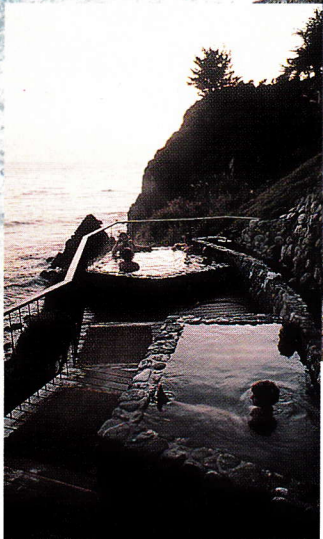




travel

# Site Pacific

LA may be a great big freeway, but the ocean road to San Francisco — Pacific Highway 1 — is a feast for the senses



“SEE YOU DOWN AT THE HOT springs,” says Beth from LA, after the briefest of introductions. “I’ll be wearing this cap — in case you don’t recognise me without my clothes on.”

Beth has just arrived for her third visit to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California’s legendary mecca for mind and body, and she’s not wasting any time. As I join her a few minutes later in one of the spa’s “swimsuit-optional” mineral baths that perch on cliffs above the Pacific, she is already lying back in the 110-degree waters soaking up the warmth of the late afternoon sun. Behind us rise the rugged Santa Lucia mountains and thick Ventana Wilderness; below us sea otters are basking on the kelp and surfing on waves that pound on the rocks.

“What group are you in?” she asks, having caught me peering

conspicuously through the sulphurous mist and bubbling waters.

“Sorry?” I reply, feebly.

“Are you here for singing Gestalt or sacred dance?” she says casually, stretching out a hand to stroke the leaves of a flower growing near a statue of Buddha.

“Oh, neither,” I say. “I’m just here as an individual.”

Individualism is to Esalen what pocket grit is to the Test and County Cricket Board: not quite playing the game. Although the idyllic retreat, set on a 165-acre promontory of redwood groves, eucalyptus trees and colourful gardens, attracts softcore dilettantes (like me) looking for renewal, relaxation and gentle pampering, Esalen is actually more about encounter groups, experience sharing and communal living than personal indulgence. Hardcore mind warriors like Beth head to Esalen to have their consciousnesses raised in any number of esoteric seminars and weekend

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workshops – from “Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain” to “Soul: from Socrates to Ray Charles”. It’s a kind of secular monastery, a metaphysical holiday camp.

Over the years it has welcomed all manner of intellectual celebrities. In the Fifties, Big Sur Hot Springs was renowned as the Eden discovered by Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac. Joan Baez once lived there and Hunter S Thompson worked as the security guard (he is said to have shot holes in his room and almost been pushed off a cliff by a group of gay intruders). Later, after Esalen had become the cradle of the “human potential movement” and the epicentre of the Sixties’ consciousness revolution, it played host to the likes of Aldous Huxley, Arnold Toynbee, Buckminster Fuller and Abraham Maslow. Later Jane Fonda, Simon and Garfunkel and George and Ringo all dropped in and dropped out.

It is easy to see why. Approximately 300 miles north of LA and 175 miles south of San Francisco, it is the perfect refuge for all kinds of travellers, but especially if you are driving one of the most spectacular routes in the world – the journey along Californian State Highway 1. Around Big Sur the serpentine, 80-mile series of cliff-top hairpins and harrowing inclines can test the most experienced of drivers – especially during the area’s frequent winter storms and heavy rainfall. An overnight stay at Esalen is a very welcome stop-over.

LA to San Francisco can be fast-laned in six or seven hours, but one of the joys of a coastal trip like this is to relax into it and soak in the subtle changes that California goes through as you head north. This is not just topographical and climatic – from long stretches of sub-tropical surf beaches to cooler, wetter mountain ranges and coastal coves – but political too. It is a truism that the state gets more liberal-minded as you go further north, yet it is hard to imagine two coastal towns as culturally different as Santa Barbara, 100 miles north of LA, and Santa Cruz, 75 miles south of San Francisco. The former is a genteel, monied and manicured resort; the latter is a tense mix of university liberalism and leftover radicalism, the place where Ken Kesey’s whole Electric Koolaid Acid Test first began.

However much time you have, whatever your political affiliations, the Pacific Coast Highway will provoke and surprise. LAers rave about the town of Solvang, a kitsch, windmill-and-clog-loving corner of the beautiful, inland Santa Ynez valley that will be forever Danish (it even has a Hamlet Motel). Tourists head in their thousands to Hearst Castle in San Simeon, the opulent hilltop folly of William Randolph Hearst, the media magnate who inspired Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*. And almost all visitors come back with memories of a favourite seaside town, from scenic Morro Bay to quaint, uppercrust Carmel, where Clint Eastwood was once mayor, to Pismo Beach, where at dusk, when the tide is out, you can speed up and down the beach.

There are also culinary discoveries to be made. Don’t miss the famous, cliff-top Nepenthe restaurant on Highway 1 just north of Esalen with its unrivalled views south along the Big Sur coast. Try Be Bop Burgers (111 State St, Santa Barbara), where a DJ will spin your favourite bobby-sox 45 as you munch on a “Bruce Johnston’s Beach Boys Veggie Burger with Fun, Fun, Fun Fries”. Or check out the surfer and biker shack, Neptune’s Net, 30 miles north of LA near Point Magu, where the fried shrimps come in three sizes: large, jumbo and colossal.

And there are some great places to stay too. In Santa Barbara try the luxury, beachfront Four Seasons



**Rocky road:** opposite, main pic, Big Sur. Inset, spa baths at Esalen. Left, the Biltmore, Santa Barbara. Below, garish room 109 at the Madonna Inn



## Esalen is a metaphysical holiday camp. “Are you here for sacred dance?” she asks casually

– especially at \$1.34 (90p) a gallon. In fact, one of the most profound joys of a trip like this is to be found in its simple, unexpected pleasures: stumbling across a diner that serves sublime breakfast hash browns; driving, rooftop down, cruise control on, into a dazzling, low sun that lights up the Tarmac like cut diamonds; and tuning in to radio stations on which you can pick up anything from Mexican pop and shout-show phone-ins to DJs called Randy and Slim who’ll “bring you the kind of country you just can’t get anywhere else”. They could be the watchwords of the Pacific Coast Highway itself. **PW** GQ travelled to California with Virgin Holidays (01293 617181). Fly-drives into LA and out of SF start at £374 per week. GQ stayed at the San Ysidro Ranch, 900 San Ysidro Lane, Montecito, CA 93108 (805 969 5046); the Ventana, Big Sur, CA 93920 (408 667 2331); and the Four Seasons at 1260 Channel Drive, Santa Barbara, CA 93108 and 495 Geary St, San Francisco, CA 94102 (call 0800 526646 for information). The Esalen Institute is on Highway 1 at Big Sur CA 93920 (408 667 3000). Call ahead – accommodation is often heavily booked, and rooms may be shared. The Madonna Inn is at 100 Madonna Road, San Luis Obispo, CA 93405 (805 543 3000). For general travel information contact the USTTA, PO Box 1EN, London W1A 1AE (0171-495 4466).

## IN A MANOR OF SPEAKING



**Moynes Park, the 500-year-old family house of Lord and Lady Ivar Mountbatten, provides the perfect setting for the ultimate weekend house party. The Elizabethan manor house, on**

the Essex/Suffolk border, has been restored by its present owners to offer accommodation in nine double bedrooms, each with en suite bathroom, many with four poster beds. One, the Moat Room, is said to have been the favourite of James Bond author Ian Fleming. There is an outdoor swimming pool and tennis court, and the 250 acres of parkland lend themselves to numerous outdoor activities,

including shooting parties which can be arranged during the season. Moynes is just an hour’s drive from the City of London and 30 minutes from Cambridge. The weekend price for nine couples is £1,665 including Saturday dinner, Sunday breakfast, lunch and tea, and the presence of Lord and Lady Ivar if required. Drinks and VAT are extra. Call Rosie Coutts on 01440 730073 for details. **LINSEY McNEILL**