

# Outdoor

## XXI

### CALIFORNIA'S FORGOTTEN ROADS

*Exploring Roads Less Traveled in the Golden State*

OVERLAND ALONG EL CAMINO DEL DIABLO  
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CLIMBING ANTERO PEAK  
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THE GREAT ESCAPE — A PHOTOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

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Our van Chilli parked on the Sonoran Desert backroads

# California's Forgotten Roads

WORDS & PHOTOS - MATTHEW LYNCH

California has an estimated 396,540 roads. That's more than any other American state, save Texas. The Golden State is also home to some of North America's most diverse habitats, with a whopping nine national parks open for public exploration. Unfortunately, California also has forty million inhabitants, making it the most populated state in America. Collectively, this means there are crowds of people exploring a vast array of natural landscapes via a great many roads. The challenge, therefore, lies in finding the roads less traveled, and the natural spots seldom explored by overlanders.

So far on my American road trip, California had been a dream. Alongside my best friend James, we'd already driven the full length of the Pacific Coast Highway – or Route 1 – or 101, as it's more commonly known. We'd traveled over six hundred miles in our red Chevy van – from the Golden Gate Bridge of San Francisco to the surfer's haven of San Diego. Yet, in all that time, we'd barely had the roads to ourselves.



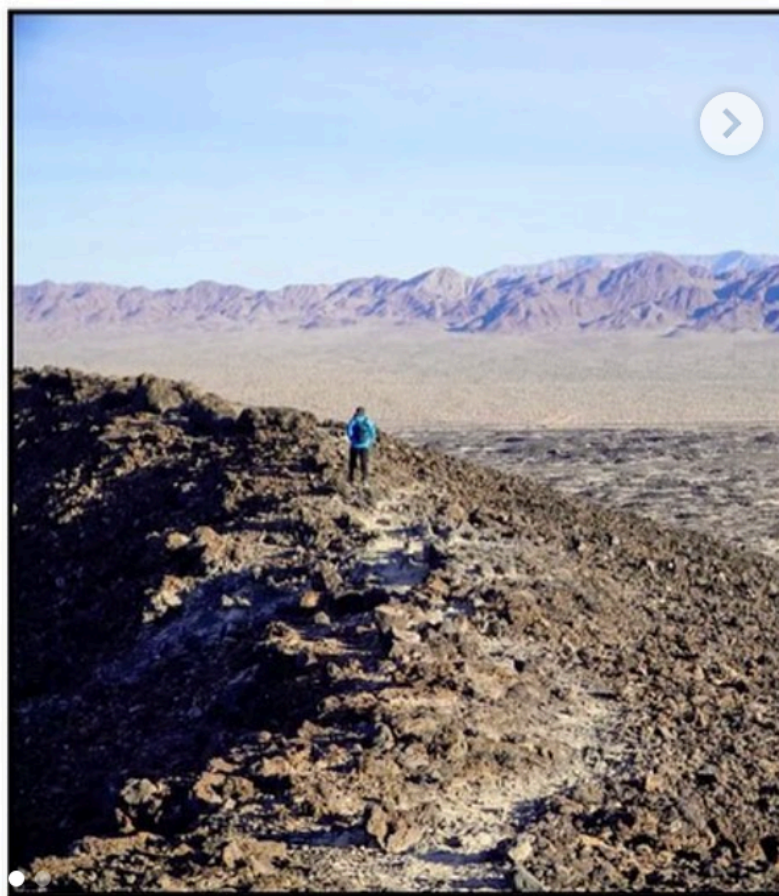


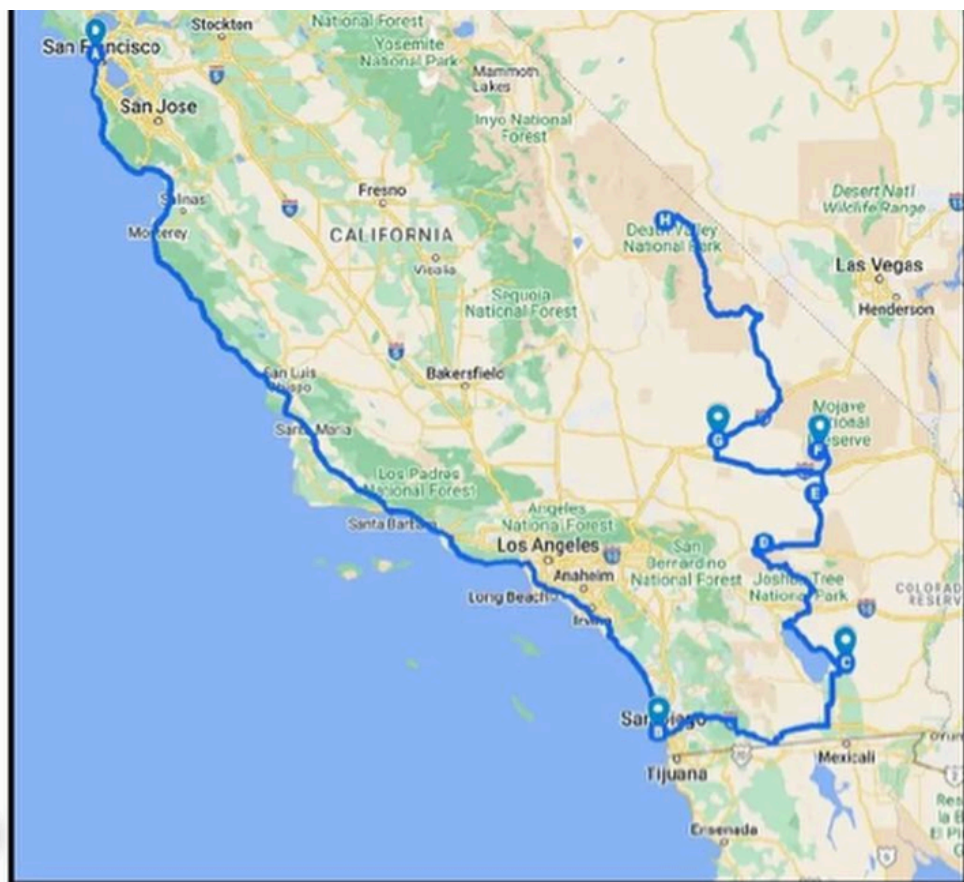
A handful of shells at Salton Sea

The following morning, woken by the rising heat, we packed up camp and drove on before our fellow van-lifers roused from their slumber. We stopped at the Salton Sea to make a cup of coffee and walked along the salt-lake shoreline to marvel at the drifts of tiny white shells abandoned in the sand. Committed to our journey, we drove on, accompanied by a vast cargo train that chugged alongside the lake and extended past the horizon.

We continued north, bisecting the main roads and pursuing our solo venture through the desert. The landscape shifted and rolled from craggy mountains to lumping hills and back to vast plains and dusty mesas again. We spent a night camping on Bureau of Land Management (B.L.M.) grounds outside Joshua Tree National Park where we found ourselves back amid a growing crowd.

Getting rather fond of our solitude, we chose to drive through Joshua Tree the next day and pressed on in search of more backcountry adventures. That night, we may have got more than we bargained for when the temperature plummeted miles from civilization. Parked in a dry lake beneath a cavernous sky of stars, we curled, shivering, in our three-season sleeping bags, as coyotes yipped and barked in the surrounding darkness.





As the cars flashed past us heading madly and directly to their destinations, we knew we'd experienced something special. Rather than take the highways between the well-trodden tourist sites, we'd chosen an adventure of our own by letting the forgotten roads guide our route. Key milestones for other travelers, such as Joshua Tree and Death Valley, now became inconsequential compared to the surprises that had greeted us along the journey. Part of the charm came from the fact that we never knew what each mile held in store for us.

To look at our route made me realize how much of America is still out there to be discovered. Even amongst some of the busiest roads, cities, and sites in the United States, unexpected routes can still be found. In fact, the best roads are often tucked right under our noses. All you have to do is step back and find them. ❏

Here we went for another hike into the wilderness. After an hour of sweating and trudging, we reached the crest of the dunes where we were greeted by mile upon mile of rolling sand. The dunes snaked and twisted into the distance before dropping down into a brown plain. All that marked the landscape was the long straight road that would guide us to our next destination.

Now in a groove, we hopped back into our van, thrilled to be exploring these seemingly forgotten landscapes. It was hard to believe that we had seen so few people on the roads. At every stopping spot, we were usually alone, accompanied by perhaps one vehicle, if that.

It may have helped that we were exploring in the low season. Few travelers are driving through the southwestern deserts of the United States in January. But clearly, a trick was being missed. No crowds and mild but sunny weather were a winning combination! Unfortunately, our luck couldn't last forever. After leaving the Kelso Dunes, we soon met the traffic heading along Interstate 15 between Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

## MATT LYNCH

AUTHOR BIO



Matt is a freelance travel writer and filmmaker specializing in outdoor adventures. Extreme travel to exotic and unusual locations is what excites him the most. His travels have taken him trekking in the Himalayas, backpacking through Asia on the Trans Siberian Railway, and wild camping along five hundred miles of long-distance hiking trails in the United Kingdom.