

USA Holiday 1996 by Heather Collins

California and Nevada

Wednesday 24 July

At last! We are on our way to California.. Barney the Taxi picked us up from Odiham at 7am and we arrived at Heathrow at 7.45 - no traffic holdups whatsoever - a good start. We checked in with American Airlines and promptly had all our luggage searched! Understandable I suppose, following last weeks 'plane crash out of JFK. We went through into the departure lounge and I had my hand luggage searched! We went on the Volunteers list but weren't called so boarded the 'plane at 10.40am. Our seats were right at the back by the toilets - not too good - but at least we had one window seat. The flight was long - 12 hours in the 'plane - 11 in the air - but passed quite quickly. I read some literature to do with Nursery Vouchers for a good part of the time and watched a bit of TV. We all had steak for dinner and a snack of a smoked turkey and cheese roll. The landing at L.A. was quite spectacular, flying between skyscrapers on the approach. We cleared customs fairly quickly, reclaimed our luggage and found the Hertz courtesy bus. After a short drive we reached the depot and collected our hire car - a Dodge Intrepid - and drove to the Holiday Inn a couple of blocks away and checked in. The room was fine, two nice big beds and spacious bathroom. We were all so tired, we lay down for a rest and fell asleep in our clothes! I woke up about 9pm and put my nightdress on but David and Katy slept in their clothes all night!

Thursday 25 July

We all woke early, about 5am and got up at 6am. We had an "all you can eat" breakfast at the hotel. David and Katy had bacon, sausage, hash browns and egg and I had fruit and a bagel and croissant. We checked out of the Holiday Inn and drove to Universal City arriving a little after 9 am. A pleasantly warm and sunny morning. David negotiated the L.A. freeways really well - it was all a lot easier than we had been told by various people. It was relatively quiet when we arrived at Universal Studios so we did all the rides first. "Jurassic Park" was a bit disappointing after reading in the Times that it was the ride to end all rides!! "Back to The Future" and "E.T." were next on the list, both well done. We then queued for the backlot tour and saw the permanent facade sets including the Back To the Future Town Hall Square and Norman Bates house from Psycho. We saw the excellent Wild West Show with superb stunts and special effects. We left at 3.30pm, exhausted, and drove to the Hollywood Roosevelt hotel. From our bedroom window we looked out onto the Chinese Theatre and a view of the Hollywood Sign. After freshening up, we took a walk up and down Hollywood Boulevard - a bit like Soho - lots of tacky gift shops. Katy bought 3 T shirts for \$9.99. Had an excellent Chinese meal close to the hotel. We were all so tired- still jet lagged - we were in bed asleep by 9pm.

Friday 26 July

We all woke about 6.30am after a good nights sleep. Wandered down the road and had a good breakfast on the corner of Sunset Boulevard in a diner. Katy had 3 waffles each the size of a dinner plate with a dollop of ice cream, syrup and a slice of melon. David had 2 sausages, 2 bacon slices, hash browns, scrambled egg, a slice of watermelon, 4 slices of toast and jelly. I had the same but without the egg. 2 teas and a coffee completed the order and it came to a little over \$11!! We checked out of the Hollywood Roosevelt, reclaimed the car and set off for Santa Monica. Drove through Beverly Hills. Beautiful houses everywhere and immaculate gardens - no wonder the rich and famous like living there. Got to coast road Route 1 and headed north.

Stopped for an hour at Dume Beach just north of Malibu. Beautiful golden beach - the sand was too hot to walk on!. Had our first sight- and paddle - of the Pacific Ocean. The waves were high and crashing on the beach. Water temperature was quite cold - not inviting enough for a swim. We continued north on Route 1 stopping at Carpinteria for some supplies. Katy and I both bought slippers and David a 6 pack of white socks. We also got some food for lunch - luscious ogen melon for 69c among other things. We drove on and just past Santa Barbara, took a right inland through spectacular mountain scenery. We stopped at a view point and couldn't believe the heat - it must have been in the 90's but dry with a hot wind blowing. Drove on passing Lake Cachuma and arrived in Solvang about 5.30pm. What an unusual town. All the buildings are Danish style - a bit weird! We had pre-booked into the Danish Country Inn and were pleased because most places had No Vacancy signs showing. A good choice anyway, lovely big room, very clean and comfortable. Katy and I headed straight for the pool and stayed there until about 7pm after having complimentary drinks and snacks in the dining room. Had a nice meal at the Little Mermaid Restaurant and then wandered about the town looking at the shops - all gift type. Back to the hotel about 9.30pm and in bed by 10pm.

Saturday 27 July

Woke refreshed about 6.30am. Got up leisurely and had a buffet style breakfast at the hotel. David had his usual bacon, hash browns and scrambled egg - I had grapefruit and a sort of unsweetened scone called a biscuit and Katy had watermelon, orange slices and some multi coloured cereal which she said was disgusting. We spent the morning in Solvang window shopping. Very hot so had a swim and time by the pool before lunch. Visited a local winery after lunch for a tour and tasting. The vineyard was owned by the Firestone Tyre family. Wine was pretty expensive so didn't buy any. Back to the hotel for a quick dip and sunbathe - very hot. Had free drinks and filled up with snacks at the hotel and then headed out into Solvang for a Danish pastry and coffee and then onto a "Tribute to Elvis" concert. What a riot! A very poor impersonation of the King but very entertaining. All the ladies were serenaded and given a plastic rose. Katy and I will treasure ours forever!

Sunday 28 July

Got up early and left Solvang at 8.15am. Headed north west on Route 101 to the coast. Stopped at Pismo Beach and got some shells for MaryAnn to remind her of home. Had coffee at the Madonna Inn, San Luis Obispo and then carried on north up the coast. Looking for a gas station, we got caught up in a festival procession at Cayacos, very pretty. Stopped at Cambria for lunch - a real Wild West town. Went to a Mexican Restaurant and were entertained by a live band - 3 guitars - drums - slide guitar and a singer- playing incredibly good blues and country music. The music was better than the food! Left Cambria reluctantly and drove up to Moonstone Bay just south of San Simeon. Strange grey beach of course sand and small green pebbles. Very hot. Drove on and saw Hearst Castle up on it's hill top just past San Simeon but didn't stop. Spectacular coastal scenery, very twisty road. Turned right into the mountains 5 miles south of Lucia onto the Nacimiento Ferguson Pass. Very steep, narrow, hair pin bends up and over the mountains - quite exhausting for all of us. David picked up a huge pine cone from the side of the road. It was quite sticky so think it may be from a Sugar Pine. Arrived in King City about 6.30pm for an overnight stop. Bit of a scary place - quite run down and poor looking. The motel was fine - clean and comfortable. Had a burger etc. At Carl's Jnr. And then went back to the motel and watched a bit of TV - all a bit tired - it's been a long day.

Monday 29 July

Woke after a good nights sleep and after coffee and Danish at the motel checked out and headed north on Route 101. Stopped at Salinas to visit our first Californian K Mart! (Just like the one in Tennessee.) Bought various things including shorts all round!!! Took the wrong road out of Salinas to Monterey but eventually sorted ourselves out. The whole of this valley between King City and Salinas is a vast vegetable growing area. Very impressive irrigation techniques. And mile upon mile of flat, cultivated fields growing many different green crops. Eventually arrived at Monterey at 11.30am. The first thing we noticed was the drop in temperature from inland. We wished we had jumpers with us! Headed straight for the Aquarium - very impressive - beautiful exhibition. I particularly liked the jelly fish - some as small as a mushroom, others bigger than a dinner plate with tendrils many feet long. Spent two hours at the Aquarium and then looked round the Cannery Row area. Lots of expensive shops. Headed north for San Francisco. The road from Santa Cruz to San Jose was very pretty, winding through great pine forests. The last 40 miles into SF was a very busy, fast 4 - 6 lane freeway. Arrived in SF at 5.30pm. after driving across the Bay Bridge - spectacular. Found the Handlery, Union Square after a bit of a struggle and checked in. Lovely hotel. The weather was windy and cool - we were all shivering!!! Got cleaned up and went out exploring. Nothing can prepare you for the steepness of the SF streets - very good for your leg muscles! Found China Town and fell in love with it. Had an impressive meal there - far more than we could eat, of course. Walked back to the hotel - tired out again. All in bed asleep by 10.30pm.

Tuesday 30 July

Woke about 7am. Leisurely time getting up. David went out to a nearby deli for coffee, tea and Danish which we ate in our room. Weather quite cool so Katy and I dressed in leggings and warm tops and then realized we would get warm walking up the steep streets so went back to the hotel and changed into shorts and T shirts. David went on to the cable car museum and we met him there. After having an interesting look round there, we walked to Fisherman's Wharf and Pier 39. Lots of shops full of knick-knacks and the inevitable T shirts. Very colourful and lively area. Katy bought a sweat shirt and a baseball hat. Saw a colony of sea lions basking in the sun just off Pier 39. Had lunch in a Subway - huge rolls filled with meat and salad. Excellent value. Went to start of Cable Cars at Hyde/Beach and bought tickets. Got in line and waited nearly an hour. We were entertained by street musicians and an escapologist. Eventually our turn came and we boarded the cable car. Katy and I hung on the side and rode the hills. WOW! Must rate as one of the best things so far of the vacation. Cable car stopped at the top of Lombard Street and we looked down - can't wait to drive down ourselves! Back to the hotel about 4pm for a cup of tea and short rest. Katy and I went back to China Town and David explored the Union Square area. I bought a sweat shirt and some Chinese tea cups and saucers and Katy bought an Alcatraz T shirt, some worry balls and a china egg. Back to hotel to meet David and then to Lefty O'Douls for a meal. Masses of delicious food as usual. Katy had spaghetti and meatballs, David had Turkey a la King and I had roast beef (melt in the mouth and no B.S.E.) - it all came to under \$20! Walked off our meal by going back to China Town - just can't keep away. Back to hotel at 9.30pm - exhausted.

Wednesday 31 July

Got up at 7am and after a quick breakfast of coffee, tea and Danish from the deli, we checked out of the Handlery at 8am. Drove down to Fisherman's Wharf and collected our tickets for Alcatraz. Good job David booked from the UK - the next available trip was Friday! Caught the 9.30am boat for a swift trip across the bay. Quite cool and windy but sunny. I was pleased to wear the sweatshirt I bought yesterday. Arrived on Alcatraz Island. What a very sad place. There was an

ex - inmate turned writer there signing copies of his life story, Leon (Whitey) Thompson, so bought one. He had been kept on Alcatraz for a total of 5 years. It was so cold inside the cell block and today was the height of summer - what must it have been like in the winter. The audio tour was excellent, you could really imagine what it must have been like being an in-mate. The cells are tiny, just room for an iron bed, folding table and chair, toilet and two shelves on the back wall. No privacy at all. We were all quite moved by the experience. Caught the 11.30am boat back to SF and collected the car. Drove down Lombard Street! I wanted to do it again, but we headed out over the Golden Gate Bridge which was half shrouded in mist. The other side was clear so we parked up and walked onto the bridge about a quarter way across - very exciting. Back to the car and drove on into Sausalito where we stopped for some lunch. We were surprised that it was a lot warmer than in SF. Headed east across the Richmond/San Rafael bridge and down to Oakland - our last look at the Pacific and the Bay Bridge. San Francisco is one of the best places we have ever visited and we all definitely want to return there one day. Had a fast drive in land on Route 580 through vast fruit growing areas - most impressive. As we approached Tracy the terrain became much drier and the mountain tops were covered with hundreds of wind turbines. They looked quite beautiful turning in the wind with the sun glinting on them. Arrived at the Best Western, Tracy around 4.30pm. Got out of the car and WOW! The heat hit us. The temperature was over 100f in the shade. Motel excellent - lovely pool. Went to local Malls - all three of them! Bought jeans, table cloth, more shoes for Katy and dungarees for Max. Had a good "All You Can Eat" at the Town House in West Valley Mall for \$7.95 each. Everything was included even drinks. Back to motel. Did a big load of washing in guest laundry and had a swim at 9.30pm. We all had fun using gym equipment and step machine. David saw a shooting star!

Thursday 1 August

Free breakfast at motel of Danish, juice, coffee and tea. Checked out just after 9.30am and headed straight back to the Mall! Bought more jeans for Katy, belts and bag among other things. Left Mall at 11am and headed east. Stopped at Oakland and took a tour round the Hershey Chocolate Factory. I have never seen so much chocolate in my life! Very modern, automated plant - interesting and worth a visit. Got a free chocolate bar at the end of the tour. Had a quick BK for lunch then headed towards Yosemite. The nearer we got the more spectacular the scenery became. Drove through a really pretty small town called Groveland. Checked into Yosemite Westgate Motel, Buck Meadows at 3.30pm. Very warm - not quite as hot as yesterday only in the 90s. Not too pleased with the motel. The room was fine but the pool wasn't finished and we all wanted to swim. Motel receptionist told David about a lake nearby for swimming. Wow! What a place. Quite a small lake fed by a waterfall - it looked like a film location. David and Katy swam - I chickened out - the water was a bit too cold for me. Back to motel and dinner in the diner next door. Not bad but not good either. David and I went for a walk along a trail behind the motel. Total peace and quiet. No sign of human life anywhere. We returned to the motel as darkness was falling to a cacophony of sound from thousands of grasshoppers. All in bed by 9.30pm - very tired.

Friday 2 August

We had difficulty getting up this morning! Had breakfast in the diner of tea and toast - pretty good. Headed for Yosemite. Quite a long drive - scenery out of this world. Tall mountains and deep, pine filled valleys. Went first to Yosemite Valley. Lots of tourists and campsites but not tacky. The Valley was an amazing sight. Sheer, rock cliffs towering above a narrow valley. Walked to Mirror Lake - very pretty. Extremely hot. Drove to Mariposa Grove to see giant redwoods - longish drive - about 35 miles from the Valley. Well worth it, though. The Sequoias were magnificent and awe inspiring. Walked through one them. Nothing can prepare you for

their immense size and beauty. Took a guided tour on a trailer which was very interesting and informative. Back to motel about 6pm pretty tired and footsore. Would have loved a swim!! Went back to Groveland for the evening. What a nice place. Boasts the oldest saloon in constant use in California - the Iron Door - with wooden swing doors!. Had a delightful meal at the Gallery. Must stay in Groveland if we ever come this way again.

Saturday 3 August

Left Buck Meadows after breakfast and headed back to Yosemite. Took the Tioga Pass road. Mile after mile of incredible mountain scenery - it just got better and better. As we climbed higher, snow began to appear on the barren mountain tops. Stopped at Lake Tenaya at 11am to take in the view and it was quite cold! Stopped again just past Ellery Lake at 9500ft and found a patch of snow to stand on - a good photo opportunity! It was really cold and we were glad to get back in the car - we were all dressed in shorts and T shirts. Crossed right over the Sierra's and down into Inyo County. Took a quick look at Mammoth Lakes ski resort and then on to Bishop for lunch at a Subway. Blistering heat once again. Carried on to Lone Pine and checked in to the Alabama Hills Motel - beautiful! Ringed by mountains - some snow capped and a great view of Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the USA at 14495ft. Lovely pool - had a relaxing hour in and out of the water. Ate at a restaurant in Lone Pine and then back to motel. Watched a film on TV - Mr.Mom - not bad, but too many commercial breaks - made the film twice as long.

Sunday 4 August

Relaxed morning. Lay in bed until 8ish, late for us! Breakfast of bagels, muffins, juice, tea and coffee at motel. Explored local area. Saw where many films were shot in the Alabama Hills. Took trail up into the mountains and looked down over Lone Pine in the valley and a dried up lake which looked pinky red. Most weird - like a sci-fi film. Quite cool in the mountains. Saw a small bird of prey circling over the valley. Wish I knew what it was. David exceeded the speed limit on the way down the mountain!!!! The road was so straight and long it was just too tempting! Stopped at Diaz Lake and spoke to a family just leaving after jet-skiing for the weekend. Americans are so polite and friendly, puts us Brits to shame. Picked up supplies at Food Mart for picnic lunch in motel room. Heated Hot Dogs in microwave and had a wonderful fresh melon. After lunch, took the road towards Mt. Whitney. Beautiful waterfall at trailhead but not such good views as in the morning. Saw Stellar's Jays and lots of chipmunks scampering about. Back down into Lone Pine. David had a drink in Jakes Bar and Katy and I looked round the shops. Not much to see as most of the shops were closed. Very hot. Back to motel at 4.30pm. Collected dirty washing and used the guest laundry while swimming and sunbathing by the pool. Motel much quieter today - had the pool to ourselves - luxury! Watched beautiful, large blue dragonflies darting about in the garden area by the pool. Had a shower and then went into Lone Pine for dinner. Ate at a barbecue ribs place. Had to wait ages but got an extra rib each because of the long wait. Back to motel and packed ready for early start tomorrow.

Monday 5 August

Up at 6am and checked out of Alabama Hills Motel at 7am after breakfast. Took the road to Death Valley. Passed many small Joshua trees along the way. Stopped at Stovepipe Wells at 8am to pay entry fee of \$5. Temperature was 100f. Saw incredible yellow sand dunes so stopped to take photos. Saw lizards running and strange animal tracks - possibly snakes. Carried on to Furnace Creek and stopped at the Visitor Centre - HOT - HOT - HOT !!! Carried on after a short break and saw a lone roller blader - very strange - has he got through yet, I wonder? Stopped at Badwater. The lowest point accessible by car in the western hemisphere at 272ft below sea level. Amazed to find a small pool of water there among the salt flats. Katy and I paddled in the water -

it was clear and warm and gave off a slightly sulphurous smell. We also licked the salt flats to check they really were salty - they were! The mountains surrounding Death Valley are beautiful with colours of pink, brown, cream, black and green. The whole area is so vast and peaceful and totally unmarked by man apart from the road through which was so quiet, we drove for mile after mile without seeing another car. Just after Badwater I tried to cook an egg on a rock but it slid off. Never mind it was fun. Drove on into Nevada at Pahrump and then on into Las Vegas. What a culture shock! After driving for 300 miles through the desert suddenly we were plunged into traffic jams, noise and chaos. Found the Excalibur Hotel and checked in after waiting in line for half an hour. Eventually made our way to the room after battling through crowds of people and hundreds of slot machines. Our room looked out over the strip across from the M.G.M. Grand. Took a walk up the Strip - very, very hot. Went in the Tropicana and M.G.M. All the hotels are extraordinary. Nice to look at from the outside but inside they are just full of slot machines and gaming tables with people relentlessly feeding in money. They all look so intense - poor things, they should get out more and relax a little! Had a buffet dinner at Excalibur. Far too much food but good selection. Lots of salads, different meats, fish, roasts, pasta and vegetables. Basically, anything you could possibly want plus lots of gooey, sugary puddings. Went back on to the Strip at about 8.30pm and caught a bus to the far end. Dark by now, but still hot. Very busy everywhere. Saw the "Volcano" erupt outside the Mirage. We were all very tired by now, so wended our way back to hotel and dropped exhausted into bed at 10.30pm.

Tuesday 6 August

Got up late - 9am. After queuing for about 45 mins. for the buffet breakfast, which was excellent in its choice, we decided to go to the Hoover Dam. It took about an hour to drive there through Boulder City. Well worth a visit - we took a tour and the guide was so informative - it all made sense of hydro-electric power to an idiot like me! The Hoover Dam is built across the State Line between Nevada and Arizona and dams the waters of the Colorado River. Back to Las Vegas about 4pm. Stopped at the Stratosphere to make a dinner reservation. Just had time to get back to the Excalibur, shower and change and get back to the Stratosphere by 5.45pm. A high speed lift whooshed us to the top and into the restaurant. Very smart and sophisticated. The restaurant does a 360 degree revolution in an hour. The view was breathtaking, the meal was enormous! David and I both had lobster bisque and Katy had chicken soup to start. David then had a steak at least 2 inches thick and Katy and I had chicken breast at least four times the size of an English equivalent, covered with crawfish and thermidor sauce. Needless to say, we couldn't eat it all! We finished with coffee and Katy had tea which she had to choose from a box of about 50 different flavours. When we had finished our meal, we went up to the observation platform and watched people being fired up the Big Shot. Rather them than me!!! We stayed for about an hour watching the lights below us on the Strip coming on as night fell. We then descended and looked around the shops for a bit before driving back to the Excalibur. Before going in, we had a look round the Luxor which is being extended. Very nice inside, not as busy or tacky as the Excalibur. Katy and I went to bed about 10.30pm and David went off to watch the gamblers for a bit.

Wednesday 7 August

Decided to check out of Las Vegas even though we had booked for another night. Headed west towards Barstow. Stopped at Buffalo Bill's on the Nevada/California stateline. Nice place, lots of interesting things - huge roller coaster, log flume and steam train. Had some breakfast and a look around before driving on. Very hot - 101f. Stopped at Calico Ghost Town about 20 miles east of Barstow. Interesting place - a real silver mining town that was abandoned in 1907 but has been restored and is now a tourist attraction. Every hour on the half hour, two "cowboys" had a

gunfight - very entertaining! Stayed for about an hour and a half - the heat got to us a bit. Arrived in Barstow and checked into the Quality Inn. Had a quick look at the local shops and then back to the hotel pool - heaven. Biggest pool so far and had it all to ourselves most of the time. At 5.30pm it was still baking hot in Baking Barstow!. Ate in the hotel restaurant. Katy and I had a light meal of soup and salad and David had soup and fried shrimp. We were all still full from last nights meal!

Thursday 8 August

Our last full day. Got up quite late and had breakfast at the hotel. Packed up the car and headed east for Victorville. Stopped at the Barstow Factory Outlets. Mostly too expensive for our taste but I did buy a T shirt in Gap for \$6.99 and a "Barney" toy for Emily. Drove on to Victorville arriving at noon. Checked into the Green Tree Inn. Very hot again - about 103f. Checked out local Mall - bought a few last minute presents and then went to the Roy Rogers Museum. Didn't stay long as it cost money to get in! Back to the motel and the best pool of the holiday. Had a relaxing afternoon swimming, reading and sunbathing. David's "Internet" pal, Mary, came to the motel at 4.30pm and we all went back to her house where we met her son, Ricardo and her friend Mike. Ricardo and his friends offered to take Katy to the State Fair but she preferred to come with us, so the three of us, Mary and Mike went to a local restaurant for yet another delicious meal. A most delightful evening. Mary has such a lovely, bubbly personality - it was so nice meeting with her. After the meal, we went back to Mikes house, which he had just had built. What an interesting home. Every room was "themed". The kitchen was done out as a 1950's style Diner with red leather bench seats and an old, period Coca Cola vending machine. In one corner was an old wooden telephone booth with real bullet holes in it. The other rooms were all very tasteful - I wish I had the time and patience to do it in my house! After being entertained by Mike and Mary and having delicious strawberry cake and coffee we went back to the motel about 10.30pm.

Friday 9 August

Our last day - SAD! Had some breakfast in the hotel restaurant and packed up the car. Mary met us at 9.30am and we followed her to her place of work. She works in a nearby Medical Centre in Human Resources. We had a tour of the hospital - what a beautiful place - carpets on the floors - comfortable chairs in the waiting areas - all very calm and peaceful and lots of smart staff with smiling faces. If this is what private medical care is like - let's scrap the N.H.S.!!!! Left Mary and Victorville at 11am and headed towards L.A. Did a detour to San Dimas (a la Bill and Ted) and then drove to the airport. Stopped for some lunch at a Burger King under the flight path and realized we were really on our way home. Returned the car to Hertz and took the courtesy bus to LAX. Checked in and had the usual boring two hour wait to board the 'plane. The 10 hour flight passed fairly quickly - Katy and I watched two films - "The Phantom" and "Sgt. Bilko". Meals and drinks were good. Didn't get much sleep, though. Arrived back at Heathrow at 11.45am local time and were met by Barney the Taxi. Arrived home at 1.30pm and everything was fine. The cats were pleased to see us and the house had been looked after well by our housesitter, Claire.
