the winter, and where stars come to escape the fish tank that is LA. Oprah owns a house here, Kim Kardashian had one of her weddings here, and local girl Katy Perry is regularly spotted in the Funk Zone, the low-key district where both the railway station and my trackside hotel, the Wayfarer, are based.

But Santa Barbara isn't just a city of beaches and (celebrity) beach babes. If you like historic architecture, then this, *mi amigo*, is the place for you. Founded around the 18th-century mission church, where I listen to a chorister sing psalms through a cloud of incense, the town is a fantasy of whitewash and terracotta. In fact, many of the original buildings were destroyed in a 1925 earthquake, as I learn on a wine-fuelled walking tour of the Old Town (eatthisshootthat.com; £78pp). In its place sprouted stunning Spanish Revival masterpieces, including the Courthouse, where tourists mingle with lawyers and law-breakers to glimpse triumphant frescoes and Gothic chandeliers – and climb the belfry.

More recently, the town has seen another kind of Spanish revival, as I discover at chi-chi Loquita, one of several new *cantinas* to have popped up in the past few years. This is Spanish cuisine – only Californified. See, California is all about food fads, and the menu here is peppered with the latest 'must-eats': cauliflower, broccoli, even Brussels sprouts. 'Sprouts are the new kale,' says my softly spoken waitress, Mahea. >

WRITER'S TIP

LA eating doesn't have to be vegan. Try celeb-y Mel's (meldrive-in.com; mains about £12) for diner classics, or Alfred (alfredcoffee.com; coffee £3) for flat whites, fancy pastries and toy dogs in tote bags



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The world outside the train may be in constant trend-led flux, but the same can't be said of life on board, a utopia of dinner calls and friendly introductions, where people chit-chat with strangers rather than read. Journeys play out like games of musical chairs, passengers hopping about the carriage for different views and different chats. There are serious conversations about Steinbeck, fun exchanges about festivals, and indulgent talk about sticky-date pudding in the dining car. It's train travel like it used to be – but not in some walnut-panelled, Agatha Christie kind of way. No, the *Coast Starlight's* USP is not that it's a window on a bygone world, but rather a window onto the best of this one.

The views are stunning: cliffs tumbling into foaming sea, spray lapping the tracks. Every bend in the line unveils a scene more dramatic than the last. My favourite bit? This stretch of coast, west of Santa Barbara – arguably the most dramatic in the country – is slap-bang in the middle of the Vandenberg Air Force Base, a vast no-man's land where missiles are launched and

cars are banned. I'm not only getting to experience California's highlights on this railroad trip, I'm seeing places drivers never would, too.

'We only took the train because of the views,' says Don, a heavy-set fellow doing the entire route to Seattle.

'Nobody travels by train any more,' chirps his wife as she takes a photo out of the window.

From Vandenberg, it's just a few horseshoe bends to my next stop: San Luis Obispo, a city of mercantile storefronts and Old West charm. Sadly, the saloons are no more; instead, stripped-back bars serve cocktails infused with coconut oil and goat's cheese (so California). And the brothels? They've been converted into sexy hang-outs such as Granada Bistro, where I sit beside a fire-pit, eating chocolatey *mole* stew with polenta mash.

If you've never heard of San Luis Obispo, you're not alone. Most of America hadn't either, until Oprah raved about its food scene on her show a few years back. She dubbed it the 'happiest city in America', and it's not surprising. This part of central California is where most

of the USA's fruit and veg is grown. Farmers' markets close the streets, drive-thrus are illegal, and the city is full of field-to-fork restaurants such as Thomas Hill Organics, which rewrites its entire menu to suit what's good at the market. In fact, the eating here is special enough to tempt Benedict Cumberbatch, the Kardashians and Kirsten Stewart to whizz up from LA.

I spend two days doing little more than eating or drinking, and wind up on a Prohibition-inspired walking tour, learning about the days when booze-runners smuggled grog down the coast to subterranean bars lining the town creek (hopenbeertours.com; £40). It's fun. We stop at buildings once blown to bits by basement-brewers, and duck into gleaming microbreweries and barbershop speakeasies to sip sour beers and fruity IPAs.

But a man cannot come to California and live on beer alone. Especially when the next stop, Paso Robles, a sleepy wine town circled by 200-plus vineyards, is only an hour's twist up the line. I've tried plenty of wine on my trip so far, but now, in Paso Robles,

I do the vineyards themselves – they're an easy, cheap Uber ride from town – knocking back crisp Chardonnays and tooth-staining Merlots.

The tastings here are nothing like the formal affairs you get on holidays in France. At Casto Cellars they pair Zinfandels with Frisbee golf; at Grey Wolf, you'll find *vino*, vodka and giant Connect Four sets. At La Cosecha, a bar and restaurant Downtown, the wine is used to cook the lamb. I feel pretty well marinated myself. Luckily, I'm staying nearby, at Melody Inn, a movie-worthy motel, complete with pool in the car park and neon out front. There are fancier places in town, but I want the full American experience – from glitzy West Hollywood hotels and roadside motels to wholesome US inns.

I certainly found the latter back in San Luis Obispo. My hotel there, Apple Farm, was a slice of pure Americana, with rocking chairs out front, and endless free homemade cookies. And I also struck gold at my next stop, Monterey, where I'd booked into the antiques-filled Martine Inn. >

LOCAL INSIGHT
See [slocarfree.org](#) for top tips on getting around San Luis Obispo country without a car (including how to get to OTT Hearst Castle by bus); it has great discount codes for hotels and restaurants, too

WHAT TO ORDER
It's not just wine – this region is also going nuts for craft distilling. Plan your own self-guided crawl at [pasoroblesdistillerytrail.com](#); try the bourbon-y Barrel Finished Vodka at [Re:Find \(refinddistillery.com\)](#); tour £8

California

Strictly speaking, I shouldn't be stopping in Monterey – it's not even on the train network. But you can't come to California and not detour here for the whales and coastal scenery: Amtrak knows as much, laying on a bus to carry passengers directly from the station in nearby Salinas.

That's the beauty of this trip. I've not been restricted to sights within a whistle-blow of the railroad tracks. Indeed, I even squeeze in that road-tripping icon Big Sur. I've done all the research – for £3, I can take the No. 22 bus from town and stop at all the bridges along the coastal route. But I needn't have bothered. One of my fellow train passengers, Richard, turns out to be from Monterey, and insists on driving me, instead.

It's incredible. Like Vandenberg, earlier on my trip, but with the chance to stop. We cruise along storm-battered cliffs, stopping at bridges that pincer across earth-splitting chasms. We wander through redwoods of neck-cracking proportions, and come across people-less beaches, trimmed with wildflowers. I'm impressed. Richard, on the other hand, can't stop talking about Vandenberg. We argue the toss over dinner that evening – which, like the petrol, Richard insists on paying for.

It seems such an extraordinary act of hospitality. But, apparently, it's pretty ordinary for California. On the train, I overhear strangers extending offers of dinner 'when you get to Sacramento/San Francisco/are next in LA'. That's another great thing about the Amtrak – it encourages connections in a way driving can't.

Then again, everyone in California is so welcoming. As is the wildlife. I'm kayaking off Monterey, surrounded by sea lions waving their flippers right by my prow. Over the past two hours in my rented kayak (adventuresbythesea.com; from £28), I've been nearly skewered by low-flying pelicans, startled by heavy-breathing seals, and found myself utterly seduced by sea otters floating, pups on their bellies, in the middle of a kelp forest.

It's improbably rich with sealife. Which is why the seafront here was once lined with huge fish-processing plants. It was an industry that brought untold wealth, but caused the sardine population's collapse, as I learn on a wander round the brilliant aquarium on the old 'Cannery Row' (montereybayaquarium.org; £39).

Seventy years on, fish stocks seem to be recovering. I'm on a boat, watching a family of humpback whales corral a shoal into a ball of silvery scales. We're close. I'm talking sniff-the-halitosis close. 'Smells like broccoli,' says Isaiah, one of the marine biologists from Monterey Bay Whale Watch (montereybaywhalewatch.com; £35). Suddenly I don't fancy fish dinner...

There are more than just whales here. 'Dolphins; 400 to 500, at least,' confirms Isaiah. They're darting through the water, between gulping humpbacks and plummeting sea birds. It's a frenzy of foam and fish, feathers and fins, the likes of which I've only seen on *Planet Earth*.

As 'road trips' go, this certainly has been a whale of one. I've had the sand between my toes and the wildlife at my feet. Seen all the sights. And even had a celebrity run-in. And I've not finished yet. San Francisco is still out there. Beyond the whales and the mist-cloaked horizon, along scenic passes tracked by speeding Mustangs. Where the railroad is still king. ■



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

BA (ba.com) has open-jaw tickets, flying Heathrow-LA, returning Oakland-Gatwick, from £716.

Thomas Cook (thomascokairlines.com) has Manchester-LA returns from £399. **Norwegian** (norwegian.com) flies Gatwick-LA from £283 return. **Amtrak's Coast Starlight** (amtrak.com) starts at £41 direct from LA to Oakland, or £97 over five pre-booked legs.

Where to stay

LA: Palihouse West Hollywood (palihousewesthollywood.com) has swish suites from £230, self-catering. **Santa Barbara: The Wayfarer** (wayfarersb.com) has doubles from £139 and four-bed dorms from £54pp, B&B. **San Luis Obispo: Apple Farm** (applefarm.com) has doubles from £85, room only. **Paso Robles: Melody Ranch** (melodyranchmotelca.com) has doubles from £71, room only. **Monterey: Martine Inn** (martineinn.com) has doubles from £162, B&B.

Where to eat

LA: Gracias Madre (graciasmadrewho.com; mains about £12) is a cool vegan brunch joint. **San Luis Obispo: Granada Bistro** (granadahotelandbistro.com; mains about £18); **Thomas Hill Organics** (thomashillorganics.com; mains about £20). **Paso Robles: La Cosecha** (lacosechabr.com; mains about £16). **Monterey:** Spot bay seals and otters from **Schooners** (schoonersmonterey.com; mains about £20).

Go packaged

GRJ Independent (01904 521936, greatrail.com/grj-independent) has an 11-night *Coast Starlight* trip from £2,495pp, with Heathrow flights and some meals. Or try **America As You Like It** (020 8742 8299, americasyoulikeit.com).

Further information

See visitcalifornia.com, visitwesthollywood.com, santabarbaraca.com, sanluisobispovacations.com, travelpaso.com, slocal.com and seemonterey.com.