

# Must LOVE Road Trips

Our writer's romantic getaway gone wrong leads to a revelation along California's Highway 1.

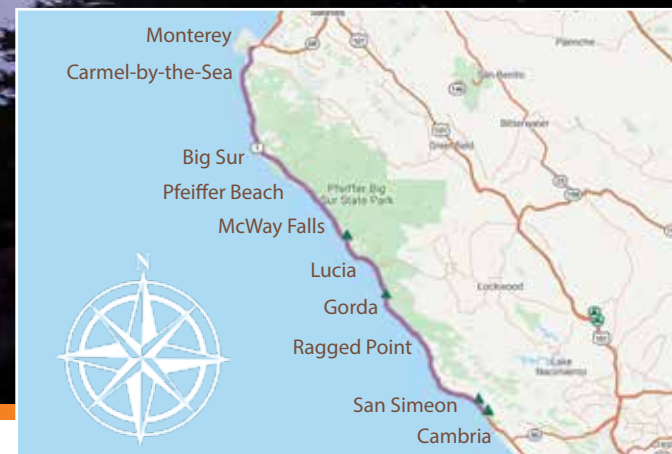
By Alan Rider

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McWay Falls in Monterey County is visible from California's Highway 1.



Bixby Creek Bridge



They say that the road to true love is filled with ups and downs. Here's proof that that's no mere aphorism.

You see, my most recent romantic interest—let's call her Wendy because that's her name—and I were brought together by our mutual love of road trips. Her online dating profile made clear she was thoroughly into them, and I'm always happy to hop in a car and head for the horizon. So when I casually mentioned to her that central California's Highway 1 through the remote coastal region dubbed Big Sur was one of my all-time favorite drives, a plan quickly came together. Wendy and I would spend a few days running down the classic 100-mile section that leads from picturesque Carmel-by-the-Sea in the north to the equally charming village of Cambria in the south.

As the date for our adventure drew closer, however, Wendy decided that she was still passionate about road trips but, well, maybe not so much about me. With the keys to a borrowed Mazda Miata RF (the latest retractable-hardtop version of the iconic two-seat sports car) already

in hand and weather forecasts promising sunny skies and balmy temperatures, I had no choice but to go on one of the world's most romantic road trips solo (sad face).

Pulling out of the parking lot of the oceanfront Sanctuary Beach Resort in Monterey that first morning, I found running the Miata RF's six-speed manual through the gears to be surprisingly therapeutic. I stopped to lower the top and let in all that gorgeous California sunshine, and that was all it took to turn my frown upside down.

Next, my empty passenger seat and I turned south on the dramatic two-lane ribbon of asphalt known as Highway 1. Past the photogenic coastline of Point Lobos State Natural Reserve, over the dramatic 360-foot concrete arch of Bixby Creek Bridge (the parking area can be extremely crowded, so



pull over somewhere safe if you want to snap pics), and on to Andrew Molera State Park. There, I met up with the folks from the Ventana Wildlife Society for a four-hour excursion to locate endangered California condors in the wild. Using a radio-tracking antenna and a spotting scope, our guide gave us a rare look at these gigantic birds that are slowly but surely soaring their way back from the brink of extinction.

After condor-watching, it was just a quick hop farther south to the tiny laid-back enclave known as the "village" of Big Sur, where you'll find the bulk of fuel and food options along the route. While you're there, check your gas gauge, and maybe grab a sandwich to nosh later at a roadside pullout. Wherever you stop for your picnic, I can guarantee you won't ever find a restaurant with a better view.

The Big Sur valley also has the greatest selection of lodging along the route. I stayed at the Big Sur River Inn and the Big Sur Lodge. (Because I was there in high season, I could only find one-night vacancies in each place.) Both offer rooms with rustic charm but no televisions, so bring a good book.



Pfeiffer Beach, Big Sur

Pressing on, you'll come to Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park, home to a grove of ancient coastal redwoods. A little farther south along Highway 1, look for the small easy-to-miss sign for Sycamore Canyon Road, the turn that leads





PHOTO BY VICTORIA GARAGLIANO/©HEARST CASTLE/VCA STATE PARKS



PHOTO BY VISIT CALIFORNIA/WYLES MCGUINNESS

Above: Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park  
Left: Hearst Castle

to Pfeiffer Beach, one of the most secluded-yet-accessible stretches of sand on the California coast.

Or continue on Highway 1, and find the pullout where you can view 80-foot McWay Falls, one of just three places in the continental U.S. where a waterfall drops directly into the ocean. It's truly one of the most spectacular settings along this entire jaw-dropping drive.

Farther south, you'll pass through Lucia, which gets its name from the Santa Lucia mountain range you've been running along since you left Carmel. Up next are Gorda (or "fat" in Spanish) and Ragged Point. All three are merely wide places in the road with quaint cafes and not much else. They are, however, good spots to take a break if, or should I say *when*, you find yourself suffering from an overload of stunning scenery.

The road will soon begin to unwind, with hairpin turns



Piedras Blancas Light Station Outstanding Natural Area in central California has free, wheelchair-accessible areas for viewing elephant seals.

and steep drop-offs replaced by more gently rolling terrain and sweeping curves. You'll eventually come upon viewing areas overlooking the beaches where thousands of elephant seals come to breed, molt and give birth. If you've never seen these blubbery beasts (males can grow to the size and weight of a small car) in the wild, it's a must-stop.

The final don't-miss attraction along Highway 1 is William Randolph Hearst's hilltop home known as Hearst Castle. The legendary mansion is 68,500 square feet of the most over-the-top architecture, landscaping and interior design you'll ever lay eyes on. It's also the place where the aging newspaper magnate held court with a list of guests that reads like a who's who of celebrities of his day, from the Marx Brothers to Charles Lindbergh. It was here, too, where Hearst and Hollywood starlet Marion Davies, his longtime paramour, cemented a romance that lasted until the day he died in 1951.

I am blown away every time I visit the estate Hearst called *La Cuesta Encantada* (which translates to "The Enchanted Hill"). But this time, not surprisingly, it was the enduring relationship between Hearst and Davies that I found myself mulling as I walked from the visitor center to my parked Miata with the empty passenger seat. I was struck by two revelations: first, that, like California Highway 1, the route to finding true love is full of unexpected twists and turns; and second, that the ultimate romance for me will always be my love affair with the open road.

Alan's first road song:  
"Already Gone"  
by the Eagles