

California



by Harley

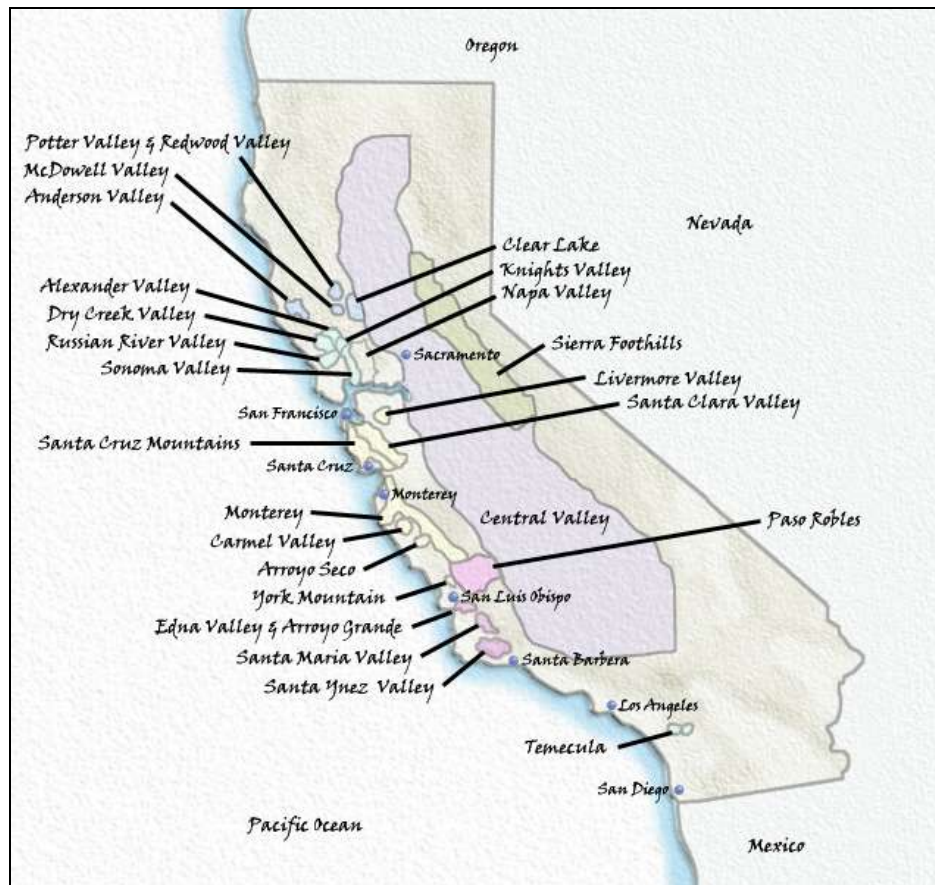
Rich Oatley reports

It was a hot time across the Mojave desert, getting used to the heavy handling of the Harley Davidson Fatboy amongst the monster 18-wheeler 'Rigs' on Interstate 15, and arms red from not wearing the leather jacket (don't tell Mom). It was a seven-hour stint from Las Vegas to Santa Barbara, as I had decided that LA was worth circumventing completely and I may as well get there in one go. What's left of my receding but ever-so-distinguished hair was fluttering in the Pacific wind and the sun was already beginning to set as I rumbled through the clean and quiet Santa Barbara streets, finally pulling up at the Hotel Andalucia – a bit smart for a biker-type, but my accent seemed to part the proverbial seas.

A shower and a self-administered bottom massage later (there's never anyone around when you need them), and I was in a local bar getting tips for where to head for in Santa Barbara Wine Country the next day. As I was against time with over 2000 miles to cover there was no time to lose basking on the beaches. After quite a few 'research' glasses, some scribbled maps and lively banter with the locals, I threw in the towel and headed for my room.

Next morning came quickly. Excited about my riding my new toy, I strode Schwarzenegger-style to my bright yellow steed, stamped the foot-plates and wound north through the lakelands into wine country – an area made internationally famous by the 2004 film Sideways. The hills between the Wine Country and the Pacific are renowned for protecting the vineyards from the cooling ocean breeze, whilst allowing a little of the early morning fog across at night to cloud-wrap the delicate Pinot Noir vines. The smorgasbord of rolling hills and lakes made for a picturesque ride, and I rolled into Buellton at lunchtime. I decided that a drink at the now world famous 'Hitching Post' was in order, but it opens only in the evening, so I headed into the extraordinary Dutch town of Solvang two miles west to find a motel for the night. Aaah, the trusty Best Western (I've never spotted a swimming pool at a Travelodge).

California Winelands



Solang is a curious place. Dutch historically, it looks like a 'Hansel and Gretel' film set and I could not help thinking that at any moment, hordes of clog-wearing crazed Gouda-lovers were about to pounce out of the shadows and immerse me in some cult (or fondue), never to let me leave. But I was here for the wine and not tulips.

Most of the local wine producers have outlets in Solvang for the more travelling-challenged tourists (the majority of the States, then). I enjoyed the tastings at Firestone, Epiphany, Presidio and Buttonwood, although many producers were experimenting (fairly unsuccessfully) with varietals not indigenous to the area (Gewurztraminer et al), although I did find some great Voignier and of course Pinot Noir. A number of producers claimed that many of their wines used grapes from elsewhere including Napa and Sonoma, which was disappointing as it was hard to get an idea of the region and its flavour. So I thought that a mission that evening down to the Hitching Post (the last stop in Sideways) would help.

Sitting at the bar, quaffing the Hitching Post's quite awesome very own flagship 'Highliner' Pinot Noir, I was joined for dinner by the wine maker and proprietor Frank Ostini. A fabulous evening of wine and food ensued into the early hours. In between mouthfuls of fresh ostrich and ludicrously tasty mid-western Flat Iron fillets, Frank claimed that he and the staff resented the fame and glory that the film 'Sideways' had given the restaurant and it's winery. Yes Frank!

After a needed sleep, it was onto two wheels once again and onto Highway One, snaking it's way and cutting spectacularly through the cliff faces of the Pacific coast. Breathtaking and deserted (and cold too) it cleared the cobwebs away in minutes.



My mission was to get up the coast, through San Francisco and into Napa and Sonoma to immerse myself once again in Uncle Sam's nectar (not the 'Bud Ice' variety). The rugged geological drama of Big Sur and Nepenthe came and went, and I stopped in Monterey Bay (home to Cannery Row as immortalised by Steinbeck) for a kip and a little action at the world famous aquarium... disappointingly home to a couple of lazy goldfish and a slightly agitated sea bass. Then up through Clint Eastwood's quaint'n'cute Carmel and with no time to stop, I roared into San Francisco's city limits. The feeling and emotion of riding a Harley across the Golden Gate Bridge, beast throbbing, feet high on the footplates and arms outstretched, on an unusually warm and rare clear day, was describable only by the enormous grin on my face. This was what it was all about.



Stopping on the north side of the bridge for a photo opportunity looking back across the bay to Alcatraz and the city itself, I met a couple of cops on bikes. Mike and 'Ponch' – that's right he had changed his name to that of Erik Estrada's character in the 80's series 'ChiPs'. Luckily he was game for a laugh and they escorted me for an impromptu tour through the streets of San Francisco, which was as fabulously surreal as it was ridiculously irregular!

Then up into Sausalito and east into Sonoma and Napa. These two valleys spread north to south parallel to the coast, making a W shape.



Very pretty scenery and big and sparkling wines rule the roost in this area – Rutherford Estates, Rubicon, Thirteen, Alpha Omega, Chappellet, Mondavi (Robster), Mumm Napa, to name but a few. Great wines, and you could really get a feel from the place and a taste of the region, which I did not necessarily feel I managed in Santa Barbara. They were not cheap however, even on

location, and often shops and chains in the UK are tentative about stocking Californian wines due to their higher than average price, which I personally feel is a shame. But I wanted to see more, and it was not until I met local Chris at a spontaneously hosted pool party, that this was possible. He told me to meet him first thing at a certain address. Was this to be my first uncomfortable encounter with the leather-clad moustache brigade that Francis had warned me about back in the office? Would I not be able to sit on my bike for days? Worse still, would I be smiling?

Thankfully not! I met Chris in a field next to a large barn on the outskirts of Napa. The barn doors were opened revealing a 1940's Steerman Bi-Plane. Once I had donned a parachute (apparently just in case) and a flight cap, we were off. Never having been in such a historical plane before (it is what they used to train the GI pilots in WW1), the experience was nothing short of sensational.



In the hour and a half we were up, we covered both valleys so that I could get a real feel for the lie of the land and see exactly where the vineyards were plotted – something I could never have done from the ground. I am forever grateful to my pilot, except for his decision to perform unprovoked and very sudden loop-the-loops and 'hammerhead' manoeuvres just to show me "what the bird could do". Impressive as it was, I am glad I had no breakfast that morning.

Although there were so many producers I still wanted to see, there was the inevitable truth of a plane to catch and I had yet to get to the fabulous Yosemite National Park. So it was time to head east across the endless farmland flats of California before climbing and twisting in to Yosemite.



Three unforgettable days were spent swimming in glacial waters and marvelling at the sense of space and wonder of this place – New Zealand, Chile and Middle Earth all wrapped into one. After this, my first and only real 'break' of the trip, with two days left and 400 miles to still cover, it was time to head east from Yosemite

Valley, across the glorious high 'Alaskan' meadowlands of the Tioga Pass and over the snow-covered Sierra Nevada Mountains. Finally, as a blistering and highly irresponsible way to finish a spectacular trip, I powered down into the searing 132 degrees of midday heat across the 90 miles of Death Valley and back to Vegas.

