

THE TIMES

NORTH AMERICA

Chill, Dad: this coast is cool

Hippie murals, seaside hot tubs, giant trees and pioneering computers: David Baddiel threw everything California has to offer at his family — and the Sunshine State won them over

By: David Baddiel

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Lap it up: Half Moon Bay

I remember, once, on Baddiel and Skinner Unplanned, bringing up a trip I'd made to Sydney and talking fondly of cuddling a koala. Frank turned to camera and said: "Koala bears — they've got chlamydia. Sorry, koalas, but it's out there now: deal with it." It made me laugh, but it did somewhat puncture my ideal of that species. So, let me warn you, I may be about to puncture your ideal of something else that appears absolutely lovely in photographs: San Francisco.

Don't get me wrong, it's a fantastic city — beautiful, culturally vital, gastronomically splendid and all that. But it's cold. In August. Something about the way it's positioned in terms of sea level and marine moisture — don't push me on this, I was never very good at geography — means that throughout the summer, when the rest of California is baking, the city remains at best crisp and at worst a bit like Cleethorpes in February. Looking out of the window on one of the high floors of the Westin hotel, the Golden Gate Bridge was visible some of the time — looking, as ever, as if an apocalyptic alien force dreamt up by Hollywood was any second now going to collapse it — and at other times shrouded in rain and fog. As Crowded House used to sing, SF is very "four seasons in one day".



Bridge the gap: David with Dolly and Ezra in San Francisco

There will be people reading who knew this, but I didn't, and I think it comes as a surprise to most other visitors, too. On talking to a number of natives, I discovered that we were very much not the first foreigners to be observed on the streets shivering and looking for somewhere to buy hoodies. In fact, there was a kind of winking, smiling glance that I noticed passing between these natives, as if it's a running gag. Sorry, San Franciscans, but it's out there now: deal with it.

The weather doesn't, however, destroy your holiday; instead, it creates a narrative for it. A case in point: on our first day in the city, my family and I went on a whale-watching trip. When we set off from Pier 39 — the Californian version of Blackpool — it was sunny. About 20 minutes later, it was pissing down, misty, and just a tad like that Robert Redford film where he's in a boat and about to die for the entire duration. About 20 minutes after that, it became grey and becalmed, and then, with all the passengers huddled in the drizzle at the front of the tiny boat (and me starting to think, frankly, "we should have gone to Lanzarote..."), a humpback whale appeared, flipping its enormous tail over the surface of the water.



A humpback puts on a show in the Pacific

It seemed to be putting on a show just for us (it wasn't: it was calling to other whales to let them know that fish were plentiful in this spot), rolling and singing and dancing across the waves for as long as it took for all on board to film it. It was breathtaking. Half an hour later, we were returning to Pier 39 under the Golden Gate Bridge and the sun, once again, was blazing.

This experience set the tone for the holiday, which was to be an adventurous one. I've written in these pages before of the pressure of holidaying with growing children, and we had chosen America because the state of being you most want to avoid in your 11- and 14-year-old kids is boredom, and the US, surely, was invented mainly to stave off that feeling. So, a road trip through northern California was chosen and did not disappoint.

With the weather again providing an ever-changing palette, we cycled across the Golden Gate Bridge — along, it seemed, with every other tourist in the city — to Sausalito, on the other side of the bay, and ate at the Spinnaker. To give you a sense of what my children are like, and why keeping them entertained can sometimes be challenging, my 11-year-old son, Ezra, recognised this as the restaurant where Woody Allen and Tony Roberts dine in *Play It Again, Sam*.



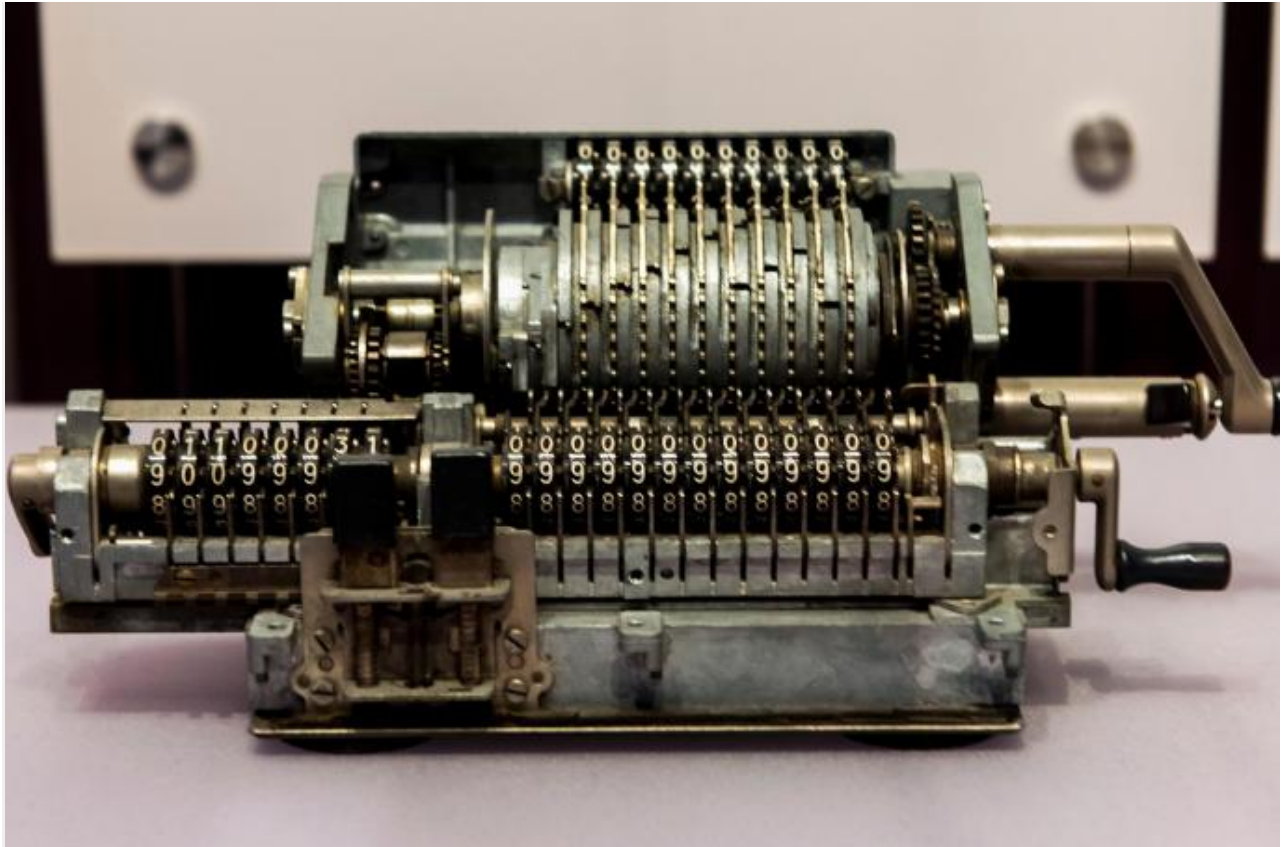
The Maestra Peace mural on the Women's Building in the Mission district of San Francisco ALAMY

We wandered endlessly through the weird and wonderful streets of the city's almost-as-big-as-China Chinatown. We rooted through supersized charity shops in the Mission District, which as a hip destination has replaced Haight-Ashbury, now something of a tourist version of its psychedelic 1960s self — although it was there that I bought vinyl copies of the two albums made by Livingston Taylor, James's brother, when it looked like he was going to be the bigger star, and which I've been unable to find anywhere else (let me know if this is too much information).

And we took family photos standing in front of the extraordinary murals in the district's famous Balmy Alley. Oh, and we went to museums and stuff, but you don't want to know about that.

From San Francisco, we followed the ocean to Half Moon Bay, where, resolutely unwarmed by the presence further down the coast of raging forest fires, it was still cold. Again, this didn't matter. Half Moon Bay itself is beautiful — I must recommend here the Beach House, a charming B&B right on the sea, complete with a hot tub you can share with strangers like it's 1973 — and the brisk weather was great once more for family cycling on the paths that stretch for miles along the shoreline. We followed them as far as the Ritz-Carlton, where an English chap called Matthew suggested that we didn't have lunch there, not, as far as I could make out, as a dining tip, but as a reaction to how we looked after two hours spent pumping pedals.

Luckily, this reminder of the stiffness of home was offset on our way back when we passed an establishment called Sam's Chowder House, where a covers band was just finishing its version of Sweet Home Alabama. It was possibly the most American moment I've ever experienced. (Though this was, of course, before it was set on course to be made great again.)



Forerunner of the iPad: a pinwheel computer from 1872, on show at the Computer History Museum ALAMY

From there, we drove further north, towards the sun. We stopped in Palo Alto (half an hour from San Francisco: boiling, never rains — go figure) to visit the Computer History Museum. This is the museum you do want to know about: a brilliant interactive space devoted to the most important science of our time. We then 101'd it (that's a freeway) up to Geyserville, a tiny town in the middle of Sonoma County.

Now, any of you who also read this paper's Magazine may have seen an article I wrote recently about how I no longer drink alcohol, so America's wine country might seem a strange region for me to visit. But if you too don't drink, come here anyway, because all the tourists are on coach trips going to the vineyards and thus you will have, all to yourself, the unbelievable beauty of northern California.

It makes you realise why so many Americans believe in God: the rivers are wide, the trees tall and the landscape green. This is the Cosmic Gardener's Own Country. The adventure element came into its own here: we kayaked down the Russian River and swam in Lake Sonoma; got lost and terrified driving in the night over the appropriately named Black Mountain ridge; hiked through Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve, where the tallest trees, they say, are higher than a football pitch (American, I assume); and drove to the sea, to Jenner, a place of extreme gorgeousness, somehow serene and wild at once, where enormous rocks loom out of the ocean. You could be at that James Bond beach in Thailand (you know the one), except that there are no other tourists.



Big trees in the Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve ALAMY

We got a table at River's End, the one restaurant overlooking the sea, and ate fresh fish (well, not my daughter, she's a vegan, and not my son, who insisted on a burger, and actually my wife is basically vegetarian now — OK, I ate fresh fish) with an uninterrupted view of a shimmering sunset.

Now I haven't got space left to tell you about the rest of the road trip, around Lake Tahoe (Emerald Bay is, as far as I can make out, a leftover slice of the Garden of Eden), and Mammoth Lakes, and then into a changing landscape, a long, long desert road, to Los Angeles, where the holiday mutated into having meetings and whatnot.

I loved northern California. I know this because, on our return, I started looking dreamily, and uselessly, at property in Jenner. So go — it's a great place for a family holiday. But remember, if you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear... some all-weather clothing.

The brief

David Baddiel was a guest of Visit California and Norwegian. For more information, see visitcalifornia.co.uk and visittheusa.co.uk.

Hotels

Doubles at the Westin St Francis, in Union Square, San Francisco, start at £205 (westinstfrancis.com). Doubles at the Beach House hotel, in Half Moon Bay, start at £190 (beach-house.com). A night at the Alexander Valley Lodge, sleeping 12, in Sonoma County, starts at £737 (alexandervalleylodge.com).

Restaurants

David ate at the Spinnaker (mains from £18; thespinnaker.com), Sam's Chowder House (from £12; samschowderhouse.com) and River's End (from £16; ilovesunsets.com).

Computer History Museum

Entry starts at £14 for adults and £11 for those aged 11-18 or over 65; it's free for children aged 10 and under (computerhistory.org).

Flights

Norwegian flies direct from Gatwick to Los Angeles and Oakland, from £159 one-way (0330 828 0854, norwegian.com/uk). British Airways, United and Virgin Atlantic fly direct to San Francisco; BA also flies to San Jose and Oakland.

Packages

Trailfinders can organise a 12-night trip similar to David's from £1,449pp, including flights into San Francisco and out of Los Angeles, accommodation and car hire (020 7368 1200, trailfinders.com). Or try Bon Voyage (0800 316 3012, bon-voyage.co.uk) or America As You Like It (020 8742 8299, americaasyoulikeit.com).

David Baddiel's one-man show My Family: Not the Sitcom is at the Playhouse Theatre, London WC2, from March 28