



A driving holiday through this picture-perfect US state makes for a heady ride
 text and photos by
 Rishad Saam Mehta



TOPLESS IN California



SIR, I KNOW she's a sweet ride, but please stay within the limit," drawled Officer Anderson as he graciously let me off with a warning instead of a fine. I was on Route 140, which was so temptingly twisty that I'd got carried away. The patrol car had caught up with me, lights flashing, after the 3rd 'S' shaped series of corners.

My partner in crime was a metallic grey Mustang, menacing of look and loud of voice. It got its muscle from a 3.7 litre engine that belted out 305 horsepower and had a roof that went down at the touch of a button. I was living the dream Californian road trip!

LICENCE TO DRIVE

The moment I walked into the rental car area at San Francisco airport, I was glad I had pre-booked my driving holiday. I had been insistent on a convertible and I saw a Mustang in bay number 24 that had a notice taped to its windscreen indicating it was exclusively reserved for me. I was going to cruise through California in an iconic American convertible - just perfect.

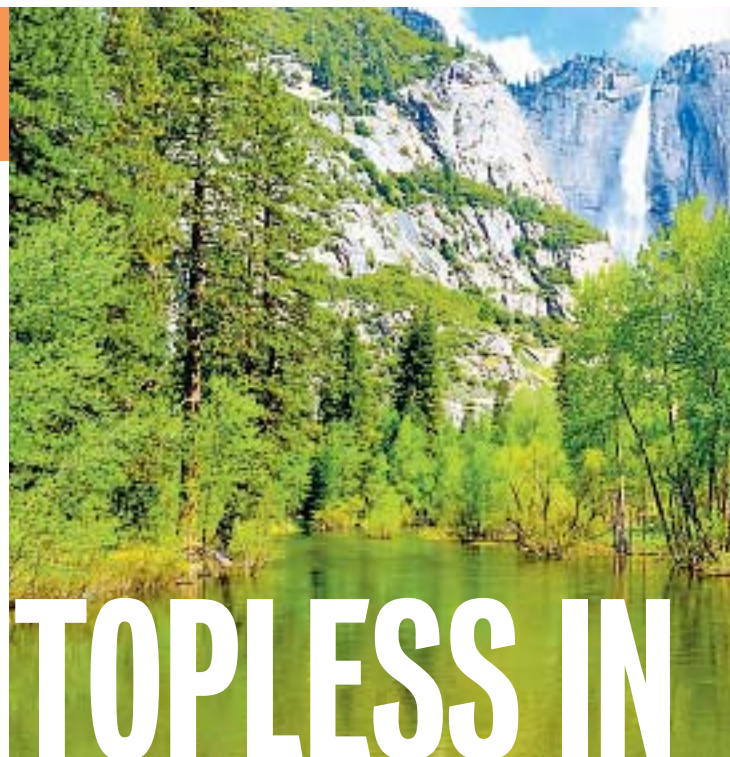
Even the Gods seemed to agree because when we set out from Frisco the next morning the sky was sunny and blue. We were headed to Yosemite, one of the US's grandest national parks.

The first 130 miles of the drive to El Portal, our base at Yosemite, was on straight and featureless freeways where I simply put the car in cruise control. It is the last 60 miles that are fantastic to drive. Highway 140, which forms this section of the drive, enters the Sierra mountain region and swings its way along cliff edges and by the roaring Merced River. And, at the wheel of this sports car I was in highway heaven. Of course Officer Anderson soon came by and pulled me back to reality.

Yosemite National Park was established on October 1, 1890, and given UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1984. It covers an area of about 3,100 sq km, and welcomes three to four million visitors every year. Though Tioga Road and Big Oak Flat Road, which lead to stunning locations like Mono Lake and Hetch Hetchy Reservoir were still snowed out in May, our friendly receptionist at Cedar Lodge told us there was still jaw-dropping scenery to see.

PARK RANGER

On the first day we drove into the park at almost 4 pm, but at this time of year the days were getting longer and daylight would remain till 8 pm at the least - enough time to make it to Mariposa Grove and back, the park ranger at the

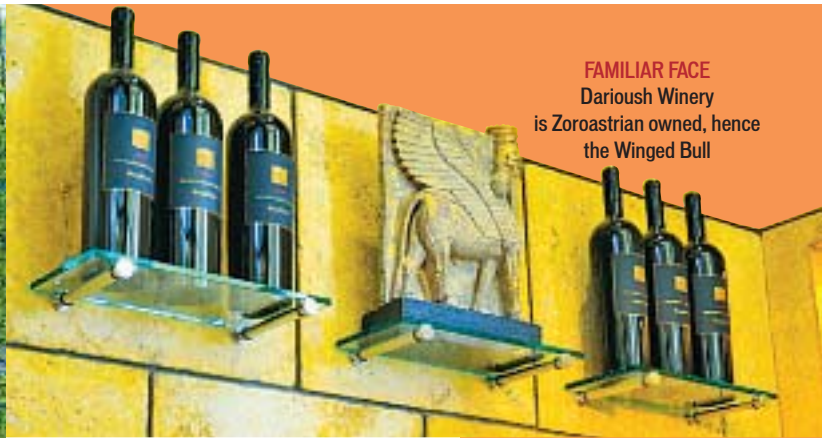


entrance told us.

But there are so many places to stop and walk to and photograph on the way there that we never did make it to Mariposa Grove - where the giant sequoia trees reach up to the skies. First up were the Bridalveil Falls. The area's old inhabitants - the Ahwahneechee Tribe - believed that inhaling the mist of the falls increases one's chances of marriage. But the falls are so tremendous that the mist is everywhere, so just walking to the falls will increase your

ALL ABOARD FOR ADVENTURE

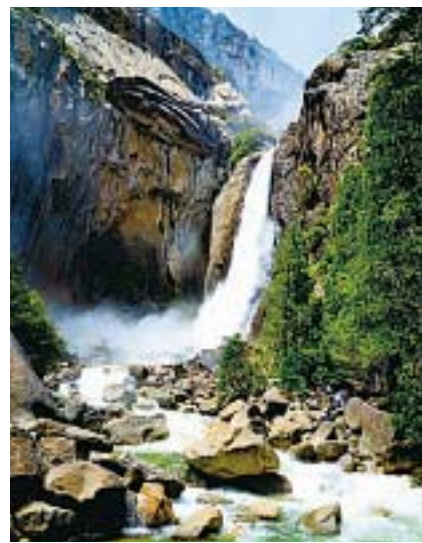
Top to bottom: Napa Valley's Wine Train; A wine tasting at a vineyard; The Castello di Amorosa Winery at Napa; On the road to Yosemite National Park



FAMILIAR FACE
Darioush Winery is Zoroastrian owned, hence the Winged Bull

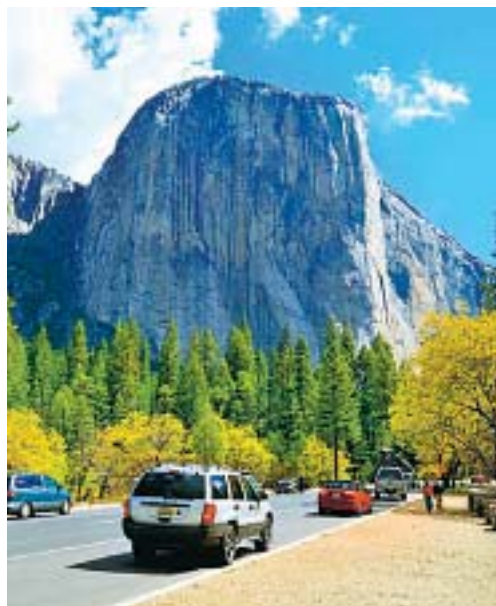
CRUISING THROUGH

The view from Swinging Bridge at Yosemite (left); The El Capitan granite massif at Yosemite (below left); Yosemite Falls (below); A crab restaurant in San Francisco (below right)



TRAVEL INFO

- Consider flying east to California on Singapore Airlines or take Continental's direct flight from Mumbai to Newark, New Jersey, and then a connection to San Francisco.
- Book your self-drive holiday through Monograms. This way, the hotels along the route and your choice of car are all pre-booked, precise driving directions are supplied and also suggestions on things to do along the way. For more info, see www.globusjourneys.in.
- You'll need to provide a credit card as guarantee for the car hire as well as at the hotels. If you want to pay incidentals by cash, remember that hotels don't always have loose change.



chances of marriage whether you want to tie the knot or not.

The mist also creates random rainbows that form between trees on the path leading to the falls. These renegade refractions of light are what make visiting the falls magical. Because we spent time at Bridalveil, we arrived quite late at Tunnel View, which was a blessing in disguise. If there is one view that you should take in at Yosemite - then this is it. Preferably during the soft light of early morning or late evening - when the waterfalls, granite dome and forests are washed in a mellow orange hue.

The next day we drove to Yosemite Valley, the park's most popular area. El Capitan and Half Dome - two granite massifs - are the prime attractions here. Since it was yet another sunny day, we could see rock climbers inching their way up the sheer faces. This part of the park sees so many visitors that there is a huge car park from where free shuttle buses ferry visitors to various points. With its cafeterias, shops, info centres and parking lots, this part feels like a little town more than a national park, but

WE COULD SEE ROCK CLIMBERS INCHING THEIR WAY UP THE SHEER FACE OF EL CAPITAN

don't forget that you're still out in the wild and you might just see a bear behind a tree.

TASTING TIMES

Our next destination was the Napa Valley, 208 miles west of Yosemite and 50 miles north of San Francisco. I didn't mind these long drives at all; in fact I revelled in them because the Mustang lent itself to long distances so compliantly. Napa is famous for its wine and we arrived to aesthetically designed wineries set within manicured vineyards.

I did a double take when I saw something that vaguely resembled the Zoroastrian Fire Temple thanks to its Persian Winged Bull motifs. This was actually the Darioush Winery, acclaimed

for its Reds. Grand and imposing, the winery whose design has been inspired by the architecture of the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis, was designed by architects Ardeshir and Roshan Nozari.

Our Napa highlight though was the wine train. This restaurant on rails is aboard a train whose carriages date back to 1915 and 1952. The locomotives that pull the train date from 1958, but now run on CNG which is quite an innovation. The train does a three hour round trip from Napa to St Helena over tracks that were first built in 1864, going past attractive wineries. In those three hours we were utterly pampered by the attentive service and the incredibly tasty food. Of course it is all paired with very fine wine. We had to put our post lunch plans on hold because we were so satiated by that groaningly delicious lunch aboard the train.

The next day the good weather continued to accompany us all the way back to San Francisco, but for me the morning was mournful because it was time to return the Mustang. I could have kept it with me in 'Frisco, but in the city every moment you aren't driving you are paying parking charges - very heavy on the wallet. So instead of that we used the cheap and convenient public transport and spent the money on the variety that San Francisco has to offer for mind, body and soul. But that is another story altogether.

brunchletters@hindustantimes.com

DRIVING RULES

IN CALIFORNIA: Seatbelts are required to be worn by law. Talking on the phone while driving is not allowed.

At STOP signs you need to come to a complete halt. At a junction with more than one STOP sign the person who stops at a STOP sign first has right of way.

Adhere to the speed limit, but also remember on a busy freeway to keep your speed the same as the volume of traffic.

IN SAN FRANCISCO it is required by law to park with the front wheels turned towards the curb. This ensures that in case of an earthquake the car will roll towards the curb and not the street.

Be careful that you don't cross the legal alcohol limit in Napa.

TIPS FOR CAR HIRE

Consider boot space while choosing a car.

Opt for zero liability insurance. Many hire cars have a GPS installed. This often cannot be disabled should you not opt for it. So don't opt for a GPS and you can use it anyway.

Opt for the prepaid full tank of fuel, this way you can return the car with the tank empty.



Best places to eat

AROUND YOSEMITE: Charles Street Dinner House - Classic American style dinner

AROUND NAPA: Ubuntu Restaurant - The vegetarian fare was so good that even an absolute meat eater like me would go there again.

Napa Valley Wine Train - For lunch, so that you can enjoy the views.

In San Francisco: Supper Club and Asia SF - If you're looking for evenings with wicked cocktails and good food.