

Oregon

For a political history of Oregon, we have to go all the way back to a very stormy March 7, 1778, when English navigator Captain James Cook, sailing east after having ‘discovered’ Hawaii, made the first European sighting of the Pacific Northwest coast of America at a craggy promontory he named *Cape Foulweather*. When his accounts of the voyage were later published, world interest was aroused, fur trade followed, and settlement began in the old Oregon Territory- the entire region west of the Rocky mountains, from California to the Alaskan panhandle (roughly midway through present day British Columbia). Oregon remained politically ambiguous for years, occupied jointly by Americans and British, until 1844, when Presidential Candidate James Polk ran on a platform of claiming it all for the United States, using the campaign slogan “*Fifty-four Forty or Fight*” (referring to 54°-40’N, the Territory’s northernmost boundary). Polk won the election, but not his bid to wage war with British Canada (choosing instead to annex half of Mexico), and Oregon was divided diplomatically at 49°N, an extension of the existing boundary to the east (the only exception being Vancouver Island, which dips below 49°N, but had long been a British stronghold and was not divided). The northern portion of the Territory became what is today southern British Columbia, and the southern portion was further parceled into the states of Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, and of course, Oregon.

‘Let sight of sand and sky and sea give respite from your daily cares...’, begins an inscription after you cross the Columbia River into Oregon, and within minutes we had surrendered ourselves completely. Oregon’s reputation as having the most beautiful stretch of coastline in the United States is well deserved, though some visitors complain that it is too foggy, missing the point. Fog is essential to its unique personality, dissolving land, sea, and sky into 350 miles of ambiguous soft-focus panoramas. Really soaked-in days are wonderfully disorienting- rain comes in whispering gusts as the air reaches full saturation, and at times the surf seems to sneak-up right next to you, so loud, yet always out of sight. When the sun shines above lower-lying fog, the atmosphere turns celestial. Solids lose their opacity, becoming consumed in bright white light, and blinding flashes lick across the tops of curling surf. All the while, the Pacific’s calm breathing beckons you to stop what you’re doing, and just stare. After three months of mostly strenuous riding, Oregon came across like a lullaby- so sweet, so sedate, so undemanding...

The genius of the Oregon coast is that while much of it passes convincingly as a ‘wilderness’, in reality, the whole thing is one big, fully developed, model recreational facility. Like many of America’s natural wonders, Oregon faces the dilemma of how to save itself from the demands of an enormous population (a little secret- by late September they’re all gone, and the weather is better). It’s solution begins on a solid foundation- beach access is protected by law, and nearly the entire coast has been preserved for public use, leaving it in a state that even Captain Cook would likely be delighted with. To keep it that way, your visit is carefully managed with a nearly continuous infrastructure of washrooms, campgrounds, overlooks, and other facilities (all of them outstanding), lining the highway in frequent, regular intervals. This may sound overwhelming to such a gentle landscape, but not so. Everything has been skillfully tucked out of sight in such a way that while you may believe you are in the middle of nowhere, running into the bushes for a desperate pee, you’re likely to find there a sparkling washroom, thoughtfully placed in anticipation of just such an emergency. Accommodating cyclists is very much a part of the mandate- where else in the world can you walk into a visitor center and be asked, completely un-prompted, “*are you driving or cycling?*” (at the California visitor center we were advised to consider getting on a bus). Oregon’s recreational master plan is so far reaching, so thoroughly conceived, and so fully realized, that the only remaining question is... what to do with all these people when it rains? Entrepreneurial savvy has neatly sidestepped this problem too, throwing into the mix a generous sprinkling of cozy B&Bs, dozens of ‘award winning’ micro breweries, a couple of friendly local cheese factories, and a few historic lighthouses. The end result is a hands-down crowd pleaser, fully prepared to greet the masses with wide open arms.

Northern California

Redwood forests once covered much of Europe, Asia, and North America, but thousands of years of slow climate change have reduced their habitat to only 3 small areas worldwide. *Coast Redwoods* grow only along the coast of northern California and southern Oregon. Their cousins, the *Giant Sequoias*, can be found further inland on the slopes of California's Sierra Nevada. And in one remote part of China, a pocket of *Dawn Redwoods* still survives. Of the three, California's Coastal Redwoods tower over all other trees in the world. They begin from a seed no bigger than that of a tomato, yet they may grow to 300 feet tall, weigh 500 tons, and live more than 2000 years. Some of these trees are believed to be the oldest living things on the planet.

Avenue of the Giants is a 40 mile stretch of quiet 2-lane road that winds through some spectacular old-growth stands. It's a great starting point, but to fully appreciate the Redwoods, you have to leave the road and go for a walk. Stand among them. Listen to them. They will fill you with wonder as you tumble through the forest like a small child exploring living room furniture. They will fill you with awe as you stand at the foot of massive black and red pillars rising endlessly into a canopy of darkness. These peaceful giants cast a powerful spell- partly because it feels so good to be among them, and partly because they command our respect. They have been standing here since before most of recorded history, and long after the struggles of today have faded from memory, they will still be here. They are living reminders of our brief, if not trivial appearance in time, and yet, we threaten to take them with us. After 150 years of continuous logging, only 4% remain, and of these, less than half lie within protected areas. But throwing up a few fences won't save the Redwoods. As neighboring forests continue to be logged, protected areas are being opened to windier, drier conditions, and now many of these trees are suffering as well.

The mighty Redwoods have been unsuccessful at fending-off the purveyors of garish tourist novelties as well, and several 'attractions' line the road, all done in the patently American fashion of displaying reverence for natural things through bizarre exploitation. Not only can you drive your car right up to three of the very biggest trees, but for an additional \$10, you can drive right through them as well (massive openings were cut specifically for this purpose, the only unfortunate side effect being that these trees are now, of course, dead). If you're still not having fun, you can visit a house carved from an enormous stump, the '*tallest tree-house in the world*', and a fully functioning RV (what else) carved entirely from a single massive log. There is even a '*drive-on tree*' (a fallen giant with a paved ramp over it, apparently with enough appeal to warrant a parking lot and gift shop). But perhaps best of all is the *Trees of Mystery* theme park, which features '*the tallest statue of Paul Bunyan anywhere in the world*', along with his sidekick *Babe*, the blue ox. They stand side by side, greeting visitors at the edge of the parking lot. Paul is perhaps 6 stories tall, with a wide, bearded smile, blue jeans, checkered shirt, axe at the ready, and one arm stretched out in a friendly wave- his enormous fiberglass hand rotating clumsily back and forth by some hidden mechanical device. Children love to play on Paul's giant toes, and decades of climbing and sliding have given them a polished, worn-in finish like that of a well used door knob. Babe stands stoically beside with a slightly less enthusiastic expression, and it's hard not to be distracted by his enormous testicles, which (though not advertised as such) are also undoubtedly the largest in the world. They hang just within reach, and with a polished appearance similar to Paul's toes, it seems that they are also every bit as popular with the kids.

San Francisco

Approaching San Francisco was unforgettable. Like Seattle, San Francisco is blessed with an enormous wilderness preserve right in its own backyard, and *Point Reyes National Seashore* is so undeveloped, and feels so remote, you'd never guess it were anywhere near a city of any size at all. We knew we were close- roadside markings were counting down the miles ...15... 10... 5... but still no sign of San Francisco. At once we left the wild coastline, turned into a deep valley, climbed the back of a high, barren hill...

...And there it was- everything- spread out all at once- the north pillar of the Golden Gate bridge immediately before us, firmly planted somewhere far below. We stayed there for a long time, taking it all in, and as the sun slipped into the Pacific, and shadows lengthened over the darkening hillside, a twinkling of light spread around the blackness of San Francisco Bay. Though nearly undetectable at first, a faint illumination grew from below the piers, and across the deck of the Golden Gate bridge. As the sky grew darker the bridge grew brighter, rising to a spectacular crescendo whereby it stood spread across the abyss like a great, Gotham phoenix. Way off in the middle of it all, almost lost in the blackness, the Alcatraz lighthouse cast a lonely, roaming eye.

The next morning we weren't sure how to get across the Golden Gate bridge, because just two days before, Canadian 'intelligence' had learned of a threat to blow the thing up, and in an effort to minimize the chances of this happening, the bike lane had been indefinitely closed (to what extent this may have thwarted terrorist activity is anyone's guess, as we both agreed that most terrorists probably don't ride bicycles). Fortunately, due to the 'high alert' situation, a number of police cars had been placed near the entrance, so after banging on a window and waking-up one of the officers, we got our directions and headed into town.

Though we would have loved to spend more time in San Francisco, our plan was to ride through it in a day, which we hoped would be enough just to get a general feel for the place. After thoroughly enjoying cycling the Golden Gate bridge (something we'd been looking forward to for a long time), we wandered through the Mission, Chinatown, Haight-Ashbury, and a few other neighborhoods, tested our legs and brakes on some of its impossibly steep hills, had lunch with a bunch of bike couriers, then continued back down the coast.

Central & Southern California

There is an awful lot happening along the stretch between San Francisco and Los Angeles. An awful lot. In terms of landscape, ambiance, attitude... just about everything. It's hard to make sense of it all, but generally speaking, there are three distinct sections- the Monterey Bay area, the remote coast south of Big Sur, and the sprawling beach town that begins around Santa Barbara, eventually becoming Los Angeles.

The most interesting feature of the Monterey Bay area is Monterey Bay itself, but unless you're prepared for extensive diving, you won't see much. An appealing second choice is to visit the *Monterey Aquarium*, which recreates, in dazzling theatrical fashion, a sampling of the various aesthetic and sensory delights tucked below the Bay's surface. The first exhibit, a three-story kelp forest swinging and bobbing in trance-inducing rhythm, sets an awesome tone. One of several whimsical oddities is a wide glass column filled with silver anchovies, all swimming in synchronized circles. The stunning closer is the million-gallon *Outer Bay* exhibit, presented through the largest glass viewing wall in the world. Dozens of sharks, tuna, sea turtles, and dolfinfish mingle in the deep, briny glow, brushed by rippling sheets of dim,

white light. Before you leave, join the piles of squealing kids right up front, and press your face against thousands of tons of cold, blue water. Standing face to face with a giant hammerhead shark will make your socks roll up and down.

Everyone loves Big Sur. Everyone loves Big Sur to the extent that not loving Big Sur could be construed as being un-American, even anti-American. It's just one of those things. Like apple pie. Fortunately, we also loved Big Sur, and in a country that worships the biggest and the best of everything, the coastline south of Big Sur is best of all (Big Sur, incidentally, is not the biggest, just Big, but people love it anyway). Here begins a long, desolate stretch of Highway 1, clinging precariously to white cliffs that plunge straight into the sea. It's also a seismically sensitive area (the San Andreas fault lies sleepily underneath), but this hasn't deterred a handful of people from choosing to build houses along the cliff side. I suppose you can't blame them. It really is nothing short of breathtaking. We fantasized about what it might be like to live in one of these perches- the relative isolation, the rarefied ocean breezes, the views... Our conversation flipped back and forth between the merits and relative dangers, before finally settling on the opinion that *yes- of course we would live here!* Then we imagined the possibility of enjoying this for many, many years, slowly growing comfortable with the inevitable all the while- such that on the day the 'big one' finally arrived, and our home dislodged from the cliff side and tumbled toward the sea, with one last glorious Pacific sunset spinning in our eyes, we would accept our fate with a grin, knowing that it was worth it while it lasted.

Around Santa Barbara, the coastline flattens, the sand whitens, the sun shines eternal, and it's summer vacation all year round. You have arrived... in southern California. Images of southern California are so widely circulated by the popular media, that even for the first-time visitor there's an incredible sense of *deja-vu*. Travel is always more rewarding when you can shed your preconceptions and penetrate the surface of things, but in southern California, why bother? There's something so totally satisfying about seeing it all laid out exactly as it is in your mind after a lifetime of movies and television. It was great fun cruising along breezy boardwalks under pink and gold skies, through fabled place after fabled place, whose names we've known since childhood, but never really knew what they were, or where they were. The only confusing revelation was to find that woven between the endless parade of surfers, palm trees, swimming pools, and movie-star wannabes, were ordinary people going about ordinary lives, thus blending fantasy and reality into something that seemed very much like a figment of its own imagination. Anyone with a television knows that southern California has at least a dozen heroes for nearly every occasion- *Easy Rider, Thelma & Louise, Natural Born Killers...* Our only disappointment was that we couldn't think of any who rode bicycles (Pee Wee Herman?), whose adventures we could re-create for ourselves, thus rounding-out the fantasy perfectly.

Los Angeles & San Diego

LA. City of Angels. Lalaland.

Los Angeles is a monster- a sprawling tangle of freeways and suburbs stretching from Malibu to Newport Beach, 140 km down the coast. The Los Angeles metropolitan area is the second largest in North America. More than 14 million people live here. In addition to being the world's leading manufacturer of popular culture, LA is well known for its traffic, race riots, earthquakes, drive-by shootings, and bush fires.

We were scared, but I suppose cycling across LA could have been worse than it was. The beach-front promenade beginning in Malibu continues for a long while, bustling with jugglers, musicians, volleyball tournaments, and so on. The general ambiance is relaxed and fun, and so is the cycling. After a few hours of this we were asking ourselves: *"OK, so where is LA?"*

Not long after passing LAX, we ran out of beach, and were forced into LA's famous snarl of traffic. Two hours later, our nerves shattered and ready to pass out from carbon monoxide inhalation, we came to a freeway overpass and stopped to have a look around. A smoldering wasteland of asphalt, concrete, plastic signage, and power lines stretched to the horizon in every direction. It mostly resembled the anonymous fringes of any big city, only this seemed endless, seething, rabid, beyond control. The freeway below us cut relentlessly straight to the horizon, with one little coil tapping into the surroundings a few miles away. Most alarming, and what really distinguished this place from others almost like it, was the apparently random scattering of nuclear power stations, refineries, and other industrial monuments rising above it all like monstrous, fire-breathing science fiction terrors let loose to graze. Together, the entire panorama shimmered in faded Technicolor, seen through a film of nauseous, brown smog. "OK, so where is LA?"

But that *was* LA. Or at least, that was what we saw of LA. There was no downtown to visit, and no skyline to look at. Aside from the *Hollywood* sign, there was nothing particularly recognizable about the place at all. The only objects of any monumental value were freeways and other civil engineering projects. The flow of cars seemed endless, yet we hardly saw any people. After 140 km, it was like we had neither left one place, nor arrived at another. To be fair, we barely skimmed the surface of LA, but the general picture seemed so completely unappealing, we couldn't help but ask ourselves: "why anyone would ever want to live here?" Perhaps one clue comes when comparing it to a city that seems so much it's opposite- New York. If the quintessential New York moment includes standing atop one of Manhattan's tall towers, the titans of business and culture filling the view all around you, and feeling an exhilaration simply by virtue of being a part of something so heroic, then the quintessential LA moment might include accelerating along some far-reaching freeway, the California sun reflecting over the hood of your convertible as you check the rearview mirror for no reason other than to confirm, with a smile, that indeed, you look fantastic.

On our last night in the United States, we stayed at campsite #1617 of the San Diego KOA RV Park, on a thin strip of gravel sandwiched between two massive recreational vehicles. Behind us, on a big lawn of fresh, green grass, a sign read: 'NO CAMPING ON THE GRASS'. It was a mostly unfitting end to two and a half months of spectacular natural beauty, exciting cities, and wonderful, hospitable people, though not completely surprising either. Looking out over an endless field of RVs, nothing stirred beyond the slow back and forth of rotating satellite dishes searching for the evening news, football, *Roseanne*. There is no doubt that the world Americans have built for themselves is impressive (if not occasionally bizarre), but to get there, they've also had to give-up a few things in the process. Not far away, one rig displayed a huge airbrushed portrait of John Wayne, and somewhere out of sight, someone was listening to the songs of Woodie Guthrie. America holds dear to it's symbols and the simple ideals they embody, yet it has grown enormous, wealthy, and complicated. I couldn't help but wonder how these icons of American mythology, these romantic heroes of a time long past, would fare in today's America. John Wayne, used to traveling unimpeded by fences and having unknowingly laid out his bedroll on someone's private property, would likely be booted out of town. And Woody Guthrie, having just ridden the rails cross-country one last time, might leap from his empty boxcar straight into the arms of the Sandpoint police. With nowhere else to go, they could spend an evening sharing tales of freedom and adventure in an RV park just like this one (if they could scrape together the money). But such are the contradictions and paradoxes of life in America today. We reflected in awe upon a country where people from places as disparate as Los Angeles and Montana not only coexist, but have rallied around the same essential principles to rise from an obscure colonial experiment into the wealthiest, most powerful nation in the world. The United States is full of extremes, and you're bound to love certain aspects of it, and despise others. But whatever your opinions are about America, you have to love Americans- warm, energetic, visionary, passionate- doing the very best they can given the context of their lives. We met some great friends here.

So long America..."and have a nice day."