

# The great frontier

Wild West adventure

There's much more to California than the Pacific Coast Highway, as Geoff Tompkinson discovers

**A** rusty old Shell gasoline sign riddled with bullet holes, the sort that nowadays often decorates the walls of diners and trendy cafes, sits at the base of one of the early manual fuel pumps. Worn out horse carts with stagecoach style wooden wheels lie partly overgrown in the scrub amidst wooden shack-like buildings listing so badly it's a wonder they are still standing at all. Walking in full riding gear down a main street reminiscent of *Gunfight at the OK Corral* we feel a bit like time travellers who have just emerged in another era. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's wind back to the start of the day...

We were several days into a seven-day ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Most people doing this would take the famous Pacific Coast Highway but we decided to cross over and ride down the eastern side of the Sierra mountain range and sample some of the remaining flavour of the old Wild West. We headed south from Lake Tahoe on Highway 395 under an overcast but gradually clearing sky. A mostly unremarkable straight line through gently undulating scrub took us towards the ever-distant hills and the California-Nevada state border.

The plan was to end the ride that night in Lee Vining in preparation for a visit to Mono Lake the next day. But after our American standard lunch of burger with fries in the Sportsmen's Bar & Grill our journey would take a Wild West diversion.

"You guys heading to Bodie?" a gravelly-voiced local asked as we prepared to hit the road. Seeing our flummoxed looks, he then proceeded to tell us all about the ghost town that is Bodie State Park, a deserted gold rush town from the 1800s. As the directions were not exactly complicated - head south for a few miles then turn left when you see the



Geoff and Liz stop off to take in the glory of their US adventure

## 'You guys heading to Bodie?' a gravelly-voiced local asked

sign - it sounded simple enough, so we hit the highway.

### On the road to Bodie

Most of the roads in this part of California have good tarmac and are pretty straight so it's very easy to drift over the 65mph limit. Luckily there aren't any speed cameras - at least not that we saw - and patrol cars are few and far between. However, occasional over-head signs warning of deer migrations do tend to focus your attention and reduce your speed.

After a while the flat plain became interspersed with small hills through which the road had been cut leaving red and yellow soil and rock wounds, scarring an otherwise scrubby green landscape. As we got further south these small hills got taller and rockier and soon the distant Sierras were obscured from view and we were

riding along a narrow valley floor. Just after a gentle curve between steeply rising rocks we passed a sign announcing the left turn to Bodie State Park followed just after the turn by a procession of signs: Pavement ends 10 miles ahead; Snow not removed beyond here; Zig zag bends for next ten miles; Danger of slipping; Cattle; Do not enter park during closed hours; Speed limit 55; No services available in Bodie.

The road itself was a welcome contrast to the straightness we had become accustomed to. A ribbon of tarmac wound through and between the hills and reintroduced us to the pure joy of carving the bends.

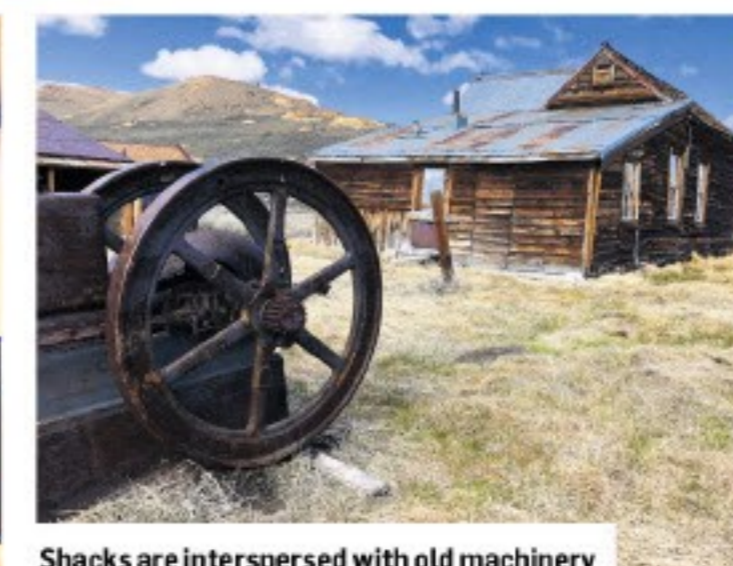
### Please, no smoking...

After about ten miles of uninhibited fun the scenery flattened out and we

*Continued over*



Sometimes a roadside lunch hits the spot



Shacks are interspersed with old machinery



The visitor centre is packed with fascination



An almost pin-straight road cuts through the rock

'Small hills got taller and rockier and soon the Sierras were obscured from view'

A chat with a local resulted in a fun and rewarding detour into

Access more tools and enhan



It's a miracle some of the buildings are still standing



Rickety carts come straight from the gold rush

# 'Childhood memories of Westerns soon flood back'

came to the end of the tarmac. The compacted mud and gravel track ahead of us snaked away into the distance and curved to the right before disappearing over a ridge. Time to stand on the pegs. After a few dusty and rib-rattling miles we crested a ridge and far in the distance we could see the remnants of a small town with buildings scattered across the face of a gently rising hill. All around were pockets of remaining snow and in places standing water lay across the track, turning the compacted mud into something a bit more interesting to traverse.

A few more minutes saw us rolling up to a stop sign and a small booth for collecting visitor fees run by the California State Parks service. As we paid our \$8 entrance fee the warden quipped with a grin "we don't see many motorbikes down here".

Memories of so many of the Westerns I was brought up on came flooding back as we walked down the streets of this museum town. A sign asks you not to steal anything and not to smoke. Fire in this wooden town would surely consume the whole place very rapidly. Timber-framed buildings listing badly stand amidst scattered collapsed carts and unidentifiable bits of machinery. A perfectly preserved church complete with wooden bell tower contrasts sharply with distant grey-painted old gold mine buildings up on a hill. Several of the buildings still have some interior contents and you can freely step inside the structurally sound ones. There is also a visitor centre with long glass cabinets full of memorabilia from the town. All too soon it was time for us to leave this wonderful place and head back down the dusty track to the 395 and our overnight stop in Lee Vining.

**The Tufa towers of Mono Lake**  
We had booked a night in the grandly named Yosemite Gateway Motel. Lee Vining is a one-horse town with a population of only 300, so this translated to a small shiplap wooden house with decent off-road parking. There was only one place

open to eat which fortunately was directly across the road. Ribs and a jacket potato in Bodie Mikes ended a fantastic day.

The next day the morning air was full with cottonwood seeds blowing like snow as we headed off for more adventures. A brief diversion up the Tioga Pass into Yosemite saw us amidst some fantastic redwood trees before we headed down to take a look at the otherworldly Mono Lake 'Tufa' formations. Mono Lake is a saline soda lake formed at least 750,000 years ago. The famous Tufa towers are continuously formed underwater as subsurface water enters the bottom of the lake through small springs. High concentrations of calcium cause calcite to precipitate around the springs. It is the build up of this calcite over centuries that causes the formation of towers. These would not normally be seen above the water surface and in fact this tourist attraction only really exists because in recent history the city of Los Angeles diverted most of the fresh water from the streams flowing into the lake for their own use. The resulting water level drop revealed the majestic towers seen today.

### Trail of the lonesome pine...

A bum-numbing, mesmerising, increasingly hot and sticky ride towards Death Valley and Lone Pine lay before us. This route along the Eastern Sierras is one of long, long stretches of sameness followed by fascinating and exciting rewards. Our next reward would start after an overnight in Lone Pine.

Lone Pine was named in the 1860s after the area's only pine tree, but it blew down in 1876. This place was the centre of the Western movie-making industry for many years and is still a hub of filming activity today. Directly on the main road is a fantastic monument to that fact in the Museum of Western Film History.

A short ride along the Whitney Portal road and we left civilisation behind. It was impossible not to imagine shootouts, stagecoach

hijacks and Apache Indian encampments behind the rounded rocks and in the sandy depressions between the contours of this amazing place. The contrast between this smoothly eroded maze of reddish sandy rocks and arches seen against the snow-capped jagged massive of Mount Whitney (at 14,505ft the tallest mountain in the Contiguous US) is starkly beautiful and was used to great effect in all those historic Westerns.

All too soon it was once again time to head on to our next stop but not before grabbing a sandwich lunch at the Chevron filling station in Lone Pine; sometimes these are the best meals of all. After a further 90 miles of increasingly hot and sticky straight lining we turned West on the Joshua tree-lined Isabella Walker Pass Road and said a fond farewell to the Eastern Sierras and the old Wild West. **MCN**



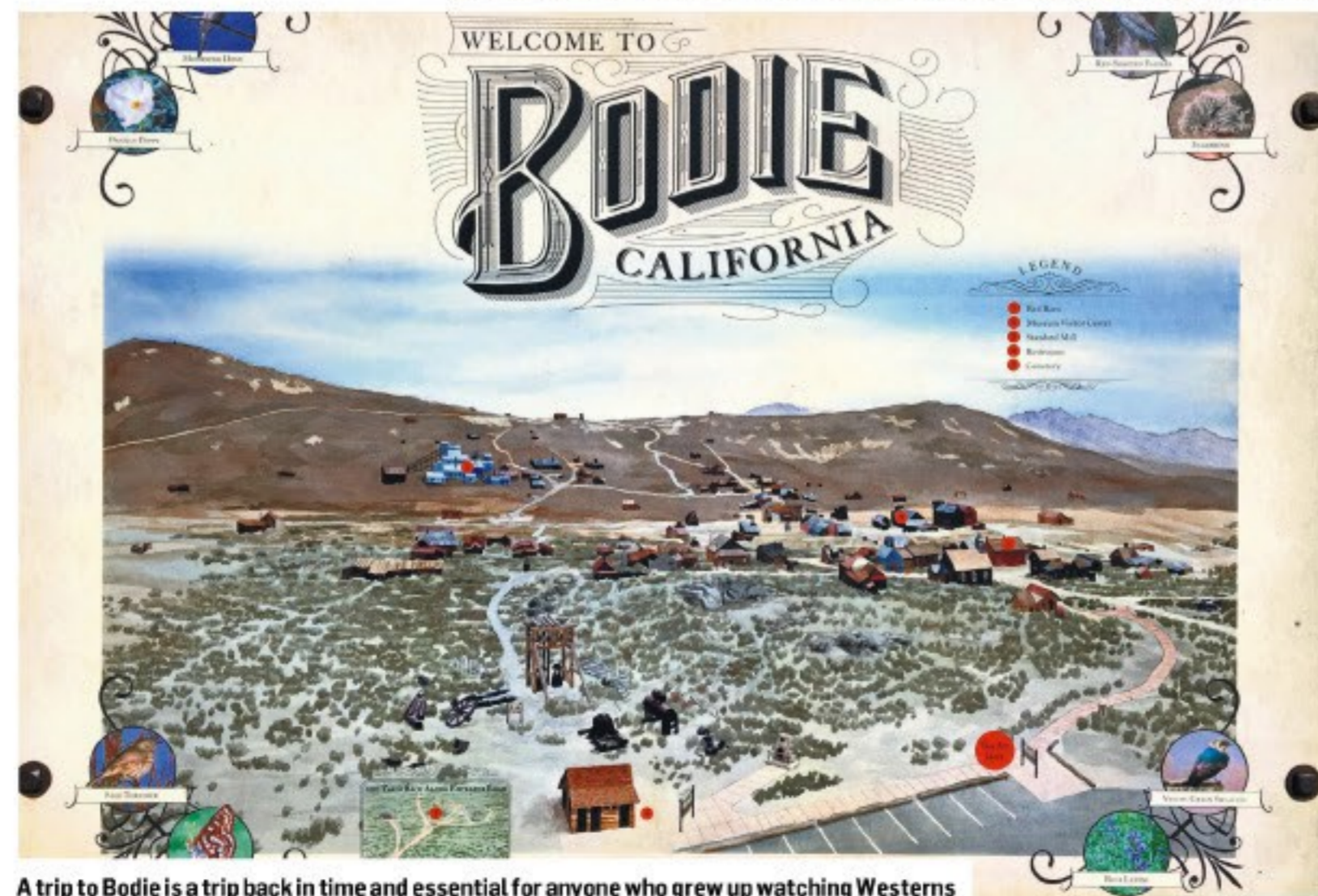
'Grey-painted buildings of the old gold mine stand on the hill'

There's gold in them there hills.. Well, there was..

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A trip to Bodie is a trip back in time and essential for anyone who grew up watching Westerns



A detour around the redwoods adds to the charm



This is not your average dentist



Mono Lake is other-worldly

## HOW TO TAKE A RIDE ON THE WEST SIDE



**Route 833 miles**

- San Francisco ● Lake Tahoe
- Topaz Lake ● Bridgeport
- Bodie Ghost Town ● Lee Vining
- Tioga Pass Road ● Mono Lake at Southern Tufa
- Lone Pine
- Alabama Hills ● Whitney Portal Road
- Isabella Walker Pass Road
- Bakersfield ● Los Angeles

California is a great place for riding motorbikes, wide and varied with many different types of roads. Being a vast state, the interesting riding roads tend to be separated by long stretches of very straight road, so be prepared for a bit of less enthralling mile munching, too. The best time for a trip down the Eastern Sierras is from May to October, although it can get very hot in July and August near Death Valley, which records some of the highest temperatures on Earth.

### Hire bikes

We rented two brand new Suzuki V-Strom 650s from MotoQuest in San Francisco and returned them to their premises in Los Angeles at the end of the trip. The cost for seven days' hire for both bikes was £2100. [www.motoquest.com](http://www.motoquest.com)

The rental Suzukis were perfect for the US adventure



### Where to stay

There's a vast choice of roadside motels and small hotels to be found and booked easily and cheaply on booking.com. You will always find a diner with a choice of hearty breakfasts.

### What to eat

Typical American fare of burgers, chips, ribs, etc. California is a melting pot of cultures and cuisines and in the bigger towns you have a selection of restaurants such as Italian, Mexican, etc.

### Get there

Fly to San Francisco or LA from as little as £650 return. It's worth noting that upgrading to premium economy will not only increase the comfort of the 11-hour flight, but will also increase baggage allowance, which is ideal if you're taking riding gear.