

The West Coast

California – Part 1

It's the last week of April and I'm heading toward California. I want to take advantage of the cooler temperatures and visit Death Valley before the summer heat arrives. It should only be in the 90s right now! My route takes me on Route 66 – I wonder how many travelers have enjoyed this route. Judging by the rock messages alongside the road I would say quite a few! It's a popular route to travel – large groups of motorcycles, cars and RVs – but not a lot of truck traffic. I went for miles with no one coming or going and not much scenery to look at. I enjoyed every mile though – getting my kicks on Route 66. My first destination in California is Joshua Tree National Park but the drive there is longer than I want to travel in one day so I stop in Needles, CA to spend a night.

Joshua Tree NP covers 794,000 acres where the Mojave and Colorado deserts converge. The landscape changes from typical flat desert to rolling hills to mile high mountain peaks. And of course there are plenty of Joshua trees to enjoy all along the way. The Joshua tree was named by a group of Mormons in the 19th century while crossing the Mojave Desert. The outstretched arms of this Yucca reaching to the heavens reminded them of the Prophet Joshua and encouraged them to continue their journey to find the Promised Lands. The trees grow up to 3 inches per year and some of the trees in the park reach 45 feet in height making them hundreds of years old. I enjoyed a full day of exploring rock formations, hiking trails and the Geology Trail road before moving on to my next location – Death Valley National Park.

The lowest point in North America, Badwater Basin at 282 feet below sea level is located just 100 miles from the highest point in the lower 48 states, Mt. Whitney at 14,491 feet. What a difference 100 miles can make! I have 2 full days to explore Death Valley. I stayed at a campground in Stovepipe Wells Village, one with electric hookup so I can access my air conditioning comfortably if temperatures climb. Summer temps are often in the 120 range with lows around 100 at night. Thank goodness it's Spring! Stovepipe is in a central location as well so I can spend one day exploring one side of the park and the other side on the second day.

My first day I head toward Badwater Basin. I pass by Mesquite Flats Sand dunes on my way to a hike on the Golden Canyon Interpretive trail. The sand dunes remind me of home and Jockey's Ridge. The wind is blowing strongly and the face of the dunes change while I'm there. Golden Canyon interpretive trail heads into some very interesting rock formations and there are two options – a 1.25 mile trek to Red Cathedral or a 4 mile loop over rocky hills. I opt for the first because I want to enjoy as much of the park as I can. The hike to Red Cathedral is easy as far as terrain but challenging with heat. Rock formations provide interesting views and Red Cathedral is worth the time and effort. I head back to the trailhead just in time to avoid a tour bus crowd. Badwater Basin is my next destination and I take my time getting there, enjoying unplanned diversions along the way including Devils Golf Course. The parched land shows cracks and there is one section that looks like a river of salt. It's hard to imagine that any living creature could survive in this environment yet there are signs of life – nearly 1,000 native plant species, aquatic life, birds, lizards, snakes and the kangaroo rat which can go for months without water.

I enjoy my second day with a trip to Scotty's Castle, named for a swindler, Walter Scott, who convinced a Chicago businessman, Albert Johnson, that there was gold mine just waiting for development in the Valley. Johnson decided that he wanted to visit his investment interests and Scott was exposed. Johnson did find the weather conditions a benefit for his chronic health problems though and decided to build a vacation home in Grapevine Canyon where a natural spring existed producing 200 gallons of water per minute. Johnson had the water piped to the building location providing drinking water, producing electricity and a refrigeration system. A true oasis in the middle of the desert. After touring the castle I decided to walk around the grounds and had my first and only encounter with a rattlesnake. We parted as friends, me moving a little more quickly than the snake. My ride back to camp included a stop at Ubehebe Crater created by a volcanic event. There are a few craters in the area and Ubehebe is the largest, about ½ mile across and 500 feet deep.

Photos include: Joshua Tree, San Andres Fault, Snow topped mountains contrast Joshua Tree desert, Mesquite Flats Sand dunes, Golden Canyon trail to Red Cathedral rock formation, mineral deposits between layers of rock, river of salt runs through Devil's Golf course, Badwater Basin salt beds, Badwater Basin, Telescope Peak with snow at 11,049 feet viewed from Badwater Basin 282 feet below sea level, Scotty's Castle.

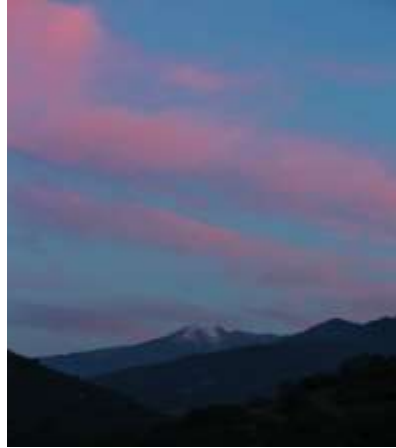




I leave Death Valley National Park and travel through the desert, including a dust storm, to Bakersfield CA. I'm staying at a RV park that is in the middle of an orange grove and you can pick all the oranges you want. It's the end of the season and I find the trees are empty when I arrive so I purchase a few at a nearby fruit stand. I'm in a farming belt area and what a change compared to the desert. The land is filled with farming activity,

flowers grow wild along the highway and wind farms often fill the view. I spend two nights in Bakersfield and then back on the road to my next destination – Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. I found a campground that was convenient for access to both parks and filled my days riding through the parks enjoying the giant trees, beautiful vistas, wildlife sightings, and water falls. The giant sequoias grow to 300+ feet with a base sometimes 40 feet in diameter. The pinecone is the size of a chicken egg with seeds the size of oat flakes and it only takes one seed to produce one of these giants. Photos include: Death Valley dust storm, wind farm, orange grove campsites, giant sequoia towers over an rv, first bear cub sighting, giant sequoia along Big Tree Trail, Kings Canyon NP is in the distance, Hume Lake, Roaring River falls, sunset over Mt Eisen.





I leave the Kings Canyon-Sequoia NP area and head west toward the ocean. My destination is Pinnacles National Park about 140 miles south of San Francisco and only 50 miles from the ocean. The park is primarily for day use and there is no road crossing from one side to the other but there is a nice small campground located on the east side of the park providing a good base location to explore the area. I enjoyed my drive to the campground and decided to retrace my tracks so I could appreciate where I had been. My reward was a view of a small group of elk, 2 day old twin cows, a coyote walking through a herd of cattle and some beautiful lush farms being harvested. I have a better understanding of food costs now after seeing the labor required to get the produce from field to store. They did everything there in the field (romaine lettuce) – cut, trimmed, packaged individually and then boxed and placed on trucks going to the market. Photos include a pair of elk, one of the twins, countryside, a huge cabbage patch, harvesting the crop.





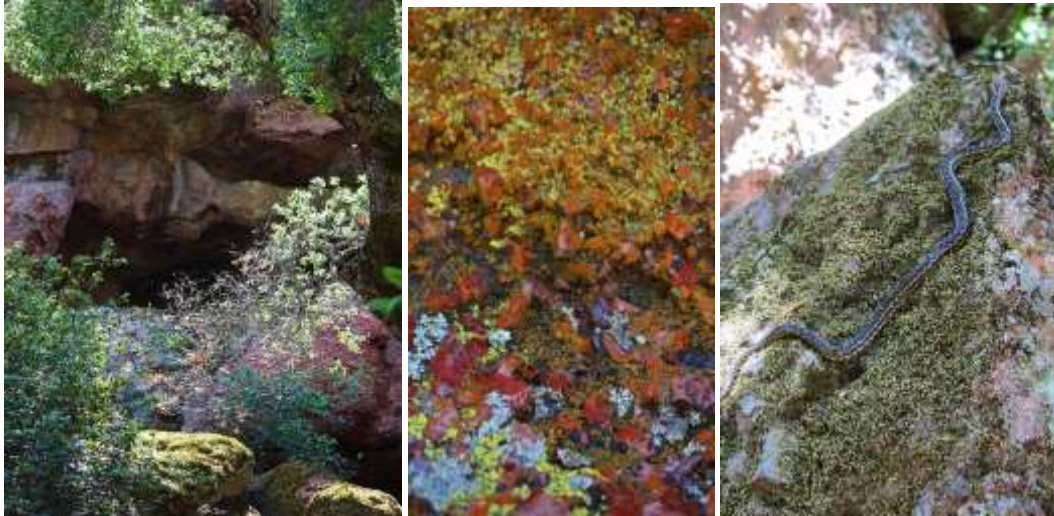
My second full day of exploring took me to the Pacific for a ride along the coastal highway from Monterey to Big Sur. What a great way to spend the day – spectacular scenery, the Pacific Ocean and some interesting towns along the way.

Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary is 276 miles of coastline, includes the largest US kelp forest, one of the largest underwater canyons and the closest to shore deep ocean access. The beach at Carmel-by-the-Sea was beautiful and dogs were allowed so Tipper enjoyed a walk in the Pacific ocean waves. Fishing boats close to shore were having a good day and so were the gulls. The lighthouse is located on the golf course and south of town is the Carmel Mission with tours available but it was late afternoon and I had many miles to go. The coastal highway is high above the shoreline and there are plenty of places to stop and hike down. I stopped at a few places and one location was popular for surfing. Carrying a board up the path after a few hours of surfing would be a great workout. I had so many beautiful views of the coastline and decided it was time to turn back north when I reached the Point Sur Lighthouse. It's open for tours on a limited basis and I think would be an interesting area to visit. Photos include Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, Carmel-by-the-Sea beach, lighthouse and Mission, coastline views, Point Sur Lighthouse.





I enjoyed a hike in the park my final day at Pinnacles. A trailhead leading from the campground took me to the Bear Gulch Reservoir – a small lake hidden among the rock formations. It was a nice trail with interesting rock formations to enjoy. A nice way to spend a few hours before heading back to camp and packing everything up for my next destination. Photos include rock formation, lichen, some kind of snake and the reservoir.



I had a few days before my next destination and I spent this time at a nice Army Corp of Engineer park at Hensley Lake. The lake is located in the middle of nowhere – seriously – there is nothing around. Perfect for some downtime, sorting through photos, catching up on travel notes, laundry, cleaning the Chinook and leisurely walks. The lake level was extremely low and a good distance from the campsite so I didn't venture over to it. A perfect break before my dream destination. My entire trip was initiated so that I could spend my birthday at a National Park I had wanted to see for so long and it was almost reality.

Next stop Yosemite.