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Traveller

'Bye, bye Miss American Pie, drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry,' Don McLean

Big America

Twin boys, a massive motorhome and nine days driving on the wrong side of the road





King of the road

Max Anderson gets his kicks on an all-American motorhome tour from Los Angeles to Las Vegas via San Francisco.

American horror has many faces. *The Exorcist*. *The Thing*. The Kardashians. None, however, is as terrifying as the Orange Crush. It looms overhead, howling, waving its arms, drawing us into its spinning vortex. Thirty-four roads and ramps – the world’s largest intersection – all bisecting and splicing overhead, on stilts.

I’m gaping through the windscreen but I’m driving through the looking glass: right is left, left is right, and my vehicle is the size of the Queen Mary. My father’s sagest advice for life was “if in doubt, slow down and stop” – but there is no stopping on an exit ramp of a 12-lane freeway in Los Angeles when it wants to feed you into another 12-lane freeway.

“Which one do I take?” I whisper.

The kids are as silent as stones, the wife the colour of camembert. I close my mouth lest I projectile-vomit on the dashboard and lose my \$500 deposit barely one hour into the holiday.

LA is a great big freeway, a shameless one. The

energy is steroidal, the self-love is bonkers. It’s a perfect introduction to California.

At the Apollo rental office, I’m shown over the 10-metre Ford F350, which sits on a bright slab of hot asphalt. It has the head of a Texas longhorn and the body of Ahab’s whale. The agent is thorough and frank, even lifting the hood: “Check the oil each day; you cook it, you bought y’self an engine.” He shows me the digital TV, the intestinal pipe stored in the bumper bar to dump sewage, the red buttons that make the body of the Recreational Vehicle swell.

“Go ahead. Press the buttons.”

Two units extend outwards by a metre, creating a master bedroom and dining area. The twin eight-year-olds, Jack and Harry, hoot with excitement while my wife, Lainie, packs the fridge, works the stove and tests the shower. “Self-contained” doesn’t do our RV justice. It ... completes us.

I turn the ignition and for the first time in my life steer a house onto a freeway. First stop Anaheim, spiritual home of Walter Elias Disney.

Disneyland is the promised land – partly because I've been promising it to the kids for years, partly because it's on the other side of the biblical intersection. (At the park entrance I gibber my shock to a fellow RV pilot about the Crush: "Yeah," he drawls, "took me days to get out of that.")

But for 10 whirling, waltzing hours the kingdom of Disney works its magic on us using animatronic Caribbean pirates, jungle animals and *Star Wars* robots. A crane-size viper on the Indiana Jones ride causes one twin to cry, evoking considerable delight in the other. More shocking still, my eyes get teary when fireworks bloom in front of the famous Cinderella castle, and Tinkerbell, lit by a golden spotlight and caroused by TV choirs, soars over the turrets.

For the first time on our nine-day trip – and

not the last – I'm reminded that, like it or not, the US lays claim to a large part of our soul.

Anaheim is also our introduction to the magic of the American RV park. We have a "pull-through", meaning (thank god) I don't have to reverse my barge into a space. I plug it into a power box and plumb the slurry pipe into the ground. The boys give the toilet a thorough workout before bunking in a compartment over the cab. Lainie and I retire to our double bed. "Can you believe this park is only \$75 a night?" she asks.

Next morning, park manager Jackie loads us up with fresh muffins and buckets of hot American coffee. "No charge!" she sings.

The parks get cheaper and cheaper. By the time we reach Las Vegas we're paying \$16 a night.

THE Pacific Coast Highway from LA to San Francisco is 720 kilometres. The cliffs soar and the surf rolls, and the RV parks begin attaching themselves to our trip like colourful map-pins.

The park at Morro Bay is a wild place with towering ocean-side pines. The boys meet seven-year-old Colin ("My dad's a firefighter!") who joins them for extravagant lightsabre contests in the twilight; after the sun goes down we walk to the Bayside Cafe for crab chowder served in hollowed-out bread bowls.

The RV is our window to the US and scenes change like the best movie montage.

At Big Sur, we're stationed beside a shallow river in a deep valley of redwoods; the boys raft in rubber rings (\$US1 (96¢) an hour) and hunt for raccoons by torchlight.

Candlestick RV Park in San Francisco looks over the 49ers' football stadium; the Chinese-American managers laugh as the kids go nuts on their table-tennis table.

Each day, I feel a little more king of the road. The boys are buckled up at the table writing journals; Lainie has her bare feet up on the dash, twiddling the radio. Serendipitously, the cab fills with the opening bars of Don McLean's *American Pie*.

My luck with family holidays is a bit tidal and I never know when it's in. But there's something about this

trip – perhaps we've been anointed by the Crush? It's as though the country can't throw enough America at us.

Take Carpinteria, a random lunch-stop off the highway. We happen on the Padaro Beach Grill, where a guy plays guitar to well-dressed families on the lawns. We eat burgers bigger than our heads, looking over a beach where people play with an extraordinary array of beach toys. Off-shore gas platforms dot the horizon, fuelling California's economy.

Our trip to Alcatraz includes a talk by the



great-niece of Al Capone. I ask her if Capone was wealthy. "Very," she says, "though it was all in cash boxes in Cuba and I believe expropriated to fund Batista's revolution."

And then there's Monterey, which comes totally out of the blue, a blinding flash of sunshiny joy. Poking into the Pacific is a timber pier lined with colourful shacks selling saltwater taffy and seafood. From a table at Crab Louie's we watch honking seals stacked among the pier's pylons. A sea otter floats on its back, its little paws working on something to eat.

We stroll along the beach and stumble on the most astonishing strip of old waterside industry gentrified into shops and bars – which is a bit embarrassing because it's Cannery Row. I adored John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* 20 years ago, though (as I confess to Lainie), I thought the novel was set on the eastern seaboard. It's not. Nor is it any longer "a stink, a grating noise" as Steinbeck had it, but restored, painted with evocative murals and palpably *loved*.

The Monterey Aquarium is a revitalised cannery with old anchovy ovens sitting proudly before state-of-the art showcases to local marine life. The boys run between glass-walled exhibits that are home to exotica such as sunfish, giant octopuses and a whole kelp forest. My tank runneth over in the darkened Jellies Exhibition, which is all '70s funkadelic music and thousands of neon-lit jellyfish. It's like walking through a lava lamp. The exit is painted with a quote from Jimi Hendrix: "You have to give people something to dream on."

I really want to find someone and dispense high fives.

THE RV is our window to the US and whether stationary (awning extended, radio playing, woodpeckers knock-knocking in the treetops) or cruising at 113km/h, the scenes change like the best movie montage.

In Yosemite National Park we walk the lush valley floor, scattering deer among the pines

and peering up at domes that rise more than 3000 metres.

In the old gold-town of Mariposa, the Ford's large petrol tanks are replenished at a station called Grizzly Gas that features life-size bear figures. Jack leans forward and intones in his best southern-American accent: "Daddeh, Ah got grizzly gas" – a fart gag that sustains the boys for hundreds of kilometres.

The desert arrives in dramatic fashion, a wall of scorched mountain ranges lined with serried ranks of wind turbines, thousands of them, white stars twinkling in hot winds. We cleave fields of corn, groves of oranges and canyons of fast-food joints. At a Denny's restaurant we try the infamous artery-busting brekky and discover the most lyrical menu item of the trip: "two moons over my hammy". (Fried eggs on ham is lyrical but not lethal – unlike the ominous-sounding "lumberjack slam".)

The biggest contrasts come from our two city stops: in San Francisco (three days) and Las Vegas (two). San Fran practically rolls over to get its tummy tickled, such is its willingness to please. The icons roll in – including the freezing fog that has us frantically buying beanies and gloves – and all are more exotic than expected. The world's crookedest street zig-zags eight times and is strangely beautiful, and the steeply descending cable cars smell deliciously of burning wood when the brakeman works the timber brakeshoes.

The city also serves up the hero of the trip: seats at the top of the AT&T Park baseball stadium. Players with only-in-America names such as Madison Bumgarner and Angel Pagan bat up before a backdrop of giant cinema screens and the Bay. Innovations such as kiss-cam (the camera picks out a couple in the stands to be goaded by 42,000 people into having a snog) redefine the meaning of spectator sport.

Vegas is stinking hot and crazy as a loon. The boys are baffled by the strip's outdoor escalators, musical fountains and airconditioned chunks of

Paris, Venice, ancient Rome and Cairo. They're content, however, to be booked into the best-appointed kids club I've ever seen so Lainie and I can play the slots. We lose all our good-parent points – but win a hundred bucks.

REGRETS? We have a few. We don't get enough time in Yosemite. We miss Clint Eastwood's home town of Carmel-by-the-Sea. And I push it too hard to make it to Vegas, so the family ends up hot, stiff and grumpy in a desert outpost called Mojave. The overnight park looks a little too colourful so I eye up the kids and decide on an easy fix. "How about we check into a motel ... with a pool."

"YAYYYYY!"

And even Mojave comes good. The desert puts on a sunset of dust, railroad cars and lonesome stars and we find ourselves in a little Tex-Mex pastiche beneath neon signs hoisted on tall poles. We grab some Taco Bell takeaway and shamelessly scoff it on our motel beds while watching *Groundhog Day*.

"Dad, are we giving back the RV soon?"

Harry asks.

"Yeah, we have to."

"That's a shame. I really like it."

I grudgingly hand in the motorhome keys at the Vegas Apollo branch. I'm like a falsely accused cop having to turn in his gun. (I played by the book! I got us a great holiday! Hell, I even nailed the Orange Crush!)

But I have attained wisdom from the Anderson family motorhome holiday, and since I'm duty bound to pass it on, it's simply this: understand that you *will* have a motorhome moment. The trick is to have it, deal with it and get it out of the way. After that, settle back in the upholstered seat, relax and embark on what is one of the most endearing, enduring and downright family-fabulous ways to see the United States of America. God bless it.

Max Anderson travelled courtesy of Flight Centre and Apollo Motorhomes.

FAST FACTS

Getting there Qantas has a return fare to Los Angeles from Sydney (from \$2017) and from Melbourne (from \$1984). Phone 13 31 33, see flightcentre.com.au.

Driving there Motorhome rental varies by vehicle availability, the season (June to September is peak in the US) and the point of collection and drop-off. Our six-berth Wanderer vehicle was arranged by Brisbane-based Apollo Motorhomes; a nine-day hire in May would cost \$US1500 (\$1429) including satnav, mileage, insurance, pick-up in LA and drop-off in Las Vegas. It pays to explore the online booking system; being flexible can get costs down. (If you're flexible, you can take a new vehicle that needs to be relocated for as little as \$10 a day; see apollorv.com/factory-special.) Phone 1800 777 779, see apollocamper.com. Also see driveaway.com.au.





Ten motorhome lessons learnt the hard way

1. If you're new to driving in the US, start somewhere where the traffic's sane, such as San Francisco; by the time you reach Los Angeles you'll be ready for it.

2. If you have to drive in LA, stick to the freeway truck lanes. And remember, there's no such thing as "Sunday traffic"; it's the same as Monday traffic.

3. Be smart – take at least 24 hours to recover from your flight before taking the wheel.

4. Be smarter still – take another 20 minutes to figure out your satnav. It's a terrific resource but it plots the quickest route, not necessarily the easiest. (That's how we ended up under the Orange Crush.)

5. Insurance is your friend; don't skimp on it. We collected a stone to the windshield: no charge.

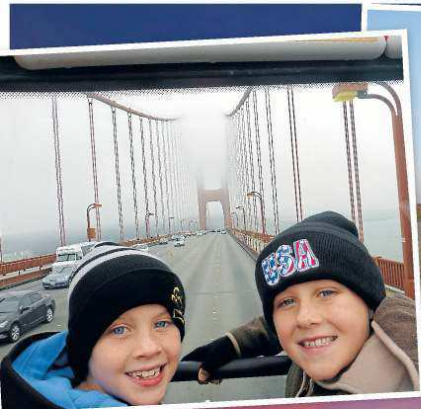
6. Beware, your vehicle roof is not insured. Low-hanging branches will cause damage without you knowing it. I kissed goodbye to \$US500 (\$477) for a tree-scored awning.

7. Plan and book as much as possible before arrival in the US. Popular RV parks such as Yosemite fill up.

8. Allocate driving days and non-driving days. Despite good intentions ("Oh, we'll drive in the morning and see the sights in the afternoon"), they don't mix. Pull up, make yourself at home and enjoy more.

9. Less driving means more holiday. Australians have a better appreciation of distance than Europeans, but I guarantee you'll still underestimate the time it takes to get anywhere.

10. The Lonely Planet guide to California (\$38.99) is a glovebox necessity.



Big America ... (clockwise from top left) the Golden Gate Bridge; the Anderson family motorhome; a poster of football players; LA freeway hell; welcome to Vegas; Bixby Bridge, California.

Photos: Max Anderson, Getty Images, Corbis