

Ormand Family Activity

May 2016: Sequoia and Yosemite

Our vacation plans tend to focus on three primary interests:

- See all 50 states (we're up to 27 so far)
- See lighthouses (Jerri is a member of the Lighthouse Society)
- See all (or most) of the national parks and monuments (Jerri has a "Passport" book in which she collects stamps)

In keeping with this, we've intended to visit the great parks in California (the ones that started it all) - Sequoia and Yosemite - and peek in on Monterey and travel down the Pacific Coast Highway.

This is also the year that Faith graduates Summa Cum Laude from Northern Arizona University! She also wants to see the great parks, she doesn't really much care for Las Vegas and Death Valley (places we intend to visit on the way out), and she already has plans for a Southern California fling with her also-graduated school chums. As we plan our route and our stays, we purchase a one-way ticket from San Diego to Fresno on Alaska Air (funny that Alaska is the only in-state carrier from San Diego to Fresno).

We have visited Las Vegas before, but we stayed at an inexpensive generic hotel, not one of the resort hotels on the Strip. I have a hankering to stay at an *real* iconic Las Vegas hotel, and what is more legendary than the Golden Nugget on Fremont Street? To get to the northwest corner of Arizona requires us to trace our usual NAU path. This time, however, I change the rules; North of Phoenix and south of Camp Verde is the Cordes Junction; this time, instead of just blasting through, we get off on the road through Prescott and Ash Fork. Prescott is one of the great Arizona towns, and is worth a visit in its own right, but this time is not the right time, so we just roll on through. By the time we get to Ash Fork and beyond it to our first stop, Kingman, it is already late. Dinner is a steak (and poor service) at the Dambar, and our first night's repose is at the El Trovatore Motel.

Staying at El Trovatore requires an appreciation for Route 66 nostalgia and kitsch. It's a comfortable room, but the bathroom is... dated. It is a bit amusing that the shower, which is a built-in tiled arrangement and not just a tub and shower curtain, has the valve handles at one end of the compartment and the shower head at the other. Here we are the next morning, standing outside the "Cary Grant" room.



We saw a lot of Kingman during our previous Route 66 visit, but we did not get inside the Bonelli House. Stopping and enquiring at the Powerhouse museum and Kingman visitors' center, we learn that the Bonelli House is open today, so we go and check it out. Bonelli was an important figure in pioneer Kingman and Mohave County, and eventually built his mercantile start into a

powerful ranching and land business that covered a considerable extent of northwest Arizona. After he died, his wife oversaw the gradual decay of the empire until only the house remained, and the last surviving child who lived here willed it to the city as a historical site. The upper story originally offered access to the large attic, used for overflow sleeping quarters for visiting relatives and a play area for the children, and has a cupola for light (and spying on the neighbors). Now, it is used for the added-on central air conditioning. The upper rooms also have doors out to the wrap-around veranda which makes this such an unusual and attractive residence.

We can't spend any more time in Kingman, because our first real vacation stop is Hoover Dam, one of the great American engineering wonders. We get there in time for one of the last power room tours (there is another tour of the interior dam structures, but it is limited

availability and very popular, and so is sold out by the afternoon). Afterwards, we drive across the dam to the Arizona side to look at the back side of the dam and the new bridge across the Colorado gorge.



The tour started with a film of the historical setting of the dam construction (which busted a few myths - nobody died by being encased in concrete; the pour was too slow for that, and they actually had men out walking in the fresh concrete to spread it out in the forms). It then progressed to a long elevator trip down to a staging room where one of the great pipes feeding the turbines ("penstocks") was visible.

Then the tour guide took us out to the platform over the generating room. The scale is boggling. There are ten of the giant turbines all in operation, generating power to be fed out for sale to the adjacent states. The smaller turbine in the foreground (of which even the portion above the floor is taller than a man) generates power for use internally by the dam operations. The overhead crane is available for lifting turbine assemblies out for repair. We are told that this room has a copy on the other side of the river.



At the conclusion of the tour is another long elevator trip back up. Back at the top is a fine little museum, and an exit to the road across the dam.



On the other side of the road is a monument set up when the dam was finished. No surprise, the dedication ceremony was a Big Deal. From the signs we learn that the components of the statues were assembled by positioning them on blocks of ice, and the components slowly lowered into place as the ice melted. Note the Art Deco style.

Part of the monument are plaques for the three states, with highlights from their state seals, such as our own Ditat Deus.



After this, we walk out across the dam, looking at the huge intake towers, and gazing down the sloping outer face of the dam. Not a good place for people with fear of heights. Also on the top of the dam were the original facilities for tours, when there was less traffic and less fear of terrorism and sabotage - ticket booths and elevators down into the dam structure, all with the 1930s Art Deco style.



On the way out of the dam area, we stop to look at the bridge, which has a pedestrian path next to the traffic lanes. Another place for acrophobes to avoid - just leaning over the rail to look down at the river below makes your head swim!

The front face of the dam and the lake behind it as viewed from the bridge. Note the towers for the power lines leaning out over the gorge; the high-voltage cables run from the generating rooms directly to these towers and thence to the distribution lines on level ground. Note also how much higher the level of the lake has been in the past.



We have finally done the Zonie tourist thing of seeing the mighty Hoover Dam. We can now proceed to Las Vegas and let the GPS device guide us to the Golden Nugget. Jerri has arranged a not-outrageously expensive room with a not deplorable view in the Rush Tower. That evening, we look around the hotel and dine on Italian fare at The Grotto, one of the Golden Nugget's nicer restaurants. Upon checking in, we get a sheet of coupons for use at the hotel. Some of them are of no interest to us - cocktails in their Gold-Diggers' lounge, or free tokens (with a minimum purchase) for playing the tables. Others, like a Grotto coupon, are great, as is the two "buy one get one free" coupons for breakfast in the hotel buffet. Which we use the next morning, and the Golden Nugget has a fine buffet.

Now, my original notion for our Vegas stay was to just relax, hang out at the pool or sit and read books or watch people. Jerri has other ideas - she wants to see the aquarium at Mandalay Bay. Upon arriving in our hotel room, I find a magazine guide to current attractions, and learn

that David Copperfield is playing at the MGM Grand. This morning we stop by the concierge desk and get two (pricey) tickets for today's evening show.



The Golden Nugget is on Fremont Street, and the Mandalay Bay hotel is at the southernmost end of the Strip. Las Vegas has two sets of buses that run routes in the casino district, so we get passes and get on the bus, just to avoid the crazy traffic on and around the Strip. Mandalay Bay has an exotic Burmese or Malaysian theme.

Inside the hotel, it is quite a hike to the back parts where the aquarium is. There are two attractions, and I get tickets for both. The aquarium is nice - for a hotel; of course, the Long Beach Aquarium is far better, and the upcoming Monterey Bay Aquarium blows it away.

The other attraction is "Monsters of the Deep", which is primarily plasticized carcasses of deep sea creatures, like this Sun Fish. Or not-so deep-sea, like an emperor penguin. Plasticized animals are creepy, but at least it wasn't plasticized human carcasses, like we've seen elsewhere. There was also a little display on deep-sea exploration and famous



vessels. I knew the most famous one was not represented, but I couldn't remember what it was - I asked their "helpful expert" who was walking around answering people's questions or dispensing interesting facts. He didn't know, and the fellow on the other end of his walkie-talkie didn't know even after doing an Internet search. It wasn't until much later that I remembered - the bathyscaphe *Trieste*, built by Auguste Piccard.

We return to the Nugget shortly after our lunch in Mandalay Bay's food court, and it's time to try out the pool. The Golden Nugget's other big attraction is "The Shark Tank". The pool is laid out around an above-ground fish tank stocked with shark and other large fish. A water slide starts from the deck over the tank, loops around, and runs through the tank - and the tube walls inside the tank are transparent. The worst part of the pool is there isn't much room for seating - every available space is occupied by a lounge chair, and there aren't enough chairs for the guests. We get lucky and find a couple of unused chairs, leave our towels in them, and try out the pool and the slide. We go down twice - unless you manage to control your speed on the slide, you zoom through the tank too fast and with too much water spraying you in the eyes to appreciate the sensation of swimming with the sharks. However, once you're in the pool, you can swim up through or around the waterfalls cascading from the upper level and look into the tank at the sealife. After some time in the pool, we lay out in the sun for a little bit until realizing that the hot Vegas sun, even in May, could be tolerated only to a limited extent. Now, when we were at Mandalay Bay the previous day, we walked past a window looking down into the pool area, and I noticed it was much larger, with more lounge chairs, and with shady umbrellas. I think the Golden Nugget does the best it can with the limited real estate that goes with being a downtown hotel.



Just to remember what it was like, I take Jerri's picture on the morning we left the hotel, before any other guests had come out. The waterfalls aren't running, but the tank is visible to the right, past one of the lounge chairs standing in the shallows. What is not visible are the gaming tables around the outer edge of the pool area run by girls in bikinis, so that even while in the pool

area, guests can gamble their money away.

That evening is the Copperfield show. Once again, we take the bus. This time, however, we get a late start - I forget the tickets in the room, and by the time I get back, the first bus is already gone, and when we board the next bus, the driver is in a prolonged "discussion" with a rider who is either drunk or drugged or just bad-tempered. We can't leave until the driver succeeds in getting the man off the bus. Looking at my watch, and gauging the progress of the bus down the boulevard, I see the MGM Grand but misjudge the distance and panic, hustling Jerri off the bus at the next stop. We were still the better part of a mile away! Poor Jerri. She was not wearing footwear appropriate for a fast walk up the crowded sidewalk. We finally got to the hotel and to the theatre just as they were admitting people. Jerri went to find a restroom while I went into the theatre to find a seat. She caught up to me before the doors closed and the show began.

It really was a very good show. Copperfield is a tremendous showman and magician. At one point during his act, an enormous flying saucer spaceship (obviously based on a lighter-than-air balloon) soared into the theatre and hovered over an awestruck crowd.

After the show, we have our dinner in the MGM Grand's stellar buffet. Honestly, it was hard to stop sampling the tremendous array of dishes. Then Jerri left to find a restroom. I paid the bill and went out myself - only to realize I had no idea where in the vast casino area she might have gone to. I had no means for her to contact me. I stood there for a long while, then did the worst thing possible - I started drifting around hoping I would cross her path.

After a long while later, I did! We started toward the main exit, stopping briefly to take Jerri's picture standing next to David Copperfield's bust. At the main lobby, we asked a valet what happened to the lions that were formerly on exhibit in the hotel, and were informed that they turned all the lions over to a wildlife refuge. Leaving the hotel via the main exit, we discover that the MGM Grand Hotel's main exit, like the Golden Nugget's, is *not* on the main road. We end up having to walk all the way around the hotel on deserted, dimly-lit sidewalks, to get back to Las Vegas Boulevard - again, with Jerri wearing her sandals. We were both glad to get back to our hotel room.



But the day isn't done. One of the chief attractions of the old downtown area is the Fremont Street Experience. Fremont Street is where the original casinos are located, including the Pioneer with its iconic "Vegas Vic" neon cowboy enticing passers-by in to try their luck. Fremont Street is now enclosed with a canopy two or three blocks long, in which are embedded millions of multicolored LEDs controlled by an amazing computer system. At night, the canopy has random images and advertisements playing, but on the hour, all the neon lights are turned off and the speakers all over the street play music, and a coordinated light show three blocks long plays in sync with the music. *Very* impressive. The previous night, we were stuck at dinner and missed all the practical shows. Tonight, I make a point of being outside before it starts. In addition to the light show, there are stages in locations along the street with bands playing (not during the show) and bars serving drinks in glowing cups. Characters in costume (sometimes girls in almost no costume) stand in little circles for you to pay for a picture with them. There are street performers and artists and magicians here and there, coming and going all night long. Overhead, people zoom past on an elaborate zipline.



The next morning we have our final breakfast at the Nugget's buffet and take our bags back out to the van and return to buy some chocolates in the little gift shop. Right around the corner from the chocolatier was this display case with the World's Largest Golden Nugget - the "Hand of Faith". So yes, the Golden Nugget has the authentic Golden Nugget.

We are leaving Las Vegas, now, driving south on the Boulevard toward the interstate. On the way, we see the iconic Welcome sign, and stop for an iconic tourist photo.



The road to Death Valley runs up inside Nevada along the border to Amargosa Valley. Along the way, we pass Creech Air Force Base, where the Thunderbirds were started. The road then turns south from Amargosa Valley over the California border through the most amazing and uncomfortable sustained dust storm or blowing dust area. We were relieved to finally make it out of the dust to get to Death Valley Junction and turn into the national monument itself. On the way, we take a side road up to Dante's Peak, a commanding overlook on the south side of Death Valley, with a view of the vast dry lake. The lowest point in North America, Badwater Basin, is just down there somewhere.



After looking around a while, we proceed back to the main road and toward our destination of the Furnace Creek Resort. At a junction in the road, we encounter a beautiful old hotel, the Furnace Creek Inn. At first, I think we have arrived, but we both notice a distinct lack of vehicles in the lot. Turns out the Inn was *THE* place to stay in Death Valley at the turn of the century, but it is now abandoned. I surely hope that they can restore the Inn to some degree of its former glory, as a historic site if not for a working lodge.

The Visitors' Center is maybe a mile further down the road. We stop, buy a 2016 National Park Pass (we will get our money's use out of it just on this trip), and discover that one of the primary attractions of Death Valley is closed - "Scotty's Castle", a 1920s-era millionaire's desert mansion that I had visited in my off-time on a previous China Lake business trip a few years earlier. Seems that a flash flood had washed the road out and deposited a great deal of mud in the Castle structures, and they would be closed for years while repairs and cleanup were under way. Seems funny that "flood", "washed out road", and "mud" would be destruction occurring in Death Valley.

We arrive at the Lodge and check in. Our "room" is actually a delightful little cabin on the edge of the resort property. The resort also has a

general store, a post office, two dining areas, horseback riding, an "80-degree year-round" swimming pool, a museum, and a golf course. I'm thinking that Death Valley might be an even nicer place for a "kick back and relax" vacation spot than Las Vegas. After settling in, we have a (surprisingly expensive) steak dinner in the more "formal" restaurant, and then return to our cabin. The stiff wind that has been blowing on us ever since we got to Amargosa Valley is shrieking around the cabin. I am sincerely hoping this is not characteristic of this place, and that it has died away by morning.

It does. The next morning is beautiful. After breakfast in the (same) restaurant, we get some sandwiches and fruit and bottled drinks in the general store for lunch later in the day, and leave for the south parts of the monument.



Along the way, in a particular region of the dry lake bed, is a stop for visitors to view the "Devil's Golf Course", where an aggressive cycle of rains and flooding and percolation and drying has churned the landscape into a tortured mess of huge salt-encrusted dirt clods. It is a vast area. In previous (unenlightened) days, the park rangers would entertain visitors by dynamiting craters exposing the briney water just under the surface. The location has been used for movies due to its exaggerated desolation.



We reach Badwater Basin. Photographic evidence that Jerri and I were at the lowest point in North America. Then we walk further out on the salt flat where all the other people are. Contrary to the park rules, guests are marking their names or home countries in the salt lake bed, or digging little pits to the brine just inches below the ground level. We walk way out there, looking for...



I'm not sure. It's just a dry lake bed. At Edwards AFB, just about a hundred miles southwest of here, they use the dry lake beds as aircraft landing strips. I think the briney sump around Badwater Basin is more interesting, and the "Sea Level" mark way up on the side of the bordering hill face.



Returning from Badwater Basin, there are a few more things to see. The ranger at the Visitors' Center recommended the natural bridge. It's quite a drive over difficult road (for a minivan) to the parking lot, and then a hike into the eastern hills. Uphill. After a while, Jerri stops, thinking it's going to be too far. I continue, thinking it can't be too much farther. It is farther than I think. After I gaze in rapture at the natural bridge, I turn back to get Jerri. I find her proceeding on her own further up the path! Then together we return for mutual photos.

Jerri's turn, as viewed from the east back toward the way we had come. Further up, the gorge becomes a slot canyon, but that's too far for Jerri.



We hike back to the van, drive slowly and carefully back to the main road, and then on to the next sight: Artist's Drive, where the hills are mounds of colored minerals. Not unlike our own Painted Desert, but closer and more varied. Also, the green which Zonies would think was a copper compound is not; rather, a manganese. Well worth the visit!

There is more stuff to see on the South road, but we have too many other things to see today, including:

- The Devil's Cornfield - a vast plain of little tufts of weed holding together their little hills of sand.
- The Sand Dunes - we've been to the Great Sand Dunes park in Colorado and White Sands; this isn't up to those standards, but it is another example of the tremendous variety of landscape in this desolate place.
- Stovepipe Wells (where we stop for lunch and a visit to the gift shop) - there's another guest lodge here, but it's really more of a hotel, nothing like the Furnace Creek Resort.
- Panamint Springs, which is the only other facility for visitors to stay, but it's camping-only; there's a gas pump and a general store/gift shop, but that's about all that distinguishes it from a large number of other camp sites (most of them in more scenic settings).

And lastly, the Charcoal Kilns. Before the establishment of the park, there was a lot of mining activity in the valley, but it's a long way to

transportation (that is, the rail station), so it served the purpose of the mining communities better to do some of the smelting of the ore locally. The juniper forest was a source of fuel, and a Swiss-born mining engineer designed these

kilns to convert bulky wood into hotter-burning and more compact charcoal. They are impressive structures, inside and out - I can walk through the lower doorways without stooping. On the back side, there is another door where more wood was introduced when the lower area accessible through the main door was completely filled. Then the fire was started, the openings blocked, and the wood burned slowly for many days until it was converted to charcoal and loaded onto burros for transportation to other places in the Valley.



On the long way back, evening falls, and we experience the magic of a giant moon rising and peeking over the mountains at the eastern edge of the Valley. Dinner is at the little cafe at the Resort. Lots and lots of foreign languages in here. The table surfaces are maps of Death Valley.



The Furnace Creek Resort really is a nice place to stay, even if we didn't try out the tennis or boche courts, the 80-degree swimming pool, the golf course, or the horse-riding stable. The comfy little cabin with the rocking chairs on the front porch would be a fine place to relax on a longer, more leisurely visit.

There's a pretty good museum here, even if the museum building itself is closed for repairs. All kinds of mining artifacts from Death Valley's nineteenth-century mineralogical past.



Didn't know that at some point, in at least one instance, the twenty mules were replaced by a huge steam tractor.

We say goodbye to Furnace Creek enroute to our last three attractions.



Besides the brine just under the surface of the dry lake at Devil's Golf Course and Badwater Basin, there are other sources of water. I knew about the freshwater spring in the canyon that permitted Scotty's Castle to be there. There is also Salt Creek, a perennial high-salinity stream that feeds a marsh of pickleweed and other resistant plants.





Also pupfish, tiny little fish the size of guppies that can tolerate the brackish water and somehow survive the shrinking and expanding cycle of the creek. You have to look closely to see them, more by the movement as they chase each other around the sandy rills.

Not far from the junction by the Resort and the Visitors' Center is the Harmony Borax Works. Miners hoping to make some decent money (mostly Chinese, and all doomed to disappointment) would work for the company, pushing hand carts out on the dry lake to gather "cotton" - placer borate minerals - and bring it to this hillside "plant", where it was concentrated for more profitable transportation out of the valley. There were many borax operations, but the Harmony works was more successful and long-lived than most.

The trip to the railhead was something like 140 miles (!!!), and took a week for the twenty-mule team and the drovers to pull these wagons (and water tank) over rough trails through the southern entrance.



There are many other things to see in Death Valley, such as Ubehebe Crater and the "Racetrack" - a mysterious place where rocks of various sizes (some of them huge) leave paths as they have moved unseen over the dry lake bed; nobody has actually seen them move, or knows how they do that. It seems Death Valley was the setting for many scenes in

Star Wars, and some people* come just to visit these places. Plenty of reasons to return to a place that most people would ask, "why would you want to go *there*?"

(* www.panamintcity.com/exclusives/starwars.html)

On the way out of the Valley, we stop at Zabriskie Point along with a lot of foreign visitors (many on rented Harley Davidson motorcycles) to climb the hill to the overlook, to view the painted hills. Then we are done with Death Valley - on to Sequoia! We stop briefly at the Amargosa Opera House in the little village at Death Valley Junction. Apparently, the inside is worth seeing (hand-painted murals), but there was no tour on the day we went through.



The World's Largest Thermometer is at Baker. It registered 137 degrees in the summer of several years ago. Today is not bad. There is a little gift shop for buying refreshments and World's Largest Thermometer paraphernalia, and inside is a readout of the temperature in an iron frying pan out in the plaza, to see if it is hot enough to fry an egg. Today is not that day.

It takes most of the day to drive through Barstow in the desert, through Tehachapi and Bakersfield on the edge of agricultural California, and up Highway 99 to Visalia and just beyond it to our hotel in Three Rivers. We see orchards with citrus trees pruned into cubical shapes for space efficiency. Everywhere there are signs urging political action to preserve access to water for farming - a reflection of the tension between California's productive rural interior and the ruling coastal elites with their excessive environmental sensitivity. Trucks loaded with oranges and onions and other bulk produce rumble beside us through the many little farming towns. Three Rivers is a cute little village stretched along the road into Sequoia that runs along the Kaweah River.

The next day, we go back through Visalia to Fresno, to the airport to pick up Faith who is arriving from her graduation celebration with her buddies in San Diego. Fresno is the gateway to Sequoia and Kings Canyon and Yosemite, hence the fake (but realistically to-scale) sequoia trunks in the airport. While we were waiting for her flight to arrive, big-screen television screens were playing Fresno tourist promo videos - it seems that the largest city in interior California has a lot to do and see in its own right.



After putting Faith and her bags in the fan, we immediately go straight east and into King's Canyon National Park - and find a giant sequoia to hug.

The first of the two famous gigantic sequoia trees is in King's Canyon - the General Grant tree.



I wasn't really intending to, but the actual canyon is here, and we have most of the day left, so we go ahead down into it. Quite spectacular.



The canyon is named for the Kings River at the bottom, a rambunctious stream that reminds us of the Big Thompson that runs down from Estes Park in the Rockies near Fort Collins where my sister's family lives (and now, my older daughter).

Streams running into the Kings River from other canyon branches sometimes flow over beautiful waterfalls like the Grizzly Falls, here. I'm glad we came down.



Further on is Roaring Falls.

The end of the paved road is just beyond, so we go all the way to the end just to be able to say we did. By the time we start back, the

cafeteria at the Canyon View visitors' center is already closed. Getting back up out of the canyon takes as long as it did to get in, and it is dark by the time we are up and at the Grant Grove visitors' center. The eating places here are closed, too, no surprise. We have no recourse but to buy some cold sandwiches and bottled drinks from the general store, and eat them on the long windey road out of King's Canyon to the south and through Sequoia. Not many cars on the road - I guess any visitors still in the park are snuggled into their tents and campers by now. But coming out of the forest, the road gets *really* uncomfortably windey as it descends down the hillface in switchback turns. In the dark. I was really glad to be down (and so were the brakes) and out of the park and back to our Three Rivers hotel.

The next day, we head back in, and our first stop is Tunnel Rock. The road used to go *through* the tunnel, but cars and trailers got too big (guessing from the scrapes and gouges visible in the rock from underneath), so the road was routed around it.



A member of some party of early explorers injured himself and was treated by the Indians here at Hospital Rock. On the nearer face are petroglyphs, and on the top are potholes dug by ancient Indians to serve as mortars to grind acorns into meal. Behind the Rock is a path down to the raging river.

Now we have come to the terrible switchback road we descended last night, It's more pleasant in the daylight. At this point, we stop with a number of other travelers to look down to the river valley and up to this great rock. Arriving at the summit and the Giant Forest visitors' center, we learn that this huge landmark is Moro Rock, and visitors can climb to the top via three hundred steps.



I count 275. It is a tremendous view from the top, not least because of the thick wisps of cloud blowing up the hillside.

Photographic evidence that we were here.



I was so proud of Jerri. She doesn't like heights, and there were an awful lot of steps, and sometimes the path ran along the nearly vertical cliff face, but she went all the way up, and all the way down. These are the nice steps to lure you into a false sense of security. Once you get to the rock itself, they aren't nearly this nice.





Sequoias are very hardy trees. Pretty much the only way they die is if they fall over. Like this monster, Faith provides a sense of scale.

Sequoia also grow in groves, or clumps, or groups, like the Parker Group here, named after the family of an Army officer who came out to enforce federal law right after the Park was formed. Not surprisingly, since they drop their cones around their feet. They are particular about their environment (so no, we can't grow them in Tucson), and it generally takes a forest fire to open up the cones to let the seeds escape, and also to clear away the competing brush and non-sequoia trees for the saplings to get a clean start.



It really was amazing to walk amidst these giant trees.



We didn't get to see it, but near the park entrance is the stump of a giant sequoia cut down in the mid-eighteenth century when Californians overcame their unbelief of the tall tales of explorers to see the enormous trees - and attempt to exploit them commercially. It seems that sequoia wood is rather brittle, so when a tree is felled, it breaks into sections, which limits its value as lumber. Seems a terribly ignominious end to a tree that took hundreds, even thousands of years to grow to this size, to be turned into pencils and grapevine stakes.



Here we are going through the tree tunnel. The *really famous* tree tunnel through a vertical, still-growing tree that you see in photos was a bit north in the Mariposa Grove in Yosemite... and it came down almost fifty years ago.

Near Wawona, actually, which we will be at in a few days.





The other world-famous biggest sequoia tree - the General Sherman.

There is a little parking lot at the bottom of the hill closest to the Sherman with only handicapped spots. I let Jerri and Faith out here and drove up the hill and around to the regular parking lot and came downhill on the path - a lengthy trudge. After we looked around and were ready to leave, we reversed the steps. When I picked them up in the lower lot, there was a ranger there who informed us that the handicapped spots are available to the general public in the

off-season - which is when we are here.

On the way out of the park, Jerri gets to do her tree-hugging.



We can now check off Kings Canyon and Sequoia. On to Yosemite! It's a

couple of hours from Three Rivers back through Visalia and Fresno and north on state route 41 to the southern entrance to Yosemite. When we get to our first stop at Wawona, it is raining fairly heavily. We don our jackets we brought just in case and try to find the Visitors' Center.



From the parking lot, we can see a barn and a covered bridge, so Faith and I head over to see if the Visitors' Center is there. It isn't, but there is a little re-creation Yosemite village across the river that we visit when the rain is done. The village is occupied by a bunch of school-age children in pioneer garb apparently in a "learn history by doing" class.

Turns out the Visitors' Center is up the hill from the parking lot in the cabin of Thomas Hill, a famous landscape artist who made his name from his paintings of Yosemite. There is also a very classy historic hotel here. I believe we learned that they had vacancies. All the other "in the park" hotels were booked up. If we had known about this lodge in Wawona, we wouldn't have chosen a hotel in Sonora, almost two hours outside the park on the northwest side.



The road from Wawona to the heart of Yosemite winds through the

forest and comes out now and then on the edge of a canyon with waterfalls on the other side. Presently we come to a tunnel through the mountain, and when we emerge from the tunnel on the other side, there is a crowded parking lot...



... and our first impression of Yosemite!

We made it! An American dream fulfilled!

The cloudy sky made for some interesting contrasts, but all the same, we came back the next day after the storm clouds had blown away, and I think the picture is much better. That's El Capitan on the left side looking across the valley at Cathedral Rock with Bridal Veil Falls running down its shoulder. In the background is Half Dome.



Further down the road, we pull off to see Bridal Veil, and walk up the path to the foot of the falls.



We didn't get to Wawona until after lunch, and by the time we get to the overlook and finish gawking and then see Bridal Veil up close, we don't get to Yosemite Village until after five. The parking at the village is haphazard, and while there are shuttle buses, we haven't learned how to use them yet. Instead, we walk from the car to the (*real*) Visitor's Center and find it is already closed. We continue walking around the loop. It isn't well marked, and at one point we find ourselves in the Yosemite Village cemetery - from when Yosemite Village was an actual village, before the establishment of the Park, and there were pioneers living here, some of whom are buried here. We look at the headstones to see if John Muir is interred (he isn't), and then continue around to the Lodge in search of dinner. Yes, the lodge is totally booked up (the lodge is a collection of unconnected hotel or dormitory style units clustered around the central common building). Dinner is fairly nice, cafeteria-style, once we find an unoccupied and not-to-dirty table - there is one man bussing tables, which I take as the answer to the question of whether we leave our empties at the table or take them to a disposal

area (we don't see any disposal area like a cafeteria would have). Then we find a counter which offers tours and other recreational activities, and buy tickets for a tram tour of the Valley for tomorrow. We also pick up a shuttle bus route map, and so we can take the shuttle back to the parking lot.

We leave the park in the dusk. On the way out, we pass a waterfall that runs under the road, but it's too dark to see it better. It's a long, long way through windey mountain roads out west of the park, and the last few miles before Sonora is terrible hill-hugging hairpin curves and switchbacks down to the valley. In the dark. Not dissimilar to what we had to do getting back to Three Rivers a few days ago.



The next morning, after the lengthy drive back in from Sonora, we stop at the Cascade falls that we saw the previous evening.

Back in the Village, we park and - this time taking advantage of the shuttle - get to the lodge before the tour. It is now lunchtime, and we grab some pizza from the cafeteria and run out to board the tram - and learn that we can't eat it on the tram! So it stays in the bag, to be eaten as opportunity presents. The young ranger girl is from Wisconsin, and she is a natural-born tour guide. With lots of stories, including

- Early rangers would entertain guests by dumping garbage in a field to attract bears. Bad idea. Bears got the wrong idea of how to get food, and guests got the wrong idea of how to treat bears. Now, even though they have bear boxes for campers to store their food

(and other tasty things like deodorant bars), bears still rip doors off of cars if they smell food items

- Bears are dangerous, but the really dangerous animal is the deer. Bears are more or less predictable, but deer can act spontaneously upon being approached. Especially when a clueless guest gets close enough to seat their child on a deer.
- More bad ranger ideas to entertain guests: In the evening, rangers would build a bonfire on a cliff near Half-Dome, and then, when the crowd of visitors assembled in the meadow for "Fire Fall", the rangers would push the fire off the edge. They used some particular wood or bark that maximized the "shower of sparks" effect. When this wood became hard to find in the forest, they switched to using used motor oil. The practice died shortly after as the rangers started to consider the potential consequences of their "entertainment".

It was a beautiful day for an open-tram ride. Not driving lets you have a good look at things - like this waterfall on the shoulder of El Capitan.





El Capitan is truly a mind boggling rock spectacle. On the tour, the guide pointed out two climbing parties scaling the rock face - mere specks, almost unnoticeable.

She also told us a story of how peregrin falcons were repopulated in the park. In the DDT days, too many falcon eggs were being destroyed, so the Park Service partnered with mountaineers - the climbers would get to the "nest" (really just a narrow rock shelf) and substitute a ping-pong ball for the egg. The egg would be hatched in an incubator. Then the climbers would take the chick back to the nest. All this handling while dangling from a cliff face an

unimaginable distance up. Wow.

After the tour, we take the shuttle back to the Visitors' Center, which is open now, and look around and buy our mementos. Faith has become quite appreciative of John Muir, even though he climbed trees during ferocious storms to see what it would be like, or spent days lying out on a rock so he could experience what it might have been like to be a glacier. Strange man. But, he attracted Theodore Roosevelt's attention, who came to Yosemite, appreciated the majesty, and advanced the cause of the National Park.



Then we take the shuttle to Half Dome Village. So named because of the fine view of this magnificent geological feature.

Across the valley from Half Dome is the rock with "Royal Arches" and "Washington Column" rising on the right-hand side and "North Dome" on the top.



At this point, the valley contains a broad lush meadow. Faith exults in the openness.

One of the attractions in the valley is "Swinging Bridge". Maybe it was at one point, but not any more. Still provides a beautiful view of Yosemite Falls.



Behind the Lodge is a walkway to the foot of the falls. The path is swarming with tourists (speaking a variety of languages). Here is a view of both Upper and Lower Falls.

No surprise, the falls are water from snowmelt. As the year continues and the volume of snow melts and runs off, the falls get smaller and smaller. Bridal Veil doesn't stop entirely, but most of the others, including Yosemite, will stop running. It seems that May is an optimal time to see the falls - and it is the off-season! We will probably never come back to Yosemite, but

for our one visit, it was the perfect time to see it!

Here are Jerri and me at the foot of the falls.





We have now experienced as much of Yosemite as we have the time for. On the way out of the park, we stop and get a better look at Cathedral Rock.

On the other side of the rightmost peak is the elevated valley from which Bridal Veil Falls runs.



This evening, we take a different route to Sonora, taking the main road down to Mariposa and then state route 49 back north, and avoid the windey switchback hillside road. This evening is also the time during our trip when we must deal with our wardrobe limitations. The hotel gives us a suggestion for a laundromat, but by the time we get there, it

is too late to start a load. A local person gives us a tip for another place on the same road in the opposite direction. This place is open later, and we manage to wash all our clothes, eating our McDonald's dinner at the little table with the washing machines thumping beside us.

The next morning, we start off to Monterey, supposedly due west from the mountains to the coast. Starting off, the GPS is in use. Once a few years back, we were going to a concert in Surprise, Arizona, in the greater Phoenix area, and the GPS was telling us to go up on Grand Avenue, which is that odd diagonal major road (originally planned to connect Phoenix to Wickenburg, which apparently was a town of more significance in that day than now). That may have been the most direct route, but it wasn't the best route; as a result, I learned not to implicitly trust GPS. As the GPS directed us along little slow state highways and not first to a major freeway, I began to suspect it was calculating a direct route and not a best route. and when it directed us underneath and past I-5, I just shut it off and traveled down the freeway until the old-fashioned map showed the route over to the Monterey Bay area.

Our Chief Engineer on TOW was born and raised in Pacific Grove, so he was familiar with the Monterey area. His mother-in-law still lives in the area, and he knew she had annual passes to the Aquarium, which is one of the reasons we are coming. The GPS graciously directed us to her home, and we chatted for a while and picked up the passes, then proceeded to the Point Pinos Lighthouse - which was already closed for the evening. Continuing into Monterey itself, we find our hotel and stash our stuff, and return to check out Cannery Row.



Monterey may have started as the Spanish capital of California, but after the Americans took it, the city wasn't much use until the sardine packing industry started. It was like a gold rush, with hundreds of people coming hoping to make their fortune either catching and selling fish or building and operating canneries, like this one here. When the sardine schools were fished out, the

economy crashed, and stayed that way until after John Steinbeck wrote his famous novel *Cannery Row*, and some locals who lived and worked in Monterey during the boom years decided to revitalize it. Today, Cannery Row is a tourist attraction with shops and restaurants

occupying the former industrial canning factory buildings. At the center of it all is a large piece of art with statues of the characters from the Steinbeck novel. Facing this sculpture was a restaurant - "Louie Linguini" - where we choose to have our dinner. It was pretty decent Italian food, and from where we sat we could see sailboats cruising about in Monterey Bay. The funny part was all the old-time photos on the walls with "Louie Linguini's" face worked in and some humorous biographical statement about him and the famous people with him in the photo.

We visit several shops. In one shopping mall (former cannery building), Faith encounters a fortune telling machine, and gets her fortune read - by the King!





In this building was a wax museum, which we decide to walk through. It started with the history of California from Indian days through the Spanish Colonial period to the American period, and ended with reconstructed scenes with characters from *Cannery Row*. At the end of the museum walkthrough, Faith finds herself canned.

Yet another fortune telling machine - "Miss Kitty".





The next day, we return to visit the Aquarium. The borrowed passes get us right in. The Aquarium also occupies a former canning plant, and has an exhibit about the canning process and the significance of canned fish during the WWII years. One of the big things about the northern California coast is tidal pools. There's a wave-making machine that simulates wave action into

the fish tanks inside and out. Outside is a deck surrounding the Aquarium's very own real tidal pool, and beyond it is the Bay. It was a beautiful day!

Another popular aspect of the northern California coast is the sea otter. There was a big centrally-located tank with a family ("herd"? "gaggle"?) of otters. Big animals, not the dinky river otters seen in Arizona zoos.





There were several commercial fish species in the Monterey area: sardine, mackerel, and... ANCHOVIES! I can't wait for them to be put on my pizza.

I didn't really think penguins would be native to these parts. Every aquarium seems to have penguins. Even Sea World in San Antonio.





It really is an excellent aquarium, and the tidal pools and the wave machine and the commercial fishing and packing aspects really set it apart from any other we've been to. It is also very much geared toward children, and the child-oriented parts don't take up very much of our time. We are done with our visit before lunch, which we have at a little family-operated Cannery Row cafe that serves sandwiches, pizzas, and soup-in-sourdough bowls.

But we don't want to repeat yesterday's error, so we leave early afternoon to get to the Point Pinos Lighthouse. It looks a *lot* like San Diego's Point Loma Lighthouse because it was designed by the same man.





Jerri's official "I Was Here" photo. There were several keepers, of course, and one of them was a widow who operated it single-handedly for about 20 years, during which Robert Louis Stevenson visited. During the war years, the lighthouse served as a Navy observation point and coastal defense. For a little while, until real cannon could be located here, they had decoy guns set up - telephone poles painted black. In the basement, the historical society has a clockwork-driven occulter (makes the light flash), and a buoy bell, and a foghorn.

We have one more objective today, and a long way to go down the Pacific Coast Highway before reaching our Morro Bay hotel. Leaving Monterey (and taking the passes back to our new friend), we pass through the beautiful Carmel By The Sea and other cozy lodges nestled in dark green canyons. There are a LOT of other people on the road. It dawns that this is Memorial Day weekend, and many Californians must be taking their own little holidays on the extended weekend.

On the way down, we see Big Sur. This is a giant rock embedded in the coastline. Unsurprisingly, there is a lighthouse here to warn ships away from the rocky coast. The lighthouse is open for tours on certain days of the week, but today isn't one of those days, and it is too late anyways. A pity; I would like to say I was actually on Big Sur.



After a fair bit of driving along Highway 1 that hugs the undulating coastline, we arrive at our destination - Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. This was formerly the property of a wealthy couple who had their mansion built above a lagoon with what the AAA travel guide touts as "the most beautiful waterfall in California". There are a LOT of cars parked along the road. We find a spot and hike back to the park, where a path winds down the canyon, *under* the highway, and out over the lagoon. It is a pretty sight, but we all agree the waterfalls in Yosemite were certainly more beautiful than this one.



Jerri and Faith with the northern California coast. This is the patio of the former mansion, which Mrs. Burns willed to the State on the condition that, if it could not be fitted for public use, then it must be demolished. Well... sadly, it was demolished. A shame, too; one of the features of the place was a do-it-yourself inclined railway from the road above in which visitors could ride a mine car down a steep rail track at the end of a winch rope. I'd ride that!



We left the park just in time to see state troopers putting parking tickets on cars on the other side of the road! Fortunately there was no ticket on our car by the time we got back to it. Continuing down Highway One in the dark and experiencing the thrill of the centrifugal force from rounding a curve above an unseen cliff to the sea. Dinner time is long past, and I am despairing of getting to Morro Bay before all the restaurants are closed, so I pull off in a little resort town called Cayucos, and we find an Italian wine cellar-type place on the main street. After standing there for a while, we finally get seated, but we notice other parties arriving even later than us are being turned away. After dinner, it isn't very much of a drive to Morro Bay and to our hotel, which at midnight is already settled down. Jerri wakes up the innkeeper and we get our key and leave the van *not* in a parking spot in the crowded undersized lot, but as close as possible to the side of the building so as to not block any doors and still be out of the way of vehicles departing in the morning.



The next morning, we go "downtown" to the bay to find a breakfast place. Outside the window, Morro Rock is visible. Very unusual formation. It is apparently a state park, because we can see lots of cars driving across the causeway to the other side of the bay and parking around the rock.

The restaurant is on a rise overlooking the bay and the shops and boathouses along the waterfront. Halfway down a stair from the restaurant to the main street below is this giant chessboard. Calls to mind the other "world's largest chessboard" in Medicine Hat, Alberta.

Too bad we don't have some time to explore Morro Bay a little. The shops along the



street are enticing. People are out on the water on paddleboards. Bicycles are being peddled everywhere. Something of a resort or vacation destination.

The objective today is to see the Hearst Castle, the San Simeon mansion of newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst. Faith has visited before and wants us to share the experience. However, upon arriving at the Mansion, we are boggled by all the cars. I remember - *today is Memorial Day!* Half the state of California seems to be using the holiday to see the Hearst Castle. Ever hopeful, I approach the ticket sales counter and verify that the earliest we can take a tour is 4:00 in the afternoon. That just won't work. Sadly, we turn away.



And drive back up the coast to look at one of Jerri's lighthouses - Piedras Blancas. It's another place that is open for tours, but you have to call ahead and schedule a tour. We didn't do that, of course, and it isn't open for tours on a holiday, anyways.

Just south of Piedras Blancas is a beach that elephant seals use as a stop on the annual migration route. These two big fellows are males, but they are too far away to make out the characteristic facial features.





Most of the beach is covered with snoozing females. We watch some of them squirming up to the dryer areas and using their front flippers to toss sand on their backs.

There are hundreds of seals on this beach! I suppose we wouldn't have seen this if we *had* been able to spend the morning at Hearst Castle, so we traded a planned activity for a spontaneous and serendipitous discovery.



After leaving the beach, we decide it just wouldn't do to be this close to the Pacific and not stick our feet in, so we got back off the road at San Simeon (a state public beach) and picked our way past crowds of vacationing Californians. I did not get in the water. Just as well, as Jerri and Faith tell me the water was *freezing*!

At this point, we have seen everything we intended to see in California on this trip. Leaving the coast, we wind our way through California

Wine Country (lots of vineyards with lots of cars of holiday visitors) and the yellow grassy rolling hills back to Bakersfield and the cubical citrus trees. It takes the rest of the day to cross California back through Boron (someday we will get to visit the great borax mine) and North Edwards (near where my family lived when my dad was posted to Edwards AFB) and Barstow back to Needles, where we stay the night. The next day, we cross back into Arizona, through Kingman, and to Ash Fork. When we did the Route 66 experience a few years ago, the tour guidebook pointed out the museum in Ash Fork, but it was closed when we went through. Today, it is open.

Ash Fork is a sad, dinky little town whose better days are behind it, but at one point, it was an important stop on the Santa Fe with a big fancy hotel, the Escalante, which was also a Harvey House. Long since demolished, what a shame.



The lady who operates the museum is retired (there is no income for the museum), and she and her husband moved here, which is odd; I get it, it's quiet and secluded, but grocery and medical care places are a long way off. She was telling us a brief history of Ash Fork, and if I got it right, the railroad stop was here because the Ash Creek actually ran and there was water for the locomotives. Nowadays, the railroad doesn't go through the town, and water for residents has to be brought in by truck - quite the ironic reversal, I thought.



I thought this girl in the buckboard looked like Charity.

Nice model of Ash Fork in its better days as a Route 66 town. Photos under the models showed what the buildings looked like when the town was thriving.



Oh, and we learn that Ash Fork is the hometown of Arizona's official historian, Marshall Trimble (<http://www.marshalltrimble.com>). The museum has its own web presence - <http://ashforkrt66museum.com>. I could argue the website is better than the actual museum! But the museum still was fun.



Like other northern Arizona towns we've visited, Ash Fork got a prefabricated jail cell shipped in. Now it is inside the museum. Inside the cell was a cot... with a teddy bear.

Prisoner Faith seems way too happy about her circumstances.



After leaving the museum, wanting to support Ash Fork with our tourist dollars, we find a lunch spot - Lulubelle's. Then we turn the keys over to Faith and allow her to drive back down south to Prescott through the traffic circles - Faith *loves* traffic circles. A few hours later we were home in Tucson with our memories of a fantastic holiday trip and bags of mementos.