

California DREAMING

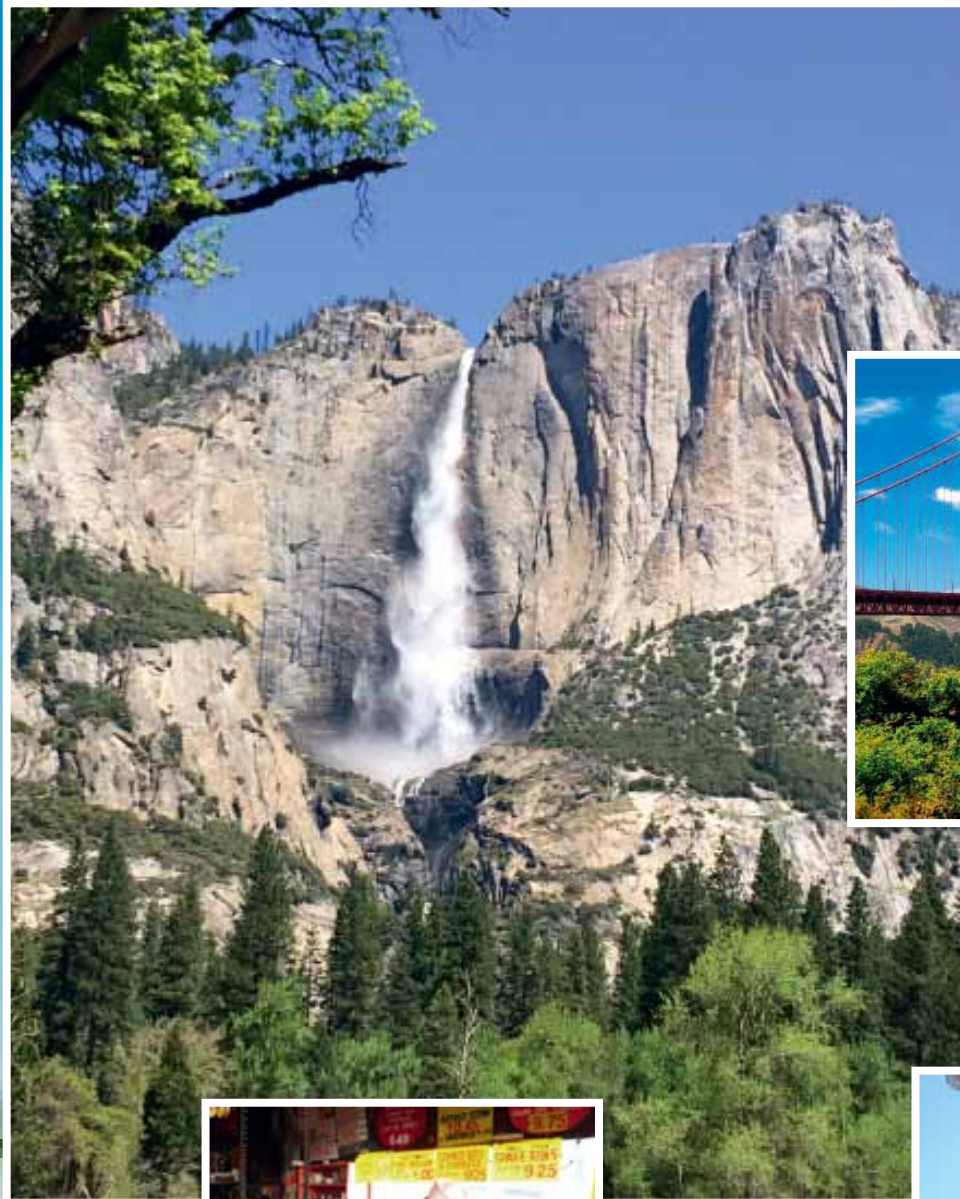
Take a group tour of the American west coast and you'll be amazed at how quickly friendships form, says *Neil Davey*

Trafalgar, a company specialising in guided holidays with a genuine insider edge, is hosting me on its Californian 'taster tour'. Being a travel writer, people often assume I get special treatment wherever I go and experience 'behind the scenes' things a 'normal' person wouldn't be able to. They've got a point. When you travel as a journalist, doors do open and lovely people from the place you're visiting do try to make sure you see it at its best. Happily, that's what everybody gets on a Trafalgar tour (each caters for up to

about 40 people) plus an excellent guide – in our case, the eternally patient, supremely organised Korie – an air-conditioned coach with free Wi-Fi, a brilliant driver – we had the calm, dependable, very entertaining Willie – accommodation, many meals and a schedule that mixes great opportunities with a decent amount of free time for your own exploring.

We begin in San Francisco, a city where, like Edinburgh, you always seem to be walking uphill – even when you turn round and go back the way you came. While others in the group use the few hours before dinner to relax, I've earmarked a bar I want to visit, Tommy's Joynt which has been under the same family ownership since 1947. I persuade fellow traveller Jeremy that it's worth what appears to be a mile-or-so's walk in the Californian sunshine to sample a couple of the 130+ beers on offer – but then we're confronted ▶

'Best of all is the tour of the hippy district of Haight-Ashbury'



Hit the road, clockwise from top left: Yosemite Falls; street art in Balmy Alley; the Golden Gate Bridge; road signs and painted houses in Haight-Ashbury; jellyfish at the Monterey Aquarium; local legend Izu (and her dog Benny) holding court; a meal at B Restaurant; the Tommy's Joynt sandwich counter



by a hill so steep it appears to be the start of a theme park ride. Calf muscles screaming, we conquer it – only to discover a steeper slope behind it. We're not looking great by the time we arrive at Tommy's, but decide our efforts more than justify a couple of beers and their celebrated brisket sandwich.

Off to a good start

Someone later jokingly suggests that the eternally uphill thing is caused by California's famous seismic activity. While earthquakes have been disastrous for San Francisco over the last century-and-a-bit, there have been benefits: the 1989 earthquake destroyed an ugly freeway, an act of God that opened up the now striking Embarcadero area and revitalised the Ferry Building. This still serves as a terminal for the ferries that zip across the harbour, but is also an indoor farmers' market, and a fine location for a graze the following morning, guided by the knowledgeable Karen of Edible Excursions. OK, I'm going to like anyone who plies me with cheese and cake – but it's a great and informative few hours.

Over the next couple of days, we explore other bits of San Francisco – including an unforgettable, bracing

walk across the Golden Gate Bridge; a delightfully healthy lunch at B Restaurant; and a stroll around the Mission District. While gentrified, the area still packs some more authentic local flavour including, thanks to Korie's knowledge, Balmy Alley – a cut-through decorated with some remarkable street art. Best of all, though, is the walking tour of the hippy district of Haight-

'Our local tour guide tells us first-hand tales from when Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix lived nearby'

Dead, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix...

By the time we head on to Monterey, the social dynamic in our party has completely changed. Barriers have not just started to crumble, but have vanished completely and the group – a colourful mix of ages and personalities from all corners of the globe and strangers only 48 hours before – are now chatting happily, swapping seats and stories like old friends. Still, shared experiences will do that, not to mention Korie's smart – and, from a British perspective, not too embarrassing – ice-breaking games.

Ashbury, led – in agreeably eccentric style – by local legend Izu and her dachshund Benny. Contrary to the old adage, Izu lived through the Sixties and remembers them, telling us first-hand tales of local residents like the Grateful

Dumbstruck by jellyfish

In Monterey, we gain access to the justifiably celebrated Monterey Aquarium an hour before it opens to the public – which we spend dumbstruck by the amazing jellyfish – and then go for the best meal of the trip, at Happy Girl Kitchen, a vegetarian restaurant run by the marvellously named Todd and Jordan Champagne. Had you asked me to predict my favourite meal, I suspect the words 'carrot' and 'risotto' would not have featured. Happy Girl Kitchen – 'the name's to make people smile,' explains Jordan – doesn't usually open for dinner, but makes an exception for Trafalgar's groups. We enjoy a splendid private dinner, fuelled by great wine, kombucha and shrubs – fermented soft drinks that are something of a HGK speciality – and superb, and healthy, food.

The following day finds us heading down the achingly pretty 17-Mile Drive – a private road that skirts a coastline of Hollywood-quality ruggedness, the famous 'Lone Cypress' and finishes in Carmel-by-the-Sea, the chocolate box town where Clint Eastwood was once mayor. It's a brief stop, however, en route to the Sierra Nevada and our next destination: Yosemite.

We arrive at night, so it's not until the following morning that I see Yosemite's jaw-dropping scenery. Even then, my mind shuts it out, unable to comprehend the half-mile high cliffs that surround this ludicrously beautiful national park

(and the bigger, almost-5000ft, peak of Half Dome). I'm not entirely convinced I close my mouth over the next two days, as this is natural beauty on a scale I've never seen before. Even the interior of our hotel, The Ahwahnee – which, it transpires, provided creepy inspiration for the hotel in Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* – can't shake the sense of wonderment provided by locations such as the aptly named Mirror Lake and Tunnel View, the dazzling waterfalls or, to my eternal delight, the few minutes we spend watching a female black bear feast on termites from a fallen tree. That, I should stress, was luck – not a standard Trafalgar offering.

The final sundowner

From the Sierra Nevada, it's a long but spectacular drive to our final destination – Sonoma. The journey has a soundtrack of California-themed songs provided by Korie – and a stop at Merced Fruit Barn, one of several such outlets that dot the state (and potentially healthier than a Little Chef, providing you ignore the stickier treats on offer).

Our first stop is at the Ravenswood Winery where our host, Peter Griffith, gives us the chance to blend our own half bottles from larger jars of Zinfandel (for flavour), Petite Sirah (for body) and Carignan (for acidity). There's a fair

amount of research sipping (look, it's not greed, it's thoroughness, alright?) – before I settle on a blend of 75% Zinfandel, 15% Carignan and 10% Petit Sirah that I'll take home and plan to save for Christmas lunch.

There's rather more expertly-made wine later at our final group dinner at Nicholson Ranch, a winery owned by the fascinating Deepak Gulrajani. He was born in Mumbai and arrived in California armed with a computer engineering degree, before deciding wine was his calling. The ranch doesn't have a restaurant – this dinner is another unique offering courtesy of Trafalgar and some fine roving catering from Cochon Volant (Flying Pig) BBQ.

As the sun sets behind the vines, there's a satisfying sense of us coming full circle, with Deepak pouring the wine Californian opportunity has allowed him to produce for a group enjoying the Californian opportunities Trafalgar has unlocked. Yep – I'll drink to that.

Neil travelled to California courtesy of Trafalgar (trafalgar.com/uk) and United Airlines (united.com).

Jaw-dropping scenery, clockwise from below: a peacock displays at Merced Fruit Barn; Neil (right) with Peter at Ravenswood; a Yosemite bear warning; tour guide Michael with a 'magic' leaf at Yosemite; a stunning Yosemite view; tomatoes from Happy Girl Kitchen



MORE ON THE TOUR

Trafalgar (trafalgar.com/uk) offers eight-day California tours from around £2,855 per person, including international flights, VIP airport transfers, all other land transfers, seven nights' accommodation on a bed and breakfast basis, some meals, sightseeing and the services of a professional travel director throughout.

For more information on travelling to California, see visitcalifornia.co.uk. ↗

