

TAKE A 'DRIVE OF A LIFETIME'

Moncton family takes a memorable road trip down California's fabled Pacific Coast Highway, hitting Monterey, the Big Sur, Morro Bay and other scenic locales

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TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

As a Cape Breton gal who has made more than a few excursions around the island's renowned Cabot Trail, I was curious to take another legendary road trip – California's Pacific Coast Highway.

In preparing to check out the PCH earlier this year, I wondered: would the west coast motorway come close to yielding the Trail's epic scenery? Would my Maritime bias sway my judgment? Would there be enough for two adults and their brood to do and see along the way to prevent marriage mayhem and family anarchy?

Fortunately, it didn't take long to realize why National Geographic names the Pacific Coast Highway – also known as Highway 1 – one of its 'drives of a lifetime', right along with my beloved Cabot Trail.

To be precise, National Geographic refers to a specific section of the PCH – from Morro Bay to Monterey – as its suggested drive. This is important to note since some deem the true PCH as the route all the way from the southern tip of Baja California north to Washington State, a distance of more than 3,000 kilometres!

Unless you have weeks of vacation time, really love driving and are willing to jeopardize the stability of your marriage/family, opt for the National Geographic trek or one slightly longer as we did, including at least one or two overnight stops, if possible.

Our launching point was Malibu, the famed beach city in Los Angeles County that consists of 34 kilometres of prime Pacific coastline. Most Malibu residents live very close – in some cases a stone's throw – from the PCH,



which runs through town.

Start your excursion in the morning in true California style by grabbing a hot beverage at a Malibu coffee shop. Many Hollywood stars live in and around the seaside community and, while we didn't see any during our stop at a local Starbucks, California people-gawking can't be beat. (For an extra-special treat, slurp that latte while watching nearby surfers ride the waves. You can almost feel your abs burn.)

When you've had your visual workout and fill of caffeine, hit the road and prepare to be awed. The show



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Carmel-by-the-Sea is an upscale, European-style village featuring beautiful homes, restaurants, shops, and art galleries.. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Beautiful beaches on highway's water side face steep mountains

HIGHWAY → F1

begins with a landscape of beautiful beaches on the highway's water side faced by steep, tree-lined mountains dotted with homes that appear to be clinging for dear life.

The cliffs eventually soften to gently rolling hills and farmland, speckled with grazing animals, strawberry fields and grape vineyards.

Our curvaceous journey soon brought us to Morro Bay, easily identified by Morro Rock, an extinct volcanic cone that measures about 176 metres high, perched starkly in the bay. We'd been told by friends that the area was a super place to savour local seafood, including oysters, fresh salmon and goodies from surrounding farms, as well as to partake in water activities, like kayaking and stand-up paddling.

While tempted to dabble in food and sport, we grabbed some photos and continued onward, skirting a multitude of gorgeous state beaches as we wound our way past magnificent pines in Cambria and reached San Simeon, perhaps best known as being home to Hearst Castle.

Construction of the castle, built for the late newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, started in 1919. The 51-hectare estate with a 115-room main house and guesthouse is now part of the California State Park System and open for public tours.

Alas, we couldn't drag ourselves away from the spectacular, Louisbourg-like sea views and forged ahead, finally stopping for one of the must-sees on the Central Coast drive – a massive colony of elephant seals at Point Piedras Blancas.

If visitors time it right and drop by during months when the seals go ashore to give birth, breed and molt, they can observe the enormous creatures from a boardwalk overlooking a sheltered beach.

One would think the beasts are called elephant seals because of their size, but it's actually due to their trunk-ish snouts. Whatever the case, their girth and awkward movements are a hit with all ages and provide an awesome 'connect with nature' moment.

The likely highlight of the PCH drive is the impressive beauty of the Big Sur region. Historically, the name Big Sur referred to an unmapped wilderness area and was simply called in Spanish 'el país grande del sur', the Big South Country. Today, Big Sur denotes the 140-kilometre stretch of rugged coastline between Carmel to the north and San Simeon to the south. The PCH winds along the length of that coastline.

As chief family travel planner, I can now admit I totally goofed in plotting just a few hours in Big Sur. Plan to dedicate at least a full day. Do a hike in a state park. Take a stroll along a coastal bluff. Enjoy a picnic in a secluded cove.

Among the cool points we missed: Nepenthe, an indoor-outdoor restaurant, perched 245 metres above the sea, and Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, known



A couple walks along Cannery Row, an area that inspired John Steinbeck's novel about life in Monterey during the heyday of the sardine canning industry. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT



Spectacular views greet visitors to California's Big Sur, a 140-kilometre stretch of rugged coastline between Carmel and San Simeon.

PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

for its amazing trails.

Still, we did get a sense of Big Sur's glory, pulling off the road at various steep vantage points to photograph the surf pummelling the rocky shoreline below us, to breathe in the salty air and to scan the redwood forests for signs of wildlife.

Some of us (OK, maybe just me) were slightly nervous bearing witness to our natural surroundings, tightening the seat-belt just a tad as our rental car twisted through the region's S-curves and hugged its cliffs. (The belt may have been snugged even more when crossing Bixby Bridge, one of the

world's highest single-span concrete arch bridges – more than 200 metres long and 80 metres high.)

With night falling, we soon descended from the heights of Big Sur to Monterey, a waterfront community that is home to the world-renowned Monterey Bay Aquarium, Fisherman's Wharf and Cannery Row, the latter of which was the inspiration for John Steinbeck's novel about life in Monterey during the heyday of the sardine canning industry.

We pulled up along 'the Row', now lined with hotels, shops and restaurants. We'd picked the InterContinental's The

Clement Monterey as our base for the night. Built on a pier, The Clement Monterey features panoramic views of historic Monterey Bay and gorgeous rooms with minimalist modern design, accented by homey touches like cozy fireplaces, luxurious duvets and stuffed sea otter toys perched atop beds. We soon noticed a pair of real sea otters frolicking in the waves not far from our balcony.

The next morning, we continued exploring Monterey and nearby Carmel-by-the-Sea, an upscale, European-style village of colourful cottages, restaurants, inns, shops, and art galleries. Nestled above a picturesque white-sand beach, Carmel is a definite contender in my where-I'd-live-if-I-won-the-lottery contest.

And speaking of contests ...

As Carmel was the last major stop in our Pacific Coast Highway drive from Malibu to San Francisco, you may be wondering if my drooling over the likes of that quaint community and Big Sur caused me to rate the PCH over the Cabot Trail.

Rather than risk losing my Canadian passport, I'll choose the Maritime drive. But the PCH is definitely a close second.

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