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Beyond Africa – West coast USA

A little bit of awesome



In search of the biggest and best the western United States has to offer, former Eastern Cape resident **Ian Vorster** travelled from Los Angeles to the Canadian border, taking in giant redwoods, Kings Canyon, Death Valley and a whole lot of 'awesome'.



Hiking the John Muir Wilderness in the eastern Sierras is an exercise in superlatives – there are hundreds of kilometres of trails.

Americans use the word awesome too loosely. I mean, how can a hairdo be awesome? If you won the lottery ... twice, now *that* would be awesome. Three guys touring Death Valley National Park on Harley Davidsons were pitching their tent next to mine. The banter continued. "If I got home from this trip and found Shania Twain standing at my front door wearing nothing but a fur coat ... with a note from my wife pinned to it, saying 'Have a good time!', now that would be awesome!" When I saw the guy's bike I realised he must be something of an expert on awesome – a Harley frame of sorts straddled a 357 cubic inch V8 Chevy motor.

Beginning down south in Los Angeles, my quest to see some big sky, to

gaze up in wonder at the canopy of a giant tree and perhaps find a little bit of awesome to take my breath away, took me as far north as the Canadian border. From the lowest point in the western hemisphere (Death Valley) through the highest, driest and wettest points in the lower 48 states.

Death Valley, as with most deserts, is made beautiful by light and extremes. With a low point of 86 metres below sea level, and a high point over 4400 metres, I photographed snow on the peaks while standing in 45°C.

At the opposite end of the scale, in the Northwest Peninsula butting up against Canada, the Olympic National Park protects some of the last-remaining temperate rainforest in the world. With close to 4000 millimetres of rain

a year, tree trunks break beneath the weight of moss growing on them.

The Northwest Peninsula has a 100-kilometre stretch of seashore which has benefited from park status. Seashore fishing is banned and you can explore only on foot. When I reached its entry point at Rialto Beach, I knew I had found a little bit of awesome.

Giants of the rainforest – hemlock and fir – grow to the edge of the beach sand. Storms fell the lumber, rivers carry the logs to sea and a rambunctious Pacific tosses them up on the beach. It's a spectacular sight – kilometres of colossal logs lying two metres deep and 20 wide in places. It was as if the breaker-mist hung as a veil, covering a sacred union between bride and groom – rainforest and ocean.



Up the northwest coast, Lake Quinault is surrounded by rainforest that is home to elk, black-tail deer and bears.

Colossal icons

The Columbia River marks the border between Oregon and Washington states. Up to seven kilometres wide, close to a thousand shipwrecks litter its mouth. The Oregon coastline is like an old woodcutter's wrinkled face, carrying its character with pride. Sea-stacks and coves abound.

Just south of the Columbia River I stumbled onto a restored fort, the winter residence of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Their trek in 1805 opened the route to the west and is about to celebrate its 200th anniversary. Stepping within its walls was to step back into that fascinating past.

Two Californian icons acquired a permanent place in my heart. Few things in the man-made world have

been as awe inspiring as the three-kilometre long web of cable that is the Golden Gate Bridge. All mantled in the glory of a west coast sunset, it took my breath away when I first crossed it while touring the coast by bicycle, and it has done so every time since then.

The second icon is the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Inland of San Francisco, many consider it the greatest wonder of the west.

"Are there any bears in this area?" I asked the young ranger in the Yosemite National Park Tourist Center, a well-known if overpopulated portal to the Sierra Nevada.

"Well, yes. You'll probably find one or two here, and a few over there," he replied without emotion as his finger trailed my proposed hike on the map.

Without hesitation I drove up to the high country and Tuolumne Meadows, well away from the main valley crowds – and any bears that might be scouring the low country trails for a late autumn snack. I backpacked up to Mono Pass for a night, ending at trail-crest in the Sierras. Here I saw the phenomenon that resulted in this being called "The Range of Light." An inexplicably beautiful tinge of pink filled the air, painting the surrounding peaks with a roseate glow. Caused by the arc of the sun's rays around the earth's circumference from below the horizon, all but the red bands of light are filtered out of view for a few moments.

Having migrated south by car from Tuolumne Meadows I met Nick at Mount Whitney, also in the Sierras,



ABOVE: The Quaking Aspens of the Eastern Sierras melt to gold in autumn.
RIGHT: Iconic west-coast Rialto Beach in Olympic National Park.



and the second highest peak in the US (4410 metres).

"Your first time?" he asked.

"It is," I replied, "what about you?"

"My twelfth, but I have to do it in a day or else I get altitude sickness."

Lanky, outdoorsy and nervous, I wondered if he was suffering from a mid-life crisis. Who would want to climb the same mountain 12 times?

I suppose knowing that you're about to do a strenuous 35-kilometre hike in one day, with an altitude gain and loss of over 3650 metres, might explain the nerves. A climb that equates climatically to a drive north from the desert climate of Los Angeles to arctic-like Alaska. I was doing it in three days.

I celebrated my fortieth atop Mount Whitney. With Mount Muir to the south, Kings Canyon National Park to the west and John Muir Wilderness and Death Valley National Park to the east, every vestige of cynicism I might have entertained toward 'big-sky talk' vanished. It was awesome.

An awesome pang

Kings Canyon in the western Sierras, along with Yosemite, protects the phenomenal giant sequoia trees (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). These trees can attain 3200 years in age, bases measure 10 metres in diameter and up to 90 metres in height, with bark nearly a half metre thick. One of these fallen monarchs once stabled forty cavalry horses. Scientists have calculated that we are now viewing only the third generation ever of the species.

"Tell us about South Africa," asked Dan. A few of us sat around a fire beneath a Monterey cypress tree on the coast just north of Santa Barbara. Dan and Kei were doing a 'credit card' bicycle tour of the coast: camping, but eating at restaurants. My wife and I were car camping and our neighbours, a geologist and his wife, were in a large motorhome.

I began to talk about things that were related to South Africa in some way. The Monterey cypress tree, is an endan-

gered species not found anywhere else – except on Robben Island. "Alcatraz and Robben Island were two of only three island penitentiaries in the world. This part of the coast is one of only five with a Mediterranean climate, the southwestern Cape being another. Then we have the Cape of Storms, and have you heard of the big seven...?"

As the idle talk drifted with the smoke through the leaves above us, I realised how much we all like to list that which is awesome ... the biggest and the best. Just then, with the nearby surf pounding Point Conception – also called the Cape Horn of the West Coast, I heard the Fairest Cape whisper my name.

And I felt an awesome pang....