



GOLD RUSH TRAIL OF CALIFORNIA

Striking gold

California is home to spectacular driving roads with scenery – and history – to match. Need an excuse to visit?

Martyn Goddard provides it

BACK IN 1848, James W Marshall discovered gold in Sutters Mill, Coloma, California. His find triggered a gold rush the following year that attracted 90,000 prospectors and merchants – the 49ers, as they were known – to the vicinity of American River Creek in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, north-east of Sacramento.

Gold fever and the thousands of people that once bustled for their stake in El Dorado have departed but the towns and roads they built, snaking their way through the majestic mountain range of the Sierras and Lake Tahoe, make for a fantastic road trip of around 450 miles. That would make a great addition to a visit to the Monterey historic races and Pebble

Beach Concours in August or, for the more adventurous, a seasonal drive to some of the best winter sports areas of North America.

I persuaded my friend, Dick McClure of Stockton, to loan me a 1954 Porsche 356 Continental for the adventure, departing 90° downtown heat around lunchtime to avoid the urban traffic. Within minutes, the perky little 1582cc coupé is buzzing through walnut groves along Comstock Road, with all the windows open. The arrow-straight valley roads give way to the twisty Camanche Parkway across the Camanche Dam, en route to our first historic mining town of Jackson and the junction with Highway 88 towards Lake Tahoe.

Founded in 1848 and burned down in 1862, the town centre boasts 42 civil war period buildings. We park the little coupé on Main Street, which has plenty of cafés and shops, and spot a plaque on the wall. It marks the fatal gun fight when Judge Smith shot town clerk Collier, over which settlement would be the seat of justice, in an example of what the locals called ‘mother lode politics’.

Highway 88 starts to rise, departing east towards the mountains, and I note signs for National Scenic Byway and road names such as Tragedy Spring Road and Inspiration Drive. The 60bhp Porsche finds the combination of grade and 8000ft altitude hard work, so we pull off to take in the view of Cople’s Lake, before cruising

down to the Kirkwood Inn for a beverage in the bar, built in 1864.

After descending Carson Pass we take a left onto Highway 89 north, driving through the yellow aspen trees at the start of the ascent of Luther pass over to South Lake Tahoe. Making a U-turn, we take a look at Runnel’s Auto Parts forecourt, which is packed with Classic American cars from the 1950s and ’60s, Hudsons and Buicks spiced up with the odd import.

The sun is setting on the last section of the day as we climb the steep hairpin bends of Highway 89, skirting the west shore of Lake Tahoe high above Emerald Bay. A little weary, we arrive at the River Ranch Lodge just outside Tahoe City in time for a hearty meal by the log fire in the

The quaint streetscapes of California's old mining towns intersperse the glorious Lake Tahoe vistas.



Nevada City Gas station, pure Americana with full service delivery.

The road is narrow, smooth and well maintained as it snakes along the river valley with stunning views of the mountains. Traffic is almost non-existent with the exception of the odd ranch pick-up or Harley biker. Some sections of the road require second gear on steep grades, through hamlets such as San Juan (population only 175!).

We take a break from the high temperature inside the car after driving hard for 50 miles and stop for lunch in Sierra Village at the Buckhorn Saloon and Mountain Greek restaurant. It's fun just sitting on the porch, watching the odd posse of bikers thunder down the street on all sorts of custom machinery.

The second half of the loop drive takes us off Highway 49 and onto Gold Lake

dining room. The Lodge is a fine hostelry – in fact it had been the home to the diplomatic and press corps for the 1960 Squaw Valley Olympic games – but we make the short drive to our borrowed lake-front cabin.

Saturday morning's overture is a stunning sunrise over the Nevada shore of Lake Tahoe, a kaleidoscope of orange, purple and blue reflected in the still water. After a basic breakfast on the deck, we fire up the motor and continue north on Highway 89 to Truckee. At this point the tourist traffic takes the interstate but we opt instead for the old Donner Trail towards Indian Springs and on to Highway 20.

The Donner Pass is named after the group of pioneers whose wagon train became trapped in the Sierra Nevada mountains by early snowfall in 1846. Of the 87 emigrants, only 48 made it after the four-month ordeal, many resorting to cannibalism to survive.


The 356 works hard on the mountain roads and the gap between second and third gear soon becomes a distinct disadvantage. At least we're blessed by mild weather, thank goodness, because this 56-year-old classic has no functioning heater. After we have descended through

the forest, we exit the highway into the strangely named Nevada City in California (that must play havoc with the post). Our first stop is Java John's coffee house before we explore downtown, which is a National Historic landmark.

There is a population of 2000 today but, back in 1856, five times that number crammed the city. Before we head out of town up the Yuba river valley on Highway 49, we brim the gas tank at

'The sun is setting as we climb the steep hairpin bends of Highway 89'

Touring around Lake Tahoe takes you away from the grit and glamour of LA. And you can stay in a lakeside cabin.



‘We cruise back to our Tahoe City cabin as a weather front forms over the lake’

Road, joining the 89 at Graeagle – and on this deserted road there is potential for a blast in the 356, so we make the most of its modest power and exploit it to the full.

By late afternoon we cruise back to our Tahoe City cabin as a weather front forms over the lake. Planning our forward route, we note that in California all even-numbered roads travel east-west, while odd-numbered roads run north-south.

Rain threatens as we depart Tahoe City along the lakeshore early on Sunday. At the south of the lake we take Highway 50 over the 7800ft Echo summit. The ascent is similar to a European Alpine pass and the 356 labours up. A blast along the dual-track road descending to Placerville soon cures a misfire that hampered our hillclimb, and we rejoin Highway 49.

Passing through Diamond Springs we see old gold rush buildings housing Red’s BBQ and the Big Horn Gunstore. From there, it’s a terrifically sinuous tree-lined road south to Sutter Creek. Joining Highway 88 towards St Jorge Winery near Lodi via Liberty Road on the valley floor,

we’re assaulted by a torrential rainstorm that sweeps across the landscape. The rain continues as we arrive at the ochre-coloured buildings to be met by Vern Vierra, winery owner, for a tasting in the cellar of his 2007 Tempranillo and Zinfandel wines which, to my taste, are delicious.

Our road trip ends back in Stockton, only 80 miles from San Francisco airport. What’s remarkable about the route is that it takes in the epic scenery of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and Lake Tahoe and fantastic driving roads in bitesize portions. Each section is interspersed with real American history in the mining towns, all of which brim with good restaurants, cafés and mom-and-pop stores that make a change from fast food and strip malls. And while I might prefer the pace of, say, a modern 911 GT3, the charm of the 356 suits the surroundings perfectly.

Trip notes

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