

Coast to Coasters meet the California Dreamers

Why California you may well ask? You'll have to cast your mind back to September 2008 & the atrocious weather we experienced during the early part of the month; torrential rain, day after day – in fact we have a vivid memory of a newspaper headline outside Patterdale post office asking “will it ever stop raining?”

The day after that headline we made the acquaintance of 5 ladies from California, all involved in the medical profession in one form or another; Krista a surgeon introduced herself & the other 4 after breakfast in Greenbank Farm where we were all staying, having walked the Grasmere to Patterdale stretch of the famous Coast to Coast walk across England from the Irish Sea to the North Sea some 190 miles later, which had been devised by Alfred Wainwright in the early 1970's. She began by saying that as we would in all probability be meeting up with them along the route we should at least know their names! They were in no order of importance or more seriously age: Krista, Jane, Mo, Bev & Wendy & meeting up with them we certainly did!!! So much so that at the journey's end, Robin Hood's Bay, 10 days later we succumbed to a pressing invitation to visit them in their own country of North America where they promised us warmer & drier weather!

Now who can resist an invitation like that? We certainly couldn't!

So that chance meeting with a few evenings spent in village pubs such as Orton, Muker, Danby Wiske, Osmotherley & Blakey Ridge together with many rest points of the day's walking where we caught up with or indeed were caught up by them, resulted in their very persistent invitation to spend time with them in California.

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That was in September 2008; in September 2010 we were standing in terminal 5 of Heathrow Airport wondering what on earth we were letting ourselves & the Californians in for. Yes, we were incredibly excited, & yes we knew we'd have a great adventure, but we hardly knew them even though we'd been in email contact with them almost daily for the last 2 years. Apprehension was the watch word!

The flight was on a British Airways 747 jumbo jet; what an experience, & very comfortable too even though the flight was 10½ hours long from Heathrow to San Francisco. It added to the already mounting excitement of our dream holiday in the New World.

We had a very early start – we got up at 2.30am; our neighbour, Andrew had offered to take us to Manchester airport to catch the connecting flight to London's Heathrow so we left the village around 3.45am & we had checked in & were through security by 5.45am. Terminal 3 has a huge number of gates & ours was 142; we waited to be called to the boarding stage & were seated on the aeroplane which would take us to terminal 5 at Heathrow, but we sat on the tarmac for about 45 minutes as the flights were being affected by the strong winds sweeping across the north of England. We were delayed by approximately an hour in all, but lost count of the times we circled to land due to the congestion in

the sky!! I didn't know they had traffic lights 20,000 feet up! However it did give the air stewards time to serve breakfast & tea or coffee to us – I hadn't realized how hungry I was!

Heathrow is huge. I was last there in 1978 as a sightseer & an aeroplane called Concorde was turning heads; times have changed of course & apparently size DOES matter. We arrived into terminal 5 & our onward flight was from the same terminal but to give you an idea of how large the place is, in order to get to our departure gate we took a driverless tube train from one end of the building to another part – it was vast! The whole operation was very slick, the only hold up being the queue to take off; we were in a line of aircraft stretching as far as I could see out of the window in front & behind – at least 25 planes I would guess. About now we were starting to get really excited!!! And off we go – no turning back now.

Once in the air we started to relax somewhat; travelling is exciting but it's also very tiring isn't it? We'd been on the go since 2.30am & we took off at around 12.30pm, but we knew that even if we managed a sleep it would be "tomorrow, our time" before our heads hit a pillow – a pillow somewhere in California – now that IS exciting!! The stewards on the plane never stopped; after seating everyone & take off they continually served drinks, food, answered a never ending stream of calls, organized makeshift cots for several babies, served more drinks & food, & collected up all the rubbish we'd created 39,000 feet above the Atlantic.

It was all very new to me; long distance flying was something I'd never experienced before as the furthest I could lay claim to was a flight to Cyprus of 4½ hours. The visibility was poor soon after takeoff & we saw little of the Atlantic Ocean, but as we crossed over to land again we could see much of the Canadian landscape & then turned south over the USA. For what seemed an interminable age, we flew over such barren landscape until we began our descent towards the bay of San Francisco. And there it was – without warning the Golden Gate Bridge of San Francisco completely free from fog, basking in the warm afternoon sunshine of California & beyond, the island of Alcatraz with the back drop of the city, which was gleaming in such splendour beyond that.

Whatever happens in the future, this first sighting of the bridge in sunshine & a gleaming, blue beyond belief sea surrounding it will stay in my memory for many years to come; it was an awesome sight & when I look at any of the many photographs we subsequently took the same thrill returns again & again.

So there we were, on American soil – well tarmac to start with, & what a delightful welcome to the country we received at Customs. We'd heard several reports of entering the country taking up to 4 hours in some cases; it took us about 30 minutes including a very cheerful lady prompting me to step forward to have my passport checked, thumb print taken & photograph captured. She had expected Gordon to step forward as well & inquired as to how long had I been married to him, I replied "10 years" & she came back with "& you're trying to lose him already?!" As friendly as she appeared, she was very professional but very warm & welcomed us to her country – in point of fact she looked of Mexican origin!

We gathered our luggage, I experienced my first "restroom" & then I suggested to Gordon that we both took a deep breath before we approached the arrivals hall – here we go! The welcome was nothing less than we'd been expecting; we knew something was going to happen as the girls had been so specific

about clearing their activities with security (supposedly) & there they were, standing in the meeting area, 3 of the 5 Dreamers, with 2 husbands having been cajoled into the similar disguises as themselves – each wore a California State T shirt, with a moustache & glasses with huge nose – some disguise!!! And just in case we missed that, there was a huge flag waving with the words “Coast to Coast meets California Dreamers, Welcome Vicky & Gordon” with the California State & Union flags intertwined. Instantly recognizable, we dropped our baggage & strode towards them & a huge welcoming array of hugs, laughing, more hugs, more laughing & with simply unbelievable dreams that had actually come true! Yes, we were actually there at last after all the emails & planning over 2 years; the dream had become reality & the reality was the great adventure was about to start.

Wendy, Bev & Jane had made it to the airport with Tom (Jane’s husband) & Jordan, (Wendy’s husband), Mo set off to come but due to a family incident had had to turn back; the only other one missing from the celebrations was Krista, but we were to meet up with her in due course. Bear in mind that their trip from Oakhurst was approximately 250 miles to SF & three cars had come to collect us – I don’t know how much luggage they thought we were bringing – or how much chocolate! Gordon & I decided to separate at this point & Wendy stole Gordon, Jordan & Tom went in the second car, & I was bundled into the car with the “tour organizer” – Jane & Bev. Out into the bright, sunny afternoon of San Francisco we drove (on the wrong side of the road too – what’s that all about?!) & Jordan & Wendy’s cars headed for the first accommodation stop at a houseboat in Sausalito, over the Golden Gate Bridge. The Bev mobile headed for Fisherman’s Wharf & bread & then they just had to give me a quick tour of Lombard with the zigzags (crooked road) & then onto the G G Bridge in search of the houseboat.

By the time we three arrived at the houseboat, the rest of the dreamers were setting up house on the water; the building had belonged to Jack London, an author, who had, as the story went, won it in a game of poker. It was over 100 years old but was quite a sizeable property sharing a jetty-like structure from the land out in to the bay with 30 or so other properties of similar design & size. We had to walk the plank to get across to it which was fine when the tide was in as there was water swirling around, but walk it when the tide was receding & there was the thickest, ugliest looking mud you can imagine. Yuk! We went inside & drinks were immediately offered; the first of many well-remembered phrases to be uttered during our tour was asked by Wendy – “do you want a cocktail?” Silly question! Two of the bedrooms were downstairs, below the waterline, one was ours & the other Wendy & Jordan had; on the same floor was a bathroom, a laundry room & a sauna. On the floor level with the plank walkway was the kitchen, a second bathroom, living & eating area, & a small terrace with a hot tub; upstairs was a small mezzanine style area with another bedded area where Tom & Jane slept & a further side area into which Bev was squeezed. All the accommodation except for one night had been booked by Jane using the Villas & Homeowners Rental service & this particular rental was the one which she was most apprehensive about – she need not have been. If there was a down side & I don’t think it was, the freeway raced past within about 200 yards of the building, but the views of the mountains around us & in particular Mount Tamalpais, together with the outlook across the bay made up for whatever the short comings were with the traffic noise.

Food was conjured up from the multitude of carrier bags of shopping that had been brought in by the 3 vehicles – so they didn’t need all the cars for our luggage, just the food (& drink). Whilst this was

materializing before our eyes we went downstairs & produced the bulk of our luggage – about 7/8 lbs of chocolate together with 3 boxes of Penrith Toffee Shop fudge & toffee; I thought Bev's eyes were going to pop out of their sockets, & Jordan kept saying "why have you brought so much chocolate?" His question was answered over the course of the next few days as he helped too to devour the various plain, white, nutty, praline, milk, or cream filled varieties we had padded out our luggage with. Within a very short space of time we were all laughing & giggling over past episodes of our Coast to Coast walk where it had all begun; strangely enough Tom & Jordan weren't really outsiders now & they joined in with many of the recollections of our previous dealings with the dreamers as if they had been brain washed over the past 2 years – of course they actually had! In fact I wouldn't have been surprised to hear that Jane had been questioning them weekly as to the many tales told of the antics on the walk! Our laughing muscles were starting to ache & they had a long way to go - & it was also very late in our day so we retired gracefully but joyously happy to be in the good ol' U S of A.

The following morning we awoke to a busy traffic sound but it was also overcast – a sea fog had interrupted our clear blue skies but it wasn't to last very long & proved to be only one of two days that were threatened with cloud during three weeks of dreaming. The tide was out too, but with the arrival of Mo part way through the morning the clouds parted, metaphorically speaking that is & the tide swept into Sausalito with gusto. In order to join us on our trek across one of the most famous bridges in the world, Mo had left her home in Mariposa at around 6am, family incident sorted, & driven nonstop to be with us all; more welcomes, hugs & gifts as Jane had t shirts of the Californian State Bear for us all & Bev gave everyone a bandana incorporating the map of Yosemite National park. Mo kept hugging us both, especially Gordon, she couldn't believe it either that we really were here in her country & was encountering the same emotions as we had all experienced yesterday at the airport & then on arrival at the houseboat. We breakfasted on various nibbles, coffee, & tea & probably in everyone else's case, chocolate!

The plan today was obviously to see what these Brits were made of & to attempt to wear them out before they got used to the good life! So Wendy & Jordan using two cars took us to the start of the bridge so we could walk across & do the touristy thing with the rest of the dreamers; some of them had never walked across so it was definitely going to be a holiday of firsts for more than just Gordon & I. It was almost cold but it was amazing seeing all the people up there either cycling or walking across, taking photographs of every view from the bridge possible, & every view of friends on the bridge available either with or without the help of the hundreds of passers' by. Wendy & Jordan went back to Sausalito & had some food in one of the restaurants whilst we were walking across the huge span of the bridge, & right on cue a large container ship sailed underneath us; we photographed several of the plaques erected to commemorate the many men who had made this tremendous structure possible either by designing it or in its construction & as we approached the other side there is a "parking lot" (another new phrase we have learned) where a cross section of one of the immense steel ropes which straddle the bridge has been sited to give an idea of how many smaller cables make up one of these ropes with various facts & figures. Our transport was awaiting us in this parking area & after yet more photographs of the views of the bridge from here we continued into the city & to find somewhere to park for the remainder of the day.

But first we toured a little again of the city sights, in particular the street known as Lombard where we travelled down the zigzags with views across the city & to the bay area. Then we drove down towards Fisherman's Wharf & found a parking garage & left both cars there for the rest of the day & evening; we walked across the road to the area where we were to catch a boat across the bay taking us to Alcatraz prison island – pier number 39? Everyone decided they were hungry after all that sea air & exercise so we had some very tasty food at one of the many hundreds of cafes along the wharf & partook of the restrooms too!

The boat we queued for was quite large & held about 200 passengers; the trip across to Alcatraz took about 15 minutes & boats were leaving every hour or so to take would be “in-mates” to their “sentence”, so by the time we arrived for our tour of the island it was pretty full of in-mates! It was a very slick operation; we were met by a Lee Marvin look-a-like ranger who welcomed us all to the island of Alcatraz & informed us of all the sight-seeing opportunities advising us to make our way to the former shower block to receive our recorded commentary of the prison buildings. After that we were “free” to wander where we wanted, in & out of several cells, all the while listening to recollections from both former prisoners & their guards. A very interesting experience all round & the one thing which was very apparent to us all was the tantalizing closeness to the city of SF with certain cells having a view across to the city & how inescapable from the island this prison was (unless your name's Clint Eastwood of course!) Alcatraz is the number 1 tourist attraction in northern California, host to over 1 million visitors each year; it has also been the setting for several films over the years since its closure in 1963.

We caught one of the last boats back to the mainland; there were also “ghost” tours of the island but there was a 4 month waiting list & anyway discretion proved to be the better part of valour!! Once back on dry land we then set off on the next part of our now very full day in the big city – a ride on a cable car in the direction of the oldest restaurant in the city, called the Tadich Grill. What a thrilling ride & yes, we did it properly & held on to the rails & hung off into the oncoming traffic. Health & safety was nowhere to be seen thank goodness so we enjoyed an uninterrupted journey through the streets of SF in complete recklessness. At one point one of us jumped off to take photos of us all hanging on, & then Jane uttered her immortal words to the brake man, “how do we let you know when we want to get off?” Driver's reply was somewhat sarcastically returned, “You just tell me when you want to get off!” Point taken! From the rails of the cable car we had a brilliant bird's eye view of the rolling ups & downs of the streets & the towering sky scrapers of the financial district, with their bright lights just starting to blot out the receding blue sky. We reached the point where Jane asked the brake man to stop! He did so at the earliest convenient place & we all jumped off, much invigorated by our joy ride. It was a couple of blocks to the Tadich Grill & we entered a very bustling, noisy atmosphere & booked a table & ordered some drinks; by memory I heard Mo order a G & T so that seemed a good idea – “I'll have what she's drinking please!” We only had a short wait before the waiter assigned to our table showed us where we should sit, brought us a menu & then battle commenced. Good food, excellent service & then Jordan enquired as to the whereabouts of a place famous for Irish coffees called the Buena Vista. Bad mistake Jordan! We decided to walk as it wasn't far at all & arrived at the bar to be greeted by a small in demeanor, waitress – what she lacked in appearance was made up by her conversation as we quickly

found out. After serving the coffees which were watery & not up to the anticipated standard, she began telling us about her dogs, in particular a stray that had moved in with her.

At this point I must stress that this was our first full day with our friends with whom we weren't very familiar in conversations face to face & although up until now all our laughing & joking had been quite reserved & not too overboard – this was all about to change. So, she was telling us all about this little dog but she referred to it as her 4 letter word which rhymed with “looker” ..... & we all sat completely dumb struck as if someone had stopped the recording in mid play. Get out of that, you can't can you? It is neither common in our conversations nor included in the Californians' vocabulary, so we were all completely taken aback & nobody knew what to say or do. The waitress continued in her one sided conversation with us, repeating that word several times more just in case we'd missed it the first few times & then disappeared to the kitchens, leaving us all in a state of shock. Jane broke the ice & said “did I hear her say what I think I heard her say?” at which point we all fell about laughing & the evening took on a new light – if a rather bad one at that!

It was about 11pm now so we thought about returning to the cars, wherever we'd left them; onto a trolley bus & again, another entertaining experience with the driver chattering to all his passengers via a microphone & personal address system. He was really having as good a time driving his trolley bus as we were having riding on it, but this time Jane refrained from asking the obvious question! We approached our stop, rang the bell & he slowed the bus down, off we got to many goodbyes & walked the short distance to the garage; it was locked – oops. Apparently this was quite common so panic over, Wendy rang the number on the reverse of the ticket & we entered the building by way of a side door, having been informed the barrier would open when we drove up to it. It did & off we went back across the Golden Gate Bridge yet again to our houseboat in Sausalito, re-living & re-telling our own versions of the waitress episode several times no doubt!

Brunch was the order of the next day – a late start & then we left for a little more culture in the city in the form of the Exploratorium & the de Young Museum of fine art, but first we had to find them! We took 2 cars this time & set off over that bridge again which incidentally charged a toll in one direction only – \$6 per car, & then tried to find the Exploratorium which is situated to the west of the city, but due to many road diversions because of road works it took a lot longer than we expected – especially Jane. However, we got there & entered the fabulous museum of natural science & aquarium together with the planetarium; unfortunately one of the main features was closed for refurbishing – the tropical forests area but we still found plenty to be inspired by, in particular the planetarium where we were seated on very comfortable armchairs & Whoopi Goldberg took us on a trip of wonderment around the galaxy. We also had a very interesting time watching all the fish in the massive aquariums & a member of the museum staff came over & was talking to us for several minutes about the various logistical problems of installing such huge tanks to house all these fish. After watching all these fish eating plankton & other micro-organisms in the water we started feeling hungry ourselves naturally! It was suggested that we take a stroll towards Haight & Ashbury where we could watch more wild life in its natural surroundings – during the late 1960's everybody under the age of about 25 was encouraged to visit SF where you could wear flowers in your hair & generally drop out of society. We arrived at the junction of these two roads to see what they meant by wild life; hippies of all ages, mostly in their late

50's, the great unwashed & uncombed with a strange smelling tobacco aroma all around just hadn't gone back home after Scott MacKenzie's record of 1967 attracted them here (If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair). Many of the shop windows which fronted onto the "side walk" were so filthy that you could hardly see into the shop; it was probably just as well in some cases thinking about it afterwards. One shop was a record store, selling what seemed to be just 60's LP's - it was quite bizarre & surreal with the faded covers of the records glued to the windows. We were making for a restaurant called Cha Cha Cha's at the corner of the street furthest from these inhabitants; it was superb, we ordered a variety of dishes – a bit like a Cypriot Meze – and jugs of beer. Quite a feast, then someone suggested we should be making for the next place of culture, namely the de Young museum which was reached by walking through some very pleasant parkland. We arrived at the museum with an hour's visiting time left but everyone agreed it was a bit of a disappointment as some of the exhibitions had either just ended or were not due to open until a couple of weeks hence. The building was huge with enormous ceilings & some exhibits were colossal in size although I must admit they mostly left me cold.

Bev was leaving our party for a couple of days as she had to work, so we were made to promise not to have any fun or even laugh once whilst she was away; of course we agreed ... not! Returning to our cars we drove back into the city towards an ice cream parlour called Bi-Rite which had been recommended to Wendy by one of her work colleagues; I thought I liked ice cream but tasting the flavours here was something else- butterscotch, toffee & strawberry like I've never known! Our next port of call was the store for more supplies; Gordon & I both love food shopping but to shop in another country & experience the delights of all the choice of flavours, sizes & colours was exhilarating- believe me! Jordan was also leaving us to return to work for a few days but we would meet up with both he & Bev when we moved accommodation down the Pacific Coast 2 days later. There was a hot tub at the houseboat so we duly made use of it armed with a drink of course & watched the stars & listened to the traffic whizzing by – but do you know the traffic was drowned out by our laughing & sheer pleasure of being in the Dreamers' company once again.

The next morning we learnt that Jordan had left early at 4am; our purpose today was to get to the top of Mount Tamalpais, a modest peak overlooking most of the bay of SF, with a very easy trail to follow although lengthy & with lots of switchbacks, but the real jewel in its crown was that Mo was going to meet us at the top having spent a few hours on a lonely beach somewhere north of where we were staying in her car! Yes, driving up to the top was also a possibility. But first we all headed to Muir Woods where we saw our first really tall red woods & they were incredible heights. Our depleted party consisted of Tom, Jane, Wendy, Mo, Gordon & I, so after the woods we headed in 2 cars for the start of the Tamalpais trail where one car was left & Mo drove off to her book on the beach. We set off in very warm sunshine on a very well maintained gravel bridleway & not long after several mountain bikers came hurtling down at break neck speed; we quickly got out of their way & then continued upwards & around the mountain side, catching glimpses of the huge expanse that was the Bay of SF becoming smaller & smaller by each stride. We then rounded another bend & saw San Quentin prison far below us; I had my zoom lens with me & caught some very interesting photos of all that was below us stretching out into what seemed forever. We stopped for refreshments of nuts, cheese, fruit & bread &

more water; the temperature had certainly warmed up & I was glad I had my shorts on rather than trackers. We continued on & reached the top encountering very few people on the way & spent quite some time marvelling at the view; we marvelled even more when Mo turned up with not only transport down but a cold box full of iced beers & soft drinks! Now that's what I call forward planning. From the top we could see over to the Pacific Coast & I was taking photos when we were suddenly aware of a mushroom shaped cloud of smoke in the distance, & at its base we saw flames leaping into the air. We were witnessing the explosion of gas at Saint Bruno & the ensuing fire raging in the area but from about 30 miles away. Because we were so distant from the disaster we didn't realise the enormity of it until later that evening when watching it on the TV.

We all piled into Mo's car – 6 of us - & she drove back to where Wendy had parked; some of us fell out & went back to the houseboat with Wendy, the rest returned with Mo to showers & recovery, & then had a meal at Sausalito. On returning I had a dip in the hot tub again & saw my very first shooting star; I'll remember that for some time to come. We were leaving the houseboat the next day so we went to bed at a reasonably early time – about midnight! Gordon was going to have his very first dip in a hot tub but several laptops were tuning in to the day's explosions in Saint Bruno so by the time he was ready to "hot tub" I was coming back inside so he would have to wait a few more days to experience the delights of the therapeutic effects of a hot tub. This accommodation had been comfortable & very interesting for us all; after all was said & done it was purely a base from which to go exploring, but it was always nice to come back & relax in the way we could.

We packed up the next day in a very organised fashion & loaded up the 2 cars, Wendy's & Mo's, & set off south across the G G Bridge for the last time in search of some more slices of paradise. We headed down on the coast road, stopping only occasionally to stretch the drivers' legs & marvel at the beautiful coastline which guided us ever southwards to Santa Cruz. On reaching this vibrant, busy town we met up with Jordan in his huge truck; Gordon had been itching to ride in it with him & now he got his chance as we all continued south again towards the condo half way between Santa Cruz & Monterey at a place known as Pajero Dunes resort. Jane had booked a fabulous apartment right next to the beach & within minutes of us emptying the cars of more food & baggage we were tumbling down to the shoreline to dip our feet in the Pacific Ocean – that was COLD! Some bright spark, namely our good friend Mo said she'd love a dip in the water but only if someone else was prepared to throw caution & reason to the wind & join her ... She didn't have to wait long for a willing sucker to join her, our tour organiser Jane took off any watch, rings & jewellery she had & then together they waded slowly at first, & then quickened their pace into the near icy waters towards the first big wave which engulfed them completely. They didn't wait for any more waves & trudged out of the Pacific waters taking delight in hugging everyone on their "lap of honour" so we were all a little soggy walking back into the condo! Jane did think she'd off loaded all the non waterproof items .... but more on this at a later date. Within a short while we were summoned down to the water again – the sun was setting in true Pacific style - & we might not get another chance like this for some time. It was a very inspiring sight to behold, & it isn't until you witness the horizon & an object as powerful as the sun disappearing beyond, that you appreciate the speed at which the earth is rotating.

The next morning we set off for the aquarium at Monterey; it was very fascinating & the weather was fabulous, but then we were promised warmer & drier weather back in September 2008 so we were holding the Dreamers to that promise! After a couple of hours of wandering, marvelling & being entertained by the multitude of species of fish we met up again & headed for a snack on the street close by. As luck would have it there was also a classic car exhibition taking place in front of us; it was fantastic & the polished, gleaming cars of the last 60 or 70 years shone in the bright sunshine of California, each car would drift by, find a parking meter & then stay about 20 minutes in the one spot before moving around the block & finding a different slot to park. There were several Harley Davidson motor bikes too with their riders suitably attired with all the necessary gear to make them look the part. We could have stayed in the warm sunshine all afternoon but there was a further trip to be made up to the wine & art festival in Santa Cruz so we all moved up the coast; Bev didn't join us as she was meeting Lee at a Doobey Brothers concert later that evening. The art festival wasn't particularly inspiring, or the wine tasting; the local wineries sold their wine by ticket but it was very expensive & you had to buy the glass too! So after wandering round a couple of times it was decided we would return to the condo. Right Jordan, a barbecue please! We then discussed the plans for the next day's activities – kayaking.

At each different location we stayed Jane had done her homework & found out about a lot of the attractions which may or may not interest us both; she would make a list, pass it around the group & then whichever attraction gained the most votes then that's exactly what we did. So kayaking came out with the most votes on the latest list & what a fantastic experience it was to be for us all. Bev had enjoyed the previous night's concert with her friend Lee & he'd agreed to join us on the water too but the time had come for Mo to go back to work so she had to leave us today & although we didn't know it at the time, we weren't to meet up with her again on this trip. We arrived at the river where it entered the Pacific & were shown to our gear which consisted of a very glamorous "skirt" to go over the rim of the kayak, a life jacket & a paddle. We then watched a short video for safety procedures & that was that – we made our way to the boats & were slotted in to the small but comfortable space; some had a tenderly named "divorce boat" which took 2 kayakers, but Gordon & I decided we wanted our own kayaks – for better or worse! But before this we had to say goodbye to Mo & it was quite a tearful parting, but we got to meet Lee now so it was hoped we would meet up again with Mo soon.

It was a most wonderful experience seeing the pelicans taking off into the air just feet in front of us, sea lions yawning at our inquisitive eyes, & sea otters playing in the water all around us. There were jelly fish, huge creatures floating past & although the river waters were not clear we could watch so much on the surface that we had only ever seen on the television. Unfortunately alongside the river bank was a gun club & as we'd been warned not to approach the banks where the wildlife may be feeding or resting it was quite a disturbing experience – for several moments I seriously thought we were being targeted because we'd strayed a little too close to the river bank! There was a river warden paddling up & down the river estuary, keeping her eye on the proceedings & Jane was in conversation with her along with several others of our party discussing the various water fowl & animals frequenting the shores & river. It had been suggested to us that as the current was very strong when the tide turned we should endeavour to paddle for an hour upstream, leaving us a good 2 hours to slowly make our way back to the jetty, so that was exactly what we were attempting to do. At one point several of the kayaks seemed

to be converging on one spot & we soon realised that food was involved & a kayak water party was in full swing! Jane had a bag full of nuts, dried fruits, jelly beans plus chocolate from Cumbria along with pretzels & other nibbles – oh, we know how to live now we know the California Dreamers!

Not long after this point we turned around & made for the opposite bank & paddled slowly along, stopping frequently to watch the amusing antics of the otters in particular, finding something to eat, rolling on their backs in the water & using their bellies as tables from which to eat their food. The peace & quiet was wonderful too, the gun fire having receded for the time being & only as we began our laboured approach towards the harbour did we hear the roar of the road traffic noise again & the sounds of civilisation. As we arrived at the jetty, Jordan & Wendy in one of the two divorce boats that our party had hired were well back onto dry land & in fact Jordan was asleep; Tom was about to disembark with a commando style roll out of the kayak & triumphantly announced that he was on shore again! Both Gordon's & my exit were a little less memorable; I think I just slithered out of the kayak resembling something like a snail! It had been another first for Gordon but we all had enjoyed the experience immensely.

We returned to the cars & made our way back to the accommodation; it was a drive of about 15 miles along the coast through a very rich area of agricultural terrain. Many of the fields were given over to strawberries but one field in particular must have had either sprouts or cabbages growing, but although they had been harvested some days before, the aroma was still very much apparent & it was a case of making sure the windows were closed as we drove passed this part! Many of the labourers were migrant workers from Mexico, causing many political problems for the people & governors of the area by taking the lowly paid jobs that other potential workers won't do but then they weren't declaring wages paid & wanting all the benefits that the state was providing for them – a difficult problem without any real operational solution the whole world over. After a quick change from our relatively dry clothing considering our epic journey up the Orinoco of California, we looked for a place to eat & settled care of Jordan & "urban spoon" for a Greek taverna not too far away & had a most enjoyable variety of food. It was a splendid facility to be able to call upon – as long as you have the internet & the where with all to surf; to enter a town you don't know, hungry & to be able to type a few parameters into a lap top or similar & find a good variety of places to eat. Of course in days gone by there was nothing wrong in carrying a guide book with the same information contained within! It's called progress – right?

But there was someone missing tonight; Mo had gone back to Mariposa & work & although we didn't know at the time, we would only see her again via Skype, but tonight we could only drink a toast to our absent friends; we were still to meet up with Krista but not just yet. The next day we packed up once again but not before Bev, Gordon & I had left the condo at 7am & headed on to the beach towards the 2 towers near where we had kayaked at Kayak Connection the previous day. The beach was deserted & it was difficult keeping up with the power walker! But it was a beautiful hour or so & Bev took pity & reduced her pace for our sake before we turned back for the apartment & helped to pack up & then we moved on. The plan today was for Jordan & Wendy to drive straight back to Oakhurst, Jordan in his big truck & Wendy using Bev's car with most of the supplies which we had acquired since arriving at the houseboat; Wendy had a land cruiser & there was more space than Bev's car for Bev, Tom, Jane, Gordon & I to carry on to William Randolph Hearst's "little ranch" - the scenic route! So that's just what we did. It

was a wonderful drive along more of the Pacific coastline; they planned everything to fit in with our needs & wants – it was quite unreal to be surrounded by such warmth & complete friendship.

We were always racing against the clock as it was going to be a long day but we did stop off somewhere near the Big Sur for a restroom & a drink & therein lies another encounter with a waitress. We walked up to a restaurant via a series of steps towards a wonderful view point & were looking to sit at a table overlooking this wonderful view of the ocean but as we moved a couple of chairs we were pounced upon by a waitress who told us off for moving the chairs – didn't we realise they were numbered? Still, she didn't start to tell us about her little dog at the same time but she might well be related ... so we gave her one of Jane's withering looks & departed to where we could perhaps take some photos of the view even if we couldn't look at it whilst we ate or drank! After which we retreated down the steps & found the cafe on the lower level & had something suitable which befitted our chair numbers! I think this was the only occasion on the entire holiday where we encountered rudeness from anyone, but because of the circumstances surrounding it, it was really very funny & we weren't in the least bit offended!

So we arrived mid afternoon at the car park where we caught the bus to visit the "little ranch" belonging to William Randolph Hearst – some little ranch. It commands a very dominant position high above the village of San Simeon; it oozes money, taste, precision planning & opulence in the extreme, but what a project that had been undertaken & completed during this man's lifetime & had been left to the nation for all to enjoy – at a price. Together with architect John Morgan it took nearly 30 years to complete (1919 – 1947) & many of the Hollywood stars came to visit: Clark Gable, Greta Garbo & Charlie Chaplin, but in 1951 the bubble burst when Hearst died & his family were forced to sell it within 6 years to the State of California in return for writing off a tax bill of \$50 million.

He even had his own airstrip & his swimming pool was literally paved with gold; nothing compared to the extravagance or indeed the age of certain items he had bought to furnish his dwelling. There was a tapestry which was created during the Middle Ages in Britain, the copy hung in the Louvre in France with a notice on it claiming that the original was hanging in a castle in California. A chair from an earlier period of history was reputed to have cost more than \$250,000; understandably we weren't invited to sit on it! We were shown around by a very efficient guide who was very good at the patter but at the same time was quite strict as one or two visitors tried to stray from the main route but were soon invited to return to the main group. We spent about 90 minutes at the castle & then returned via another coach down the mountainside to the car park via a visitor centre. It was a remarkable experience in efficient marketing & slick tourism; our group was one of the last of the day & there were about 20 groups of approximately 25 people everyday being shown around the castle @ \$35. It was about 5pm when we got back to the car & drove back up the coastal road a short way to see sea lions basking in the late afternoon sunshine, completely unaware of the throngs of sight seers marvelling at the buildings & furnishings of the castle.

We still had a long drive to get to Oakhurst but stopped off at Paso Robles (place of oak) in the heartland of the wine growing region & found a very good Mexican restaurant; I was stunned by the dramatic change in temperature when we got out of the car in the town to eat – it must have gone up from about

60° F to 85° F since we left the coast behind. This was going to be the temperature for the next few days – oh good! As we came over the final crest of the hill above Oakhurst, Jane exclaimed that she couldn't believe we were actually going to stay at their little ranch, such was her excitement! The lights of the valley below sparkled to welcome us to their home territory as we arrived very late at Tom & Jane's little ranch – about 11.30pm - Bev took Wendy's car & went home which was about a 15 minute drive & we were shown to our lovely room – an ensuite with the crickets making lots of noise outside. Jane was working for the next couple of days so Tom was to be the tour guide on a temporary basis of course; we slept very well that night – we were in a wonderful part of the state & this was the Dreamers' home territory now. We were to be introduced to Yosemite tomorrow, more impressive scenery without a doubt.

After a leisurely morning Tom drove us to Mariposa Grove to see some huge, wide girthed trees; the park where we wandered was well set out with trail markers & the opportunity to ride on an open air bus through the park. I thought that how lazy that would be but after a short stroll up towards one of the larger trees I was beginning to feel the effects of a higher altitude than I'd ever been used to – we were around 6,500 feet above sea level here in Mariposa Grove & it was going to take a little while to adjust so I had to settle for walking a little slower – for now at least. A lot of the trees & the formations some of them created were given names such as The Grizzly Giant around 1,800 years old, The Faithful Couple & the Clothespin Tree & everything seemed a larger than life size as Tom picked up an enormous cone from one of the sugar pines. We wandered about, stunned by the immensity of the trees both in sheer size & shapes – one of them had a tunnel cut through which a stagecoach was reputed to have passed through in the 1880's; of course we stood inside for the photos!

There are several points of entry into Yosemite National Park via a ranger kiosk where a levy is paid or a season pass is shown per car & literature is freely given by the ranger on duty. As long as you don't stray out of the national park area, & it is vast, you are able to wander without too much restriction as long as you remember that this is home for the bears too & after dark they rule! After a good walk around all these giant redwoods we returned to the car & continued our tour towards Sentinel Dome where we were informed that Jordan & Wendy were married; it is a fantastic vantage point down the valley of Yosemite & understandably an awesome place to exchange wedding vows. There was a suitable area at which to park & then it was a case of trekking around & up onto the dome top to appreciate more views of this incredible area; Tom pointed out several notable mountains such as Half Dome, North Dome & the Three Brothers & then we returned the way we had climbed & continued to Glacier Point by car which was slightly lower than Sentinel Dome at around 8,000 feet above sea level. We had been in complete isolation on the top of Sentinel Dome but on reaching the new vantage point there was a large parking area, restrooms, & throngs of people arriving & leaving the various viewing platforms all the time, obviously a very popular tourist area & rightly so. Considering our altitude, the air was lovely & warm & although the time was moving on towards 5pm we still had quite a lot of daylight left to enjoy & dutifully climbed up to the recognised view point & clicked away on the cameras for just one more photo which might be better than the last 10 of the same view!

Reluctantly, we turned back & walked to the car, still dumbstruck at the calibre of the scenery & the sheer size of everything – be they trees or rocks, gorges or mountains. The standard of the roads was

excellent but on our route upwards today we had been delayed by a good 20 minutes in a queue of traffic waiting for the road repairers to finish their part of the new road surface, such is the continual job to maintain these roads throughout the summer & autumn months because as soon as the snows arrive all work has to stop until the next year. Every so often there was a yellow sign with a bear on it; Tom explained to us that this was to warn drivers of the closeness to the roadside of the bears & each sign was erected where a bear had died as a result of a collision with a car & sadly, there were quite a lot of signs. We drove back towards Oakhurst along a similar route but by the time we reached the area where the road works had held us up earlier, they had packed up for the day so we had a straight run; we did however stop off at a place called Winowna where there was a covered wooden bridge across a river & a beautiful hotel with a homesteader's wagon in the grassed area in front. Tom was a very good substitute guide for Jane!

As it was getting quite late the question of food came up inevitably, & Tom suggested the pizza place in Oakhurst which was pretty good so he rang Jane who was on call for 48 hours & arranged that she would make for it too if call outs allowed. Wendy & Jordan also joined us together with Jordan's daughter Mahala & we had a great couple of hours telling them where Tom had driven & how spectacular the views were which of course they were all well aware of! The pizzas were excellent too & we washed them down with a jug of beer. We returned to the house up the hill & went to bed shortly afterwards; Bev was going to join us the next day & we were going to meet up with Krista for the first time too hopefully & I was going to get to visit Trader Joe's store!

Gordon & Tom went to collect the door which was to replace their existing one but was a couple of feet taller & Bev who had joined us took me with her to do a few errands & to the craft shop where she buys most of her supplies for card making & scrap booking. I was amazed at how many of the people we met who were known to the Dreamers also knew us too!! So after all the errands had been run we set off towards Fresno & Trader Joe's & then on to Krista's bungalow; the drive was about 45 miles & took about an hour & we bought lots of goodies including enough food to feed a small army, not a few of us at a barbecue! We made our way to Krista's beautiful pad & although she hadn't come home from work Bev had a key so we let ourselves in & took over her house; she arrived soon after & we began another re-union – after all Krista was the one who'd been brave enough to make contact with us in the first place at the B & B in Patterdale 2 years earlier so she had a lot to answer for!! Gordon was in his element – he had a BBQ at his command so was in charge of the cooking for the first time in 10 days, & her bungalow wasn't only delightful but she had a swimming pool in her back garden with an adjoining hot tub/Jacuzzi. We really didn't want to leave & after we feasted on a delicious meal we bathed, bubbled & bathed again until way after dark & were also joined part way through by Wendy who was on her way home from work too. It was late when we left the hospitality of Krista & her Fresno home but got home around midnight, but we would see Krista again tomorrow as she was joining us at Bass Lake which is where Wendy, Jordan & their fluffy, energetic Cockapoo lived about 15 minutes drive from Oakhurst.

Jane was back with us for the duration now & we left for Bass Lake & sampled the extraordinary experience of flume walking – it was a metal walkway constructed over a storm drain which followed the contours of the land & beyond the first few hundred yards after we'd got used to the concept of

what we could see below our feet as we were walking it made very interesting walking – apart from the flies & every time we slowed down the flies encouraged us to quicken our pace as they couldn't catch us at anything more than battle speed! We walked approximately 2 miles & reached a dam where we had a little of the trail food accompanying us before retracing our steps back along the walkway & enjoyed a little more of the scenery this time as we didn't have to concentrate quite as much on where we put our feet.

All the while the temperature had been steadily rising & was probably into the 80's by the time we returned to the car; definitely time to cool down by the water & so we changed into swimwear, & made our way down to the most incredible house which was certainly in competition with the "little ranch" we had visited a few days previously on the Pacific Coast – the only difference being that this house was lived in for real! It belonged to Bob, an associate of Jordan's & Jordan kept an eye on things when he was away at his other properties around the world; so we borrowed Bob's party boat, decked out in leather & oozing expensive taste after walking down the jetty with streams of damp mist channelled onto you if you become too warm in the heat of the day or night, & a telephone system if you required it whilst relaxing by the water side. Opulence & extravagance was in abundance everywhere we looked.

We walked on to the boat & cast off towards the opposite shore line & disembarked for Forks burgers at the cafe owned by the same family for years – they were delicious & were washed down by something alcoholic no doubt! And then it was time to party, party, party! We set off for a very leisurely couple of hours boating along much of the length of the Bass Lake; the properties along the shore were unbelievable with many of them sporting private jetties, canopies & bars to accommodate the needs of the owners, & alongside boats of varying size, design & expense. On the water were several other craft but not many apparently compared to the high season; the girls were marvelling at being able to see the bottom of the lake, a sight not often seen due to the mud churned up by so many users. So once again & not for the first time this holiday we were experiencing the delights of somewhere at its best rather than at its busiest. All the while we were being offered cocktails in various alcoholic strengths courtesy of Wendy; there was a large ice chest – all part of the boats furnishings – well stocked by the Owens with soft drinks, mixers, beers & spirits. Well it is called a party boat after all!

After some time of leisurely drifting along the water Jordan decided to put some fuel into the speed boat he owned so he was dropped off at the jetty where the boat was moored along with a "volunteer" to help him – yes, Gordon! The occupants of the party boat continued back into the middle of the lake taking in more tranquillity until two guys in a speed boat roared past waving madly & we realised the joy riders were none other than Jordan & Gordon of course! Eventually we all rendezvoused on a small beach area & chilled out again; Tom went for a swim, Jane & I paddled about in warm clear water, which quickly became cooler as we wandered from the shore. Then Jordan asked if anyone else fancied a ride in his "little boat" – so Jane, Tom & I piled into his speed boat & off we went; I've never travelled so fast on water as I did that day & I don't expect I will again. Yes, it was exhilarating but as we rounded each tight turn, we were definitely defying gravity as we swung around with a good part of the boat's hull out of the water – leisurely drifting? No, this is what messing about in boats was all about for an hour or two!

We returned to the sedate speed of the party boat eventually & then Wendy took us in to the dock at Bob's place & we then began our exploration of Bob's mansion. I won't go into too much detail but one item is worth a mention; Jane needed to pay a visit to the smallest room in the house & came back with a very cheeky smile on her face. Of course we all wanted to know why exactly – the toilet was a normal toilet until you started to look around for the toilet paper, then it became a washer & dryer in one! It was mentioned on many occasions after this day was over when any of our group ventured into a restroom – another first! But this gives a picture of the rest of the buildings & furnishings – no expense was spared, everything was computer driven, from the lights when you walked into a room to opening curtains & turning on water taps & showers. After wandering around for an hour we returned to Wendy & Jordan's house which they had more or less completely rebuilt & it was fabulous; Jordan rustled up a barbecue – he certainly knows about food & a huge variety of flavours easily tempt the taste buds when he's about! He didn't disappoint & we were soon joined by Krista who we then bored with all the details about the speed boat, the flume & Bob's place. Mo should have joined us too but her mother wasn't too well so had to decline & in fact we weren't to see her again in the flesh so to speak but thanks to Jordan & Wendy on our last night in California they managed to contact Mo via Skype so we could see & speak with her via the computers. Bev was working late so she missed out on more fun & laughing, but we told her later that we hadn't laughed once as per her instructions – for some strange reason she didn't believe us ....

The next day was a chilling out morning; I rang Dad who was delighted to hear from us & I told him all we had done so far in about 5 minutes – he was eager to hear all about it on our return & made the comment that we appeared to him to have been away for ages – 12 days so far which was just a little over half way through our adventure. After a bite to eat we set off for the Yosemite Valley floor & the Awawnee hotel with Tom, Jane & Bev & at Tunnel view recreated the 2010 calendar that Bev had concocted. She had super imposed a photo of Gordon & I at Colby near Richmond on the September page of the calendar she had created from the 2008 Coast to Coast photos & now we were actually at that spot we just had to try & imitate it. The back drop of El Capitain in all its splendid white granite form was awesome with brilliant sunshine, blue sky & cool trees in the foreground making it a fantastic photo opportunity. We drove on to the Awawnee hotel where we sat & nibbled on a little light lunch with assorted cocktails then found the field where you can lie on the floor & stare up at the climbers attempting the sheer face of El Capitain; they usually take 3 days to scale these dizzy heights & when nightfall comes they simply bivouac where they have reached & hang there & sleep – not for the faint hearted. We watched them for quite some time with binoculars & I took several photos with the zoom lens on the camera & they still appeared like ants on a wall!

After another exhilarating day's scenery we returned to Bev's for a meal & she found a film called "What about Bob" which was appropriate from the previous day's delights of the opulence of his house at Bass Lake. We drank, laughed & planned the next day & enjoyed the peaceful position of Bev's lovely home in the trees, & returned very late to Tom & Jane's B & B, another lovely home on the hillside.

We left around 11 am in search of the gold country en route to Sutter Creek & took highway 49 northwards; we reached Jamestown, parked & immediately got into conversation with the sheriff of the old jail house there. The town was steeped in the Wild West & the stagecoach raced into the main street

as we sought out a watering hole in the shape of a saloon with spit & sawdust on the floor & empty peanut shells scattered all around our feet. I think Jane, Bev & I had a sarsaparilla each, Wendy a little something with ice in it & the boys something a little more manly but to gaze around was going back a century to what life must have been like in the affluent times before the gold ran out. We dared to throw our empty nut shells on the floor too – such daring & no-one pulled a gun on us or challenged us to a gun fight at a nearby corral. We stopped off at Columbia as well, another relic of the 49 gold rush; the weather was very warm in both locations & at one point I managed a photo of a notorious gun slinger by the name of Quick Draw MacGord who was leaning against a hitching post of the veranda of an hotel of some disrepute. We arrived in Sutter Creek late in the afternoon & wandered around the town before going to find the accommodation that Jane had booked for us all – it was a typical wooden town house with a couple of rocking chairs on the front porch crying out to be rocked. There was a veranda at the rear which looked out on to the dry creek with fig trees abounding & the house itself was certainly old but very spacious with accommodation on one floor consisting of two large bedrooms, a bathroom & large kitchen; we had the convertible settee on which to sleep & it really was extremely comfortable. Jane had booked a meal for us all at Susan's Place down the road & we sauntered down there; it was obvious from the start that we were the last guests & our waitress, Heidi, introduced herself & although her language wasn't as flowery as the waitress at Buena Vista in SF, she was memorable by her impatience that we actually wanted what we asked for & not what she thought we should have to eat & drink.

Opposite the house was the Knight Foundry with quite a history to it; it was water powered & responsible for many items of iron works for the gold rush & afterwards. Tom took some photos of the inside workings through a much neglected window but it looked as though it had stood idle for many years sadly. Jane had bought a cigar at Columbia's smoke house earlier in the day & enjoyed it on the porch whilst rocking in her chair; relaxed? I think so!

The following day we set off back towards Oakhurst but called in for breakfast at Jackson where we saw the 2 hugest people I think I've ever seen; they waddled in through the door, double doors fortunately, & engaged in an enormous gluttonous gorging which made me feel quite disgusted. I had a cinnamon pastry, Gordon had coffee & the rest of the posse had a variety of food befitting their appetites but nothing close to Mr & Mrs Greedy! Then we drove to Jamestown again & had a stroll through the many antique & bric a brac stores where Gordon bought a second hand Californian car number plate & a can crusher; after a couple of interesting hours of browsing we carried on to Angel Camp where at another old junk shop Gordon bought Jane & Tom an old miner's lamp. The scenery on both the outward & return drives up to Sutter Creek had been wonderful, full of rolling mountains, reservoirs & switchbacks, but we had a meal booked at the Japanese restaurant in Oakhurst for the evening so we had to return to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but not before a photo stop at an eatery where a helicopter was perched on top of the roof.

We met again at the restaurant & Krista managed to join us; Mo should have done as well but her Mother was still not out of the woods yet so we still didn't manage an evening of us all together. In fact Bev was working so couldn't join our throng either but we remembered her previous instruction over not laughing or having fun – well for at least a couple of seconds anyway! The meal was to be a teppanyaki – the chef cooks it all in front of you on an iron plate or in this case on a stainless steel rectangle approximately 4' x 3' fuelled by gas. Neither of us had experienced a meal such as this & it was quite an occasion to watch the chef at work, spinning an egg, tossing it up in the air & then catching it in his chef's hat! We assumed, quite wrongly, that the egg was hard boiled, until he cracked it open & commenced to scramble it ready to add with some fried rice he was finishing off at the side of the cooking surface. A variety of dishes were cooked to order & several had differing types of fish, some

cooked, some not but Gordon & I had chicken & calamari – it just had to be the most delicious, moist & tasty calamari we had ever experienced.

After the meal & much laughing (but don't tell Bev) we decided to pay a visit to where Bev was working that evening; Jordan, Wendy & Krista were all working the next day & left the party but Tom, Jane, Gordon & I drove the short distance to where she spent much of her waking week, parked in a large car park & began to walk towards the main entrance of the medical centre only to be greeted by a horrified expression on her face by the reception area! The facility closed at 9pm & as she saw 4 people walking towards her reception she didn't realise that we weren't patients in need of treatment - & so close to her closing time too. But very quickly her expression changed from one of horror to an amused grin that we might have come to relieve the slow clock & even slower passing of the last few minutes before the closed sign went up. After about 30 minutes – just on the stroke of closing time – we left & Bev arranged to meet us back at Tom & Jane's for a dip in the hot tub under the stars; however on returning to their house Gordon realised he had mis-placed his wallet & so began a frantic search first to the restaurant but to no avail, & then a phone call to Bev before she left the medical centre to see if Gordon had left it there inside. No, nothing, but after a few more worrying minutes Jane got another call from Bev to tell her that she had gone out to the car park & found it on the floor where we'd parked. Panic over! When Bev arrived a little while later she got a very big hug from a very relieved Gordon!!

We were already approaching our 15<sup>th</sup> day of the holiday & beginning to wish the time would slow down a little. Today was to be a lazy day at Biset Station (the name Tom & Jane have chosen for their B & B when it opens, as it was the name given to the staging post when the coach would stop here in days gone by & rest & water the horses & take on supplies etc). Bev joined us for brunch & then we went shopping to Rayleys for supplies; later that evening we walked down to Crab Cakes for a meal & played a fishing game on the table while we waited for our food to arrive - they really know how to enjoy themselves in Oakhurst! It was a lovely warm night again & we inevitably found ourselves back in the hot tub again on our return – what a perfectly relaxing end to a perfectly relaxing day in Oakhurst which was to be our last night in this area for tomorrow, we were on the move again, this time making for Lake Tahoe across the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

We left Oakhurst around 10.30 after Bev & Wendy had arrived; supplies were packed ready for the next leg of our adventure or rather as it was now officially referred to “The Dream Tour”. We arrived once again in Yosemite Park & more photographs were of course taken of the surrounding breath taking scenery & of the Dreamers in various poses with dramatic backdrops wherever we turned. We parked at Curry Village on the valley floor, one of the car parks which had been visible from the Glacier point a few days before; we had seen & done so much, travelled so many miles across all sorts of country that time was beginning to seem a little unreal & putting each day into perspective according to the activity we had completed or indeed who we had shared the day with was starting to become rather complicated to say the least. It was a good job I was trying to write down details of the day in to some kind of order each night before bed – assuming I could remember in enough detail what we'd done!

So here we were in Curry Village, in the morning sunshine of September, surrounded by such generous, warm hearted & fun-loving friends, several thousand miles from our reality & wondering what the next chapter in our Dream Tour was going to bring. We didn't have to wait for very long as we began the drive towards the Tioga Pass which due to its elevation (9,945ft) is closed from November through to May due to the sheer fall of snow. Again, we didn't know in which direction to gaze as the views were stunning in every direction, until finally we arrived at Tuolumne Meadows which is a beautiful sub-alpine

meadow resting at 8,600ft with the Tuolumne River winding through the valley. It was such a picturesque huge meadow stretching over 2 miles into the distance, with numerous trails zig-zagging the area but signs to ask you to respect the wildlife both living & growing & keep to the marked ways so we set off towards a small climb up onto one of the rocks above the meadow for a better view across this gorgeous landscape. We weren't disappointed.

We returned to the cars after more photographs of course & set off again to our night's accommodation at the Tioga Pass Resort which was described by Jane as, & she quoted the write up, "rustic" – you can say that again! But what a position; 9,945 above sea level, the air certainly became challenging to breathe normally & we were required to empty the cars of everything before nightfall; we were in mountain bear territory & food was their main objective but they wouldn't be deterred by a car door being locked if they thought there might be the chance of supper inside it! Having emptied the cars of anything resembling food into the log cabin, we then had to put it all into plastic containers to stop the mice having a go when we were off guard! Yes, rustic was definitely a good adjective for this night! The sleeping arrangements were entertaining – we were awarded the double room to ourselves, meaning Bev, Wendy, Tom & Jane had the delights of the other bedroom sleeping four in various styles; within half an hour of our arriving & unpacking the cars the vodka bottle somehow inexplicably found its way to losing the lid so Jane had the quickest 3 measures I've seen anyone down in a long time! Surprisingly she became very giggly as we walked down the track for a bite to eat in the small restaurant of the main building which also doubled as the reception area & shop. Within a very short space of time all that Jane wanted to do was fall asleep & Tom was quickly approaching the same state too - what was in that vodka?

Eventually we went back to the log cabin & were aware that the air was not only very thin but had become extremely cold & the moon was brightly lighting our way back up the track; Gordon & I were dressed in shorts, the rest were in trousers & complaining at us for making them feel cold by just looking at us. We would have frost tonight, no mistake! But the cabin was well insulated & had adequate heating thank goodness.

The next morning brought fantastic air quality as we walked out in search of fresh coffee at the main building; the scenery was again stunning & as the air quickly warmed it was another first in this incredible county. The bears had left the cars alone through the night so everything was piled back into the cars & we waited for Jordan to join us; he'd been working until the early morning & was driving to meet up with us here so we would have three cars to choose from now! He arrived sooner than Wendy expected & off we set after a brief chat, to even more stunning scenery, sheer drops, fabulous lakes with crystal clear water & snow capped mountains with spires dreaming their way up into the heavens. We stopped soon after & then several times in the next 10 or so miles as the views were simply staggering & although many cameras were clicking I don't think any photograph could truly do the scenes justice. The steep drops of the road through deep gorges with views over the Eastern Sierra gave way to Mono Lake known as the Dead Sea of California & eventually we arrived at Lee Vining, a one street town at the foot of the Tioga Pass Road by the lake; it is a million year old alkaline inland sea which is far from dead as it is home to around 300 species of birds, & has unusual features of tufa, which are pillars of calcium carbonate originally created under water anything from 200 – 900 years ago. The salt flats themselves

stretch for several miles, but the water level has dropped 45 feet since feeding Los Angeles' increasing thirst in 1941. After the dramatic descent we had just undergone, this extremely flat & somewhat barren landscape seemed out of place somehow but that was soon to change yet again as we started to gain height & head in search of Bodie which is California's largest deserted gold rush town – being one of the wildest & lawless towns in the West with a population of over 10,000. There are about 170 wooden buildings left in an arrested state of decay: they will not be restored nor will they be allowed to deteriorate further; every imaginable building still remains, even down to the tumble weed. After an extensive fire destroying many of the properties the town was finally abandoned in the early 1920's. It was quite pitiful to see how a town's people could drive themselves into destruction & peering through some of the windows it's possible to see personal belongings & many furnishings simply left to wither.

Once again we have a lot to learn about tourist attractions here in the UK; a restroom was sited next to the parking areas, plenty of litter bins & no tacky souvenir shops waiting to help you part with more of your holiday spending money! No restriction of where you can & where you cannot wander either making it a paradise for every one able bodied! We could have had a tour of the mine but only if it was pre-booked & we didn't even decide we were going to stop off at Bodie until the morning of the visit.

We finally arrived in South Lake Tahoe to the best accommodation so far, situated in the Keys area of the resort & it was a huge house with a master bedroom with dressing room & en suite bathroom consisting of a shower the size of our bathroom at home (well, almost as Gordon proved by walking around the inside of the shower cubicle without getting wet - & yes, the water was turned on at the time!), a bath with an agitator facility to create bubbles & two separate hand basins with mirrors, cabinets & of course a toilet! This led out onto a huge lounge, dining & kitchen area with the statutory ice making facility within the refrigerator/freezer. Downstairs were 3 further bedrooms, a bathroom, a laundry area & door into the garage where a Mustang convertible sat waiting for more photographs of pretenders to new money - we duly obeyed & smiled in all the right places! Wendy cracked open the vodka – the messy night began!

The next morning Gordon was awakened by a phone call from his son Craig in Sweden; it was his birthday & Craig wanted to be the first to wish him a happy one! They chatted at length then Gordon opened his cards of which there were several in spite of the distance from home; the plan for the morning was for Gordon & Tom to visit Radio Shack in Lake Tahoe town to buy a digital camera similar to Tom's which was all-singing & all-dancing! Jordan & Wendy went out for a run, & Jane, Bev & I went for a walk to the Keys & to check out times/prices for hiring a boat later in the day. There had been a sharp frost overnight & the trees were dripping with the melting ice as we walked through the back waters towards the marina & wildlife area where campaigns were afoot to prevent further urbanisation of the terrain. Here was the money, everywhere as far as the eye could see were huge, expensive gleaming boats of all shapes & cost; many were moored up for what looked like the winter & only a few were occupied – yet again: how the other half live! Bev was well into power walking & had she been left to her own devices I'm sure she would have walked twice as far as Jane & I but she was kind to us & walked at a very brisk pace with us!

We arrived back after gathering information on the boat hiring & found Gordon & Tom “playing” with their matching cameras; the deal had been done & Gordon had his very own digital camera & was pointing & pressing at everything moving or standing still! The joggers were back too & we all decided to hire bicycles & have some fun along the coastline of the second largest fresh water lake on earth (the largest being Lake Baikal in Russia). We all chose various types of bike & set off on the cycle tracks at the side of the busy road & stopped off at a couple of interesting collections of wooden houses steeped in history, a photo shoot of course ensued as Gordon was learning about his new acquisition & as the scenery provided an idyllic back drop he made good use of it. We then cycled to a wildlife haven where there is a cross section of a river which flows in to the lake & you can walk under the river & view everything in its own habitat rather than the fish etc being caught & taken to a purpose built viewing platform. Many of the salmon were spawning in their hundreds & the water was literally alive with them.

But one incident has to be mentioned which had us all but one in stitches. We were all happily cycling along to this wildlife area & all of a sudden Jordan seemed to be attempting a moonie but got rather entangled with his shorts, pedals & handle bars & ended up over the handle bars & in a nearby unsuspecting bush. His pride took a severe dip, he cut his leg, but no-one actually came to his rescue as we were all laughing too much to help!! I was riding at the rear (excuse the pun) of the party so had a good view (again, pardon the pun!) but I still don’t know how he managed to entangle himself the way he did & then fall off the bike into the bush.

After we had watched the salmon we returned to the cycle park where we’d left the bikes & had a picnic of the usual interesting nibbles such as pretzels, cheese, crisps, cooked meat, nuts galore & fruit, washed down with various liquids. The sun was beating down & we were looking for shade but apart from a few small shrubs there was none to be had. Then we cycled back towards where we hired the bikes from & reluctantly handed them back – that was fun. We drove back in convoy to the house & got ready to go off on the boat to explore the big lake until the sun set around 7pm.

The ride unfortunately wasn’t quite what we’d hoped for – we hadn’t realised that the plan had been to get to a point of the lake after powering nearly full throttle for half an hour & then slowly retrace our steps for the remaining time out on the water. To be honest it wasn’t the best 30 minutes we’d spent as we couldn’t speak, see much or keep warm, so when the throttle was finally subdued it was an immense relief to both Gordon & I. However, the remaining time aboard was pleasant, visiting Emerald Bay where the only island on the lake exists; we also travelled across the width towards State Line & Nevada, but time was getting on, the sun was setting quickly & the boat had to be back on time or we incurred an extra charge – all well & good but could we find the correct inlet from whence we’d emerged on to the lake? Could we heck! I think a little panic was starting to creep in & Jordan was on the boat’s radio calling in to the marina where we’d hired the boat but to no avail! No matter, eventually we found the opening & began our very slow return to dock as per all the many signs along the waterfront; it was very cold now & we could really do with a warm somewhere – the Fresh Ketch along the harbour provided just that warmth with a hot drink & fish & chips! Now, there’s a birthday tea Gordon!

Suitably re-heated we returned to the house by way of Raley's where the girls sorted out a birthday cake for you know who, together with candles! As if by magic they always managed to come up with something a little special & of course this was no exception so we all sang Happy Birthday to him & we all munched on the cake & I think ice cream might have appeared too to help it down! And tomorrow was another celebration; it was our 11<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

We awoke to yes, another sun filled day in South Lake Tahoe! Today we would get to meet Bev's father who was driving from Reno where he lived via Carson City & to Lake Tahoe to see his daughter for a couple of hours & then drive back; they think nothing of driving these huge distances at the drop of a hat, whereas we quibble about a 10 mile trip to Penrith – probably something to do with the price of petrol in this country!

Don, Bev's father, was arriving around mid-morning so we went shopping for something for lunch to Raley's of course! He arrived & was introduced to Gordon & I and said, "Welcome to the Colonies!" What a gentleman he is & then we met Mr Crow, his darling black Labrador. Lunch consisted of tortilla chips, & all the trimmings – food back home will never be as colourful as this with so many bursting flavours & fresh variety. Lunch was over too quickly but plans had been hatched to go to Stateline & over the border into Nevada where gambling was allowed, so we said our goodbyes to Don & were driven to the border.

It was really strange to see the high rise casinos on Stateline literally over the state line into Nevada where we were to take the Heavenly tram (very aptly named) & really float above the world. The remaining members of the party were going shopping so we were left to our own devices. For \$32 each we took a ride skywards & three quarters of the way up Mount Heavenly in a cable car which is used by skiers in the winter months as it's quite a playground for the Californians, & in the summer months used as a quick way to see forever on a clear day!

At last & for the first & only time we were actually let loose on our own in America! Two hours we spent marvelling at the ride upwards with views all around which were phenomenal & then the platform where we could walk around & look at places several miles away such as Carson City which was 20 miles distant, Mount Tallac which was looking taller every time we glanced at it, the Keys where our accommodation seemed minute, & to see the lake in all its gleaming, glittering size stretching out beyond us for what seemed to the edge of the horizon was indeed a spectacle worth a cable car ride – it was truly a heavenly mountain.

After quite some time we caught another cable car back down; they were each large enough to hold 6 people so as with the car upwards we had one to ourselves, presumably as it was a quiet time of day as the ride was due to close quite soon. The views were absolutely unparalleled in the late September afternoon sunshine & just before we alighted we saw Bev sitting waiting for us & both she & I waved to each other madly as if we hadn't seen each other for weeks – it had been a couple of hours! Quite a wedding anniversary so far .... & now we were all set to go to a casino which according to Urban Spoon was the best place for a rib eye steak The steak apparently was good – I am not a big lover of beef steaks but I wasn't going to pass by this casino again in a while so I thought that at \$10.50 it was definitely

worth a gamble; & then I got the chance to play the fruit machine or one armed bandit – it even warranted a photo! Yet another day full of firsts – cable car ride, rib eye steak, casino gambling; it just goes on & on.

We all returned to the wonderful accommodation where we had some serious celebrating to do – after all it was our anniversary today & it was Wendy & Jordan's tomorrow but Jordan had to return home to Bass Lake in the early hours of the morning for work so we said our farewells to him as we wouldn't see him again whilst in California. We had to prepare for our most exhausting day so far as some bright spark had suggested a climb up to the summit of Tallac – a mere 9,735 feet above sea level – Jane Williams step forward please!

Day 20 – that meant too few days left of our dream tour, but food packed & water on board we took 2 cars, one was left further up the valley which Tom & Wendy parked & that left Bev, Jane, Gordon & I to start the trek ever upwards to the highest point Gordon & I have ever climbed under our own steam. The prospect was pretty daunting but as we had kept having glances throughout our short stay in South Lake Tahoe the adrenalin had been building daily; this was going to be a mountain to remember. Jane had scattered her father's ashes on a tarn visible from Mount Tallac called Fallen Leaf Tarn, another Indian connection but what tremendously imaginative names they gave things & this was an idyllic place to end his time on earth & Jane was always going to come back here & tell him what antics she had been getting up to!

So having completed the necessary forms in duplicate to let the ranger service know who was out in Desolation Wilderness, we set off ahead of Tom & Wendy who would be about 30 minutes behind us; it wouldn't take them long to catch us up as we were dragging behind & slowing everyone down due to the altitude. We weren't really used to the higher altitude although we'd been living at around 6,000 feet for several days now but it was weird to experience the thin air & every step we took together with every breath we took was quite a struggle, but determined we carried on still bringing up the rear. There were several photo stops but with a fantastic back drop of Heavenly Mountain, Lake Tahoe & the blue, blue skies; Fallen leaf Tarn was now way below us & the Keys where we'd spent the last 4 days was a tiny pin prick on a massive map. The day was very warm with little or no wind & much water was drunk; the mountain wasn't particularly attractive above the tree line but it was the sheer height & views from it which were captivating, & the challenge was there in front of us – we had to climb it!

About 500 feet from the summit we were really struggling & Jane was holding back with us; we knew Wendy, Bev & Tom were close to the summit by now but we urged Jane to continue without us. Then I said something to Gordon which rather made both our minds up – I said that not reaching this summit would be akin to walking the Coast to Coast & not dipping our boots in the North Sea after we'd reached the coast. Apparently this must have worked because although we were both exhausted we were now on auto pilot & reached the top finally, but very triumphantly. What a vantage point & what a thrill it gave us both, in fact all of us. I think Jane said she had climbed it 7 times now & announced that she wanted her ashes scattering up here; Wendy replied as quick as a flash that she'd better hurry up & die if she wanted any of us to scatter them for her!!

And that was the lovely humour that reigned throughout the dream tour – and the dream tour was to come to an end the day after tomorrow but not until we had managed to get down from this mountain before the bears came out to play. We had ascended the short, sharp way & Jane planned the descent to be a more leisurely affair – if you can call 7 miles down a mountain leisurely of course! We dropped down towards Lake Gilmore which sparkled in the late afternoon sunshine but Wendy was the time keeper now & she urged us to keep going after a small stop to admire the scenery & cool down our head attire, very aware that we had a long way to go & the light would start to fade soon. She walked at the rear behind Gordon who was suffering with his knees on the downward track but we learned that Wendy too suffered from knee problems & was creaking just as much if not more than Gordon & I! We got down to where Wendy & Tom had left the second vehicle earlier in the day eventually, after some remarkable desolate scenery; this way down was in complete contrast to the climb up this morning, enclosed & wooded, but still enchanting. We were all very tired – some of us a little more so than others, but we still had to fit everyone into one car to then get to the 2<sup>nd</sup> car where Jane, Bev, Gordon & I had left from – now who's the smallest ... Bev???? Bev insisted on climbing into the boot of Wendy's land cruiser & a suitable photo was taken of the poor unfortunate piece of luggage called Bev! By memory it was a couple of miles down the track to collect the other car so were soon able to release her out of the confined space, none the worse for wear.

As with everything else that happened on our dream tour it ended up as a big laugh for us all & this was no exception. Tom & Jane separated from us at this juncture to go & check on her Dad's seat that had been placed at Fallen Leaf Tarn to his memory; the rest of us drove to Raley's to collect pizzas & ice cream – well what better way to celebrate our greatest achievement to date height wise & it was our last night in Tahoe for tomorrow we all had to pack up & head westward toward San Francisco.

It was a relatively quiet night as I think we were all pretty exhausted & one or two of us were creaking somewhat with tired & aching joints; I can't understand why! We heard during the evening that Mo's Mum was recovering nicely, & then it was announced that Krista would be joining us in Sacramento for lunch the following day after a drive of some hours to be there. We spent much of the night looking at many of the photographs taken during the day; what a stupendous day it had been – to cap all the other terrific days which had gone before – how could we choose which was the best day? We couldn't even begin to attempt such a task – they were all dream days but, as with our Coast to Coast walk of two years previous, although we wanted to get to the end of it we also were well aware that the end meant no more dream touring & goodbyes to our very dear friends.

We rose quite early next morning, not too bad after the walk – perhaps we had been in better condition than we thought – one or two of the other dreamers were hobbling a little – oops! So we emptied the very desirable accommodation that had been home to us for 4 nights of all our belongings & piled into the cars again, saying goodbye to Lake Tahoe & the Sierra Nevadas & sat back for a very scenic drive over the pass towards Sacramento, the capital of California – Arnie Schwarzenegger was still governor but not for many weeks longer & we had a brief tour of Capitol Hill & the wide avenues leading up to the impressive government buildings. Although the flag of office was flying I didn't see him waving to us but we did see a mounted police lady keeping a watchful eye on proceedings; we did an about turn & headed off to the old town of Sacramento to find somewhere to park & somewhere to eat & meet up

with Krista for lunch. We found a central place near to the old station & quayside of the Sacramento River & walked aboard a replica of one of the steam paddle driven boats that would manoeuvre up & down the river in years gone by. We had a very cooling iced tea – well, some of us did! After a few photos of the boat, river & road bridge that operated as if on a lifting gear when a tall boat needed access through to the quayside, we met a lady who amused us greatly. She was taking photos of the bridge like many others about her but I caught her eye & she started up a conversation with me saying that the batteries in her camera were dead & she wasn't going to let on to her husband or he'd become angry with her so she was going to pretend she was taking photos & not say anything to him until they were back in the car! I was an accessory to the fact!

Lunchtime – & Krista met up with us all at a pleasant restaurant with a view of the old street; more photos & more tortillas & chicken & spicy food washed down with more iced tea – for some us. We had a good couple of hours & then it was time to find our villa in the suburbs of the city & unpack for the last time. We had a fair bit of food left from the last port of call so rustled up spare ribs, garlic bread & fruit & nibbles of all kinds for a farewell supper. We spent a warm & friendly few hours reminiscing over the past 3 weeks & Wendy with remote assistance from Jordan managed to Skype with Mo so we were at last – on our last night in California – all together again.

There was a lull in the conversation & Jane asked the question, “Where do we go from here? We've been to your country, you've been to ours; what next?”

Some bright spark said, “I've never been to New Zealand” ..... the rest as they say, is history; so on that hot & balmy September evening in a stranger's rented villa, miles from anybody's home town we decided to meet up in New Zealand in the January of 2014 to begin another adventure – how do we follow this one?

Our farewells began with Krista departing for Fresno at a very late hour; Bev was in tears & she'd be seeing Krista again very soon! We knew her tears were for us all really & that our goodbyes would be for a lot longer than just days, but let's not dwell on goodbyes, there was a another bridge to cross & Wendy was going to run the gauntlet!

The night was airless & not a very good night's sleep was achieved by anyone really; we were up, packed & then left & found a nearby cafe for breakfast of sizeable proportions for those with appetites the size of horses!! Gordon & I had coffee for breakfast. We left mid morning & drove towards San Francisco on 8 lane roads of unbelievable size to spend a couple of hours sightseeing & grab an In & Out burger from near Fisherman's Wharf; however we didn't bargain on becoming wanted criminals as well as everything else we'd become whilst Stateside.

The problem arose because we approached one of the bay's bridges & didn't know which toll gate we should be making for as they were arranged as pre-paid/fast track, cash & other. Jane was motioning Wendy to make for the left hand side but realised too late that these were all fast track gates & there was nothing left but to crash the toll gate & speed off into the blue yonder. Tom & Gordon were following behind but realised our predicament in time but rather upset the car behind them by cutting in front to get to the right gate & pay; they did however ask the gate man to apologise to the car behind!

We drove down to the shore line opposite the city & saw Alcatraz from a very different angle again; several photos were taken as the temperatures soared to reach 93°F. For a city which spends much of its time shrouded in fog we had witnessed very little of this mist & felt privileged that we had experienced such wonderful weather conditions – we flew into SF in sunshine & we were to leave it in the same way. But first we continued to park & find an In & Out burger cafe; Jane said we couldn't go home without trying one so try one we did. It was a confusing couple of hours in amongst the crowds of Fisherman's Wharf who all wanted to try an In & Out burger; Gordon & I sat in the sunshine whilst Bev & Jane took our order, but before anything else we all had to find a toilet & that in itself was entertaining as we had to use a "secret code" to open the door obtained from any of the nearby shops just so long as you bought something from them!

Much relieved we all tucked in to the tasty food the Dreamers had ordered on our behalf, a burger & fries which was to be our last meal on Californian soil – nothing terribly exotic but while sitting around munching on yet another impromptu snack I felt a sense of real warmth & friendship! We'd had so much fun these past 3 weeks, doing absolutely nothing more than enjoying life as if nothing else mattered in the same carefree way we used to live our summer holidays of our childhood. It could have continued indefinitely .....

The heat of the afternoon was catching up with us & I think we were ready to escape to the air conditioned airport buildings, much as we hated to go home, but go home we must! Bev & Wendy tried to kidnap I Wuv You & Bovva but their plans were thwarted when Jane called Security!! We checked in via the computer & checked in our bags which were bulging at the seams with goodies purloined along the way – a fair swap for the chocolate from Kennedy's Chocolate factory in Orton we had delivered to the Dreamers! Now came the bit we didn't really want – the goodbyes to each of them; Jane, Bev, Wendy & Tom each hugged us in turn & yes, there were a few tears of sadness that the Dream Tour was ending but we left them standing at the barriers knowing that we'd all meet up again in New Zealand.

We went through passport control, joined a long queue waiting to be scanned & then found our gate area & waited & waited. We didn't speak much, we were both re-living the past days & though tired had a very satisfied feeling; we'd been part of a wonderful Californian tour & had so many tales to tell our friends back home, but first we had a long flight to Heathrow & then back to Manchester. We dozed for most of the trip back & reached Manchester in drizzle – what a surprise! Andrew, our neighbour, collected us & we were deposited back home quickly & comfortably to a pile of mail, messages & cold weather! We were exhausted; the adrenalin had been flowing on the outward journey, it was waning very much on the return & all we needed was good night's sleep.

We awoke the next morning – had it all been a dream? Judging by all the emails that were awaiting us from the Californians, it had definitely NOT been a dream, merely a Dream Tour.