

USA 2001 by Heather Collins

Southern California, Arizona and Nevada

Day 1: Sunday 19th August

We woke to a dull and rainy morning. It was our 34th Wedding Anniversary and after exchanging cards and greetings we lay in bed for a while listening to the radio and drinking tea. The taxi was booked to arrive at 11.30am to take us to the airport so we had a few hours to shower, dress, eat breakfast and finish packing our bags. The cab arrived on time and we bade Kathryn a fond farewell and were on our way.

The drive to Heathrow was uneventful and we were soon checking in at the Air Canada desk. We walked around the airport shops for a while before buying a sandwich and drink and sat at a table and people watched. When the gate number showed on the Departures board, we went through to the lounge and were soon taking our seats on the plane. Everyone was on board by 2.15pm and it looked as though we might be leaving on time at 2.30pm. Unfortunately, freight was still being loaded which caused a delay and we finally took off at 3.45pm.

The flight was smooth and comfortable and the food and service were excellent. The movies were entertaining too. The first was “Heartbreakers”, a new release starring Sigourney Weaver and the second was an old Harrison Ford, “Witness”, that I had seen before. The time passed quickly and after being served a snack and more drinks we were making the final approach into Montreal, landing at 10.30pm (UK time). After leaving the plane, all passengers had to walk across disinfected mats as a precaution against Foot and Mouth disease. We then passed through Canadian Immigration, collected our bags and then through Customs. I made a quick phone call to Kathryn to report on our progress. She was fine and was about to go to bed. We took an elevator up a floor to go through US Immigration, even though we were in Canada and then through US Customs. This all took quite a time but finally we re-checked our bags and went to the departure lounge for the flight to Los Angeles. The plane left on time and we had another good flight with more food and drink. It seemed as if we had been eating all day! David and I slept as much as we could and the time soon passed. A few miles from LA we saw an electric storm lighting up the night sky. As we flew over LA, the city was lit up below us with a myriad of lights – it looked so beautiful. We landed at 9.45pm, local time, and were soon off the plane. No immigration to go through as we had been cleared at Montreal so we made our way to baggage reclaim. It was chaotic as only one belt was working and it took over half an hour to get our bags. David phoned the hotel and arranged for the courtesy bus to pick us up. We waited outside the Terminal and were amazed at how busy it was. The bus came and then set off around the airport picking up passengers from all the Terminals.

We finally reached the Hacienda Hotel at 11.30pm and checked in. The room was great and we quickly got ready for bed as we were both very tired. Mike from San Francisco phoned to wish us well which was so nice. We would get to see him and Dana in a couple of week's time, all being well.

Day 2: Monday 20th August

We both slept well after our exhausting day yesterday and woke around 6.30am. David wanted to get up but I persuaded him there was no hurry – we really were on holiday – so we lay in bed chatting and watching TV until 8am when we had showers and got dressed. The weather was beautiful – a sunny Californian morning! We had an excellent breakfast at the hotel coffee shop but had forgotten American portions were so much bigger than at home and ordered way too much food. After breakfast, we took a walk around the hotel facilities – the courtyards and pool area. It was just as good as we remembered from three years ago. Opposite the hotel where there had been a building site, there was now a large supermarket, Ralph's, and several small shops. The supermarket was excellent. The displays of fruit and vegetables were the finest I had ever seen. There must have been at least fifteen different varieties of mushrooms and everything looked fresh and of top quality – very impressive. Back at the hotel we phoned Kathryn at home. She had been in London all day attending a job interview and was happy with the way it had gone.

We checked out at 10.30am and got the courtesy bus back to LAX and then the Alamo bus to the car hire depot. This all took a couple of hours but eventually we were issued with a bright red Chevy Impala and soon we were on the Interstate driving south. David was pleased with the car and soon got used to driving it. We drove through some attractive towns along the coastal road particularly Oceanside and Carlsbad. The beaches were lovely and were busy with people having a good time in and out of the water. We stopped at a supermarket and picked up some drinks and a big bag of Pretzels which we ate driving along. Neither of us wanted lunch – too much breakfast!

By 4pm we were driving into San Diego and checked into the Motel 6. Our room was on the fourth floor and was excellent. We relaxed in the room for a while before heading out into the city. The traffic was very heavy and we just drove around trying to get our bearings. The road led down to the border with Mexico but we didn't cross as the car wasn't insured. San Diego was a large sprawling city with some smart areas and some less so but nothing really noteworthy. We drove around looking for somewhere to eat and settled on the "Gathering" a fairly nondescript place in a residential area. We both ordered Pecan Chicken which was "interesting". It was chicken breast coated with crushed pecans and honey. It was overpoweringly sickly sweet and not very pleasant. We made our way back to the motel in the dark and found ourselves in a rabbit warren of small roads – most of which were dead ends! We eventually found the Interstate and got back to the motel at 9pm. I was really tired so went to bed and watched a little TV before sleeping.

Day 3: Tuesday 21st August

We both slept well again and woke about 6.30am. The morning was cloudy but warm and dry. We got up leisurely and went for breakfast in the diner next to the motel. David asked the waitress about the small train we had seen running through the city. She told us it was the San Diego Trolley and we could use it to get to the US/Mexico border and then walk into Tijuana. We both agreed it would be a good thing to do so we drove to a nearby station, bought tickets for the round trip and got on the trolley. It cost \$4.50 each – a real bargain! The Trolley consisted of four coaches and ran on rails. It was clean and functional and we enjoyed the ride. Announcements were made at intervals reminding passengers that eating and drinking were not allowed and neither were feet on the seats! Most of the other passengers appeared to be Mexicans taking the trip home. We seemed to be the only tourists on board. The Trolley meandered through San Diego and finally arrived at San Ysidro, the last town in the USA. Everyone got off and it was a bit confusing with people streaming past us. A man asked us if we were going to Tijuana and suggested we got on one of the buses which would take us into the town for a small fee. Before getting the bus, I phoned Kathryn from a payphone as it was 8pm in England. She had had a good day and another job interview which went well. We got on the bus which took us across the border and into the

centre of Tijuana. Tijuana was very interesting – vibrant, noisy and colourful. The main street was full of noisy bars and restaurants each with it's collection of musicians serenading the diners. The shops were full of pottery and leather goods aimed at the tourists and there were a good few strip joints thrown in for good measure! It was 1pm and we were hungry so we went in a restaurant and sat on a covered terrace that was open to the street and ordered a chicken dish for two. It came in an iron dish with cheese, avocado, pepper and chorizo around the edge. It came with freshly made tortillas, rice and re-fried beans. Musicians kept coming in and touting for business at the tables. If you showed any interest they would play guitars, violins and trumpets and sing and then want to be paid. At one time a group of about ten players came in and filled up most of the space between the tables. The music was very loud and not particularly good and we wished they would shut up so we could enjoy our meal in peace! After lunch, we walked the length of the main street, going in and out of the gift shops. On the corner of each block, there was a donkey bedecked with fancy coloured harness and headband. All the donkeys were white with brown stripes and looked like zebras. Whether the stripes were real or painted, I don't know but the tourists were encouraged to pay to have a photo taken with them. We resisted this offer and carried on with our walk. We bought a few things and bartered the price down – always a good thing to do! We walked back across the bridge into the USA and were struck by the contrast between the two countries. Mexico is like a third world country – scruffy and poor – where tourists are pestered to spend or give their \$'s. We got the Trolley back to the car – a journey of about one hour – and looked at the sights out of the opposite window. David was keen to see the shopping Malls so we spent a couple of hours shop hopping and made a few purchases. We finally got back to the motel at 7pm and relaxed for a while before going to the diner for a few drinks and a burger. We had enjoyed our trip into Mexico – much better than Sea Life Centre where we had planned to go. We found San Diego confusing, particularly the freeways, maybe it was just the jet-lag!

Day 4: Wednesday 22nd August

We were both up early and ready to check out at 8.30am. Neither of us wanted breakfast – too much food yesterday.

We headed north to the I15 out of San Diego and were soon speeding along the freeway. After about 25 miles we took a right turn and were soon driving along wonderfully quiet, scenic back roads. We stopped at Santa Ysabel for a drink and to phone Kathryn. Santa Ysabel was a sleepy little town in the middle of nowhere but had the most amazing bakery shop. About 50 different types of bread and dozens of delicious cakes were baked fresh on the premises. I bought a couple of cakes to eat later and then we walked across the road to a restaurant for toast and tea/coffee. Whilst we were enjoying our late breakfast, we became aware of a lot of Police vehicles outside. Word went around that they had been tipped off that a guy who was on the run after murdering his family near Sacramento had been spotted in the area. It was a false alarm and the policemen and “suspect” all stood around in the parking lot chatting and laughing. We drove on to Route 78 through quiet mountainous country with incredible views. About 10 miles out of Santa Ysabel, we were stopped at a Police road block and asked where we were from and where we were going and then let on our way.

The road took us through the San Bernadino National Forest and across the San Jacinto Mountains. The road climbed to 5000ft and then we were over the mountains and looking down into the Palm Springs valley. The mountains on either side of the valley were barren and dry but the valley was green and lush. The road wound down to the valley through a series of steep hair pin bends. When we got to Palm Desert we couldn't believe how green it was with beautiful flowers everywhere. The road into town was an eight lane highway with virtually no traffic! We stopped for some petrol and the heat hit us. The outside temperature was in excess of 100f. We drove on into Palm Springs and checked into the Motel 6. The car was unloaded in no time and we sat in the room and

ate our yummy cakes that I had bought earlier. We decided to visit the Aerial Tramway which had been closed for maintenance on our last visit four years ago. It was a short drive away and we were soon paying the entry fee of \$20.80 each – a lot of money, we thought. The ride to the top was spectacular, over two and a half miles up the mountainside in a big gondola that rotated through 360°. At the top we climbed the steps to the highest observation point and looked down into the valley below. We could see the dessert towns and hundreds of wind turbines in the desert sparkling in the sun. Across the valley was the San Andreas fault line and to the south, 40 miles away, was the Salton Sea – the largest expanse of land below sea level in the western hemisphere. The Salton Sea was formed between 1905 and 1907 when the Colorado River broke through irrigation canals. Unlike prehistoric lakes which have long since dried up, the Salton Sea persists and continues to rise due to irrigation run off. This Sea is almost 50% saltier than the ocean. The elevation at the observation platform was 8581ft but it was still hot – in the mid 80's. To the west, the mountainside was covered with sugar pines with large, elongated cones hanging from the branches. The area is home to mountain lions, eagles, deer and coyote as well as squirrels and assorted bird life. The highest mountain is San Jacinto at 10804ft – only 2000ft higher than where we were standing.

The gift shop was disappointing but we bought drinks and sat on a terrace and watched blue birds with black tufted heads flying amongst the trees. We caught the gondola down the mountain and returned to the motel. The Aerial Tramway was excellent and well worth a visit, if a little pricey.

It was 5pm when we got back to the motel and still very hot so we both went for a swim in the warm waters of the motel pool and relaxed until 6.30pm. We got ready to go out and walked a few blocks to an area where we had seen a lot of eating places earlier. They were all very expensive and quite pretentious so we walked back to the motel, got in the car and drove out of town until we saw something that took our fancy. We settled on Coco's – a family style diner and had an excellent meal. After dinner, we drove to Walmart but were both too tired to shop so we turned around and returned to the motel and were both in bed by 10pm.

Day 5: Thursday 23rd August

Up early again and on the road at 8.30am heading east. The road out of town took us past the wind farm. There were thousands of turbines – some tall, some short – as far as the eye could see.

We stopped at Yucca Valley for breakfast at Denny's and had the usual Raisin Bran for me and eggs and hash browns for David. We amused ourselves for a short while at the adjacent shops but were soon on the road again. It was hot at 9.30am - 87°F. We entered the Joshua Tree National Park at the west entrance and were once again surrounded by the stark beauty of the desert. After a few miles, we were stopped by a construction man and had to wait for 15 minutes or so for an escort truck to take us through the road building area. We used the time to take photos of the Joshua Trees and had a chat with Jim the construction man. The escort vehicle arrived after about 20 minutes and led the way for a couple of miles. We accidentally took a wrong turn and were on an unpaved road for a few miles. It was so quiet and deserted; we didn't see another vehicle for about 20 minutes. Eventually, we joined the road and drove on in a little more comfort! We stopped at Skull Rock just after we had been debating whether we had seen it in this park or some other place. I was right this time!

Next stop was the Cholla Cactus Garden (pronounced choy-a). We had walked through it four years ago and it had made a lasting impression. It was just as spectacular the second time around especially as I picked up an information leaflet this time and read the description at each marked point. There were notices around saying that on no account should visitor's touch the cactus as it could be very painful. Unfortunately, David didn't read them and he tried to remove one from his

shoe and got a barb embedded in his finger. It would take until the middle of October before it finally worked its way out.

We drove on through the park and exited at the eastern point and joined the I10. The road had recently been tarred and was in excellent condition. There was very little traffic only a few trucks. Next stop was a gas station at Desert Centre to phone Kathryn. She had good news of a job offer that she was going to accept tomorrow. We drove on into Blythe and checked into the Best Western Sahara. A lovely room, with fridge and microwave, overlooking the pool. After settling in, we drove around the town which didn't take long as Blythe is a very small place. We stopped at Albertson's to buy drinks and fruit and then found the library to collect and send emails. Then back to the motel for some pool time. It was a beautiful pool fringed with palm trees. The water was pleasantly cooling and we lounged around for a couple of hours relaxing and reading. Dinner was at the Courtesy Coffee Shop opposite the motel. We had an excellent meal of baby back ribs for me and a prime rib for David. Bizarrely, there were two palm trees growing through the roof of the building! It was getting dark when we left the restaurant but it was still very warm as we crossed the road back to the motel. The rest of the evening was spent in the room watching TV and relaxing.

Day 6: Friday 24th August

We both slept in late this morning. I got up at 8.30am and went to the motel lobby to collect the complimentary breakfast. There was a good choice of cereal, toast, bagels and cakes as well as juice, coffee and tea. I loaded up a tray with goodies and went back to the room. It was hot already, high 80's, and the sky was clear blue. David had just stepped out of the shower so we sat and ate breakfast in the room enjoying the peace and quiet. Most other guests had already checked out and there were only a few cars left in the parking lot. Breakfast over, we loaded up the car, checked out and drove a short way to a hardware store as David wanted to buy a thermometer to see how hot it got. I took the opportunity to phone Kathryn and have a brief chat. That done, we got on the I10 heading east. The driving was easy – not much traffic again and we made good time. The scenery was impressive – wide, arid plains surrounded by distant mountains. We saw many tall “Saguaro” cacti growing at the side of the road; some must have been over ten feet tall.

We had one stop for fuel about 30 miles from Phoenix and then drove straight to Scottsdale and checked into the Motel 6 about 1pm. Scottsdale looked a smart, upmarket town and we were pleased we had decided to stay there and not in the centre of Phoenix. Adjacent to the motel was a huge Mall so after unpacking the car we walked the short way to the Mall entrance in the searing heat. It was 100° in the shade! The Mall was climate controlled to perfection – not too hot – not too cold. We made a few purchases from the smart shops. David bought a hat to keep the sun off and I got some jeans and some diamond ear-rings for Kathryn. We spent a pleasant couple of hours in the Mall and then returned to the motel. We got in the car and drove around the local area stopping at an attractive development of small shops and boutiques built around shady courtyards with fountains and flowers. Back to the motel for me to have a swim and for David to rest in the room. The heat was not so intense at 5.30pm, probably only 95°. I stayed by the pool for an hour and then got ready to go out. We drove fifteen miles north to “Rawhide”- a replica 1800's town. It was well done and there was free street entertainment. There was a lot of other stuff like wagon rides and a stunt show that cost extra. We ate at the Steakhouse which meant we got our entry fee repaid. The food was excellent and there was a good Country and Western band playing. There was other entertainment as well, like a balloon modeller, to keep the diners happy while waiting for the food to arrive. The whole evening was most enjoyable and we would recommend “Rawhide” to anyone visiting the area. It was still hot at 10.30pm when we got back to the motel. We switched the TV on and watched the weather presentation. It had been 109° in Phoenix today – almost a record!

Day 7: Saturday 25th August

We got up reasonably early, about 8am, and after tidying up and phoning home we got in the car and drove to Old Scottsdale – an area of beautifully restored old buildings set in wide, tree lined streets. It was very warm, 90° at 9am and there were very few people about. Most of the shops, which all seemed to be selling tourist stuff, didn't open until 10am so we window shopped for a while and took photos here and there. We stopped at a coffee shop for a drink and then walked some more. We went in what looked like a small café but when inside was an extremely busy large diner and bar. We had another drink and some toast and enjoyed the atmosphere. It was fascinating to watch the bar staff making Bloody Mary's at ten in the morning! By now, it was very hot – too hot to walk – so we got in the car and drove around looking for a Wal-Mart. We never did find it but stopped at K-Mart and Target and bought a few things. I got some trainers and sandals from Payless so was happy.

We drove around some more stopping at a grocery store to pick up some lunch supplies which we took back to the motel and ate in the room in the cool. I then did some laundry as we were getting short on clean clothes. It was fiery hot at 3.30pm, 107° in the shade, so we rested in the room until the worst of the heat was over. I finished drying the laundry by 5pm so we decided to have another attempt at finding Wal-Mart. This time we were successful. It was a vast store and even sold fresh fruit. I stocked up on a few essentials but didn't buy much. By the time we returned to the motel the sun had set. It was still very warm but the intensity of the heat had gone. We freshened up and drove back to the Old Town area in search of food. It was very busy and a lot of the restaurants had queues outside. Neither of us was very hungry so we returned to the bar we had visited earlier in the day – Pishke's. I had soup and a salad and David had a veggie omelette washed down with a couple of large Bloody Marys. Back to the motel by 9.30pm to relax and watch TV.

Day 8: Sunday 26th August

We were both a bit slow this morning but finally got out of bed about 8.30am and checked out of the motel at 10am. We phoned home before we left and had a chat with Kathryn. She is very excited about her new job and is looking forward to starting in a few days time.

The road out of Scottsdale was quiet but we hit every red light for about 20 miles! After a few miles the traffic slowed and we could see Police cars up ahead. A SUV had crashed into the central reservation ripping up trees and was really badly smashed up and battered. No sign of the driver so I suppose he had been taken to the hospital or morgue. There seemed to be no reason for the accident, the road was wide and straight so who knows what happened! We eventually got away from built up areas and were on a quiet highway driving through cactus strewn desert plains ringed with barren mountains. The cactus was amazing – Prickly Pears with bright red fruits, Cholla and tall, branching Saguaros. We stopped for brunch at 11.30am at Wickenburg and had a great meal of scrambled eggs, hash browns, toast, tea and coffee at the Homestead Restaurant – all for \$8. We followed the road west and saw little traffic, passing through small towns every ten miles or so. The road ran alongside the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad track for about sixty miles but we didn't see any moving trains. We saw a couple of road-kill Coyotes at the side of the road though.

The road led us to the Colorado River at Parker and we turned north driving alongside the river for many miles. It looked so blue, sparkling in the hot sun with many small boats whizzing up and down some pulling water ski-ers. We arrived in Lake Havasu City just before 3pm and checked into the Bridgeview Motel. Our room had a view of the river and was a short walk from London Bridge. It was even hotter than Scottsdale - a whopping 116°! After settling into the room, we walked the short distance to the London Bridge Resort. It was almost too hot to bear and as we

walked alongside the road, a large truck pulling a boat on a trailer came past us. The hot draft it caused was so strong it knocked me off my feet and I landed on the road with a bump. David thought I had been hit by the truck and was in a panic but I explained what had happened and the only damage was a grazed knee. We quickly got into the air-conditioned shops and began to cool down. We made a couple of purchases, a Christmas Snowman decoration and a novelty clock decorated with chickens and cockerels which David particularly liked. Next stop was the Brew Pub for a couple of cooling drinks. We got chatting with a guy sitting at the bar. It turned out he was from Kodak, Tennessee and he was surprised to hear that we had been there six years before for Andrew and Tracey's wedding. Small world, huh? He was interested to hear of all the places we remembered in the area and how much we had enjoyed being there. He was working in Lake Havasu City for a Telecoms company for a few months but would be returning to Tennessee soon. The walk back to the motel at 6pm was even hotter. David put his thermometer outside the room in the shade and it climbed to 120° - phew!!! We cooled off in the room for a while – it was even too hot to swim – before going out again to find somewhere to eat. We drove over London Bridge and pulled into the Barley Brothers Brew Pub. We had enjoyed a great meal there four years before and were not disappointed this time. Our table was by the window overlooking the river and bridge and we watched the lights come on in the park below as night fell. I had shrimp in hot pepper sauce on a bed of linguini and David had a hot chilli pork dish. David also enjoyed a pint of excellent beer brewed on the premises. After dinner, we walked around the park area for a while before returning to the motel via Safeway's to pick up some more bottles of water.

Day 9: Monday 27th August

We checked out of Bridgeview Motel just after 9am. Kathryn had phoned us just before we left and she was having a good time and was happy. First stop was the Lake Havasu City Post Office to mail some postcards and then across the road to the library to use the computer lab. David accessed his email and we received a lovely long letter from Kathryn. The rest was the usual junk mail. Chores done, we drove north alongside the Colorado River and up to Bullhead. Some of the way was very scenic – dry desert mountains and twisty roads. Our map showed a scenic highway along the Mojave Valley so we did a slight detour to take it in. Unfortunately, it was the most un-scenic road we drove along today! Mile after mile of tacky shops and used car lots. The roads without the scenic markers were far better – maybe the map maker had the wrong glasses on that day!!

We stopped at Searchlight, a few miles into Nevada, for a late breakfast at 11.30am. We were both pretty hungry and had a good meal of, eggs, bacon and potatoes followed by toast and jelly. The place was a run down Casino and fairly dismal but the food was good and cheap. Next stop was Las Vegas where we booked into the Motel 6 just off the Strip. It was an enormous place with fifteen two storey blocks and two pools. Each block was separate so although it was a big place it was quiet. We unwound in the room for a while, phoned Kathryn briefly to give her our room number and then headed out to the Strip. It was very hot but not quite as bad as Lake Havasu City or Phoenix - 108° in the shade. The strip was almost unrecognisable since our last visit four years ago. There were a lot of new casino's each bigger and grander than the next. Our favourite was The Venetian. It was absolutely stunning with replica buildings of Venice and a canal with real Gondolas for hire. There were many street performers in elaborate costumes, some singing arias from operas. The most striking feature inside was a painted ceiling in beautiful colours, very similar to one's we had seen in Rome. The Paris Casino was a little disappointing apart from the replica Eiffel Tower which was a scaled down version of the real thing. The Bellagio was an impressive replica of Milan and was full of expensive designer shops. The MGM Grand had real lions performing tricks in an enclosure in the casino. There were two guys in with three young lions throwing chewy bones at them to make them play. The lions were in extremely good condition and were obviously well cared for.

We had a steak and shrimp dinner at the Tropicana which was OK for \$11.95 each. It was not the best meal we had eaten, though. Back to the motel just after 10pm as we were both tired. We had been walking around for the best part of six hours and I had a few blisters on my feet to show for it! The phone was beeping in our room to say we had received a fax. It was from Mike in San Francisco –nice. I was in bed, asleep by 10.30pm – completely exhausted!

Day 10: Tuesday 28th August

Just couldn't get out of bed today! Finally made it to Carrow's next door for a "Power Breakfast" consisting of eggs, bacon, hash browns, fruit, toast and loads of other stuff all for \$2.99 each, at 9.30am. Back to the motel to phone Kathryn. She had been offered another job with quite a lot more money and had to choose which one to take! I bet "more money" wins!!

We got in the car and drove up The Strip to the Venetian to take photos. It looked even better this morning as it was quiet. We wandered along the "Grand Canal" and saw a magnificent white and gold gondola being prepared. We followed its progress to the boarding point and were surprised to see a wedding party waiting. The bride, groom, best man and minister climbed into the white and gold gondola and were ferried along the waterway with the marriage taking place along the way. The bride looked beautiful in a simple white gown with a white band holding her long dark hair back. It all looked very romantic and was taken seriously by all the participants, even by the onlookers.

The shops were full of interesting and unusual items. One shop was full of the most amazing wood carvings by an Italian artist, Livio de Marchi. There was a girl taking a shower, a magnificent horse and various clothing ranging from a bra to hats and a raincoat. Extremely expensive, though. If I ever get too much money, I would certainly like to buy a piece of his work.

We finished taking photos inside and went outside to take some more! It was getting hot again, over 100° at 11am. Back to the car and a drive up The Strip as far as the Stratosphere. We looked up and could see the roller coaster and the Big Shot at the top in action. We turned around and drove back to the Tropicana and parked. We enjoyed a couple of cooling drinks and wasted a few dollars on the machines before watching the Showgirl Prize Draw. The showgirl had to pull five tickets out of a drum and the winners got \$50 if they were in the audience and a spin of the Prize Wheel. Most prizes were for shows and meals at the Tropicana as well as some cash prizes. We had some tickets in the drum but didn't win, of course. However, we had won tickets to a magic show yesterday so we decided to use them and went to the 2pm performance. The magician was Rick Thomas and it was an excellent show that lasted for an hour. He made birds appear and disappear and girls too. He did the "saw a lady in half" trick and as a finale, made live tigers appear and disappear. He had two empty cages from which he had just taken two tigers out. He then covered them with a cloth and hauled them up off the ground pulled the cloth off and there were two more tigers in them! We really enjoyed the magic show – especially as we got in for free (usual price \$15.95). The show finished in time to see the next Showgirl Prize Draw – guess what – we didn't win again!

Next stop was the Mandalay Bay to visit the aquarium. It was pretty good – lots of smallish sharks and rays, jelly fish and other brightly coloured tropical fish. We walked through tunnels as if we were under the sea and had the fish all around us. As I said, it was Ok but not fantastic, we have certainly seen better. By now it was 5.30pm and we were getting tired so returned to the motel so I could do some laundry and have a rest for a while. By 7pm we were getting hungry so we took a right turn out of the motel and headed away from the Strip to a quieter part of town. There was only so much excitement a couple of old codgers like us could take! First we stopped at Wal Mart to pick up some socks for David and then we found a Thai/Chinese Restaurant where we had an

excellent meal in quiet and pleasant surroundings. Stomachs full once more, we returned to the motel to plan tomorrow's drive and relax before bed.

Day 11: Wednesday 29th August

We woke up reasonably early, 7am, but just couldn't get out of bed! Kathryn phoned just after eight to say she had accepted the higher paid job and was very excited about it. We chatted for ten minutes or so and then I finally made it to the shower and we were both ready for the day an hour later. We loaded half the stuff into the car before going to Carrow's for another "Power Breakfast". That done, we finished loading the car, checked out and were on our way out of Las Vegas. We had both really enjoyed our stay there but were ready to move on. The drive to Pahrump, the last town of any size before Death Valley, was uneventful. It was a long way, over 50 miles. Once through Pahrump we saw very little traffic or habitation, just the occasional lonely homestead now and then. We entered Death Valley National Park and the scenery became more and more desolate and barren. The mountains were bare exposed rock of many different colours, reds, greens, yellows. Quite stunning. We approached Badwater from the south and parked in the lay-by. We got out of the car and our breath was nearly taken away by the strong hot wind that was blowing. The temperature was 118° (I was carrying the thermometer) and we were 285 feet below sea level. Once the photographs were taken we were back in the car – it was too hot to hang around!

Next stop was The Devils Golf Course, an area of crusty salt formations, for a few more photos and then we took the scenic Artists Drive along a narrow one way road. It was all incredibly beautiful but the best part was The Artists Palette, an exposed rock face of reds, pinks, yellows, greens and purples formed by various mineral deposits. More photos were taken and then it was on to Furnace Creek to pay the \$10 park entrance fee. The drive from Furnace Creek to Lone Pine – a distance of 90 odd miles – was amazing. We went over two mountain ranges, across a dry salt valley and along many hairpin mountain roads finally arriving at Lone Pine at 4.30pm. We checked into the Alabama Hills Motel and were given an excellent room with a balcony overlooking the mountains. We had stayed in the same motel five years ago but had forgotten and thought we had stayed at the Best Western so we were pleasantly surprised. It was a warm 88°, a much more comfortable temperature than we had experienced for the past week. I went for swim about 5.30pm and David joined me after a short while. The pool water was quite cold so I didn't swim for too long. It felt warm when I got out of the water so I relaxed on a lounge with a good book for a while. We showered and dressed and drove into Lone Pine. The first stop was Jakes Saloon for a quick drink then a great meal at the Totem Pole in the centre of town. I had the most delicious BBQ ribs and David had fried chicken which he said was good too. We sat on a patio in the warm evening air and ate our meal as a velvety darkness fell. After the meal, we walked up and down the main street looking in shop windows. Lone Pine is a very small town and consists of one small supermarket, drug store, hardware shop and a few gift shops and galleries. The filling station was selling the most expensive gas we had seen this trip \$1.93 for a gallon of Regular. The cheapest we had bought was \$1.27 near Phoenix. Back to the motel about 10pm to watch a little TV.

Day 12: Thursday 30th August

We were awake just in time for Kathryn's call at a little after 8am. There was no hurry to get up as today was to be a rest day. David went to the lobby to pick up the complimentary breakfast and came back to the room with a laden tray. There were pots of oat cereal which we mixed with water and then microwaved – they were delicious – also iced doughnuts, juice, tea and coffee. We ate our breakfast on the balcony looking out over the mountains enjoying the peaceful surroundings. The weather was perfect again – clear blue sky and temperature in the mid 80s at 9.30am.

Breakfast finished, we tidied up, got in the car and drove into Lone Pine. We poked around the gift shops for a while and then took the road towards Mt. Whitney. It was even more beautiful than we remembered and we stopped several times to take photos and admire the view. The road ran out at Whitney Portal so we stopped in the car park and we were surprised to see a lot of broken glass from car windows on the ground. There were notices everywhere warning of bear activity in the area and not to leave food or perfumed goods in cars as the bears would break into the cars to get at it. There were secure metal lockers provided for any such items so we locked up our pretzels and wet wipes and then took a walk to the waterfall. There were a lot of cars parked but no one around. They must have belonged to hikers who had gone off along the trail. We were quite high – over 8364ft – and it was pleasantly warm amongst the pine trees. We climbed up to the waterfall and then back down to the car park. After releasing our pretzels and wet wipes, we drove back down the mountain to the valley bottom and then drove on to Independence, a small town 15 miles north of Lone Pine. It was much like Lone Pine, sleepy, quiet with not much happening. We had a light lunch at the Rock n’ Rhino Pizza Garden & Pub. David had a bowl of chilli and I had Chicken Noodle soup, sharing a plate of garlic bread. After lunch, we walked around the main street, which didn’t take long, and then headed back to Lone Pine. We stopped for gas in Independence, paying \$1.89 a gallon. It was still cheaper than in Lone Pine which had gone up to a whopping \$1.99 this morning.

Back to the motel to cool off on the balcony, eating peanuts, drinking juice and generally relaxing. We both fell asleep for about an hour and then sat by the pool for the rest of the afternoon. It was very warm but quite breezy – all in all a very pleasant way to spend an afternoon. As the sun went down, our thoughts turned to food once more and we got ready to go out. Just before leaving, Mike phoned to say he and Dana would be riding their Harley’s to meet up with us in Kernville tomorrow evening. Looking forward to seeing them both – it’s been a couple of years since we last got together.

We drove into Lone Pine and went to the Mt. Whitney Restaurant and ordered soup and Buffalo Burgers. The burgers were excellent – the buffalo meat delicious. David ordered an “Arrogant Bastard” ale. The bottle was covered with funny comments and instructions which had us both laughing. David enjoyed the beer so would not be writing to the brewers to complain!

Day 13: Friday 31st August

Another good nights sleep and woke just in time to receive Kathryn’s call at 8.10am. David went to the lobby to get some breakfast and brought it back to the room. No hot cereals today, just doughnuts. We were ready to check out just after 9am. and turned left out of Lone Pine and travelled south for about an hour. As we were making good time, we decided to take a detour to Ridgecrest and do a little shopping. First stop was a hardware store where we browsed for a while comparing stuff with English stores. It was a fascinating shop where you could buy tools, garden equipment, rope, wire, plumbing bits, electrical stuff etc. etc. David thought it was great – his kind of place! He bought two rat traps (don’t ask!) and a window squeegee. Guess I’m going to get clean windows when we get home! Next stop was Kmart to get David some jeans and a few things for me.

Back on the road, we soon turned west and were in the mountains of the Sequoia National Forest. It was very quiet and beautiful. The road twisted and turned and after about an hour we saw Lake Isabella sparkling blue in the sun. We drove around the lake to the west, through Wofford Heights and then north to Kernville. Our hotel at the Falling Rivers Resort was a couple of miles out of town but was easy to find and we were soon checked in. Our room was enormous with a fully equipped kitchen with fridge, cooker and microwave. There was an outside eating area with a barbecue and seating area looking out towards the river. We settled into the room, which was one

half of a cabin, then went back to the town to stock up on supplies at the grocery store. We bought a couple of microwave meals for lunch, tea, coffee, milk juice and, best of all, some hot oat cereal pots for breakfast tomorrow! We went back to the hotel with our goodies, heated up our lunch and sat outside in the hot sun to eat. I went to the pool after lunch for a swim. The pool area was beautiful but the water was unheated so the swim was short! I lay in the hot sun reading and relaxing for about an hour – heaven. The hotel was a collection of small single storey blocks close to the river. There were no other buildings around and it was very quiet and peaceful. I had a shower at 6pm. And then we got ready to go out. We drove into Kernville but all the shops were closed or closing. We saw a nice looking Italian Restaurant which we may eat in tomorrow. We left a note at Mike and Dana’s motel to say what number room we were in at Falling Rivers and then drove out of town about three miles to the Cheyenne Restaurant. It was a “rustic” place but the food and service were good. We arrived back at our hotel to find Mike and Dana had just got there. It was so good to see them both again and we were all grinning and hugging and hopping about with mutual excitement. They were hungry after their long bike ride from San Francisco so we drove them back to the Cheyenne and sat talking with them while they had dinner. The waiting staff were surprised to see us back so soon and there was much joking around!

Mike and Dana came back to our room and we sat talking and catching up on news for a couple of hours before they returned to the Pine Cone Motel. They weren’t too pleased with their motel and were going to try and find another for tomorrow night. Could be difficult as it was Labour Day week-end.

Day 14: Saturday 1st September

I had a bad night, stomach cramps for several hours, so was up late. I went to phone Kathryn from the payphone by the lobby at around 10am – no phone in the room, which was unusual. David made some tea and heated the oatmeal pots in the microwave and we sat outside enjoying the sun and watching tiny hummingbirds visit the feeders hanging from the trees.

Next, we drove into Kernville and visited the gift and antique shops – nothing took our fancy so our dollars stayed in our pockets. There was a small arts and crafts market on the green at the centre of town and we walked around admiring the paintings and other items.

Another short trip to the grocery store to buy drinks and sandwiches for lunch and then back to the hotel briefly. We had decided to drive north to see the Giant Sequoia trees and, after checking at the Forest Information Booth to pick up a map, we were on our way. The road wound along the side of the River Kern for about 25 miles. There were camp-sites every so often and cars parked at the side of the road wherever it was possible to do so. The river was low and rocky but with shallow, sandy pools where people were enjoying themselves in small rubber boats. We reached the Trail of 100 giants and walked among the impressive trees. Some had large holes in the trunks big enough for several people to stand in. Others had been burnt over the years and had tunnels right through the trunks. A paved trail had been laid through the trees and we walked through the forest admiring the beauty and peace of the majestic Sequoia’s.

Back to the hotel for a rest. I had had so little sleep last night; I needed to catch up a little. We both slept for about an hour and a half and felt much better. I got up and had a shower and then we went into Kernville to meet up with Mike and Dana. David had made a reservation at Romeo and Anna’s Italian Restaurant and we had a fun time eating there. The food was excellent and the atmosphere was relaxed and jolly. Mike and Dana had enjoyed their day pottering around Kernville but had not managed to change motels. They had changed rooms though, as they had

been over-run with ants the previous night. Not a pleasant experience to be woken by ants crawling over you in bed!!

We all went back to our room and sat around talking for another couple of hours. It is so easy to get on with Mike and Dana – they are good, fun people. We bade them a fond farewell at 10.30pm and watched them ride off on Mike's impressive Harley Davidson. They were planning to leave early in the morning for the return journey to San Francisco so we wouldn't be seeing them again this trip. David and I felt so privileged that they had made the long trip to meet up with us.

Day 15: Sunday 2nd September

We had intended to be up early and on the road by 9am. Unfortunately, David would not get out of bed! I was up at 8am – showered, dressed, made the tea and then phoned Kathryn. David finally emerged at 9am. It was another beautiful morning, warm and sunny. I sat outside drinking tea and watching the hummingbirds at the feeders. They were so tiny, with translucent wings flapping furiously, their long, slender beaks inserted in the feeder holes sipping the red syrup. David and I had more hot oatmeal for breakfast sitting outside listening to the river tumbling over the rocks. We did a final pack, loaded the car and finally checked out at 10am. As we drove past Mike and Dana's motel, we were surprised to see their bikes still parked outside so we stopped to say a final goodbye. They were running late too! They had a long ride ahead of them but were going to take it slow and use the back roads across the mountains for the first few miles.

We headed south around Lake Isabella, stopping after a few miles to take some photos. The road from Isabella to Bakersfield followed the River Kern and was very narrow and twisty with deep gullies. It was quite slow going after the first few miles of Freeway ended and it became a one lane road. We eventually drove through the mountains and were on a long, straight road for twenty miles or so before joining the Interstate all the way to Los Angeles. We made good time and went straight to the Farmers Market south of Hollywood and had a good lunch at one of the pavement cafes. After browsing around the market for a while, we drove back to a flea market we had spotted near by. David bought a huge wood carving to hang on a wall for \$10. I was a bit worried as to how we would get it home but David had noticed it was made of several pieces screwed together and he thought he would be able to get it apart. Next stop was the Hacienda. We checked in and were given a nice room overlooking the courtyard. It had a small balcony and we sat there for a while with cold drinks watching the fountains playing in the sun. It was warm in LA but a lot cooler than we had become used to further inland.

We took the car back to Alamo and went back to the airport in the courtesy bus. We then waited for a Hacienda bus but it was so long coming, we had to find a phone to let them know we were there. The bus arrived eventually and we were taken back to the hotel. It had taken nearly two hours to return the car and get back to the hotel – a distance of no more than three miles each way! Back in the room, we repacked everything and managed to condense the bags to three to be checked in and three pieces of hand luggage. David took the carving apart and we split the four pieces between the bags. It was very difficult to lift the two big cases, they were so full! Packing done, we were hungry. We ate at the hotel coffee shop and then went across the road to Ralph's Supermarket for a few last minute things and then to the hotel bar for a drink before returning to the room for an early night.

Day 16: Monday 3rd September

Neither of us slept well and we were awake before the alarm sounded at 6.30am. We had a light breakfast of toast, tea and coffee in the Coffee Shop, finished packing, loaded the bags on a trolley and got the courtesy bus to the airport. We arrived way too early at 8am and were checked in by 8.10am. We had heard on the radio yesterday to check in three hours before flight time but this seemed a little unnecessary! After phoning Kathryn, we visited the airport shops, shed a few dollars and then sat in the lounge waiting for the flight to Toronto. The plane left on time and the five hour flight passed quickly. I read, dozed and watched the in-flight movies. We had a short wait at Toronto for our connecting flight to Heathrow and were soon on the final leg of our journey. We arrived back in the UK at 8am and were met by our taxi and were soon on the motorway heading home. Kathryn was waiting for us when we arrived and it was so nice to see her smiling face once more.

It had been an excellent holiday and we had done far more than we had planned and been to some amazing places. The main highlight was meeting up with Dana and Mike in Kernville. Each place we visited had a unique quality but my favourites were the Joshua Tree National Park and Death Valley. There is nothing like these places in England and to me they are very special. We both enjoyed Tijuana and were very pleased we had gone there – it was definitely a fun day.

Every time we visit America, we are impressed with the kindness and gentle manners of the people. Nothing is ever too much trouble, even in the smallest café or shop, good service is always accompanied with a smiling greeting. I am planning our next trip already – watch this space!!!
