

Big Sur, California. Above: a view of the Venice V Hotel in Venice Beach. Below: Jill Dawson. Opposite: the White Water Hotel on Moonstone Beach

Good vibrations

On the epic Californian adventure of her dreams, the writer *Jill Dawson* discovers a renewed sense of vitality and peace, surrounded by the Golden State's breathtaking natural beauty

MY BIG CALIFORNIA TRIP STARTS AUSPICIOUSLY WHEN MY MOTHER-peace tarot circular deck shows up as a lit object on the airport security screen at Heathrow. I invite the guard who intervenes to pick a card – the Four of Discs. ‘Gaining control of your doorway. Who comes in and who stays out,’ I say, reading it from the leaflet in the deck, in case he thinks I’m making it up. We both laugh. ‘I love my job,’ he says.

That card seems to be for me, too. Gaining control of your doorway; I have told all my writing students that I’m out of reach and am sworn off Zoom. It has been a tough four years full of caring for others – the death of my mother and of a dear friend, Sally Cline. I have wanted to come to California for so long. I feel that I am here for some sort of reset: a shedding of an old skin, the discovery of a new one.

I arrive late and fall into bed without time to appreciate the loveliness of my surroundings. Dorland Mountain Arts is a retreat for writers and artists, about a 60-minute drive from San Diego, nestled in the Palomar Mountain range, overlooking the Temecula valley. At sunrise, I wake to find a little cottontail rabbit on the deck, nibbling at the shortpod mustard flowers. My cabin is surrounded by strong-smelling rosemary plants and the valley is all yellow, ochre and green: California chaparral. A Western Fence lizard does a few press-ups while I drink my coffee. The sun is arriving through a bridal veil



of mist and a mourning dove is calling: ‘Who, who, who are you?’

Who would I be if I stopped caring for others for a while and only pleased myself? I’m here to write a memoir. A reckoning, a taking-stock. I have published a lot of books but, oddly, this one is – for the moment at least – not for publication, but just for me.

Following my own rhythms with no one else to care for is delicious. It has been so long since I could work all night or get up at five in the morning to write. I had a child at 26, another at 38 and then fostered my third when I was 52, so I feel that I have stretched out the child-raising years more than most.

By the time my husband Meredith arrives to join me a month later, I have written 34,000 words

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of the memoir. I might have a ‘talent for aloneness’ (a description of autism by the psychologist Uta Frith), but four weeks is the longest we have ever been apart in our 23-year marriage. I’m stir-crazy by now and keen for his company and a change of pace.

We hire a car and start with Los Angeles. Meredith is an architect, so he wants to show me landmarks such as the Getty Museum, the Gamble House, the Stahl House. We stay at the V hotel in Venice Beach, which he visited in his twenties. Back then, it was a sketchy place, peopled by skateboarders, drunks and free-wheeling protestors. They’re still here, but now there are chi-chi boutiques and restaurants on the nearby Abbot Kinney Boulevard. This lovely long street is a pleasure to stroll along, something that’s hard to do in L.A.

Travelling with an architect can be hazardous; I have spent

many a trip listening to Meredith tutting over someone’s stupid decision about where to put the windows. But the V Hotel does not disappoint. Once home to Charlie Chaplin and the actress Clara Bow, it has been reimaged with panache and has a fantastic vibe.

Driving in Downtown LA is as bad as everyone says – the city is 40 miles across – but Meredith is surprisingly relaxed as he navigates 10 lanes of traffic. Just as well, as the next part of our adventure is a road trip, starting back in Temecula. (I have driven in the States, but long ago. The pleasure of being in a couple means you can give up struggling at things that one of you is vastly better at.)

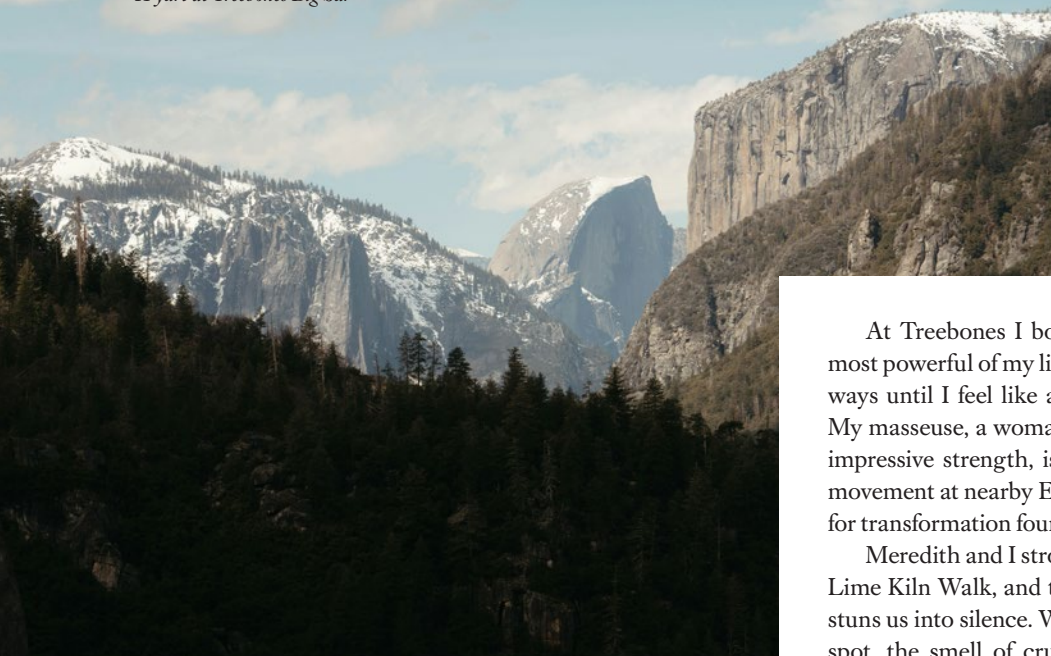
California is a huge state, twice the size of Great Britain. There is a lot to see. ‘Here, beneath the immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent,’ the writer Joan Didion, one of its most famous inhabitants, once wrote. We are grateful when the tourist board Visit California helps us plan the road trip with an itinerary, drive-times and routes, suggestions of hotels and accommodation to suit our tastes and interests. Meredith and I often have different ideas about what to do on holiday, but there is one thing we agree on: we want to see more of the ocean.

Our first stop is the White Water Hotel on Moonstone Beach in SLO Cal, the nickname given to California’s Central Coast, San Luis Obispo County. We wander along the boardwalk, listening to curlews and oystercatchers to shake off the five-hour car journey. The hotel provides bikes that we take into the small town of Cambria to pootle around the vintage shops and galleries. Our evening meal at the unpretentious Brydige restaurant – it looks like a private house – is my favourite of our trip: mushrooms roasted in truffle oil, beetroot with goat’s cheese, hazelnuts, persimmons and tangerine oil, sole in brown butter with cipollini onions and fennel and, to finish, a pistachio ice-cream with smoked salt. We celebrate Meredith’s birthday in Monterey’s finest hotel, the Seven Gables, a Victorian mansion with sweeping views of the bay where characters in a Henry James novel would feel at home.

Time to please myself. Fish and chips at Montecito, wine tasting at Hearst vineyards, visiting Carmel – where we discover a Frank Lloyd Wright house right on the beach that, astonishingly, Meredith didn’t know about – walking alongside a creek among fragrant herbs and enchanted ferns, and having lunch with a blue jay hopping around us. We sleep in gorgeous yurts at Treebones in Big Sur to the sound of elephant seals honking and braying on the beach; Meredith spies a bobcat, as cool as you like, stalking through the grounds.



Yosemite National Park. Clockwise from right: an Airstream at Autocamp Yosemite. The author's tarot deck. The Big Sur coastline. A yurt at Treebones Big Sur



At Treebones I book a massage, which turns out to be the most powerful of my life – the therapist moves my body in strange ways until I feel like a locust, with legs bending up to my ears. My masseuse, a woman in her late seventies with grey plaits and impressive strength, is one of the originators of the body-work movement at nearby Esalen, the world-famous Californian centre for transformation founded in the early 1960s.

Meredith and I stroll – at last – among the stately redwoods in Lime Kiln Walk, and this place of golden light and gentle creeks stuns us into silence. When we sit down for lunch in a high sunny spot, the smell of crushed oregano, lemongrass and rosemary rises up. A flight of brown pelicans swoops over us like a Red Arrow display.

After that, we drive on to Yosemite to see the sunrise at Tunnel View, walk to the Mirror Lake and eat our picnic, observing through binoculars a climber picking his way up a terrifying granite slab. I have always wanted to stay in a Silver Airstream and our last night is at Autocamps Yosemite, where we eat wood-fired pizzas among the fragrant Monterey pines, while a jazz singer busking on the deck is accompanied by the haunting cry of an owl. This is a trip that has piled on sensory pleasure.

I even get to have a tarot reading from the Motherpeace originator and feminist scholar Vicki Noble, based these days in Santa Cruz. In the middle of our conversation, I discover that she is an admirer of the books of my late friend Sally Cline. I pick the Sun card for the future: Californian solar energy, glowing with warmth and light. Coming through something. The strength of being alone; the bliss of being with someone you love.

There is a moment in Big Sur when a tiny ruby-throated hummingbird flies up in front of me, pirouettes and disappears, and I remember my tarot cards glowing on the screen, setting off security at Heathrow. If this trip were a tarot card, it would be the Ten of Cups. My cup runneth over: almost more joy than a heart can hold.

'Pixie' by Jill Dawson (£16.99, Bloomsbury) is published in March. Venice V Hotel (mrandmrsmith.com), from about £125 a room a night. White Water Cambria (whitewatercambria.com), from about £185 a room a night. Treebones Big Sur (treebonesresort.com), from £316 a yurt a night. Autocamp Yosemite (autocamp.com), from £203 an Airstream a night. Seven Gables Inn (thesevengablesinn.com), from £270 a room a night. For more information, see visitcalifornia.com. □

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