

“The holiday of a lifetime”



The Longest Day

"I've just got a few things left to do" were the words I heard in my ears as I went upstairs to bed. Shall I put the alarm on or shall I trust in Jen to wake us all up. Well just in case I thought - I'll set the alarm for 2.30am. Just as well, because as I got up and showered it seemed strangely quiet downstairs. There then followed one of the most hectic and amazing 30mins I've experienced as we got ourselves dressed, closed the bags - not to forget making the sandwiches (which Ruth made) - and completed our final preparations for the trip. The taxi driver arrived ahead of time and drove at a wonderfully sedate speed to the coach station where we got out and joined others at 3.30am waiting for Flightlink 201. Strange how every one seemed to be huddled against the cold and yet I seemed warm - must have been something to do with the fact that it was such a short time since I'd left my bed.

The coach arrived on time and we started off on the long journey to California. This part of the journey was uneventful with stops at Newport and Reading, except for the surprise that we didn't need sandwiches after all (the coach had a trolley service - well a human version), so the Harrison's started their trip in usual fashion - camping/picnic refugees. At Reading a large family & friends party joined the coach en route to Orlando via Gatwick - a regular event for them apparently. Anyway it was pleasant to talk about our respective plans for the remainder of the journey to Terminal 4. It took 40mins to drive around Heathrow - this I'd not anticipated and made our decision to take the early bus, a sensible one.

We decanted ourselves from the coach and tumbled into the airport, going straight to the checking-in desk and found to our shock that our hand luggage was "too heavy". We then had to unpack, on the floor in front of the desk, computers and books - "essential reading for the flight" - and check the our mobile office into the baggage hold. Worries - have I taken everything I needed out - yes; have I left anything of value in the bag - yes, our car-hire vouchers - worry, worry for 12 hours; did I ask Jen to borrow some scales to check weights - yes (stay calm, stay calm). Then of course I got "caught" by the security gate after telling Jen and Ruth what to do - it was the buckle on my belt - still I raised my arms and spread my legs like a professional traveler!

This left us with nearly three hours to kill waiting for the Gate to open and for our embarkation onto BA285. A long three hours - still we had the sandwiches! I was able to go and buy some Zantac (just in case), Jen and Ruth bought some chewing gum (for the take-off) - it's supposed to be good for that (said our nervous travel companion); and a newspaper (which told us the grim news about Kosova). We're off to enjoy ourselves (hopefully) and there are life and death matters in Europe. Not the best of days to leave, on what was to be a "holiday of a lifetime".

Eventually the departure board told us to go to Gate 3 and we queued and boarded the plane, a 747-400 taking our seats in Row 30, A-C window and over a wing. I've chosen not to relate in any detail the next ten hours, but really how do you describe boredom! Still we survived and at least we had all the in-flight entertainment, which some poor souls didn't. Where we were there were mainly Americans, but also Germans and a couple of Middle-eastern parties. No one talked to anyone. They didn't even ask before putting down the reclining seats, so of course Jen and I had less space than anyone else on the flight - squashed from the front, and too reticent to inflict the same on those behind - typical. The first film shown was "Enemy of the State" which was good but the sound (earphones) gave us all headaches. The meals were very adequate - a nice bit of steak, nice wine (Merlot from California) and all other snacks more than welcome as a means of breaking up the trip.

Towards the end of the flight we broke out of cloud and were able to see vast expanses of Northern Canada - flat and frozen, amazing and desolate. It made me realise that cold desert is a very appropriate term. How could you survive in such a featureless area? Occasionally a frozen river or lake would be visible and then gradually we saw some more features - rivers dissecting the plains, then some hills. Unfortunately after a while, the clouds came back for the rest of the trip into San Francisco. The landing was scary - it looked until the last minute that we were going to land in water, but in fact the tarmac was parallel with the seashore and just as we touched down we saw land for the first time.

Out through the gates - should we dispose of the last of the "picnic" before we went through customs? After all there were all those strict warnings about importing foodstuffs into the State of

California - but surely that was meant for fruit and vegetables, not Walkers Crisps and boxed drinks?

The entry to America was not what I'd expected. The customs officials were unsmiling, even surly; no "have a nice day" or "welcome to the U S of A", just a disinterest in what they were being expected to do, and the people they were meeting. Not the best advert for, or welcome to, the States. Of course all airports look alike now - we could have been in another terminal building at Heathrow - there seems to be international design standards for airports - functional, no style, don't forget the shopping opportunity!

So we spilled out into the outside world. A baggage handler hailed a cab for us - I'd read the books so remembered to tip (hopefully at the right level) - and we got in. Well this was an experience from a number of standpoints. First of all surprise, the driver was a Pakistani, his English being very poor, his driving slightly alarming. The journey into San Francisco took us past quite a lot of shanty housing and as he weaved in and out at what seemed much higher speeds than I thought (from my reading) were permissible, I thought this was to be my best chance to get the information from an expert on how to drive in America. "What about speed limits", I asked - unintelligible answer but the speed of the cab dropped appreciably. Then, "can you explain the lane drill", I haven't got a clue what he said but we seemed to stay in the same lane for longer than before - at least for a little while. I gave up, deciding to buy a book from the first bookshop I came across - this hopefully would advise me how to drive in America.

We arrived at the Grant Plaza on the edge of Chinatown, just by the entrance gates, at 2.30pm; ie not much later than the time we'd left Heathrow. Unfortunately our room was not ready and so we left our bags and went down the road to a café/bookshop on the corner - the Café de la Presse. I had café au lait, Jen and Ruth - hot chocolate. I checked the book stock - no books on driving, a search that was to prove fruitless throughout the journey. How do the Americans learn to drive, obviously from experience, not theory!

On the way back to the hotel we bought a few postcards and I bought a converter lens for my camera. I'm not convinced it was a sound purchase, but I had wanted a wider angle lens and the price

seemed good. The salesman was particularly persuasive! Back at the hotel we slept/dozed for a couple of hours and then set out on a figure of eight walk to get our bearings of the area around the hotel. We saw Union Square, got our first sighting of a cable car and saw lots of shops - most of them closing. By eight o'clock we were back in the hotel and in bed. I woke at 1.15am, and then again at 4.00a, this time coughing - a dry atmosphere I think, but finally dozed until 6.0am when the others began to surface. So ended "the longest day".

Early explorations

I've already described my disturbed night, I think Ruth had problems as well - it was very hot in the room and there was no obvious way of controlling the heat. Hotels in the States quite often do not have a dining room associated with them and this was the case with the Grant Plaza. However Sue and Gary Pashley had recommended somewhere to go (they had already recommended the Grant Plaza to us) and so off we went in search of Roxanne's. We actually went three sides of the block to find it but this extra exercise prepared us the better for the breakfast feast we were to enjoy. I can't remember what Ruth and Jen ate, but I had a croissant sandwich - packed full of bacon and other goodies. The coffee was lovely too, always being topped up. A really lasting memory of America - the Columbian coffee they serve, so fresh, so full of flavour, yet light as well. Roxanne's was on one of the cablecar lines so we were able to watch them as we ate - a novel experience.

After breakfast, we walked down to Union Square and Market Street; we popped into the Visitor Centre (of course) but not before Jen was approached by the San Francisco equivalent of the Big Issue salesman (she must have social worker written on her forehead). Inside I got involved in a lengthy conversation with an assistant of German origin (an ex-professor I believe) who was fluent in a number of European languages. I went into the bank - inquired on how the cashcard networks worked and got some dollars. We then went into the Nordstrom - an amazing shopping "experience" built on several gallery levels around a central atrium made up of curving elevators; then into Macy's (to use the Post Office) and a first visit to the cosmetics department. Needing a bit of a rest and refreshment I set off to find a drugstore to buy drinks/snacks but when I returned empty-handed to Union Square (where I'd left Jen and Ruth) I found

them sucking from Tesco boxed drinks - the Harrison picnic preparation had not been in vane after all! We decided it would be a good idea to buy Muni passports, amazing value at \$10 each for three days, providing access to all buses and cablecars.

From Union Square we caught a 45 bus to the Maritime Museum and spent time on the quay/jetty where we got our first glimpse of Alcatraz. We observed the aging joggers and the more youthful in-line skaters and in turn were observed by very large seagulls, one of which perched above our heads in a somewhat proprietorial manner. We had lunch at the Ale Garden Café and experienced what I can only describe as a totally unique dining-out experience. As each new customer arrived and sat down in the open air they were insulted to some degree or another. It was his way of coping with the fact that he had no help - his staff hadn't turned up. Somehow, although unexpected, it was done in a light-hearted enough way that it didn't become unsettling or unpleasant. For additional entertainment we had music from a sax player and singer, who was very good and attempted to sell us his CD (of course). I think we had pizzas, I know I drank Anchor Steam Beer - very pleasant, and with the sun shining (albeit it with quite a strong wind) this was a relaxing hour and I began to feel the holiday had really started.

After lunch we strolled along the road towards Fisherman's Wharf (a quick stop in the Sweet Factory for Ruth and Jen while I watched and listened to itinerant traders and street artists outside) and then back to the Powell-Hyde cablecar terminus to return to the hotel. This was a real experience, fun even, and the fact that we had to queue for a while to get on didn't diminish it. I got a few photos from the cablecar, we looked down Lombard Street, went over Nob Hill and descended down towards Market Street on the most amazing switch-back where the intersecting roads provide flat bits on the overall long descent. We got off at Pine Street (by Roxanne's) and dropped a film off to be processed to check the working of the new lens.

After a rest we followed a guided walk through Chinatown. This was a bustling, lively area which showed no signs of closing. We did a bit of consumer testing for cheap postcards. Most shops seemed to have them in the doorway as an incentive to enter the shop, payment being at the back of the shop. Assistants stand in

the doorway to guide you to the back, steering you towards other bargains and obviously also preventing theft. Incidentally, the cheapest we found was 15 for \$1!

We ended up buying bananas and caught the bus up to Van Ness Avenue. This is a busy road, running across the top of the city. We dropped into a bakery for cakes and water and then walked along to Hard Rock Café - more Anchor Beer, refillable coke (for Ruth - a nice idea), and rose wine (for Jen). The memorabilia on display was interesting and everything very pleasant. We probably could have stayed there longer but we were tired and I think we felt the need for an early night. Leaving the Hard Rock Café we had a brief encounter with an ex-Marshall in an outdoor shop (who told us a little of his background) and then started a long walk back along California Street until we hit Pine and the hotel. The memories of that walk were the amazing hills, cars having to park sideways, steps in the pavements, streets that "seemed to disappear over the edge", posh hotels and the restoration of cathedral stained glass, it must have been all of 50 years old!! A really pleasant experience and a nice end to a busy day.

Still time at the end of the day to catch a little television. This was really awful; it seemed adverts appeared every 10 mins with the news being headlines only - this was true of all the networks and something we experienced wherever we went. And so to bed.

A trip around San Francisco

After breakfast at Roxanne's, this time going for the healthy option, "seasonal fruit salad", we returned to the hotel to be picked up to go on a city tour which we'd booked through the hotel. It appears that this is the only guaranteed way to get on such city tours, and in addition is the best way of getting a trip to Alcatraz Island which we also planned to visit. The tour itself started in the Maritime Museum area and in order (roughly) took us to Chinatown, the Financial District and along the waterfront, through the Shopping Centre and then up to the Hotel area and across Van Ness to Western Addition.

This area was interesting for its different styles of housing, all explained by a knowledgeable and pleasant guide who somehow

combined this with his driving (no comment). The housing was generally quite expensive and abutted onto the Haight-Ashbury district (flower power was still mildly evident - but one felt mainly for tourist purposes) and then onto Twin Peaks (a stop for photos and illegal shopping from street traders).

The wonderful views across the city enabled us to finally get our bearings and see the awesome size of the "Bay Area" across to Oakland and beyond. From here the tour took us to the Golden Gate Park where we stopped long enough to have a brief walk through the Botanical Gardens (the alternative was the Japanese Tea Garden). Then on down to the sea at "the Dutch Windmill" and via Point Lobos through the Presidio (an abandoned US Navy base) to the Golden Gate Bridge.

The tour itself was really god value and gave us an insight to life in San Francisco and pointers to sites we might like to return to later on if we had the chance. The views from the Bridge, in perfect weather - itself quite unusual - were inspiring. The tour finished by returning to Fisherman's Wharf, passing the Exploratorium on the way as well as the Marina area (damaged in the '89 quake), all sites I'd seen on the webcams before we left Cardiff.

We didn't have much time to eat before we had to get on the boat for our visit to Alcatraz Island. The trip itself was quite short and we disembarked to listen to an introduction from a National Park Ranger and a short film of the island's history, before picking-up an excellent audio presentation to guide us round the cell blocks. Alcatraz is an unreal place; if it wasn't a prison it would be valuable real estate having such a prime location so close to the city. Undoubtedly the conditions would have been harsh and the punishment regime described on the tape, most unpleasant, but on a sunny day like today one was tempted to think that prisoners there might have had "good days" as well.

We returned to the wharf and caught the boat back to Fisherman's Wharf. I had the company of a fearless seagull (is this a characteristic of San Francisco) who seemed to refuse to move until I'd photographed it. Every time someone passed by it would hop along the railing, only to hop back again to stand right in front of my nose when the way was clear.



Arriving back at Fisherman's Wharf there was only thing that had to be done - a Ben & Jerry's ice cream. This was to give us the energy to start another walking session. We walked across to Lombard Street, the "crookediest street in the world", a completely artificial creation, we felt we'd seen steeper streets that needed to be "zig-zagged", and then we walked across to Union St to catch the 45 bus back to Union Square. We did Macy's again (late night shopping and

a look at the Floral Displays - a Provence theme I seem to remember), bought cosmetics, got a trial of suncream for me (free!) and then had dinner in Planet Hollywood (BBQ Cheeseburger, LA Lasanga, a Chicken thing and Cream Turkey soup). It was only a short walk to the hotel dropping into a drugstore on the way and looking at some of the fine financial district buildings at night.

I fell asleep easily and slept well until the throbbing head (caused by sun and wind) woke me up. The others slept through until 7.00am. We were becoming acclimatised.

Roaming around

The experienced travellers woke after a good nights sleep with very little idea of what they were going to do today. One idea was to go back and see some of the sights we had seen the day before and that is what turned out to be the plan. But a certain amount of indecision meant a later breakfast than previous days. We went to the Café de la Presse at the bottom of the road and had a light breakfast - cereals, scones and croissant with orange juice and coffee (of course) but also herbal tea (this having been discovered the previous day by mum). We sat at the counter and watched the waiters making the coffee etc. - what industry; also the cleaning of the cutlery - very impressive. After breakfast we walked along Stockton to have another look at the Chinese shops, amazing - live fish, toads (yes !!!) and weird vegetables and fruits. The way they shop is amazing too - smelling seaweed, touching everything; you can imagine what Jen was thinking and saying about food hygiene, etc. The smells that hit the senses too.

I was standing at a corner whilst Jen was buying the regulation bananas - well at 60¢ a lb. you have to, don't you, and I was thinking I could smell fish. The next thing I was aware of were the trays of wriggling live fish and men touching them, turning them over and pointing at the one they wanted. It was interesting to note that the women seemed to buy the fruit and veg. whilst the men bought the fish. Then there were the cooked food shops; all manner of golden brown "things" hanging up, except for some black things which Jen suspected were Chicken's Feet.

We left Stockton where it joined Columbus - narrowly missing being mowed down by a funeral cortege. The streets are so busy that they have funeral marshals who jump out at intersections and hold up little signs and stop the traffic. An outrider on a motorbike goes ahead and the whole procession moves at pace through the intersection in convoy. We started the long climb up to Telegraph Hill and the Coit Tower, stopping twice to ask the way. "You are embarrassing me", said someone, "it would be even more embarrassing to get lost", we said. Anyway it was nice to hear people speak. That's another thing I haven't mentioned. It's difficult to think about minorities or ethnicity in a place like San Francisco. There are Chinese (all speaking Chinese), French, Germans, Spaniards (and of course Mexicans), Indians and Pakistanis - all speaking their own languages. It's like the United Nations in session as you walk along the street - I'm not talking about tourists either, these were the residents.

Coit Tower was spectacular - the day was brilliant, the views were marvellous - we walked around for a good hour and Ruth and I went up the tower in an elevator and got wonderful views across the whole bay and city. Good photo opportunities but Ruth had decided photos were not for her at this moment having been advised that she HAD to spend some of her money and that this was the last film we were going to give her.

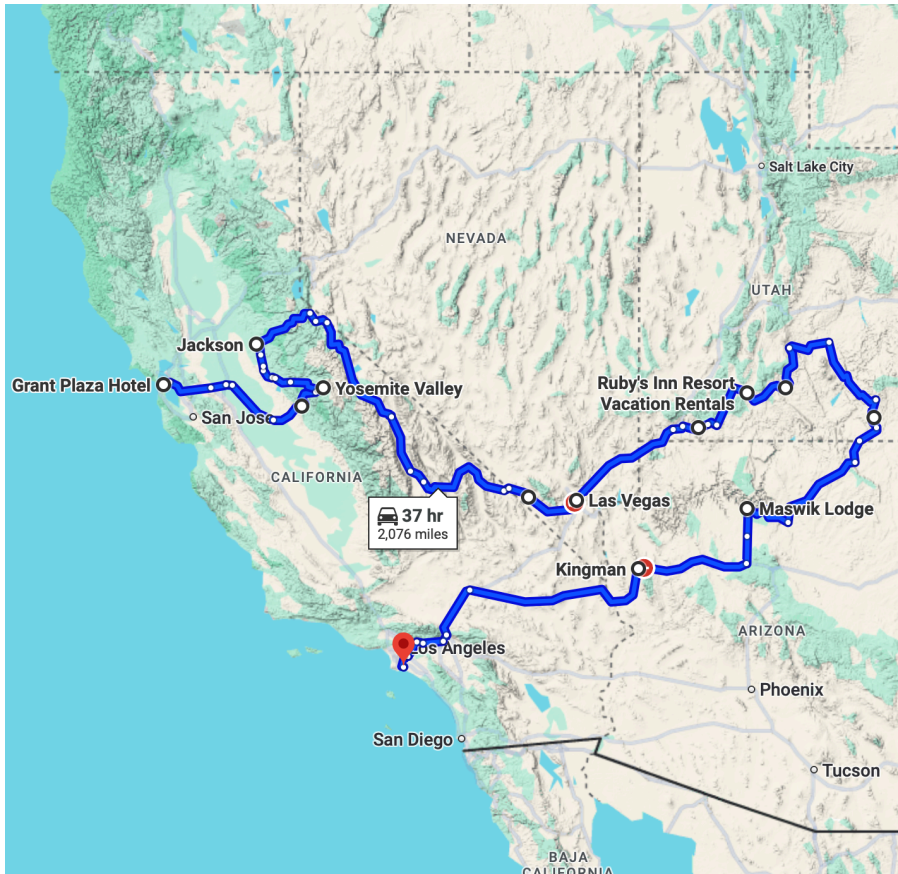
We had an ice cream and a banana. I had a panic about a film that jammed in the camera, but hopefully I cleared it with perhaps only one or two shots being lost. We walked down towards the Waterfront by way of a couple of small gardens and then back towards the Embarcadero wandering through a Farmer's Market on the way. We were heading for the Crocker Galleria - the last shops we "just had to see". Well they were deserted, obviously designed for the weekday shopper working in the Financial area. 1,000,000 people commute into SF every day. The population of SF is 730,000 and the cost of housing is such that people have to have more than one job to be able to afford within the city itself. So therefore they live out in the suburbs and face up to 6.5 hrs commuting everyday. With all the wealth the signs of poverty are obvious as well, with beggars everywhere. We had soup for lunch in the Galleria (mushroom, minestrone) and the shops were shops and not that impressive so we took a bus west to the Western Addition and Golden Gate park. The bus pass came into its own as we hopped off

to take photos and then back on. Interesting housing; Victorians they call them -some are Queen Anne's if they have rounded pillars in front of them. None of them are old of course, the city only dating really from the turn of the century after the earthquake and fire.

We walked through Golden Gate Park - the Aids Garden, the Japanese Tea Garden (very nice) and then by bus routes (44, and then 1) back to Chinatown and the hotel. I slipped out to take a few more photos and check the car-hire booking from the Alamo garage just round the corner. I also slipped a Guinness down in the Café de la Presse and chatted to a local about American Football and his possible English ancestry. Dinner was to be a bus ride away (it had got quite cold now) in the Italian quarter so we went looking for a reasonable and nice place to eat. We found neither; but did find somewhere to eat. Starters were OK - salmon (grilled) and risotto balls (cheese and peas), then lasagna, pork loin and fettuccine. I never want to see another mushroom again. It was just too much and I couldn't finish it. The wine (Californian Rose) was exorbitant, the whole meal poor value for money - a disappointment, I'm afraid. We caught a bus back along Stockton to Pine Street and thence back to the hotel and a little television before falling asleep.

The Grand Tour Begins

Well today was to be the day I tackled the American road system and the drivers on it. From the position of observer I had drawn the conclusion that there was little logical about either. No one could tell me what four flashing red lights indicated. Although you were "supposed" to be able to turn right when a red light was showing, that didn't seem to be happening in SF and to cap it all, the pedestrian seemed to be "king/queen" as long as they crossed in designated places and did so on a green light (parallel with the traffic crossing). No panda crossings or pedestrian controlled crossings BUT plenty of traffic lights almost on every junction. Add to this a curious junction at which everyone has to stop, yet they seem to know whose turn it was to move into the box and you can see that my first unaccompanied trip was going to be a mega-adventure. Oh! Have I mentioned kerbing - no I haven't. That's a local regulation that is enforced to stop cars running away. You need to point your tyres into towards the kerb when parked on a hill.



As with nearly everything in the US the number of regulations and statutory offences or fines seems huge. They do not seem to leave anything to common sense. Is this something to do with so many cultures in the city/state, or is it something to do with the perceived levels of intelligence of the inhabitants, by the authorities? Anyway this reinforces an observation that we made about the nature of the American psyche. It goes like this - they refuse to take responsibility for the way you feel about something, or the way that you (or they) do something - once they've explained what they are prepared to do. Thus they warn you about being late (they'll then leave without you); they tell you where you can get information about food (but don't print it on the labels); they spell out health dangers to pregnant women and children (but carefully

don't acknowledge any responsibility for the quality of the information). Curious.


Anyway, we got up early and packed the bags and went up to Roxanne's for breakfast for the last time to eat and watch the cable cars going up Powell. We were welcomed and sat at the same table for the third time. Today the place was packed by 9.00am (it being a Sunday morning), so to get "our table" was something even Tina (the owner/waitress) commented on as being unusual. Ruth had Chocolate Chip Pancakes, Jen - Cornbeef Hash Special, me - sausage, bacon and fried potato. Really tasty and good value, as usual. I then went on up the road about 50 yds to the Alamo base - all so convenient. I had to wait quite a longtime as they were really busy but then I was in the garage looking at the car and trying to figure out how it worked. All reasonably obvious except the lack of a handbrake- and lights that didn't seem to want to go out. A quick consultation with the staff alerted me to a footbrake (which acts as a handbrake) and the fact that the lights staying on was a safety feature - of course, I should have realised that.

Back to the hotel, cautiously negotiating the flashing red lights and finding a parking space by the hotel - quite an achievement. All part of the planning however, as a Sunday departure was supposed to provide me with reduced traffic to negotiate as I learnt the ways of the road "on the wrong side". The automatic was a godsend however as the hill starts would have been quite impossible without this assistance.

Anyway we packed up and set off without too many problems and even the entry to the freeway and the Bay Bridge was negotiated without difficulty. We drove through strange foothills of the coastal range with houses clinging to the hillsides overlooking the eight/ten lane highway. The road direction signs are on the same model as French ones (you need to know where you're going) but are even harder to follow - road numbers are not that important it seems. We got lost once, which meant that we had to retrace our steps through Pleasanton and Livermore (home of the National Physical Laboratory) and so saw "hometown America" for the first time - more of that later. We rejoined the freeway and drove on down to Modesto (the home of the Gallo vinery) where we decided a coffee break was necessary.

Ruth fancied a McDonald's so following our noses we found one on I and 4th Street - what an address. What followed next was an adventure in itself which no doubt Jen will retell in much detail. This must have rated as the worst McD in the world. We joined a queue of about 4/5 orders and waited 35 minutes before we were served. By the time we got to the front we had decided to make the order as simple as possible, so fries x 3, Sprite x 2 and a chocolate milkshake was what we asked for. The entertainment while we waited was interesting however. Remember this was Sunday lunchtime - Palm Sunday - and we had fervent bible discussions going on between youngsters who had obviously just come from church. They live and speak their faith and are not reserved about it at all.

The rest of the journey to Mariposa was pretty uneventful and we arrived at the Comfort Hotel (reserved by booking ahead from SF that morning) without any problems. The drive through the foothills of the Sierra was pleasant with the scenery changing around every corner of the road. Mariposa is small and was closed (was this just a Sunday occurrence?) but the room clean and comfortable. We decided to just eat simple (after our Italian experience the night before) so I was dispatched to the Happy Burger to get sandwiches, fries and coffee. We were unable to finish the food (there being so much of it) but it was adequate and cheap. Then off to sleep with thoughts of the day ahead; we needed to make an early start to get through the improvements to a landslip effected road.



California Highway Conditions

State Route 140

SR 140
[CENTRAL CALIFORNIA]
NO TRAFFIC RESTRICTIONS ARE REPORTED FOR THIS AREA.

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THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS PROVIDED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
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SR 140 WILL BE CLOSED AT THE YOSEMITE NAT'L PARK BDRY (MARIPOSA CO) FROM
0800 HRS TO 1630 HRS & FROM 2230 HRS TO 0630 HRS MONDAY THRU SUNDAY -
DUE TO CONSTRUCTION - MOTORISTS WILL BE ALLOWED ACCESS INTO THE PARK FROM
0630 HRS TO 0800 HRS & FROM 1630 HRS TO 2230 HRS MONDAY THRU SATURDAY &
FROM 0630 HRS SUNDAY TO 0800 HRS MONDAY

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The Yosemite Experience

We had a different challenge to meet today. The road from Mariposa to El Portal was closed every day at 8.00am to enable road construction to take place. We planned to leave at 7.00am but in the end didn't leave until 7.20am after a pleasant breakfast in the Comfort Motel. We thought this a very nice place and recommend it; we got a good rate as well, \$50 for room for the night.

Anyway the dash up the Merced Valley was accomplished with a minute to spare. I didn't see much of the scenery but I think it was pretty spectacular, a bit Scottish in a way with a tumbling river and towering valley sides. Once we got into the park we made for the Visitor Centre, bought our Golden Eagle pass to enable us to visit all the National Parks and watched an orientation film. We looked around the museum and took in a visit to a Native American village, and a demonstration of arrow making and Acorn Mush by Native Americans. Then, following the advice of a Ranger, we took a walk from the Centre to get good views of Yosemite Falls. This we did in a leisurely manner and with the sun shining brightly was a wonderful entrée to the Park. On our return we had a sandwich from the café (a weird choices of fillings) and listened to the horror stories about the bears coming down and stealing food. We then set off around the park by way of a guided trail book which Ruth read out for us - telling us where to stop and what to see - she did the job admirably giving the whole experience more value to us.

It's fair to say that we saw Yosemite in ideal conditions; the highlights (for me) being El Capitan, Tunnel View and the Yosemite Falls. We also saw a coyote who approached the parked cars, Jen thought it looked a bit sick - difficult to judge really since I don't know what one in the pink looks like - but our resident pessimist could be relied upon to caution us all not to go near it, even if we had planned to!

Hopefully the photos will tell the story of Yosemite accurately. I was left with the impression that everything else we were to see would have to be remarkable to improve upon Yosemite.

We had been a bit concerned about the news of a particularly nasty set of murders that had taken place in the area in the very recent past and so we left Yosemite with a sense that perhaps we

could now relax our guard a bit as well. The journey to Jackson was punctuated by strange Gold Rush towns - Sonora, Jamestown and Angels Camp (Frogtown) - which caused us to make-up strange stories about what the people in these places did, or even do now, and in particular where the Frog Jumping Stadium was actually located. (This is related to a Mark Twain story, there being much in this area which has a Mark Twain connection.) The descent to Moccasin Point was down the bendiest road I've ever driven on - an amazing incline that went on for at least 5 miles. Poor Jen was feeling quite sick by the time we reached the bottom; Ruth, being in the front, continued her duties as navigator and narrator from the prepared notes I'd collected for the journey, and fortunately suffered less.

We got to Jackson about 6.00pm and checked-in to a very nice room on the first floor of the BestWestern Amador motel. This was to be a bit more expensive than the previous night but was just as comfortable and had the benefit of a bathtub as well which was a relief to my tired limbs. I went out for a brief walk around the town and to get money from the ATM. Really interesting little place which had been a Gold Rush town and is now, judging from the nature of the shops, a town that relies on passing tourist trade. We "dined" at Denny's where I had a steak which was adequate; Ruth had very little and Jen something else. We went to bed reasonably early as we planned an early start the next day. The thoughts of the local murder however returned in the evening whilst watching television when we realised that we had seen a memorial service at Moccasin Point to the two girls and the mother of one of them, who had been killed.

Into the Hills

Oh! It was hard to get up this morning. We were showing signs of tiredness and so our departure from the BestWestern Amador at Jackson was somewhat later than intended. We had breakfast in Denny's, light for once, bacon/sausage/pancakes for me. Jen and Ruth went off to the town to have a look around whilst I went to get gas and to settle up. I also went up to the Shopping Mall which was opposite the hotel; the only way you could get to it across the road was by car there being no pavements or crossings.

Did I say that I'd finally sorted out how the traffic lights work - on a courtesy system - a bit like a barbers shop. You pull to a stop, give way to pedestrians - always; then note if anyone had arrived before you and let them go first. Interesting!

Jen also met a lady from Cardiff in one of the shops in Jackson, and spent some time describing the changes to Llanishen where she'd been brought up, and finding out what she missed most since her emigration to the States.

We stopped after a few miles to get some provisions for the day, plus some "Twinkies" which Jen had promised to get for Jan Lalande. They only lasted about 10 miles! The journey across the Sierra was very easy; we encountered snow after a little while and it was piled up high in drifts and snowbanks in exposed places. From the west the mountains were not that impressive - not Alpine-like at all (this was Route 88 by the way) and the countryside was dominated by coniferous natural forest. A few stops for photo-opportunities, a few nervous creeps past "avalanche areas - do not stop" and we were on the other side.

Here the mountains were much more "frost damaged" but the trees had vanished. The vegetation was now scrub - something like sage bush. No grass anywhere. This was obviously a very dry area in the lee of the mountains. I knew about rain shadows from my geographic past but it was weird to see snow on the mountain tops, yet desert scrub on the low hills and plains. Rather like seeing the pingos from the air as we crossed over Canada, you know these things exist, but don't know quite what they will look like, or the scale of them, until you've experienced them yourself.

The rest of the drive today was relatively uneventful apart from stops at Bodie and Mono Lake. Bodie is a ghost-town way up in the hills, preserved now in the condition it was when deserted finally in the 1920's. We walked around the houses and stores feeling bitterly cold in the biting wind, looking up at weird mushroom, or flying saucer shaped clouds. It was so cold that my camera froze - it doesn't seem to have been the same since. I think the temperature was about 18F, so a few degrees of frost, even in mid-afternoon!

Mono Lake was a phenomenon I had wanted to see; it's a chemical lake that had tufas, exposed by the drop in water-level caused by the export of water by aqueduct to Los Angeles. Originally I'd hoped to have been able to drive straight across the Sierra Nevada from Yosemite to Mono Lake, but then I realised that the road was closed by snow for up to nine months of the year! Stopping by a closed Visitor Centre, there was just time for me to run down to the water's edge, take a few photos and then run back. Interesting formations though.

Back in the car the rest of the drive that day was uneventful. The roads were wonderful - open panoramic views, relatively free from traffic and distant views of the Sierra Nevada, or mountain rivers, to keep ones interest. We stayed the night at Bishop, in a Vagabond Inn, and found to our dismay that a stop in Death Valley was not going to be possible - all booked up, so tomorrow we need to set off early and drive straight through to Las Vegas. I had to re-jig my plans a bit to accommodate the change, the computer and the spreadsheets of the journey I had prepared coming in useful. We went out for a meal in the Whiskey Grill where I had a **VERY** rare steak, Jen salmon, and Ruth "something" with fries. Back to the motel for a reasonably early night and a very good night's sleep as we had the early start to make.

Snow and Sand

The early start didn't work out completely as planned but we did manage to get away by about 8.30. The Vagabond provides a complimentary continental breakfast - we were to find this varies in it's interpretation. Here we were provided with fruit and a pastry - these were very nice. On top of that there was coffee and popcorn available all the time.

I went across the road to the BestWestern to get a directory and book ahead for the next few days in Utah - being slightly concerned at our lack of success in booking into anywhere in Death Valley. This took about 30mins as their computer (or the operator) was having problems. Whilst there, some Forestry Workers came in and re-told their experiences of putting out a forest blaze the previous day - this seemed amazing given the weather, but they said that most of the fires they were called to were started deliberately for one reason or another. Anyway, we eventually got away and

made for Big Pine, Lone Pine and Independence. At the second of these Jen and Ruth did some supermarket shopping and I retreated to a café for a coffee and muffin **AND** the restroom. Off we went again, remembering what we had heard as we left about Bishop about snow closing the roads north - we had escaped all this by a matter of hours the previous day!! It was bitterly cold however and the top of the Sierras were hidden from view by cloud.

Eventually we left Hwy 395 and headed east towards Death Valley. The landscape became more surreal as we passed on. This was matched by my intestinal discomfort and I was shortly to experience the famous “**downbringings**” episode. The rare steak took it’s revenge!! We stopped at Crawley Point and crawled down the steep grades into the valleys. As we approached Stovepipe Wells it seemed we were going to find the Valley in mist/cloud - but it was a sandstorm. We went into the shop and I retreated again to the restroom a couple of times. Anyway, not the most hospitable place on earth to have “problems”. My companions seemed to have enjoyed my discomfort a little, I’m afraid to say and the steak was given the blame!

Anyway, after a while the wind dropped and so did the sand, and we were able to walk out onto the dunes near Stovepipe Wells. We then drove along to the Visitor Centre and visited the museum and watched a film and then out again to drive the rest of the Valley, the weather having brightened up considerably.

The light at this time of day was not the best for photographing Zabriskie Point - a shame - so we drove down the length of the Valley past Badwater (lowest point in the Western hemisphere at -282ft) and stopping for a walk up Golden Canyon - wonderful folded and tilted rocks. As a retired geographer I was in my element - the rocks and the features were breathtaking - arroyos, alluvial fans, playas, and more. The vegetation here was greener than we had seen earlier the day before - obviously because we were going south and it was not summer in the Valley yet. On the other hand we were just a little too early for the flowers, which was unfortunate.

The drive to Las Vegas was largely uneventful. Jen had her second go at driving and we stopped for gas in Parrump which ought to win the competition for the oddest town ever. Spread out

over miles and miles of scrubland - billed as the New Old West, perhaps you can understand why. Trailers and pre-fab homes were everywhere, but all widely spaced out. I can only imagine that the reason for living here was cost. But it was still 61 miles from Vegas so about 2hrs per day of commuting would have been necessary. Weird. The road descended down into Vegas which we saw from about 25 miles out - a blaze of light in the middle of nowhere. We found the motel easily (but not before doubts were expressed repeatedly, by the deputy navigator, that we must be on the wrong road) and checked in. This Vagabond gets bottom marks for accommodation so far. This was not helped by a rather noisy and youthful clientele. That didn't worry me however as I fell asleep almost immediately and slept right though. The extensive driving over the past four days had eventually taken their toll (plus the unmentionables, of course).

Vegas for a day

Jen didn't like the Vagabond Inn at Las Vegas. True it was a little more "well used" than others we had stayed in so far, but then again that's not surprising given the 30 million visitors the city sees every year. The growth of the city is phenomenal (if you want statistics refer to the Rough Guide to California). The main problem was that it was noisy when we arrived. I think in truth it was people getting ready to go out and enjoy themselves, but our problem was that we were shattered and I fell asleep immediately. Jen decided to keep guard, she didn't get undressed and slept in Ruth's bed with the lights on! I slept well and woke up reasonably refreshed but, as was to transpire for the first part of the day, much weakened and lacking in energy.

The plan was to do our "outlet shopping" during the day and then "walk the strip" in the evening. We drove out to the Berlz Outlet World just south of Las Vegas and started the first session. I'm not going to dwell on this torture. What I will report is that I rapidly got very tired and it was not until after I'd had something to eat - pizza, that I began to feel better. We watched an unfortunately very obese couple tackle their food next to us. The "downbringings" had taken their toll of me.

However all was not entirely grim, I did manage to buy myself some CK Jeans, Timberland trainers and Rockport shoes. It'll

give Peter & David something to think about and probably put them off designer clothes for life. If it does, then it will at least save them money in the long run. Ruth got trainers and shoes; Jen trainers and in so doing we got quite a bit more off the "shopping list" that we'd been given before leaving Cardiff. The next stop was the "Fashion Outlet at Las Vegas" which turned out to be 41 miles south of Las Vegas at Primm! Another resort town complete with hotel, casino, theme park and shopping mall. A couple of hours walking around and shopping plus our first pretzel saw that one off and we turned for home.

I had begun to feel better by now, was it the food, was it the fact that shopping was over for the day. We'll never know, and I'm not going to admit to the latter!.

A quick rest in the room, and then a good view of the Treasure Island show from the hotel and then we were off north to Circus Circus. A really good free show of jugglers and acrobats. Ruth had fun on the arcade games that she was allowed to play. We had earlier been advised to leave one casino when Jen had sat down at a slot machine because Ruth was underage. She'd just won \$5, so we'd worked out that she was not going to be able to break the bank at Las Vegas that night - at least with Ruth in company. After that we walked south past Treasure Island again - this time we saw the show in the dark, and on past Mirage and Frontier to Caesar's Palace. This was as far as we made it. We'd not eaten properly all day and it was now just short of 11.00pm. We decided to go into the Caesar's Palace Emporium to see if we could find something to eat there. Unfortunately we were just a little too late, but we did see the most amazing shopping experience - there's no better word to describe it.

We'd noticed a Denny's earlier and decided at 11.30pm that was where we'd have dinner. Usual fare - cheap and cheerful and an interesting chat with other diners on "how normal" Las Vegas really is. And so to bed. Jen this time trusted herself to get undressed, but I woke the next morning to find a chair against the double locked door, and again the light was left on.

Into Mormon Country

If it's Good Friday it must be Las Vegas! What a contrast of sensations! To be in Las Vegas on this day was strange to say the least, but that's the way the itinerary had taken us. We got up reasonably early and packed and had our "continental breakfast" of doughnuts and coffee that the Vagabond provided and drove the car up to New York New York. The plan being to do a little more sight-seeing first before we drove the short distance to St George and Springlands where our next stop was to be.

We crossed the road into MGM (the largest hotel in the world with 5005 rooms) and strolled through the casino; this was 10.00am mind you. There was a reasonable amount of "business" going on, men playing vingt-et-un, poker and roulette; women mainly on the machines - sometimes operating more than one at a time! We were heading for the pool and the theme park. We saw the former and gave the latter a miss, as we were not going to have the time to make the 10\$ entrance fee worthwhile. This place really needs a week to get used to it, but at least we know now how it works - it really needs a pre-visit to prepare you for it's upfrontness and garishness, but it's not to be missed and we didn't really even touch the surface.

We made a visit to the Ethel M chocolate shop and M&M World, and watched people climbing on the Gamesworks climbing wall - then the tallest indoor wall in the world (of course). Quite an experience to see them climbing (top roped) and then abseiling down. Ruth enjoyed the visit to M&M and came away with a few trophies!

Back across the road to NYNY, where a huge roller coaster goes all around the hotel, and into a mock re-creation of Greenwich Village / Central Park / Broadway - little shops and cafes with slot machines intermingled. We had lunch here in the "Americas" restaurant. Me, a Club s/w (turkey, bacon, lettuce, and tomato with fries), Ruth a macaroni and cheese and Jen another s/w of some description. We made our way back through an arcade area to the car park - where we had earlier rather warily parked, in the hotel. Actually you're expected to park there - it's just not promoted or advertised. The Americans expect people to be far more

demanding, therefore they provide more and thus things are taken for granted.

We then did our version of "Leaving Las Vegas". I must say that although the roads are very busy the standard of driving and courtesy was very high. Whether that's because there are so many out-of-towners, or whether the system ensures this, I don't know but I came away from the city less stressed than I at first imagined I would have done when I began my first entry, two days previously.

The drive to St George passed without incident. We watched a storm brewing up over the hills ahead of us. Quite a vista as the valley was so wide - indescribably wide - so that you could see the whole thing developing in front of you. The rain didn't touch us till after we stopped at St George and this we reached by way of an interesting descent through the valley of the Virgin River. A brief stop for gas (\$1.29 per gallon of which 42¢ was tax) and then a stop in St George briefly for a look around and a Post Office call. A street fair was going on, but by now it had begun to get quite cold and the rain was beginning to fall. So no time to stop and listen to a group singing Louie, Louie -> Gloria (vaguely reminiscent), and regrettably no time to stop and listen to the choir in the adjacent Mormon church singing either. They had a concert that night and we could see them arriving in their tuxes and long crimson gowns.

The rest of the drive was marred by the descending clouds and the threatening skies from which the rain kept off long enough to enable us to reach Springdale without having to worry about getting wet. This part of the journey revealed different scenery - grass for a start, cattle on the hills and a river in a recognisable valley to follow. Through the settlements of Virgin and Rockville and then into Springdale.

We missed the motel the first time through (ooh that's a nice one on the right!) and then Ruth's joy and surprise to find that this was the one we were stopping in. The views from the verandahs of the wooden building were stupendous and the luxurious appointments of the room were lovely.

We decided on a quiet night in because Ruth's tummy was still not right and so I went out to get a pizza and we had a TV night watching first "Grease" and then "Excess Baggage" on a channel

called HBO (Home Box Office, I think). The clocks have advanced an hour (we've lost an hour due to the fact we're now on Mountain Time and we lose another hour tomorrow as it goes on to Daylight Saving Time). We then eventually gain an hour back when we return to Los Angeles. Luckily Jen has not noticed these changes bearing in mind the annual saga of "what time is it really" or "I think I'll take 30mins today and 30mins tomorrow". Here it would have blown her mind to have had two clock changes in just over 24 hours.

A frosty morning in Zion Canyon

We awoke to a sparkling day - the sun was shining bright but it was bitter out, and there was a frost on the car. Jen and I went for a walk around the motel grounds and left Ruth to get up gradually and perhaps make her own way down to make herself a cup of tea from the lobby area. We admired the motel from the outside, marvelled at its setting and walked down to the river past a pond before returning to the Switchback Restaurant and Store. I left Jen in the shop and went to find Ruth. I found her sitting in a rocking-chair reading a book on the outside verandah. The two of us packed up the car and settled the bill and made for the Switchback to have breakfast.

I had a continental breakfast - orange juice, muffin (carrot-cake), fruit and coffee; Ruth had an omelet and Jen had the same with sausages. Jen commented on the greasiness of her breakfast and gave it a low mark on our "breakfast rating scale". In the shop I bought a few stones for the proto cactus garden I intended to build and Ruth managed to get a lovely "angel cat" photo-frame. We then set out for the Zion National Park. Unfortunately by now the sun had begun to disappear behind the clouds and by the time we emerged from the Visitor Centre it was obvious that we had missed the best of the day. We drove up to the head of the canyon and walked up the Riverside Walk. Walking beneath crags over 1000ft high in places, with frequent warnings about the possibility of rockfalls. I have already mentioned how the Americans seem to place all responsibility upon the consumer - well this seemed extreme and one wondered if they would ever close a path, or even the Park, or whether it is more important in their psyche to enable access.

In any case we got to the top of the walk without incident apart from the occasional squirrel and flower in bloom. The views were amazing however and to see a river at the bottom of the canyon (where previous canyons seemed to be dry) was a pleasure, as was the sight of trees coming into leaf and grass (yes, grass) covering patches of ground. At the head of the walk we came to The Narrows. This is where the river fills the valley floor completely for a distance of 15 miles and for this reason, and because of the risk of flash floods, walking up the canyon is forbidden without permit. Just 80 permits per day are allocated to walk down the riverbed. Two people had died last year in this area (in July) and it was easy to see how this could have happened given that the river in flood can carry the equivalent of 75,000 truckloads of stone per day - the normal flow yielding just 30 trucks.

As we walked back to the car a few snowflakes fell and photo opportunities decreased as the clouds began to descend. Back to the Visitor Centre to see the "Orientation Video" which we had missed on the way-in because we wanted to get a parking place to do the walk. The film was informative but a little dated. Not as notably as the Yosemite one (1962), but definitely in need of an update. We then left for the drive to Bryce Canyon and Ruby's Inn where we were to stop the night. The first part of the drive was interesting going up the Switchback and through the tunnel with its windows which you can look out of to see the valley beneath you as you climb up and out of it. We were the baton carrier (the last in a convoy) and so we speculated on what they would do if we decided to stop in the tunnel - perhaps to have a picnic - and gaze out of the tunnel windows.

After this the weather really closed in, so there's not much else to report on the journey as we couldn't see much apart from Red Rock Canyon which was to be a foretaste of what we were to see at Bryce the following day. Ruby's Inn was a huge leisure complex and quite busy. After checking-in we did a fair bit of sorting out, moving warm clothes back into our travel case - I had previously said (in Bishop) that we could put them away now. By now the snow was falling quite heavily and the first questioning of our plans for the next day began to occur. We had a good mootch around the large store and then had dinner (a buffet) from the Cowboy's Buffet and Steakroom. We all had the buffet - a mixture of about 8 meat dishes was possible, I had sweet and sour pork, barbecue beef and

spare rib with potato and carrot, followed by an ice cream. We all went back to re-fill our plates and this made it excellent value at \$13.50 each. Back to our room for a television check on the weather and an update on the "Strike on Yugoslavia" as CNN billed their presentation.

I must comment on the trivial nature of nearly all American TV. Very little depth to it and even in "Larry King Live" it was obvious that the production / scripting (auto queue) was not working properly. We watched wild life and nature programmes on the Discovery Channel. At least (although not very detailed) it was reasonably intelligent and interesting. And so to sleep and worries about the weather prospects for the next day.

A snowy day at Bryce Canyon

I didn't sleep well and had trouble with my breathing, could this be anything to do with being above 7,000 ft or was it as Jen had suggested the day before, related to pollen. Anyway the alarm was set for 7.30am Mountain Daylight Saving Time and it took me about 5 seconds after looking out of the window to decide that we would not be going far today. It being Easter Sunday, we rang New Milton shortly after 8.00am and then went back to the shop to buy boots (for Ruth), hats for us all and gloves for Jen and Ruth. This accomplished we returned to the room to make the repeat call to New Milton to speak to Gail, Peter, David and Granny. Our news delivered, we had a brief walk around Ruby's Inn in the snow. Ruth having a wonderful time in the snow and getting quite wet in the process. Across the road was a mock Wild West street which we visited, breaking the virgin snow around it and then back to the café for a coffee and hot chocolate followed by some postcard writing.

After a picnic lunch (the product of the shopping trip) the weather had improved sufficiently to consider going out to see Bryce Canyon. We were very impressed by the efforts taken to clear the roads and paths around the motel, but even more impressed to see the efforts to clear the roads into the N.P. on a holiday. The regulation stop at the Visitor Centre to pick up maps and get an idea of what we could expect to see, and then we were off to the end of the road to work our way back.

The first two stops Paria View (8175ft) and Bryce Point (8300ft) we saw in the sunshine. Subsequent stops at Inspiration Point, Sunset Point and Sunrise Point were marred by the skies covering over again and the return of flurries of snow. Still the views were amazing and I took a lot of pictures. A quick return to the Visitor Centre to check on some animal trails we had seen - probably a long-tailed weasel and then back to the motel.

I'd left open the possibility of going back to the canyon for sunset - if the weather seemed right - but it began to close in and the weather over the rim did not improve. Therefore we had an early dinner - we all had the buffet again - which was not so good the second time because the choice was less, perhaps because it was a Sunday, and then an early retreat to the room to watch a little TV. We eventually settled on watching "Back to the Future" and became intensely annoyed by the breaks every 11 minutes for commercials which themselves lasted at least 4 minutes.

The Second Longest Day

Having "lost" a day as a consequence of our second night at Bryce, we had a long drive ahead of us today. Essentially the plan was to catch ourselves up by missing out the overnight stay at Torrey, and instead do the whole round trip to Mexican Hat in one day. On the map this looked perfectly feasible - 274 miles looked possible and with an early start could be accomplished with couple of stops. It didn't quite turn out that way and in the end we arrived weary and very tired at our destination.

We hadn't gone far before we took a diversion to Kodachrome Basin. Well the name seemed compelling and it was only a short way off the road. In the end, because the weather was still rather overcast, the former name of Thorny Meadows seemed more apt. The "unique" geyser pipes didn't seem that dramatic and the colours didn't quite seem the same without the sun. What was interesting was the "trust" system that these State Parks use for getting payment for entry. You fill-in a form and put your fee in an envelope; if you fail to purchase a ticket and display it, you can be "cited". The same had been true at Bodie. The moral of the story is that you need to carry a pen around with you when you go to pay your fees because you have to supply so much information about

yourself and/or your car. So Kodachrome Basin was not a success and that had put us a further 45 minutes away from Mexican Hat.

Scenic Byway 12 is a lovely road and Jen took over much of the driving today as we skirted the Dixie National Forest and descended into Capitol Reef National Park. This was an unexpected pleasure. The scenery was on an altogether more manageable scale and we stopped at Chimney Rocks for a short hike up to a viewpoint. We saw large paw prints on the trail and I suggested they might be those of a mountain lion (well they might have been); but a large dog was probably more likely. Then after taking the regulation photos, we made use of the "hole in the ground" which provided the plumbing for the restrooms here, and proceeded towards Hanksville.

Now it is rather difficult to explain why Hanksville actually exists (like a lot of the places we had seen) - the descriptions in the Rough Guide of such places are usually very appropriate. For us the only purpose of this settlement was to pinpoint where the junction to Highway 95 started. This road was a mixture of long unchanging roads and vast scenery mixed with sudden surprising and quite exhilarating vistas, such as the one which opened up when we saw the top of Lake Powell at Hite for the first time.

Time unfortunately did not permit a diversion into the Natural Bridges National Monument as we had to press on to reach Mexican Hat. The road gradually became unchanging (even rather boring) and then a bit of a shock - a notice informing us that the metalled surface was to end shortly and we were going to have to go over a rough road - what was ahead of us? The truth was a sheer cliff that we had to descend by way of what the Americans call a "switchback". This perilous descent had Jen almost screaming at me to brake as we wound our way down the Moqui Dugway to its base. I think we were all so relieved to have survived a journey as near to a theme park ride as you can get, that we missed the turning to Goosenecks (more of which later), and with the calls of nature becoming ever more pressing, went straight past the Mexican Hat rock formation that gave the town its name and on to the San Juan Inn and Trading Post where we were to spend the night.

Having dropped off Jen and Ruth, I went back to the Hat and took a few photos of it and the Navajo Sandstone formations behind

it. By the time I returned Jen was in the shop and been told about the Goosenecks and bought a postcard of them - the best examples of entrenched meanders in the world. Our supper followed, steak for me and chilli for Jen and then straight to bed to watch "Ally McBeal", to Ruth's delight.

Goosenecks, Buttes and Canyons

This day was to turn out to be one of the best days of the holiday for spectacular scenery, photos and "trading" experiences. We started reasonably early after a light breakfast served, as the night before, by the Navajo Indians who ran the San Juan Inn & Trading Post. They have lovely smiles and are very patient and attentive when you talk to them. They also walk in a leaning forward manner, why I'm not sure but this causes them to look as if they are just about to break into a run. Anyway it was nice to have had some contact with Native Americans.

On advice gleaned the previous night, we decided to retrace our steps to see the Goosenecks - they were an eye-opener; the photos hopefully will speak volumes but suffice to say I'm glad we made the detour and I know Jen was equally impressed. We also stopped under the Hat to take photos and at the bridge over the San Juan River for Jen to take a photo of the motel, one of the nicest we had stayed in, with very good value food as well. The motel, I forgot to say, was also the site of a hydrological and sediment measuring station. This caused me to ponder upon how hard we have tried to apply theories developed in the States to interpretation of fluvial geomorphologies elsewhere. Everything is on a different scale - for instance the rivers seem to be always carrying silt in suspension, and where such extremes of climate are being experienced it doesn't seem realistic to suppose the same processes are at work in temperate climates, as they are in this classic Leopold, Wolman and Miller country.

The short drive to Monument Valley and our second encounter with Indians followed. When President Andrew Johnson "gave" the Navajo Nation a Reservation which included all of Monument Valley and the approaches to the Grand Canyon, he must have thought - "well that's a good deal - what worthless land"; the Navajo have however turned the scenery to their advantage and at almost every pullout there is a jewellery, blanket or pottery stall. In

addition you are canvassed to take a tour as you park by their visitor centre. This is rather "primitive" but very informative and tells you the history of the people and their reservation. Everything is marked up however in the shop - they don't miss a trick! The Valley was stupendous - really wonderful and we just drove around slowly taking it all in. Jen and Ruth bought some jewellery at one point from an Indian lady in the middle of nowhere.

The rest of the day (from about 2.00pm) was spent in getting to Grand Canyon Village. The road took us through first Kayenta and then towards Tuba City past the Black Mesa where coal is mined and taken to Page to fuel the massive power station that processes the uranium that is also mined in the area - thankfully not in view of the road. As we drove we saw men "working on the railroad". It seemed that the work went on for miles and miles - when they do repair work they deal with it as a big project, not in small bite-size chunks. Further on we saw trains. These four-engine-powered affairs pulling upwards of 70 wagons - many of them double-decked - were amazing to behold. Where were they going, what were they carrying? There was plenty of road freight as well, so what is the policy for transport by rail?

Anyway, we approached the Grand Canyon by way of Desert View and more Indian "trading posts". We stopped briefly at the Little Colorado River Canyon viewpoint to find the prices were cheaper than Monument Valley; Jen however was happy to feel she'd helped in a "Big Issue" sort of way, the lady she'd bought from in the Valley. This then raises the question - how do they get their trading point in the Valley, or elsewhere - do they have franchises? Do they circulate around on a rota? Do they pool all income and share it out equally? They certainly know how to make money from tourists.

At Desert View we had our first sight of the Grand Canyon. Jen and Ruth climbed a tower and reported back that the views from the top were superb. I was upset to see that we had arrived at this end of the Canyon and were looking towards the sun - thus spoiling photos; this plus the haze (possible smog from the power stations which afflicts the Canyon) spoils the first view for me. Still a few photos were taken but it was impossible to illustrate the depth of the canyon even at it's top end!

It then seemed sensible to drive west as fast as we could, drop the car at the motel and then go to a viewpoint to get the sunset. This we did, dropping our bags in the Maswik Lodge and making for Hopi Point as quickly as possible by way of a shuttle bus that runs frequently over roads that cars are prohibited to travel on.

We got there just in time, a couple of shots looking east and then disaster. Brrrr went the camera - end of film. "You have got another film, haven't you" from Jen; "Of course"; "Oh no! It's a 'used' one." They didn't believe me, but it was true, my system of taking spent films out of the camera case, had broken down. I was left to watch the sunset without the need to "worry" about taking photographs, a spectacular sight.

Jen hadn't enjoyed the bus trip up and had suggested walking back (at least 3 miles) because the road in a couple of places had gone quite close to the "edge" and the bus had seemed to be labouring a little as it towed a second trailer compartment behind it. This time the bus seemed really overfilled and we all looked round anxiously for the limits for carrying passengers - there weren't any! Dinner was cafeteria style - soup and a burger type thing and then, following a brief shop-stop, straight back to our room. For me, straight to sleep as I intended to get up early the next morning, complete with replenished film stocks, to see sunrise over the Grand Canyon.

Sunrise and Snow showers

Although I'd set the alarm to what I thought was the correct time, I was glad to have woken earlier finding it lighter outside than I thought it ought to be. Hurriedly getting dressed, I jumped in the car and set off for Mather Point, already identified from my research, as being the prime spot for sunrises. The frost was thick on the windscreen and I was glad to have the woollen hat bought at Ruby's Inn to wear. Not sure of how to get where I needed to be, I was glad to find that it was not far, and that there were parking spaces. Needless to say, I was not alone and there were a whole crowd of folk - most with cameras (and tripods) all to see the sun rise over the Grand Canyon. The event was memorable - I hope my photos go some way to doing the view justice. I had been using filters quite a bit for the past couple of days to get accentuation of colours, but

for this morning I tried a number of plain and filter shots. We'll just have to see how they turn out.

I got a chance to speak to an American couple and a couple from Nottingham whilst waiting for the colours to change, I also walked round to another vantage point at Yavapai Point. The couple from Nottingham were only over for a week, they were ice hockey nuts and enjoyed telling me that the Panthers had beaten the Devils this year. They were intending to drive to Zion that day (via Page) before returning to Las Vegas which they had flown into before flying to San Francisco for a day before their flight home! I suggested they did the bus tour, but as events were to turn out later today, I wonder whether they even made Zion!

The weather forecast the previous night had mentioned snow, and although the sky didn't look menacing that morning our experience had shown that weather changes quite rapidly in the high desert area. Still, we had a reasonably leisurely breakfast in the cafeteria (after ringing home) and then made our way back to the place I'd been that morning - impossible to find a parking place; back to the visitor centre - same story, but we were able to park across the road and walk in (which surprisingly few others were attempting to do. A quick look round and then another attempt to get a view - this time successful - so Jen and Ruth were able to see the Grand Canyon in daylight, just!

We also chatted with an American couple who, when we said how amazing this all was, expressed themselves committed anglophiles and said "God made this, you made Britain", which was an interesting observation. As we looked over from the Observatory at Yavapai Point it became obvious that the weather was changing dramatically. First it began to rain and then after we'd retreated to a supermarket car park (JC Penny's, I think), it began to snow. It looked for a while as if our Bryce Canyon experience might repeat itself as we drove south towards Williams, but thankfully we seemed to manage to keep ahead of the worst of the snow, despite seeing snow ploughs making in the opposite direction.

From Williams we made for Kingman on I-40 (the replacement for Route 66). Our destination was to be "A Wayfairer's Inn", another BestWestern motel. Before we got there however we embarked upon a game of giving names to the different trucks that

we saw. This was based upon the very threatening nature of their size and speed - in Arizona they can go full speed (75mph) on the Interstate Highway. Thus depending upon it's colour we had Blue Meanie (obviously), Purple Peril, Red Devil, etc. By the time we got to Kingman the weather had improved and although cold there was little sign of snow. The same could not be said of the rest of northern Arizona / southern Utah which did seem to have been hit quite severely by the storm!

The motel at Kingman was really very pleasant and we accepted the advice of the receptionist and headed for an Italian restaurant - the PortoFino - for our evening meal. I think we can only describe it as an unrepeatabe experience. The menu was interesting and it was easy to make a choice. We both chose minestrone which arrived with huge pieces of vegetable floating in a greasy chicken-based liquid. Ruth had chosen Fettucine a la cotta which arrived before we finished our soup. Then to our surprise our main courses arrived **before** we had finished our soup. This was literally whipped away from under our noses because the replacement plates were being delivered to the table before the soup plates were empty - you felt duty bound to take the next course! I had chosen chicken in a lemon and capers sauce whilst Jen had chosen a salmon dish. She was not at all impressed by her meal, whilst mine was just a little too tart for me. It was not cheap either! The dilemma then was whether to apply the standard 15% rule - cowards that we are, I did!! The practice of tipping on the pre-tax value of the order, not on the quality of the service is a strange one. You can get excellent service on a small value order and bad service on a high-value order and yet the tip is EXPECTED and is related to value, not service!

Not much else happened that night after the drive back to the motel along "Historic Route 66". Route 66 towns are making something of their legacy (however young it is) and preservation of old 50's coffee shops and ice cream parlours is to be found in several places. Strange really isn't it, they're actually trying to create a history for themselves!

The Home Run to LA

Breakfast at Kingman was one of the best we had - the quality, and value at this BestWestern had encouraged us to try and arrange accommodation with them in Los Angeles also. The manager was very obliging and arranged a place for us and printed off a confirmation note saying laughingly "you can wave this under their nose if you need to". Before we left, Ruth was insistent that we had the brake light replaced which we had been alerted to a few days earlier. I think she was a bit frightened of being stopped and it made good sense given that we were heading for LA, the Freeways and the land of aggressive driving. A very helpful and friendly garage fixed me up for about \$14 and whilst this was being done, Jen checked prices of used cars - dramatically cheaper than Britain. We also found that the price of petrol which we thought was already ridiculously cheap had just gone up from about 99¢ per gallon - amazing!

The journey to LA was largely uneventful - more large trucks, a lot of massive trains and a McDonald's stop being the only diversions. Into LA and the motel was found without many problems. Then disaster struck - they denied having a reservation for us. What followed was a period of annoyance and disappointment as the front-desk receptionist refused to take any responsibility for what was happening and furthermore was extremely unhelpful in finding us any alternative. Luckily the Vagabond at Costa Mesa had vacancies and we headed for it.

In the end, the location of this motel was an improvement on the one we had originally intended to stay at, being further away from Disneyland and more central for other trips we did. The room was pleasant, back to Bishop standards (rather than Vegas) and with a heated swimming pool which Ruth used, and a very nice deli next door. We were not sad to have missed out on the BestWestern, but still very angry at the way we had been treated. Jen was soon on the phone to express our displeasure.

Freeways and Fun

What were we to do in Los Angeles? I had already experienced Freeway driving the previous day and found it mildly unsettling but there was no choice but to use them given the vast

distances between places that we wanted to visit. Therefore we had little choice but to get on the Freeway (which I had great difficulty in doing for several mornings - missing the turning immediately outside the deli) and drive.

Ruth was orchestrating this part of the adventure. Having “suffered” rocks for so many days, she was now going to see “real-life things”. First up was to be Universal Studios. One hour later we were looking for the exit from the Freeway, in that time we had seen people drinking coffee in their cars, reading, eccentric lane changing and many examples of flagrant non-adherence to speed limits. In that one hour I had worked out my strategy for driving the Freeway. Get in a middle lane and stay there, only leaving it as the junction you want to take, gets nearer.

Universal Studios

It was a holiday week and so not unsurprisingly, the Park was quite busy. It’s difficult to find much to say about Universal - I think we were all a little disappointed. The ET ride was tame and not very interesting, the tour round the studio lot was strictly controlled and not very informative, although the earthquake effects were good. The effects stage was interesting - culminating in the fire effects area. The only theme park ride was Jurassic Park and this we went on twice, getting quite wet in the process. There was also the animal training show and a wild west stuntman show - but overall I don’t think we were that impressed.

By now we were dining and breakfasting in the deli and that was where we went before retiring for the night.

A day at the Farm

Various leaflets I’d picked up, plus guide books, suggested that Knotts Berry Farm was the “adventure park” to visit when in Los Angeles. This we did therefore on this Saturday morning. It was not a long drive from Costa Mesa to Anaheim - the home of Knotts Berry Farm as well as Disneyland.

The Farm was a family fruit farm which started up other activities to entertain customers who came to the farm to buy products. Now the brand name has been sold and the growing of

fruit and production of jams and preserves has moved elsewhere. The sideline has thus become the main business. The Farm has the largest “woody” in the world and our early arrival meant that Ruth and I didn’t have too long to wait to get a ride. I would have to say that this was one of the most memorable experiences in my “roller coaster” life. The ride was amazing and seemed to go on for ages. I don’t think Ruth enjoyed it as much as I did, but I enjoyed the noise, the fact that it wasn’t as smooth as other rides - you got thrown about a bit and it was fast.

The Farm had a lot of other rides, some of which required a bit of queuing but in the pleasant sunshine the day went fast. One ride we didn’t go on was a plunge which scared me silly whilst other attractions were dodgems which we all went on, a shooting gallery which Jen had a go on, a mystical presentation of Indian history and a train ride which took us round the park. Elsewhere in the park there were a number of craft shops and we visited some of them and bought some trinkets. As we left, the lights on the woody put the ride in a different light and I wondered what it would be like to ride it at night.

Seaside and shopping again

It was Sunday and we decided to have an easier (and cheaper) day. The sky was overcast and at Huntington Beach, just down the road from Costa Mesa, the surfers were not much in evidence. We walked out on the pier, examining as we went the amazing set of ordinances that governed use of the pier - I almost wondered whether breathing was allowed! A short walk on the beach followed before we retreated to the safe and comforting surroundings of a shopping mall. Again we were looking for goods for the shopping list - Levis I believe it was this time. This was to be the last shopping trip and was as painless as the previous ones had been.

We decided to drive further south to Newport Beach and after having a pleasant cup of coffee walked in the gentle drizzling rain around some interesting houses, some obviously “holiday homes” but others continually occupied. We noticed the lack of back gardens, the prevalence of barbecues, the fact that these and other garden equipment seemed to be left unguarded in the gardens and

then the opulence of some of the furnishings which we could see from the road. There was truly some considerable wealth here.

Disneyland

Just up the road from Costa Mesa, Disneyland was going to be our venue for two days. Not much to say about it really. It was showing its age. Paris had looked much slicker, but within the Park there were a number of minor differences. We spent a long time seeking autographs and getting photographs of Disney characters, so this was essentially restful activity. We went round the park on the train to get our bearings and from that worked out that Space Mountain and Star Tours would be getting visits. Ruth and I went on the Thunder Railroad a few times but it was really tame. What was good, and something we eventually persuaded even Jen to come on, was the Indiana Jones Adventure, and although a bit nervous about it I think she enjoyed it. The old favourites - Splash Mountain, Pirates of the Caribbean, "It's small world" and of course the "kiddy rides" were taken in and a good time was had by all.

Hollywood and LAX

The flight home was not until the late afternoon, therefore we had a morning to fill before we took the car back to Los Angeles Airport (LAX) and check-in. I had arranged a tour around the Warner Bros. Studios and prior to this we thought we'd have a look at Hollywood. Well we had a bit of an adventure in the end! The first part of the plan worked well. We found Hollywood Boulevard without much problem, drove past some big houses, looked at tall palm trees and parked just off the Boulevard on the Walk of Fame. It was early morning so we didn't have much problem in walking back to Mann's Chinese Theatre where we looked at the concrete hand and foot pints - Sean Connery had been there the day before so we talked to the person who was finishing off the work of preserving it and he told us how it was all done.

We then walked back along the Walk of Fame to the car seeing the famous "stars" in the pavement; Ruth finding a R ... Harrison and photographing her foot in the process. We (I) really didn't feel under any pressure in driving the short distance to Burbank and the WB studios. This confidence was misplaced - we found it hard to map-read our way across Hollywood and only just

made our appointment in time after quite a few anxious moments on steep hills, freeways and the like. Still all was well that ended well. It was not to be the last fraught moment as far as cars went that day, however.

The tour around Burbank was very good - there were only about 16 of us in the party and so we had personal attention. The tour started with a film describing the stars who had worked for Warner and the history of the studios. We then went into a museum with lots of the original stage props and costumes to look at. I was interested in correspondence between Jack Warner and the makers of Bonnie and Clyde that was quite vitriolic. From the museum we went to some of the sets including that for Friends - which pleased Ruth quite a bit. A visit to the props room - a vast warehouse of catalogued items, almost an archive, of things that could be used in films or TV and then we went on a trip round some of the outside sets including a glimpse at part of the outside set (Chicago) for ER.

The trip round the studios was a pleasant way to end our visit to Los Angeles - in many ways it was more real than lots of the other things we'd seen or experienced - and was enjoyed by all. We had plenty of time to get to the airport now and so set off. What I didn't know was how hard it was going to be to find the Alamo garage. This plus hassle at a filling station with a "begging American" meant that I arrived at the airport just a little stressed.

Still we had plenty of time to calm down, much of it spent waiting in a BA queue to check-in - incredibly inefficient and slow, and also incredibly lax (hee hee) in security terms. The bags that we were sure would be overweight were hardly checked. The bag that had to go in the hold on the way over came with us in the cabin. I don't know whether they really cared much at all. LAX appeared to be a really laid back airport. There was time for us to have a pretty awful snack meal - Chinese I think it was and do bits of comfort shopping (ie time-filling activity). We boarded the "City of Bangor" on time and took off, and were soon fed. Then as darkness fell, and after a film had been screened, lights were dimmed and attempts at sleep were made. Although it was not comfortable I think we all catnapped a bit and fortunately the plane was relatively still and quiet.

Jetlag and travel weariness

Arrival into Heathrow happened almost without us realising where we were. It was either that or I was so tired that I didn't know what was going on. Through customs without a hitch; a long wait for our baggage and then an even longer wait for the coach back to Cardiff. We did manage to find a seat however which at Terminal 4 Arrivals is a bit of a rarity. A sandwich and a coffee (neither up to US standards) were eaten for comfort reasons rather than hunger and then eventually, we boarded the bus.

The reverse trip was equally uneventful save for Jen striking up a conversation with a pilot who was returning to South Wales. He told her about flying Concorde and other things - I was too tired to listen; in fact I think I was almost out to the world.

Cardiff couldn't come soon enough and fortunately we had a chauffeur to greet us and take us home. All that was left for me to do was to take the films down to Albany Road the next morning and get them speedily developed so that we could begin to relive what we had experienced over the previous three weeks.

I'm left with wonderful memories of amazing scenery. The feeling that we probably tried to do too much, and see too much. A dislike of Los Angeles, but an affection for San Francisco. A regret that we didn't speak to many Americans. Incredible surprise at how inexpensive it had been to live for three weeks in the States, particularly ordinary food, petrol and motels. Support for the American breakfast idea, and wondering why we don't do that more in this country. A desire to go back, for longer - even to some of the same places again. And finally thanks to a Norwich Union Endowment Insurance Policy (and thus indirectly to my Dad) who made it all possible by providing the windfall that paid for most of the wonderful holiday it had turned out to be.