

Travel

IN NEXT SATURDAY'S WMN...

Martin Hesp is California Dreaming in the second instalment of his road trip - Travel

RHS Rosemoor experts share the secrets of autumn colour - Gardening



Al Capone's pool can really put a spring in your step...

Martin Hesp puts his nerves - and eco-credentials - to the test in California

It was the way she flew through the air some 100 feet above the Pacific waves that cast a magical spell. But then, everything I had done over that past week had been way out in the sensation zone. The distant, dizzying lands of America's Far West held me enchanted.

Which didn't really come as a massive surprise because California is about excitement. California is where "stuff" happens. It is renowned as the planet's "randy" kingdom, where the weird is wonderful, and the wonderful nearly always thrills. So when the person from London-based America As You Like It travel company asked if I'd like to have a go on a circus freestyle, I wasn't in the least bit flabbergasted when she told me the school was in Los Angeles. That's a city where some really crazy stuff happens - you only have to traverse its amazing 22-mile coastal cycle route to learn that. Venlo Bosch has to be one of the wildest scenic locations in the world. Learning to fly on a high trapeze in nearby Santa Monica seemed almost subtle.

Not quite so subtle, however, that a middle-aged British journalist failed to complete the course thanks to a cricked neck. My excuse is that I was suffering some stiffness thanks to a great deal of driving in a very draughty motorcar. Not that I was complaining, because it was quite simply some of the best driving I've ever done - way up in the high deserts of that hot, vast and stunning state.

There's only one kind of vehicle to drive in such places - and yes, I'll be



planting some trees and recycling everything including the kitchen sink to repay the planet for this - I hired a big thropy convertible. Only with the roof down and a V8 rumbling can you really go California dreaming... And it does seem like a dream when you are somewhere

like the Joshua Tree National Park. This altitudinous desert is everyone's idea of the Far West - a kind of giant cowboy country consisting of more than half a million acres of stark wilderness.

At first glance the desert seems empty save for rocks, the odd tree and more rocks - but it's actually rich in plants and animals that survive in this land of climatic extremes. The trees give the park its name - Joshua trees are a giant type of yucca that have the appearance of these ridiculous mobile phone masts that are designed to look like trees but don't.

Vast granite crags weather-beaten into creepy shapes are dotted all over the empty landscape and between them canyons provide walkers with beautiful trails where you can examine the spring desert flowers and admire the rattlesnakes.

On another day we went on a Jeep

Martin in one of the pools at Al Capone's former residence, The Two Bunch Palms Resort, top, and a canyon in the Joshua Tree National Park, below



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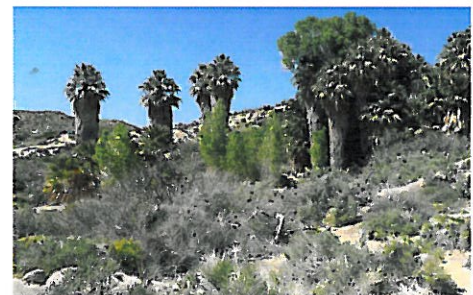
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safari to explore some of the remarkable box canyons that adorn the flanks of the San Andreas Fault which is a feature of so much of California in general, and the valley that plays home in Palm Springs in particular. The place which lends itself to this healthy activity partly because it boasts an amazing 22-mile cycleway along the LA coast.

For the bench, think Hayward. Then think - bloody mary. That, at least, is what I did prior to my trapeze lesson. I found the best bloody mary I have ever consumed at the end of Santa Monica Pier, which helped quell my fears.

Not that this was necessary in the end because the windy journey in my convertible had given me the stiff neck which the trainer advised would get much worse if I went aloft fighting the G-forces some 50 feet above the wooden deck. As I looked at my fellow students who all seemed aged between 12 and 18, I began to see that a small degree of suppleness was required. The simple swing seemed easy enough - but within two hours all these kids were flying through the air to be caught by a trapeze artist hanging upside-down on another swing. I wasn't going to be able to do that in a thousand years - although the teachers told me many a 75-year-old had achieved it.

FACTBOX

Martin travelled with America As You Like It which offers tailor-made holidays across the US. See americasyoulikeit.com or call 020 8742 8299. A seven-night trip to California starts from £1,155 per person, including return flights from London to LA, seven days' convertible car hire, three nights at the Ambrose Hotel in Santa Monica and four nights at the Palms in Rancho Mirage. They can also assist with booking Desert Jeep Adventures, the Trapeze School and lake rentals in Santa Monica. For more information on the Santa Monica area, visit santamonica.com and on the Palm Springs area visit palm Springs.com.

As a consolation I settled down to a good dinner just a few metres away in the Lobster restaurant, perched high above the pier. Its massive windows must have the best views in all LA, and after I'd finished off a large creature of the type which gave the place its name, I asked the waiter if Hollywood celebs frequented the place for the food and ocean vista.

"Some," he shrugged. "But mainly Brits." He gave me a look that suggested that in his world I'd be considered something of a Z-lister - and with that I was ready to head north on the second leg of my amazing Californian road journey.

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