



WORDS ELISABETH KING

CALIFORNIA CALLING

CALIFORNIA is a major magnet for Aussie travellers and wine tourists. Over 500,000 of us cross the Pacific each year, but it's time to ditch the false impression that California is all about Hollywood, theme parks, the Napa and Sonoma valleys and big business. There's more than 400,000 square kilometres of the Golden State to explore and plenty more wine regions to learn about.

Anza Borrego Desert State Park, a 200,000ha sprawl of sand, rock and cactus tailor-made for die-hard road trip enthusiasts is only a two-hour drive from San Diego. Made up of 800km of dirt roads, a web of hiking trails and 12 wilderness areas, the park is named after Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza and the Spanish word "borrego" for the bighorn sheep that call this spectacular wedge of California desert home.

There's no question of roughing it, though. The desert begins just west of the resort town of Borrego Springs with its groomed golf courses and plush hotels such as La Casa del Zorro and the revamped Palm Canyon Hotel and RV Resort. Like Palm Springs, the town was once a bolthole for Hollywood stars and many of them ate at The Coyote Steakhouse. Mexican food is the major drawcard at Pablito's of the Desert, Jilberto's Taco Shop and the boisterous Carmelita's Mexican Grill.

Anza Borrego's wildflower season is Southern California's version of Groundhog Day. From March, great swathes of brittle bush, popcorn flowers, desert lilies and sunflowers erupt around each dusty bend. There's plenty of wildlife, too. I was

disappointed not to see a red diamond rattlesnake (or maybe not) or a roadrunner on a recent visit but there were plenty of golden eagles, iguanas and mule deer.

The California Gold Rush kicked off at Sutter's Mill on the American River in 1848. Most people come here for a rush of another kind these days - adrenalin - to book a rafting trip on the South Fork American, the most popular stretch of whitewater in California.

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Sacramento, the state capital, is the best place to bed down and dine, and there are over 200 wineries within a one-hour drive. For the best of "New American" menus, book a table at Mulvaney's B&L, The Firehouse Restaurant and Grange Restaurant & Bar, serving paddock-to-plate and seasonal craft cocktails. A Sinatra soundtrack, 1950's decor, martinis and Scotch-on-the-rocks keep the crowds coming at The Back Door Lounge bar.

Just shy of the Oregon stateline is Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park - one of the last strongholds of the Roosevelt Elk, the largest elk species in North America.

Urban America seems light years away as you drive through the park, momentarily taking your eyes off the road to gaze up at the world's tallest trees. You can't miss an elk sighting because it's usually preceded by a whistling bugle cry that can be heard for kilometres. Originally built for sawmill workers, the renovated Elk Meadow Cabins are close to Lady Bird Johnson Grove, a bucket list-worthy stand of redwoods. A short drive away in the town of Klamath where the listings at Pey-Mey Express Chester's Chicken are finger-lickin' good.

Make a detour to Eureka, the westernmost city in the US, where the ornate Victoria mansions tell the story of the town's 19th century dependence on "King Timber". Drop by for a beer at The Lost Coast Brewery & Bar and an exceptional meal at the Brick & Fire Bistro.

I discovered Shasta Lake a couple of years ago when I was writing a story about the celebrations planned to mark the centenary of Woody Guthrie's birth. The fabled singer-songwriter spent much of the 1930s in California and wrote This Land Is Your Land, the unofficial American anthem, while working on the construction of Shasta Dam. The resulting lake is the largest reservoir in California and calls itself the "houseboating capital of the world".

It's no idle boast. You can hire a houseboat from one of 10 marinas around the lake's 587km shoreline from plush yachts with staterooms and jacuzzis to tarp-covered fishermen's motorboats. Fishing is big business with a small army of male-only groups casting their lines for bass, sturgeon

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and catfish. If time is limited, head for the Shasta Wine Village to taste a wide variety of regional bottlings. The Old Thyme B&B in Redding features beautifully restored Victorian cottages and continues the retro-hip trend with superbly prepared homemade biscuits and authentic sausage gravy at the Old Mill Eatery.

There's never a dull moment at Lake Tahoe - summer or winter. The 116km drive around the lake's rim is touted as the most beautiful drive in America and on any day the sun shines off the crystal-clear waters it's impossible to disagree. Skiers converge on the area in winter and the tech and private equity booms have prompted a glut of lush lakefront mansions that have turned Lake Tahoe into the California equivalent of The Hamptons in summer.

There are luxury hotels to match, including the Ritz-Carlton, The Cedar House Sport Hotel and The Landing Resort & Spa. There are also hundreds of restaurants, ranging from pizza bars that make their own micro-brews to fine dining meccas such as Trokay and Stella, the waterfront Lone Eagle Grille and Bar and Christy Hill. The Eldorado wine region just west of South Lake Tahoe has more than 40 wineries. Don't miss Wofford Acres where the tasting room sports spectacular views of the American River Canyon. 

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