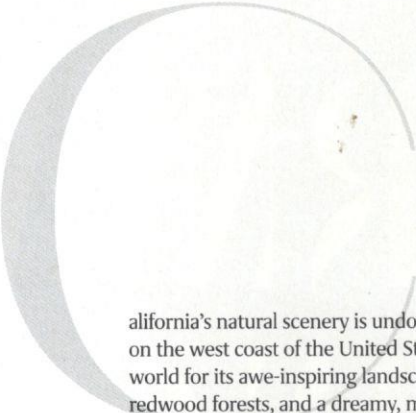




CALIFORNIA DREAMING

The state of California, in the United States, is best explored by road along the Pacific Coast Highway. On a summer holiday in the country, **Pallavi Mehra** discovers the state's surreal landscapes.

Santa Barbara is a relaxed coastal town with Mediterranean weather and Spanish colonial architecture.



California's natural scenery is undoubtedly breathtaking. The state, located on the west coast of the United States, is visited by people from all over the world for its awe-inspiring landscapes—think pristine beaches, majestic redwood forests, and a dreamy, misty coastline. One of the best ways to explore the picturesque state is to embark on a road trip from the Northern California city of San Francisco to Southern California's Los Angeles along Highway One, also known as the Pacific Coast Highway. Offering panoramic vistas of the state's arresting natural beauty, including the glistening Pacific Ocean, this is one of the most scenic drives in the world.

My adventure begins in San Francisco, with a stop in Monterey, a town in a rugged mountainous region of California's central coast, and Santa Barbara, which is also known as the American Riviera.

DAY 1: SAN FRANCISCO

The city of San Francisco is a melting pot of cultures, with people from all over the world calling it home. This diversity is reflected in the city's restaurants, museums, and cultural landmarks. The first order of business is to check into my hotel—The St. Regis San Francisco, a well-appointed property located in the heart of the city. After a hearty breakfast of eggs benedict and avocado toast, I drive north to Presidio (presidio.gov), San Francisco's newest national park with a stunning backdrop of the Golden Gate Bridge. Spread over 1,500 acres, the Presidio is a former military base. After my tour of the Presidio, I am famished and make my way to the Michelin-starred restaurant Spruce in the charming neighbourhood of Presidio Heights. At Spruce, I devour a tasting menu of modern American dishes. My favourites are the baby kale Caesar salad, black burgundy truffle cappelletti, and the seared Hokkaido scallops.

Next up, is an excursion to the California Academy of Sciences (calacademy.org) and the Minnesota Street Project (minnesotastreetproject.com). The California Academy of Sciences is a natural history museum, aquarium, planetarium, and science education centre. The Minnesota Street Project is an artist-led, non-profit organisation that supports the production, exhibition, and distribution of modern art. For an evening snack of samosas and chai, I walk to the nearby Indian eatery Besharam. After all that walking, it is time to unwind on a catamaran during sunset on the San Francisco Bay. Sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge as the sun sets behind it is a mesmerising experience. Dinner is at Mourad, a progressive Moroccan eatery helmed by chef Mourad Lahlou. I sample black cod, lamb, and eggplant along with milk bread served with heirloom beans and couscous.

DAY 2: MONTEREY

On the day of the California road trip, I check out of my hotel and drive for about two hours south to Big Sur. It is a 300 km drive from San Francisco to Big Sur. Highway One takes you along the California coast, past beaches and cliffs. I reach Post Ranch Inn, nestled in the Santa Lucia Mountains overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Designed by architect Mickey Muennig, the hotel features luxury tree houses, an award-winning restaurant, and state-of-the-art amenities, all encompassed by the Big Sur redwood forest. Lunch is a delicious seafood meal at Post Ranch Inn's restaurant Sierra Mar.

Post lunch is the most beautiful part of the road trip—Big Sur. The area of Big Sur is a rugged and mountainous region of the Central Coast of California, where Santa Lucia Mountains rise abruptly from the Pacific

Ocean. We drive on the Bixby Bridge, one of the most photographed bridges in the United States, and stop at several vista points, including Hurricane Point Rocky and the McWay Falls. From Big Sur, I drive to Monterey; the quaint coastal town welcomes me with the barks of California sea lions. The Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa, where I check in, is located on the banks of Monterey Bay; it is the best vantage point to see the sea lions and other marine life that Monterey is known for, including whales, dolphins, and turtles.

Once I check in, I drive to Lucia restaurant at Bernardus Lodge & Spa in the nearby town of Carmel for a guided tour of the chef's garden followed by dinner. Situated amid 28 acres of olive orchards and vineyards with sweeping views of the Santa Lucia Range, Lucia is a fine-dining restaurant serving California cuisine made using local and seasonal produce as well as regional seafood and artisan-farmed meats. Dinner is an heirloom tomato salad, artichoke and fontina cheese ravioli, crème brûlée, and chocolate hazelnut pastry. After dinner, all I can do is sink into my bed in dreamy languor, with the squeals of the sea lions putting me to sleep.

DAY 3: SANTA BARBARA

If Monterey is all about marine life, Santa Barbara, a town four hours south of Monterey is all about vineyards. Also known as the American Riviera, Santa Barbara is a relaxed coastal town with Mediterranean weather and Spanish colonial architecture. I check into El Encanto, a Belmond Hotel, and make myself comfortable at its upscale restaurant—the Dining Room. For lunch, there is the Santa Barbara burger, local halibut fish and chips, and the grains and greens bowl.

After lunch, it's time to explore Santa Barbara. A few minutes away, in downtown Santa Barbara, is the 13-block area called The Funk Zone. Once an industrial area, it has now been transformed into a vibrant arts, culture, and entertainment district. I have a wine-tasting reservation at a family-run winery—Margerum Wine Company, which came on my radar when its wine was served during former President Barack Obama's White House State Dinner.

Following wine tasting and grabbing an ice cream cone at Santa Barbara's wildly popular McConnell's Fine Ice Creams (mcconnells.com), I drive to the town's harbour for a sunset sailboat charter. A sunset sail along the Santa



▲ California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco is a natural history museum and science education centre.

▼ Lucia serves California cuisine made using local and seasonal produce.



▼ El Encanto is a landmark hotel in Santa Barbara that overlooks the Pacific Ocean.

▲ The Minnesota Street Project is an artist-led organisation for modern art.



Barbara coast with a backdrop of the Santa Ynez Mountains and Channel Islands at a distance is perfect, and just what I need after a long travel day. Dinner is at The Lark, located in the centre of The Funk Zone. Highlights from the shared plates are the roasted cauliflower with harissa yoghurt, grilled branzino with fennel confit, and chocolate mousse with salted caramel.

DAY 4: LOS ANGELES

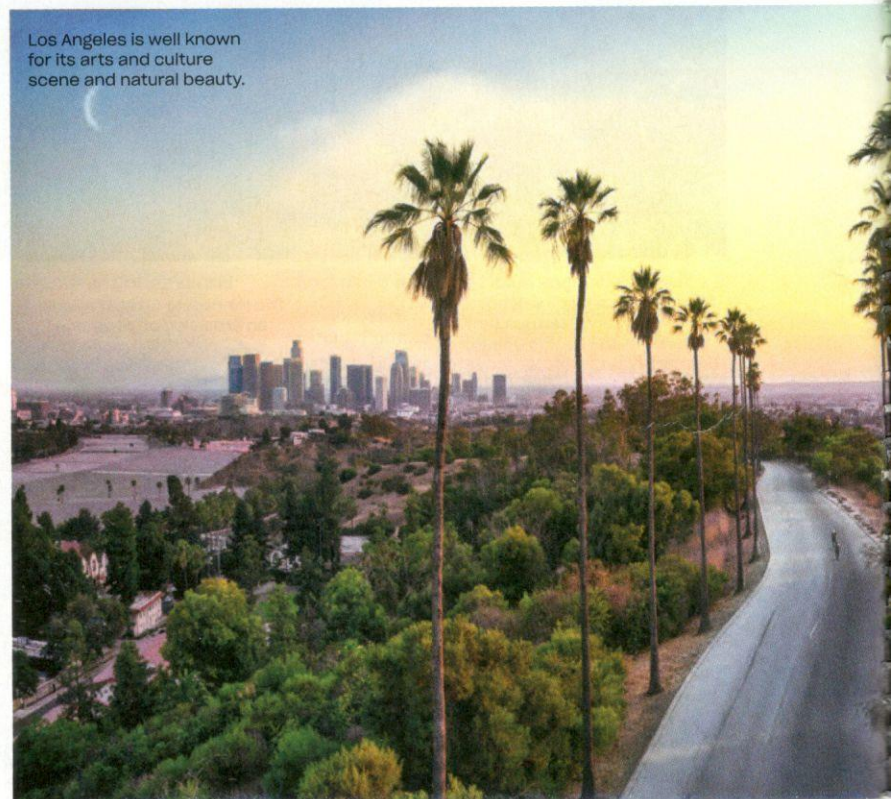
My California road trip ends in the southern Californian city of Los Angeles. Not only is Los Angeles one of the most glamorous cities in the United States, but it also has a thriving arts and culture scene and striking natural beauty. I reach Los Angeles around lunchtime and check into my hotel, Sunset Tower Hotel, a historic hotel located on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood. I decide to walk along the Sunset Strip, a vibrant street that is lined with nightclubs, bars, and restaurants. For lunch, I grab some tacos from an authentic Mexican food truck. Then it is time for a much-needed massage. The spa at my hotel is booked out, so I walk over to the nearby Pendry Hotel for their signature Energising Massage, which is a 60-minute session using a combination of Swedish, deep tissue, and aromatherapy techniques.

Refreshed, I make my way to Sunset Tower Hotel's The Tower Bar for evening cocktails and dinner. The Tower Bar is a chic restaurant and lounge, known for its romantic ambience, live jazz musicians, and celebrity sightings. Dinner is a feast of French-American plates including fried calamari, tomato and mozzarella pizza, spicy tuna tartare, rack of lamb, and rigatoni carbonara. As enticing as it is, I skip dessert. Instead, I go to Hamburger Mary's for a nightcap and a drag show. Founded in 1972 in San Francisco, Hamburger Mary's is a drag-themed burger restaurant and bar. It is well-loved for its flamboyant drag shows and cocktails. West Hollywood has a long history of being a haven for the LGBTQIA+ community. Since the 1930s, it has been a safe place for queer people to live and express themselves. The drag show at Hamburger Mary's is a blast and have us in splits till the wee hours of the morning.

I wake up early next morning for a guided hike to the Hollywood Sign, which is celebrating its 100-year anniversary in 2023. The hike takes about three hours and rewards us with spectacular views of the Hollywood Sign, the city's skyline, and the Pacific Ocean. Standing behind the Hollywood Sign and looking down at the sprawling city and twinkling ocean, I can't help but feel on top of the world. That is what California does to you. 🌐



Abaca near the San Francisco harbour offers Filipino-Californian cuisine.



Los Angeles is well known for its arts and culture scene and natural beauty.



Living The California Dream

GETTING THERE

Air India (airindia.com) offers direct flights from New Delhi and Mumbai to San Francisco.

WHERE TO STAY

San Francisco St. Regis San Francisco is a high-end, contemporary hotel in the SoMa district of San Francisco. The property is near several of the city's top landmarks such as Union Square, Chinatown, and the Financial District. *Doubles from ₹35,577; marriott.com*

Monterey Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa is located on Cannery Row, a historic district known for its seafood eateries and shops. The property features elegant guest rooms and suites, all of which offer ocean views.

Doubles from ₹46,300; montereyplaza.com

Santa Barbara Encanto, A Belmond Hotel is a national historic landmark situated on a verdant hilltop overlooking the Pacific Ocean and the city of Santa Barbara. *Doubles from ₹51,121; belmond.com*

Los Angeles Built in 1931, **Sunset Tower Hotel** was originally a luxury apartment building and home to several famous residents over the years, including John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, and Elizabeth Taylor. *Doubles from ₹31,518; sunsettowerhotel.com*

WHERE TO EAT

Helmed by chef Mourad Lahlou, **Mourad** is a Michelin-starred, Moroccan restaurant in San Francisco. This upscale eatery specialises in crafting beautifully plated, contemporary Moroccan dishes made with artisanal ingredients. *mouradsf.com*

Besharam is a modern Indian eatery with a focus on Gujarati cuisine in San Francisco's Dogpatch district. We recommend the restaurant's samosas, *khandvi*, *dhokli*, and *shrikhand* cheesecake. *besharamrestaurant.com*

The Butcher's Daughter is a plant-based eatery in West Hollywood, Los Angeles. It serves a seasonal, multi-cuisine menu with a focus on fresh, local produce. Order the pad thai, veggie burger, avocado eggs benedict, and you will not be disappointed. *thebutchersdaughter.com*

Abacá is a stylish restaurant offering Filipino-Californian cuisine located near the San Francisco harbour. Try the *kare kare* (oxtail stew), *sisig* (crispy pork belly), and *lumpia* (spring rolls). *restaurantabaca.com*

Housed in a historic building in downtown Monterey, **Alta Bakery & Cafe** is a local favourite. Chef Ben Spungin crafts appetising pastries and desserts using locally sourced, seasonal ingredients. *altamonterey.com*

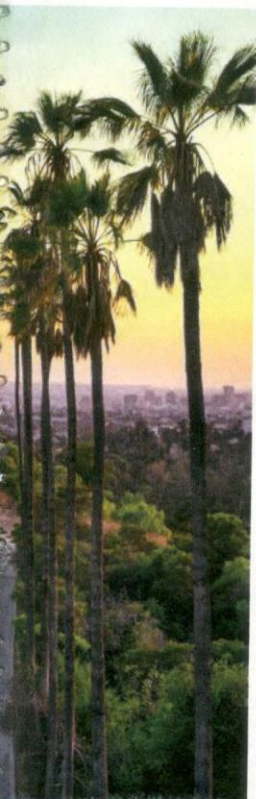
The Lark is an American cuisine restaurant situated in the restored Santa Barbara Fish Market building. Led by chef Jason Paluska, the eatery's culinary team have crafted a menu to celebrate California and its produce. *thelarksb.com*

WHERE TO VISIT

The Presidio boasts beautiful open spaces including beaches, forests and a lake, museums, art and archaeological sites, a public golf course, and restaurants. *presidio.gov*

The Minnesota Street Project houses more than 50 artist studios, as well as a number of galleries, project spaces, and artist-run organisations. *minnesotastreetproject.com*

Highlights of the **California Academy of Sciences** are the Amazon Rainforest, which is a temperature-controlled dome that transports visitors to the inside of a rainforest and a 26-year-old albino alligator named Claude. *calacademy.org*



An aerial view of the glamorous city of Los Angeles.

