



Travel

California? I love it, love it, love it

OCEAN VIEW: The spectacular restaurant at the Post Ranch Inn overlooking the Pacific and, right, Dylan on his US adventure

THERE are two essential things you need from a hotel. When you're a long way from home you need a brilliant power shower (hot, strong, consistent), and then you need them to serve a perfect club sandwich (voluminous, tasty, with lots of fries). Thankfully San Francisco's Clift has both.

There is no better place than San Francisco to start a proper California road trip, and there is no better place

Dylan Jones is blown away by the food, scenery and fabulous service on his West Coast road trip

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KODAK GREENWOOD

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to stay than The Clift. Originally built as part of Ian Schrager's trendy Morgans group (Schrager was at the forefront of the 'boutique hotel' trend), it now caters for all: young trendies, tourist families and long-haul businessmen alike. It is a wonderful oasis.

Yes, it has all the 'For your convenience, a 15 per cent gratuity and a five per cent service charge will be added' as well as the '\$3.50 delivery charge per order' nonsense at the bottom of your room service bill – and the waiter will glower at you for deciding not to leave a fourth tip – but unfortunately you get this in almost all US hotels these days.

There are bigger, grander hotels than The Clift, but not many that are this friendly.

SAN FRANCISCO is surprisingly small, with only 700,000 permanent residents, so you can do the whole city in a weekend: Chinatown (for the food), Haight-Ashbury (for checking out the remnants of the Sixties counter culture), the Mission (alternative shopping and second-hand books), Union Square (designer shopping), Fisherman's Wharf (where most tourists end up at some point on their trip), Alcatraz (a big box ticked), Twin Peaks (the best view over the city), and the Golden Gate Bridge (one of the best views in the world, and one not to be missed).

I noticed there were many more homeless people in the city than the last time I was here, and it can be disconcerting for the children to come out of a store only to be faced

I tried the spa – it was like standing next to the speakers at a Ramones gig, covered head to toe in mud

with half-a-dozen vagrants pushing shopping trolleys full of rags and old food, looking like extras from Michael Jackson's Thriller video. Still, this is the modern US urban experience, and one any visitor has to deal with. Just be thankful you're not visiting Detroit.

There are few better places in the world to eat and drink than San Francisco and the Napa and Sonoma regions north of the city. It's almost impossible to eat badly here. At one level you have fine dining like you've never had before – once considered the best restaurant in the world, Thomas Keller's French Laundry is still a wonderful

gastronomic assault course (in our case quite literally, as my youngest daughter head-butted her specially made dessert due to jet-lag) –

and at the other you have the generic diner experience. We took our ten and 12-year-old girls for breakfast at a diner next to The Clift and even they were daunted by the size of the helpings. Death by pancakes? It's easily done in San Francisco.

The sushi is to die for too and, being lucky enough to have a daughter who adores the stuff, we sought some out. It was a bit like trying to find a Starbucks in Seattle – sushi bars are everywhere and it took us only ten minutes to find one that had been voted San Francisco's Best Sushi Bar of 2004.

The food was perfect although, as my eldest daughter said when we walked into the strangely deserted restaurant: 'Maybe it's empty because of the smell.'

Indeed, even the least salubrious places serve amazing food here.

Having left San Fran by driving over the Golden Gate Bridge, we diverted to Muir Woods, which has some of the best giant redwoods in the country. This diversion was recommended to me by TV historian Simon Schama, and turned out to be one of the highlights of our trip.

We then drove for an hour up to lovely St Helena, a picture-book town with cutesy shops and restaurants, which my wife called 'Noddy Town', to Calistoga Ranch in the Napa Valley. Along with its sister venues, Calistoga Solage and Calistoga Auberge, it is one of the best top-end resorts in the whole state. Set in the middle of a huge wood, the ranch has state-of-the-art log cabins with gas fires, central heating, outdoor showers, a full wet-bar and fully functioning kitchen, 24-hour room service, a superb restaurant, hiking trails, wine routes – the lot.

One night we had dinner in the Lakehouse restaurant, and while the food was extraordinary (some sort of grilled salmon salad), the service was seven-star.

Our young waiter was keen, charming, helpful, interesting and interested in a quite unforced and genuine way. We loved him almost as much as we enjoyed the meal. I've stayed at many of the best resort hotels in the world, and this place was faultless.

As a parting shot, just as we climbed into our Mercedes to leave, the bellboy handed us a little plastic cup containing a selection of frozen grapes for our journey. This was a new one on me, and was actually rather fabulous. Love it, love it, love it.

WE THEN went to stay at Solage Calistoga, which is a different vibe altogether, looking rather like a top-notch army base (in a good way). The service and amenities are just as good as the Ranch, but everything is far more utilitarian. The staff couldn't be more helpful, although I would imagine that, if asked, they would all prefer to work at the Ranch.

The Solage is famous for its spa, so when you've spent a hard day winetasting you can relax in the company of expert masseurs. The signature treatment here is the mudslide, and this is what my wife and I decided on. Basically you cover yourself in mud, sit in a sauna, then have a bath and sit on some sort of vibrating lounger with an inbuilt iPod which pumps Enya into your hind quarters.

Frankly, I found it a bit like standing too close to the speakers at a Ramones concert, but then I've always been rather cynical when it comes to spa treatments.

On the way to Solage we dropped into Yountville to sample the food at Jeanty's Bistro, which is one of the best restaurants in town, and well worth a visit.

You should try the tomato soup (huge) and the cheese plate (not bad either), and drink one glass of chardonnay too many. This will help you cope with the coachloads of pensioners looking for another free glass of



DRIVE OF YOUR LIFE: The breathtaking Big Sur coastline seen from the Pacific Coast Highway



GREAT OUTDOORS: A cabin at the luxury Calistoga Ranch and, below, cuisine at the restaurant in the Post Ranch Inn

GETTING THERE

America As You Like It (020 8742 8299, www.americaasyoulikeit.com) offers a two-week fly-drive package, flying to San Francisco and back from Los Angeles, from £569. It can also arrange accommodation. For more details on the area's hotels, see www.clifthotel.com (The Clift), www.ojairesort.com (Ojai Valley Inn & Spa), www.montagebeverlyhills.com (The Montage Beverly Hills), www.calistogaranch.com (Calistoga Ranch), www.solagecalistoga.com (Solage Calistoga) and www.aubegeresorts.com (Auberge Resorts).



bubbly, who wander around the town in packs.

If you want to see a lot of old people in stonewashed denim and box-fresh training shoes, this is the place to come. Just be sure not to trip up any of them, as you'll always be outnumbered. And if they decide to attack, you're toast.

Another day we went to Bottega, which is right next to Jeanty's and in two years has become one of the best destination restaurants in the area, serving dishes such as burrata autunnale (mozzarella with butternut squash and mushrooms), wood-grilled octopus, hand-cut whole-egg linguine and Adriatic seafood brodetto.

Not only is Bottega – drum roll – better than the French Laundry, but I think it's the best new restaurant I've been to in the past year.

It is run by celebrity chef Michael Chiarello, a charming host who could be actor Alec Baldwin's doppelgänger. Here is a man who cares deeply about his food, and cares deeply about telling people he cares about it, too. And he does it with great style and panache.

If you're doing Napa, this place is a must. Great front-of-house, great service, extraordinary food.

There is a slight Stefford feeling about the Calistoga/St Helena/Yountville area, although just as I was beginning to think I was in a world imagined by an eight-year-old, I stopped at a gas station to fill up.

'So, where you from, fella?'
'I'm from London, actually.'
'London? Cool. I love the place. So, you finally got rid of Tony Blair and his ugly wife, eh?'
I was suddenly transported back

to a black cab on the Old Kent Road. Luckily, when I blinked I was back in Napa, about to enjoy the 90-minute journey back to San Francisco, and then on to 101 South, on the way to Big Sur – a resort made famous by Jack Kerouac and Brian Wilson, and now renowned for the Post Ranch Inn.

I was done with Napa and Sonoma, but all I wanted to do was return as quickly as possible. Rarely have I met such nice, enthusiastic people, all of whom took such a great delight in their visitors.

Honestly, if you were an alien and you landed in San Francisco or Napa, you'd wonder why anybody ever attempted to leave Earth and fly anywhere else.

From San Fran you take the Pacific Coast Highway all the way down to LA, and what a drive it is. It was the end of October when we went and all the farms along the coast were covered in pumpkins, as they tend to take Halloween extremely seriously. It's not unusual to see houses completely covered with extravagant spiders' webs, Madame Tussaud-style witches or models of those dribbling extras from Thriller.

Mind you, in San Fran people tend to be so badly attired that it was difficult to tell if they'd got dressed up specially for the festivities or not.

In one cafe my eldest was very

unsure about our waiter, asking: 'Is she a woman trying to look like a man or a man trying to look like a woman?'

Me, I didn't know.

As you career down the coast you should keep an eye out for whales and elephant seals appearing out of the waves, and if you stop in any of the coastal villages you'll think you have stepped back in time.

If you're feeling adventurous at this point, just past the town of Davenport you'll see a turn-off for Bonny Doon, which has a more-than-interesting winery, not least because cult British cartoonist Ralph Steadman designed their label.

FOR us, it was on to Carmel, Monterey and then Big Sur. If you're planning on stopping here, you really should book in at the Post Ranch Inn; not just because it's the place to stay in Big Sur, not just because it's one of the best spas in North America, but simply because if you tell people you spent the night in Big Sur and didn't stay here, you will be unceremoniously laughed out of town.

It is beautiful. High up in the hills, you check in and are then driven up to your modern wood cabin. And once there, you take a dip in the stainless-steel hot tub on the terrace, crack open

a bottle of chardonnay and watch the sunset.

The Post Ranch Inn is simply magnificent, and if you don't enjoy it then you obviously don't enjoy the good things in life.

From there, we drove down to Santa Barbara, staying at the Ojai Hotel (which was recommended to me by at least six Californians, and didn't disappoint in any way), and then on to Los Angeles, where – for the third time – I stayed at the Montage Hotel on North Canon Drive, just round the corner from Rodeo Drive. If you're smart you'll stay here rather than at one of the hotels with a bigger reputation. The service is attentive, the rooms are spacious and there is an air of secrecy about the place – always a good feeling to have in a hotel. It is also bang in the middle of Beverly Hills, and you can walk to most of the good restaurants.

The Montage is a perfect amalgam of all that is good about California: it is smart, the food is better than it needs to be, the service is better than you're likely to get anywhere else in the world, and it's the sort of place you will want to go back to as soon as you can.

Which is why I've already booked my Californian holiday for next year.

● Dylan Jones is the editor of GQ magazine.