

Exploring California's coast in a camper van



DANIEL OTIS PHOTOS

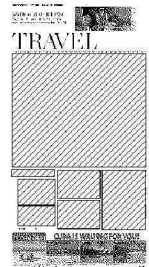
Daniel Otis, with his rental camper van, takes a break on Highway 1. His trip provided an eclectic mix of sights like Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Carmel-by-the-Sea.

Six-day road trip takes writer from L.A. to San Francisco

DANIEL OTIS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

CENTRAL COAST, CALIF. —The steely sea crashes into Anacapa Island, where gulls, pelicans and cormorants cling to precipitous crap-stained cliffs of volcanic rock, creating a cacophony of calls that rivals the surf. There are dripping caves, islets where California sea lions languidly laze and the impossible-looking, 12-metre-tall Arch Rock. Beneath the surface, fish dart, kelp forests sway and curious sea lions steal fleeting peeks.

"It's wilderness, wild and raw," Dawn Brooks says during my six-night camper-van road trip along California's Central Coast from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Right now, I'm kayaking in Channel Islands Nation-



al Park and Brooks is my guide.

An hour's boat ride from the mainland, Anacapa Island is a desolate, windswept sanctuary for nearly 70 bird species. On the way, pods of common dolphins dart about the ferry's prow.

"You've got to trust me with your life," Brooks says. She tells me to put on my helmet.

An archlike islet has formed a chute near the island. Following Brooks' lead, I point my kayak toward it, then wait in a small pool to catch a swell that rockets me through on the crest of white, churning foam.

I spend the night in my camper van at Carpinteria State Beach. Oil rigs shimmer like Christmas trees in the dark ocean distance.

The next day, I stop in Ventura, a small Spanish-founded city where old hippies soak in sun, tattooed dudes pedal pimped-out low-riders and packs of wetsuit-clad surfers bob like otters in the sea. Then following California's fabled coastal Highway 1, I soon reach Santa Barbara.

Built in 1820, the city's old Spanish mission evokes a time before Santa Barbara became known for its surf and shopping. I take in local flora at the lovely Santa Barbara Botanic Garden (sbbg.org) before strolling along the city's beach and wharf.

A stone's throw from the ocean, I find Jim O'Mahoney standing in front of the Santa Barbara Surf Museum next to a vintage Corvette.

"It doesn't steer, it doesn't stop, but it's fast," the veteran surfing champion says, and laughs.

O'Mahoney takes me through his tiny museum. Ukulele music pipes through overhead speakers in a room filled with Hawaiian surfboards, cases of O'Mahoney's trophies and all kinds of surfing memorabilia. A California native, O'Mahoney, 71, has been taking to the waves since the age of 5.

"It's the best sport on the planet," he says. "It's the ultimate pleasure. . . . It's you against the ocean."

From Santa Barbara, I head inland through the golden, rolling pastures of the Santa Ynez Valley. At the Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort (alisal.com), rancher Bill Porcher takes me on a horseback ride through undulating hills punctuated by gnarled old oak trees festooned with beard lichen.

"It's a hard way to make a living,"

Porcher says of ranching. "It's just something that's in my blood. I wouldn't want to do anything else."

Founded as a Danish colony in 1911, today, the nearby town of Solvang oozes Scandinavian kitsch.

There's even a replica windmill and quaint half-timbered shops shilling Nordic treats and knick-knacks. I don't stay long.

I drive straight north toward the San Rafael Mountains, taking a detour that feels like a pilgrimage. In just more than 20 minutes, I reach the gates of what was once late pop star Michael Jackson's fairy-tale playground.

The gilded Neverland sign is long gone. There's no going inside and you can see nothing of the house or grounds from the road.

Yet the troubled singer's spirit fills the place: the entrance's stone walls are covered with messages written with a marker and handwritten notes that shimmy in the wind.

Back on the coast, I stop at Pismo Beach, a scrappy seaside town that's beautiful in its faded '60s glory, then drop in at the nearby delightfully gaudy pink-painted Madonna Inn (madonnainn.com).

Not far, San Luis Obispo sits under the summit of Cerro San Luis Obispo mountain. Strolling the picturesque student town, I take in the 18th-century Spanish mission and the nauseatingly technicolour Bubblegum Alley, which — you guessed it — is an alley plastered with chewed gum.

Winding roads lead to Hearst Castle (hearthcastle.org) the eclectic, palatial mansion built by newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst between 1919 and 1947. There are rich parlours, meandering gardens and opulent swimming pools. Imported antiquities from places such as ancient Egypt and Rome stand hacked and chiseled into place.

Here, the eccentric millionaire hosted the likes of former British prime minister Winston Churchill and aviator Amelia Earhart before his death in 1951.

I follow the coast again, stopping at the elephant seal vista point outside San Simeon, where dozens of cattle

and calves snooze in the sand.

The mountains push closer to the sea near wildfire-ravaged Big Sur. Sheer, crumbling cliffs meet the pounding Pacific Ocean. I spend the night in sleepily elegant Carmel-by-the-Sea.

The next morning, I explore the rugged, meandering oceanfront trails of Point Lobos State Natural Reserve before heading north to Moss Landing, where I take a boat tour through Elkhorn Slough (elkhornslough.org) — an 11-kilometre wetland habitat that's home to flocks of aquatic birds and rafts of ridiculously cute sea otters.

Heading inland, I stop at Gilroy Gardens Family Theme Park (gilroygardens.org), full of twisting "circus" trees, kids' rides and bright Chinese lanterns — and the nearby town of Gilroy, which styles itself as the "Garlic Capital of the World." You can smell the pungent bulb everywhere.

I spend my last night alone in my camper van in Mount Madonna County Park, out of reach and out of phone service. Secluded campsites sit nestled between pine forests and small groves of towering redwood trees.

Tomorrow, I'll have to make the short drive to San Francisco to ditch the camper van and catch my flight home. Tonight, I listen to the stillness of the forest and the soft patter of deer hooves while pulling my blankets close against the cool mountain night.

Daniel Otis was hosted by the Central Coast Tourism Council, which did not review or approve this story.

> WHEN YOU GO

Get there: You can start this trip in Los Angeles and end in San Francisco, or vice versa.

Get around:

> Rent a car at the airport. Outside those airports, Jucy (jucyusa.com) rents camper vans equipped with tiny kitchens, sitting areas and sleeping space for four people for about \$42 (U.S.) a day. One-way trips are possible.

> Island Packers Cruises (islandpackers.com) can get you on a boat from Oxnard to Channel

Islands National Park, while Channel Islands Kayak Center (cikayak.com) gets you paddling.

> Coastal towns such as Ventura and Santa Barbara are great places to explore on two wheels. Guided bicycle tours can be arranged through Ventura Bike Depot (venturabikedepot.com) and Santa Barbara Adventure Co. (sbadventureco.com). In Moss Landing, Elkhorn Slough Safari (elkhornslough.com) operates boat tours.

When to go: Year-round, though finding campsites and accommodation can be a bit more difficult from late June to Labour Day, and for the Channel Islands, seas can be cold and rough between mid-October and mid-April.

Stay:

> Located between Ventura and Santa Barbara, Carpinteria State Beach (parks.ca.gov) offers bare-bones campsites right next to a beautiful stretch of sand.

> A short drive from Santa Barbara, Goleta's Kimpton Goodland (thegoodland.com) is an upscale hipster hangout with turntable-equipped rooms, a swimming pool, outdoor fire pits and a bumping bar that features live music and DJs.

> Just outside of Solvang, you can get a taste of the Wild West in class and comfort at the sprawling Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort (alisal.com).

> In San Luis Obispo, SLO Brew Lofts (slobrew.com) is one of the city's newest accommodation options. Conveniently perched above SLO Brew's brew pub, the centrally located lofts feature fireplaces and fully equipped kitchens.

Be aware: The Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge, damaged by winter rains, is closed and a stretch of Highway 1 near Big Sur is causing massive detours. Check travel alerts online at Caltrans.com for updates.

Do your research: centralcoast-tourism.com, camp-california.com



Otis glides on a bicycle along Santa Barbara's oceanfront promenade, kayaks along Anacapa Island, part of in Channel Islands National Park, and gets ready for a ride with veteran rancher Bill Porcher on the sprawling grounds of the Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort near Solvang.



DANIEL OTIS

Cyclists ride eclectic bicycles down Ventura's oceanfront promenade.

6 SPOTS TO WINE AND DINE

Local seafood, farm-fresh produce, award-winning wine and delicious craft beer — it's all here. There are thousands of places to drink and dine along California's Central Coast. **Daniel Otis** shares a few that impressed



Monterey Red Abalone "Relleno Style" is served at Cultura Comida.

Carmel-by-the-Sea

Cultura Comida y Bebida (culturacarmel.com) is one of the newest restaurants in this sleepy, seaside town. Offering an artistic tapas-style twist on Mexican classics in a small and swanky space, must-tries include the Cultura Mole, which is crammed full of smoked pork and hunks of orange, and the Monterey Red Abalone "Relleno Style," which is delicately cooked in butter, garlic and dried chili. If you love wine, the Carmel Wine Walk by-the-Sea offers a wine-tasting passport that gets you flights in nine different tasting rooms. You can order yours online or pick one up at Carmel-by-the-Sea's visitor centre.



Arugula tops the "Ode To Dan Russo" pizza at Lucky Penny.

Santa Barbara's Funk Zone

There is no shortage of places to wine and dine in delightful Santa Barbara. Chock full of watering holes and eateries, the city's walkable Funk Zone (funkzone.net) arts and culture district is a great place to start. Decorated with a mosaic of shiny pen-

nies, the Funk Zone's aptly-named Lucky Penny (luckypennysb.com) makes a mean wood-fired pizza (I recommend the arugula-topped "Ode To Dan Russo.")



Los Agaves is known for its simply sweet flan.

Los Agaves in Santa Barbara

Don't let the thronged takeout counter or sparse and homely décor turn you away — this restaurant is so good it deserves its own mention. Cooking up Mexican fare with local ingredients, Los Agaves (los-agaves.com) is known for dishes like its delectably gooey Queso Fundido appetizer, fresh fish and shrimp-filled Agaves Enchiladas and simply sweet flan for dessert. Even the creamy housemade mango dressing that comes with its side salad is delicious. With two locations in Santa Barbara and one in Goleta, you have no excuse to skip this understated gem.



A flight of craft beer is the best way to sample suds at SLO Brew.

San Luis Obispo

SLO Brew (slobrew.com) is a massive brewpub with a menu that leans on savoury appetizers, hulking salads, big burgers and pizzas topped with greens. It also has nearly a dozen homemade beers on tap and it reg-

ularly hosts live bands. If you're more of a cocktail person, hip Sidecar Cocktail Co. (sidecarcocktail.com) has an impressive and inventive menu. Try the "Bartender Roulette" option, where you can get a custom cocktail. If you need to pick up lunch or snacks for the road, SLO Provisions (sloprovisions.com) specializes in salads, sandwiches and baked treats.



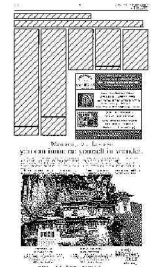
A brownie dessert special stands out at the Waterside.

Oxnard and the Channel Islands

You'll need to bring something to eat on your trip to the isolated Channel Islands National Park. Channel Islands Provisioners (cip.bz) can pack you a custom lunch bag that can include everything from gourmet sandwiches made with locally caught fish to intricate salads, homemade pastries and organic trail mix in reusable containers. Once you're back ashore from your island jaunt, a short walk will take you to the Waterside Restaurant and Wine Bar (thewatersiderestaurantandwinebar.com), which dishes up seafood and meats on a patio that overlooks a marina.

Moss Landing and Castroville

When I arrived in tiny Moss Landing, everyone I met told me I had to eat at Phil's Fish Market (philsfishmarket.com), a beachfront family business that has been around for more than three decades. I tried its speciality, Cioppino: a massive tomato-based stew crammed full of crab, fish, scallops, squid, mussels, clams and shrimp. A short drive away in Castroville, a town that calls itself the



"Artichoke Center of the Word," it's worth stopping at the Choke Coach



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Cioppino at Phil's Fish Market is smothered in seafood.

(facebook.com/TheChokeCoach), an artichoke-themed food truck parked at Pezzini Farms (pezzini-farms.com). I recommend the French fried artichokes with its yummy garlic Dijon dip.

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