

California

Perhaps, now that I am home again, that should read, '*California, there I went!*' My visit was with two relatives, David and Elizabeth, in a party of 43 on a conducted tour, with Titan Tours. It was led by the Tour Manager, Peter Graham., who organised everything along the way, and generally smoothed our path. He was also a fount of information on all that we saw. Our very skilful coach driver, an American, was called Mark.

It began on Sunday, 9th October at 4.15am, when I had to get up, as I was being collected by the Titan minibus at 5.40. Calling for David and Elizabeth in the north of Hayling Island, we picked up two people, bound for a tour to Australia, in Haslemere, then headed for Heathrow and a proper breakfast! Our Boeing 747/400 on Flight BA283 took off at 11.55 for its non-stop flight to Los Angeles, arriving some ten hours later, when the time was 10pm BST, but only 2pm Pacific Time. The Immigration Officer being satisfied - he told me I didn't *look* like Osama bin Laden! - we joined the tour coach for a 2½ hour journey to our first hotel in San Diego. I was glad to go to bed at 8 o'clock, having been *awake* for 24 hours, and slept for nine hours. The hotel was built on a '*rain forest*' theme, with lush vegetation, waterfalls, and pools with large tropical fish in open spaces within the walls. There was a lack of adequate signs, and more than once! I lost my way going to the restaurant or to my room, and found myself going round these central areas time after time. I managed to learn the route by the time we left!

Next morning we toured San Diego in our coach with a local guide, and ended in the Old Town. The Spanish influence is strong in the south of California; most of the staff working in the hotels is Mexican, while many of the buildings have a Spanish look. After a second night in the same hotel, we set off on Tuesday morning to cross the Sonora Desert, passing within a few miles of the Mexican border, into Arizona. In Phoenix, the State Capital, we visited the State Legislature building before going to our hotel.

On Wednesday we had an early start, at 7.15am, so we stopped for breakfast at a place called Sedona, a town surrounded by red rocks forming some curious shapes. On then to the Grand

Canyon, where we had booked a flight over it, covering 100 miles. The views were incredible, I had been told that pictures and descriptions could not do it justice, and that was certainly true. It is 270 miles long, 10 miles wide and 1 mile deep. The Colorado River in the bottom looks like a narrow stream, though it is actually 300 feet wide and 100 feet deep! After the flight, we went to the rim and looked down into the depths, then to an IMAX cinema to see a spectacular film of its history and a re-enactment of the first exploration by boat along the river, by the one-armed Major John Wesley Powell in 1869. After a memorable day, we went to the nearby small town of Williams and our hotel for the night.

Before leaving on Thursday morning we watched a mock '*shoot-out*', Wild West style, and then were on our way to Las Vegas in Nevada, where our hotel was the Stardust. My room was almost at the end of a corridor so long that I could get all the exercise I needed for the day just by going along to the lift! That evening we were taken in our coach on a tour along the Boulevard or as it is known, to see the lights. Many of the hotels have a theme - Egyptian, Venetian, Parisian, and so on, all with appropriate models outside, and some had fun-fairs on the roof. We went in to the Rio Hotel and viewed the gaming floor from a gallery, and part of the floor show. Next stop was the Bellagio Hotel to see the '*water-ballet*' created by fountains moving in time to music. Everything in Las Vegas is designed to attract visitors to the gaming floors, where there are hundreds of gambling machines as well as the card tables and other forms of gambling. Even the Gideon Bible in my hotel room had a gold cover, instead of the usual red, green or blue, though whether by accident or design I don't know. Friday was a '*free*' day, as we were staying for two nights, so I went on an extra tour to the Hoover Dam a few miles away. There is a main road across the top of the dam, which we should have used on our way to Las Vegas, but because of the present security measures, buses and coaches are no longer allowed on it, so we had to come by a different route.

We left Las Vegas on Saturday morning crossing the Mojave Desert back from Nevada into California, I was rather amused to see by the

roadside, as we crossed the State Boundary Line, a sign saying '*Welcome to California*', followed by five or six more signs pointing out the amounts of the fines imposed for non-compliance with various State laws!

Our first stop was at a place called Calico, a former silver mining town, but since the mines ran out, now a '*ghost town*' made into a tourist attraction. The original wooden buildings have been made into shops, restaurants, and museums' re-creating what life was like there in the 19th century. We had our lunch served appropriately on enamelled plates, something I have not used since my Scout Camp days! Crossing the desert and some mountains we entered the California Central Valley, rich farming land with mile after mile of fruit and nut orchards of every kind, and cattle ranches. To put the icing on the cake for these prosperous farmers, oil and gas are extracted from under the ground. We spent the night at a small town called Visalia.

On Sunday morning our first call was at the Mariposa Grove of giant redwood Sequoia trees for a conducted tour on a large trailer pulled by a tractor, with a commentary through headphones. The afternoon was spent in Yosemite National Park, and then we went on to our next hotel at Sonora.

Eight o' clock on Monday morning saw us on the road once more for the short drive into San Francisco, which we entered over the Bay Bridge, longer than but not as eye-catching as the more famous Golden Gate Bridge. The early start was in case of morning traffic delays, as we were booked on a cruise round the Bay at 10.30, but we were in good time at Fisherman's Wharf, where the boat was waiting. We sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge, which spans the narrow entrance to the very large Bay and harbour, rather like at Portsmouth Harbour, but on a much larger scale, then round Alcatraz Island, no longer used as a prison. In the afternoon we had a local guide to conduct us on a tour of the city in our coach, including crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. Tolls are payable on both bridges to enter the city, but not to leave it. Finally we reached our hotel, and my room was on the 24th floor of 26. As we were staying here for two nights, Tuesday was a free day, so with David and Elizabeth I rode on one of the famous cable-cars down to Fisherman's

Wharf, it was one of the most uncomfortable rides I have ever had! After looking round the shops and having lunch - fish of course! - David and Elizabeth went back to the hotel, but I visited the Cable Car Museum, housed in the building where the cables are driven, passing over large pulley wheels before entering the tunnels under the roads, and what a noise they made! Leaving there I looked down the road and saw all the notices on the buildings were in Chinese, at the beginning of Chinatown. I walked down there and waited for a bus to take me to Union Square, where all the large shops like Macy's are. It was actually a trolley-bus, and when it came it was quite full. Immediately I got on, a young Chinese girl got up and gave me her seat; the Chinese are very polite and always defer to older people. Apart from a black man sitting in front of me, I was the only non-Chinese on the bus. They were very helpful when I asked which stop for Union Square.

Next morning, Wednesday, we headed south along the coast, making our first stop at Monterey, then on to Carmel for lunch. By coincidence, it was exactly 61 years since I had stood on the Biblical Mount Carmel in Palestine, in October 1944. We continued along the special 17-mile Coastal Drive, with spectacular scenery all the way, and on to our hotel for the night at San Simeon. The furniture was made out of logs, but still very comfortable. Continuing southwards along the coast on Thursday, we stopped to look at a large colony of sea-lions lying on the beach huddled together. Only one of them moved, to look up languidly to see what this horde of disturbing visitors wanted, then went back to sleep in the sun. Solvang, our coffee stop, was founded by Danes, and the buildings were in the Danish style, even to imitation storks in nests on some of the roofs. Our lunch stop was at Santa Barbara, but first we visited the Mission on the outskirts of the town. When the Spaniards occupied Mexico and other parts of America, the Roman Catholic Church sent out missionaries northwards into California, and they set up a string of these missions. This was, I think, the largest.

The final leg of the journey took us past Hollywood and Los Angeles to our hotel in a suburb of LA called Anaheim which consists

largely of hotels for visitors to Disneyland. We were to stay three nights there, and a ticket to Disneyland was included in the tour; we could use it on either Friday or Saturday. We elected to have an easy day on Friday, so we stayed round the hotel. In the afternoon I walked along the road for half a mile to Disneyland to visit the '*Downtown*' shopping area, not inside the theme park itself, so no ticket was needed.

Some of the party went on an extra tour to the Universal Film Studios in Hollywood for the day, but as I rarely go to the cinema I knew nothing about the film sets to be seen, so did not opt for this one. We three went on Saturday morning by the shuttle bus from our hotel to Disneyland. The usual cost of a ticket was \$56, which is about £38, but once inside all rides are free, as often as you wished. We went in a boat through the '*African Jungle*', where life-size working models of animals and people formed tableaux along the way. The '*Pirates of the Caribbean*' adventure was by boat in the dark, with tableaux lit up along the sides depicting various pirate activities. Next we went along the '*Mississippi River*' on a replica stern-wheeler boat, again with appropriate tableaux.

After that, David and Elizabeth went back to the hotel, but I stayed on for a time to sample other rides and to look round further. Particularly I wanted to ride on the old time American railroad train which went all round the perimeter of the park, with the Conductor, in period uniform, calling out '*A-all a-bo-a-rd!*' after each stop. We all returned in the evening to watch the '*Parade of Dreams*', with various brightly lit floats depicting Disney scenes, and characters in costume dancing in front, or on the floats themselves. It was a most spectacular sight, and the place was crowded. Later there was a fireworks display, but we chose not to stay for that, as it did not begin till 9.30pm. The theme park, the first Disneyland, was opened there in 1955, so they were celebrating their Golden Jubilee with these special attractions.

On our last morning, Sunday, we left in our coach for Los Angeles Airport, but on the way toured the city and Hollywood. We stopped at the place where there are several theatres and concert halls, then visited the famous Hollywood Bowl open air theatre. We stopped at a '*Mexican Village*' area, next to the main Union Street

railway station, or '*railroad depot*'. Lastly we went to the Hollywood Boulevard, to have lunch in a huge shopping mall, which had five floors. Next door was the Chinese Theatre, where over the years many of the film stars had left the imprints of their hands and feet in concrete on the forecourt, with the dates when they were made. Some went back to the days of silent films, like Mary Pickford in 1926. I included some of the better known ones to end my video record of the trip.

Although such a tour involves a great deal of travelling, the scenery was so varied that it never became boring on the longer stages. The towns and villages were spacious, with wide roads. Altogether we covered over 2,500 miles in the coach. Add to that some 5,500 miles each way by air and the journey to and from Heathrow, the grand total must be nearly 14,000 miles in sixteen days, but well worth it. What's more, I can now say that I have set foot in all five continents!

Trevor Hopkinson

