

Sea & Ski



Combine sun-kissed shores with snow-filled slopes on a California twin-centre with a twist, writes **Paul McLaughlin**

California – the name features in the titles of hundreds of songs, countless movies, endless pages of literature and on a VW Campervan, conjuring up images of golden-sand beaches and blonde, suntanned surfers.

We've all been raised on a diet of sun-soaked images from Baywatch to Beverly Hills to Big Sur – but the state is also home to some of the best skiing in North America. One day you might be paddleboarding in the Pacific Ocean and by the next morning you can be carving the powder slopes of its ski resorts. What's not to like? Having tested my snowboarding skills on the slopes of Europe, I was itching to explore this new domain and see why California appeals to active travellers all year round.

THE SCENIC ROUTE

Naturally, the best way to savour California is on a road trip, so we began our journey in San Francisco and

headed a few hours south to Monterey, one of the most popular spots on the central coast.

Visiting while ski season was still underway meant we were blessed with mild sunny weather and the benefit of fewer tourists and queues. Monterey has a rich cultural history and is renowned as a creative hub, home to legendary music festivals and an array of visual and literary artists – though none is more strongly associated with the area than John Steinbeck. Commonly known as Steinbeck Country, Monterey's famous Cannery Row owes its name and much of its preserved character to the author's famous novel.

The charming city is also famous for its plentiful marine life, which includes sea lions, sea otters, harbour seals, kelp forests, pelicans, dolphins and several species of whale. There are whale-watching excursions aplenty, although weather conditions meant we opted for the Monterey Bay Aquarium instead. ➤

PICTURE: Zach Dolanac/SeaMonterey.com

Where
to
STAY



Occupying a picturesque bayfront location on historic Cannery Row, the **Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa** is a short walk from the Monterey Bay Aquarium and offers a broad range of amenities including spacious ocean-view rooms, a Jacuzzi, private beach and sauna. In-house dining options include Schooners Coastal Kitchen & Bar while the Lobby Lounge is an ideal spot to soak up piano music with a pre-dinner cocktail.

Rooms from £218 per night.
montereyplazahotel.com

One of Lake Tahoe's finest boutique hotels, **The Landing Lake Tahoe Resort & Spa** offers a four-star boutique experience and commands a prime waterfront location. All rooms feature stone fireplaces, and many have spectacular lake views. On-site restaurant Jimmys serves a selection of regionally inspired specials that celebrate the best of each season and has a 1,500-bottle wine vault. Rooms from £200 per night.
thelandingtahoe.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Monterey Bay Aquarium; shops on Ocean Avenue, Carmel-by-the-Sea; Carmel Beach; Monterey Canning Company, Cannery Row PICTURES: Visit Monterey; Shutterstock/ZikG, Benjamin Mark Demarest

My previous visit predated the smartphone, but now celebrating its 40th anniversary, the world-famous facility is a must-see attraction in Monterey. The not-for-profit organisation is a leader in science education and a global voice for ocean conservation through active programmes in marine science and public policy. More than two million visitors a year enter its doors to marvel at the impressive exhibits.

Chief among these is the 1.2-million-gallon Open Sea, which showcases a vast blue world featuring green sea turtles and hammerhead sharks, a massive school of Pacific sardines, the elusive ocean sunfish and iridescent mahi-mahi. Visitors frequently sit mesmerised for hours watching the smaller fish swimming between bigger predators or awaiting feeding time, when hammerheads and tuna speed past, sardines swarm in glittering schools and turtles glide past as though choreographed in some hypnotic dance.

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STORYBOOK STREETS

From Monterey we take the short journey south to Carmel-by-the-Sea. This pretty, one-square-mile city is tucked away along California's scenic coast, but looks more like a Tolkien-esque fairytale village. The narrow, hilly streets are full of intriguing restaurants, wine-tasting rooms, boutique shops, art galleries, around 40 inns and hotels and a beautiful white sandy beach, popular with surfers and considered one of the finest in the world.

The words 'quaint' and 'quirky' spring to mind in Carmel. You won't find any chain restaurants here, neon signs are off the menu and,

until Clint Eastwood took over as mayor in 1986, eating ice cream on the street was also against the law. All this combines to make Carmel a fascinating and popular destination. Five new boutique hotels have opened in the past two years within that one square mile alone.

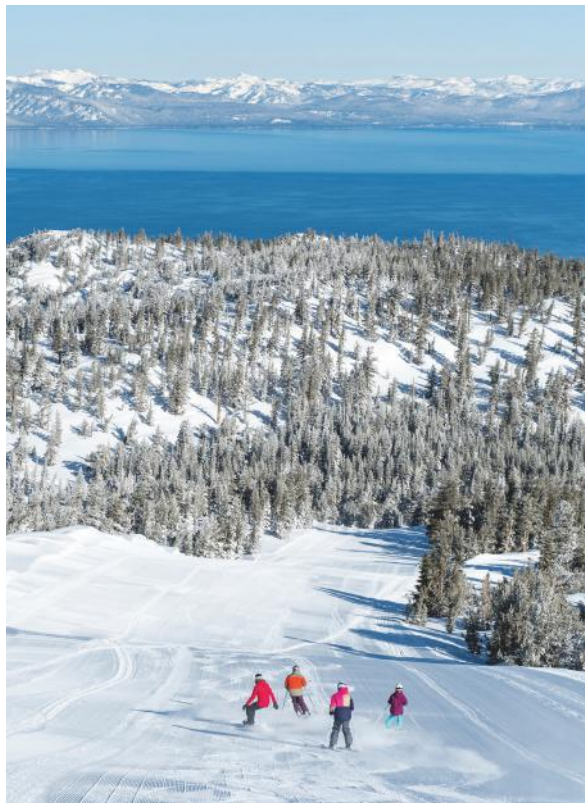
While exploring the meandering alleyways, we stop at Dawn's Dream Winery, one of Carmel's 18 wine-tasting rooms. California is the wine capital of the US and home to a quarter of the wineries in the country, with a combination of year-round sunshine, varied landscapes, warm inland air and cool ocean breezes creating a fertile environment for many grape varieties.

SNOW HEIGHTS

After sun and sea, it was time to check out California's snow-covered slopes, so we headed northwest towards South Lake Tahoe. After a five-and-a-half-hour drive, we entered Eldorado ➤

DESTINATIONS

THE US | CALIFORNIA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Heavenly Mountain; après-ski by the firepit; Heavenly Village; view of Lake Tahoe from the sightseeing deck

PICTURES: Rachid Dahnoun/Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority; Paul McLaughlin; Shutterstock/Sundry Photography

DID YOU KNOW?

- Since 1963, a permit has been required to wear high heels above two inches in downtown Carmel – pop into City Hall to pick this up free of charge.
- The water in Lake Tahoe is enough to cover an area the size of California to a depth of 14 inches.
- Almost all artichokes grown commercially in the United States come from California.

County and the Eldorado National Forest, where the snow line came into view and the scenery took on an astonishing beauty. Our visit coincided with one of the heaviest winter storms in recent history, creating huge snow drifts along the highway and coating the trees in a bright white veil.

We were feeling both smug and relieved at having taken the precaution of hiring a sturdy 4x4 as we passed countless stranded vehicles less equipped for the challenging conditions.

South Lake Tahoe is a resort city on the southern end of the lake that straddles the state border with Nevada. It sits deep in the Sierra Nevada mountains with spectacular alpine views and a relaxed vibe.

Year-round outdoor activities include skiing, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, sleigh rides and sledging in winter plus hiking, biking, kayaking, boating, fishing, swimming and golf in the warmer months.

Snow enthusiasts are spoilt for choice with 23 ski areas around Lake Tahoe's perimeter, among them North Lake, Palisades, Northstar,

Sugar Bowl, Diamond Peak, Kirkwood and Heavenly, our base to explore this winter playground.

The California side of large, pedestrian-friendly Heavenly Village is filled with restaurants, shops, bars and live music, but if casinos and noisy slot machines are your thing, a walk across Stateline Avenue takes you into Nevada's distinctly different proposition.

VIEW TO A THRILL

A journey on the Heavenly Gondola, which rises 2.4 miles up the mountain from the centre of the resort, revealed panoramic views over vast Lake Tahoe. It has a huge 72 miles of shoreline and depths of up to 500 metres – deeper than Loch Ness or the North Sea. Countless European ski resorts offer stunning alpine views but looking down on Lake Tahoe from nearly two miles above sea level is something else. The largest and tallest mountain in Lake Tahoe, at 3,068 metres, Heavenly seamlessly straddles the two states and offers skiers and snowboarders plenty to keep themselves amused. With one of the largest snowmaking

operations in the world – Heavenly makes more than three metres of the white stuff each year – the snow passes are far from cheap, but clients won't be disappointed.

There is something here for all levels of ability: a mix of on-piste skiing and fun intermediate runs, superb tree skiing and plenty of opportunities to pop in and out of side-country terrain. The ski season runs from late November to mid-April; January and February are the prime months, but March or April mean fewer crowds and a more relaxed atmosphere.

Back down in the village, close to the base of the gondola, a wealth

of après-ski options have firepits to help ward off the chill. Menus range from American and Italian to Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and Thai – a change from the cheese-heavy offerings of the French Alps, and with a welcome assortment of ales from the many local breweries.

South Lake Tahoe shines as a destination that combines strikingly different worlds: the spectacular beauty of a national park and all the amenities of a world-class resort.

With 300 days of sunshine a year, it's a popular playground come summer too – proving California more than lives up to its enduring appeal year-round. **TW**

BOOK IT

Aer Lingus offers six flights a week in winter from eight UK airports to San Francisco, via Dublin, where customers can clear US immigration before their transatlantic flight. Return economy fares start from £538 and business class from £1,299 including taxes, charges and 23kg luggage. aerlingus.com

Purely America offers a five-night sea and ski trip pairing three nights in an Inland View Room at Monterey Plaza and two nights in a Standard Fireplace Room at The Landing Tahoe Resort & Spa, both room-only, from £1,549 including Aer Lingus flights via Dublin to San Francisco and compact car hire with insurance, based on two sharing and departing on October 24. purelyamerica.co.uk