

FROM BEGGARS TO BEAUTY AND BACK: DOWN AMERICA'S WEST COAST



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When I was a kid in Hobart I used to read the comic 'Freckles and His Friends'. Freckles lived in a fictional suburb of Seattle called Shadyside and spent a lot of his time wandering with his friends around the Seattle docks. I could relate to that, because I used to wander around Hobart's docks with my friends, and Seattle's looked awfully like Hobart's, where the wooden piers creaked as you walked along them and between the planks you could see the green sea slopping. You and your friends, as did Freckles and his friends, walked along the wharf, a cargo ship towering up beside you until you reached the gangplank. You went up to the sailor on guard and asked: 'Please Sir, may we see over the ship?' It worked, one time in three, and you'd head first for the engine room, smelling of oil, power and wanderlust, and gaze in awe, thinking of the places it had powered the ship to and where, one day, you might go too. ... And one day I did go to Seattle, much, much later, to find that while Hobart's present docks bear some similarity to what they once were, Seattle's docks are nothing like those Freckles might have walked along.

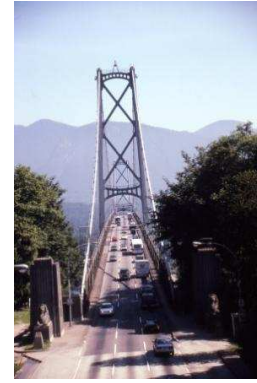


In 1971, I spent six weeks in Victoria, British Columbia, teaching educational psychology to American draft dodgers, who dodged to safety in Trudeau's liberal Canada. But that is quite another story – one in which I suspect that I, not they, learned the most interesting things. Victoria is just across Juan de Fuca Strait from the Olympic Peninsula, the other side of which is Seattle – but you couldn't see Seattle because Mt. Olympus, a big snow covered mountain, stood magnificently in the way. Later still, in 1994, after a few days in Vancouver, Catherine and I drove the circle from the Canadian border around the Olympic Peninsula, which had previously called to me with its silver peaks, to reach Seattle. And from Seattle we belted down the Oregon and Californian coast to San Francisco via Yosemite National Park.

* * *

In summer, Vancouver is green, beautiful, and hot. In 30 minutes you can drive from a nude beach, through the city, trendy Robson Street, Stanley Park where racoons climb trees and hiss at you in the morning, and skunks go on parade in the late afternoon. In between you can cross the Lion Gate Bridge and drive to Grouse Mountain and its ski

lift. On the way you can pay tribute to those who build huge houses as monuments to their success.



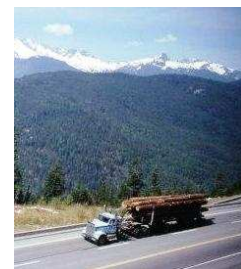
British Properties in northwest Vancouver was built by rich ultra-nationalists in the 20s and 30s, who preserved their privileged way of life by building half-timbered British properties – hence the creative name of the suburb – discretely hidden amongst tall trees on large blocks of land. It is the most expensive suburb in Vancouver, if not Canada, making it the logical target for Hong Kong billionaires relocating in anticipation of a rough ride after the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China. The *fung shui* of British Properties was perfect, on a hillside facing the sea, except for those trees. They not only prevented luck from sweeping right from the Pacific Ocean into one's house, they hid the houses from public view. But remove those pesky trees and large houses may be replaced by border-to-border *enormous* houses that may then be subject to the envious stares of those of lesser fortune, the miserable owners of smaller houses.

But continuing past the thrice ethnically confused British Properties, we drive up the coast to Whistler Mountain and Whistler Village.



Whistler is a recently created ski resort; a long gondola ride takes you above the snow line, with incredible views and chilly walks. We try to hear the 'whistlers', the marmots that whistle through their buck teeth thereby giving Whistler Mountain its name, but we neither see nor hear them. On the return, we stop to view

Shannon Falls, one of the three tallest in the Americas. There is a lovely shaded picnic ground, then a walk through pines and firs beside a brilliantly clear stream. The sun plays on the running waters. Two Chinese families are picnicking in the shade. In Hong Kong accented Cantonese (as Catherine tells me) one says: 'What a lovely place, but what a pity about all these trees.' Her companion replies: 'Yes, wouldn't you think they'd cut them down.'



Well they did, if not quite at the picnic spot. It's time to drive south.

We leave Vancouver on a hot clear morning, heading to the Visitor Information Center at Custer, the Canadian-US border. A vehemently helpful old lady mans the counter, who firmly commands us to take *this* route and not *that* for want *you* would want to see. I take careful and obvious notes, for I dare not disobey.

Washington is rolling and multi-green, light and dark, whereas the British Columbia we had just left was an all-over rich, dark green. We have a long drive ahead so we bypass Bellingham and take Chuckanut Drive (what squirrels do, get it?) splendidly curtained

from the sea by huge conifers. Here and there is a lookout between the trees where we can gaze over the Juan de Fuca Straits back to Canada from whence we had come, the reverse of the view from Vancouver Island. The day is perfect, hot sunny and clear as spring water.



As we drive South the country changes, we go through poor fishing villages to Keystone, where the ferry to Port Townsend goes. The ferry terminal is typically US user unfriendly. You follow the signs until you find yourself heading away from the terminal and there in the rear vision mirror you can see the ferry loading for Port Townsend. A frenzied U-turn, don't drive where you did just a moment ago, and you make it, just in time.

We drive along the coast through pleasant farming country and fishing villages Discovery Bay and Blyn until just before Port Angeles, we head south up high to the Celtic sounding Heart O' the Hills to Hurricane Ridge. At 6,000 ft, Hurricane Ridge provides us with a good walk with stunning views. Here we do find the whistlers that eluded us at Whistler, two large, red marmots that whistle through their two large idiot-looking front teeth. Happy, we bowl back downhill to Port Angeles for the night, to find we have struck a hot rod car rally and a noisy hotel room reeking of stale tobacco smoke.



We refresh our lungs next day as we drive west to Lake Crescent, where the temperature plunges. The lake is so deep it hasn't been bottomed and so cold the road is in fog for a kilometre. From here we travel through the Olympic National Park to what it is all about: mountains, animals and forests. At Hoh Rain forest there are good walks, very old trees bearded with grey-green moss, west coast trees, sitka spruce, hemlock with the drooping top, douglas fir with the ridged bark.

We press on to what our guide book tells us is 'Washington's best kept secret': Pacific Beach, bordering the Quinault Indian Reservation. Impressed by the blurb, we book in advance at the Pacific Beach Inn. We quickly learn why Pacific Beach has been kept a secret. It is blanketed by a sea fog. The tide is out, the sand grey, the sky grey. An old couple walk to the sea. Dimly discernable in the mist, semi-naked Indian children play disconsolately around an expiring log fire. An air of quiet desolation prevails. And this is midsummer. That night we are awakened by a man and a girl loudly disagreeing as to whether they are to effect congress to cheer themselves up – or rather himself, by the sound of things. An ambiguous silence descends.



Saddened by nature's grey veil and the cruel imbalance of human desire, we proceed next morning in dense fog down the coast road with heavy heart. We skirt Grays Harbour to reach Hoquiam and Aberdeen; surely here is the end of the world? But as we ponder this depressing question, suddenly the sun blazes down. Nature's black dog lifts with the fog as we find ourselves on a stress-inducing, crowded 10-lane freeway, hurtling towards Seattle along Route 5. At a lay-by we find a very welcome free coffee and toilet, courtesy of the City of Seattle, and refreshed, voided and collected, we drive on to Seattle and our downtown hotel in Spring Street, small, cheap yet good.

Seattle is beautifully situated on Puget Sound one side, Lake Washington on the other, a backdrop including the melodramatic Mt. Olympus. The town centre has interesting shops and excellent restaurants. What they call 'Northwest' cuisine comprises much salmon and lamb, with interesting fruit and vegetable combinations, accompanied, if this is your inclination or addiction, by Washington State wines. The



whites, especially their rhine riesling, are tops, while the reds are gutsier than Canadians achieve with the same hybrid grape varieties. The pinots are not as good as Oregon pinots which are world famous, as are now if not then, Tasmanian pinots. In Seattle we come across another feature that we have adopted; that monument to cut-price capitalism, the factory outlet, where prices for quality shoes and runners, Reebok, Nike, Rockport, are less than half those of Stanley Market in Hong Kong itself, that barren rock that cut-price capitalism turned into a mighty city.



We find the dark side of Seattle in a newspaper article. For alleged health reasons, the Mayor of Seattle ordered the clearance of a squatters' district, 'The Jungle' as the locals called it. He sent bulldozers in to flatten the shanties and lean-tos in which about 1,000 people had been living. They couldn't afford anything grander. 'Where will they go?' a reporter asked the Mayor. 'Ain't my problem. I got me my job to do, is all.'

We found out where they went. They camped on the street corners in Seattle, in Pike Place Market, in Spring Street where our hotel and the rich tourists are, in First Street, down by the waterfront. They stood, or sat, or lay on the street, their placards reading: 'No home. No job. Two children to support.' They stood or sat or lay patiently, with hopeless eyes and hopeful hands. Canada had its fair share of beggars, many no doubt panhandlers like my pretty French Canadian – that's another story for another day – while some were no doubt genuine. In USA, and particularly in Seattle, and later in San Francisco as I shall be relating, most were genuine. Their eyes said so.

We are to spend a few days in San Francisco with Eddie, Catherine's nephew, then we part, me back to Australia, Catherine to Toronto to visit her mother. On the spur of the moment, we decide to go via Yosemite, thus adding some considerable distance to our schedule. Make that one clear day in San Francisco. Doubting that the compact Mitsubishi we have been using so far isn't up to this speeded schedule, I swap it for a Pontiac. A wise decision as it turned out.

We leave after lunch to overnight at Castle Rock. The drive has some picturesque features: some nice lakes, except they are crowded with screaming power-boats. Castle Rock itself has little of interest, the Castle Rock motel of even less interest, as is the Mexican dinner in a nearby restaurant. The only thing of interest in fact is our waitress, who looks like Miss Tijuana 1994.

We detour to Mt. St Helens: there it is with half it's side blown away. That happened



at 8:32 Sunday morning, May 18, 1980, the north face collapsing in a massive rock debris avalanche. 57 people and 7,000 large animals – bear, elk, moose – were killed. It looks peaceful now, but the volcano is dormant and could go up

again any time. There is a trade in ash artefacts – Catherine bought this lovely wolf lady.



We lunch with the mountain watching us, and then drive to Astoria and follow the road via the Oregon Coast, which we have heard is so picturesque. But it is boring at first, all main road and towns, the most interesting thing a 'thirties fire engine. Things improve from

Wheeler, but I have to say it is a shy coast; the Old Coast Road in Victoria is similar but more dramatic.



We overnight at Newport, where it is 60 degrees Fahrenheit but the wind is freezing; as cold as Hobart is at a similar 16 degrees C when a southerly buster belts you around the ears. Our guide book says tells that Newport has charming old shops and restaurants and good accommodation. Our B&B of choice is old, said to have sea views. It has, if you climb a funny old watch tower, perhaps like the widow's walk in Canadian houses (where the wife watches and waits for her seafaring husband to come home).

Jan, our landlady, describes herself as an 'ex-schoolmarm'. The lounge room shelves have several books and issue of a magazine called *UTNE*, containing articles on

Machiavelli, new gods, S&M and cross-dressing, suggesting that Jan might be a schoolmarm with interesting ideas about discipline. We flee those possibilities to have dinner at the *Whaler's Rest*, a restaurant on the water front, which is justifiably crowded in view of the fabulous seafood. On our return, we learn the rules of guest houses when more than one party is staying there: first in bags the TV. We retire early to our room.



We revisit the waterfront next morning. It is very picturesque, with nice murals along warehouse walls. The coast from here on is more interesting. Seal Coast has wide beaches, rather like the area before and after The Twelve Apostles. We stop at the Devil's Churn, where we have a superb espresso coffee at a little stall. Maybe the trees aren't Australian, but the rest could be.

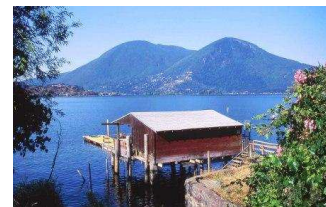


Brookings is an uninteresting place on the Oregon/Californian border. I am on the alert for some beautiful old houses I remember seeing from a Greyhound bus when I travelled in these parts in 1979. Crescent City? No, must be Eureka then. Yes it is, but Eureka fifteen years on is huge and sprawling, but it is late, there is a traffic jam, and we have to bypass it. We see those houses in the distance, but at least I now know where those splendid old wooden houses are.



We are travelling at high speed, with an urgent agenda: Willetts is our target for tonight, if we are to make Yosemite tomorrow. So Redwood, Redway, Gamberville, and splendid stands of sequoias speed past in an intriguing, regretful blur. We find a good motel, and an excellent Japanese restaurant with a very nice table in the garden. The waitress is so thin she must be a rice grain away from death, yet she is ebulliently happy and serves us with a brilliant smile.

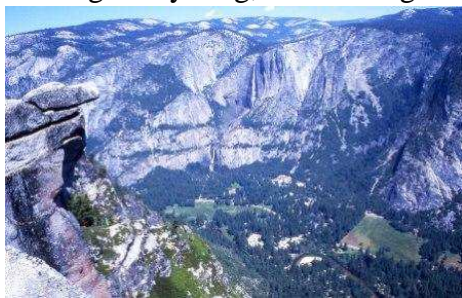
Early next morning we turn east to Route 5, across Williams Lake, a beautiful place, with lovely houses beside the lake, and splendid flowers. Soon after, the countryside is harsh, flat and brown. Sacramento is the capital of California and an old place of note, but we



have to bypass it at high speed. Thence to Yosemite via Route 148; dramatic, steep brown hills rear up like startled mustangs as we race past and soon we are in the Merced Valley. Our hotel is just outside Yosemite National Park, right beside the Merced River. On a balcony just above the river, we have dinner helped down with a

terrific Californian zinfandel, that oddball grape that Californians know what to do with but few Australian winemakers do (Cape Mentelle excepted).

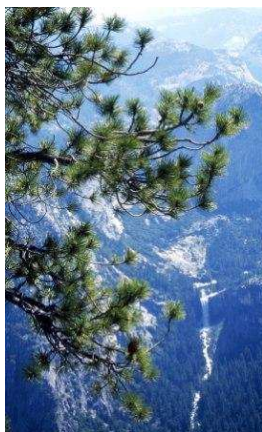
We spend the next morning cramming Yosemite into a few hours. We do the valley floor then it's up to Glacier Point and on to visit the Valley of the Giants. Glacier is 16 miles out of town and I think we have plenty of petrol. The drive is fantastic, lots of wild flowers out. Then, suddenly, the petrol gauge drops to zero and the warning light signals trouble. I decide to go ahead anyway. To turn back would mean losing everything, and I thought the car must have a reserve. We proceed in a state of



high anxiety. Glacier point is magnificent, the air couldn't be clearer. I had walked here from the Valley floor 20 years ago, and had quite forgotten just how magnificent the view is. You can see the whole shape of the Valley, the town an airplane drop below, the curved rim and its series of falls framed on the left by Half Dome. But to more

urgent matters, I ask a ranger where is the nearest gas station. Mariposa, he informs me. With higher anxiety, and cruising in neutral where possible, we reach Mariposa. It turns out the fuel gauge and lights were completely wrong; we had gallons still left but by this time it is too late to see the Valley of the Giants. I'll have to settle for the different giants in our

Styx Valley, if Forestry Tasmanian would only just *leave them alone*.



The tank filled, we proceed with all haste to San Francisco. A terrible shame, for there is much to photograph. One sight outside Livermore intrigued me: a vast wind farm of three-armed crucifixes, thousands of them along the hill tops, turning gracefully to green California long before we'd

thought of doing it...

We are staying at a downtown hotel run by Eddie, Catherine's entrepreneurial nephew: he runs the hotel, several kindergartens, and is a part-time actor. After checking in, we seal a busy, nerve-racking and visually sumptuous day with an equally sumptuous but definitely not nerve-racking dinner of excellent duck and



Eddie Tang

salmon, with a Clos du Bois merlot. It is the best meal we have had this trip: *Café Mozart*, 708 Bush Street, if you happen to be that way when next in SF.

We have but a day to take a cruise to the artists colony of Sausalito, passing Alcatraz on the way. Eddie whisks us off to more cut-price capitalism at a factory outlet on the way to the Napa Valley, thence to wineries Beringer, in a fabulous castle and a huge Viognier at \$10 a taste, Chandon which specialises in bubbly, and Franciscan where you discover how small you are by sitting in their giant-sized garden seat.

Eddie drives Catherine to the airport in the morning. My flight not being until late that



night, I walk around the downtown area. Grace Cathedral on Nob Hill is impressive. Inside, the choir is rehearsing a Bach motet while outside some Chinese students are practising a lion dance, a metaphor for Catherine and I perhaps.



Wandering back to the hotel via Chinatown, I am shocked, as I was in Seattle, at the number of beggars. One guy, who seems healthy enough, is holding a placard: 'I have AIDS and a wife and children to support.' Is it a scam? What do you do about that? What *could* you do that would change anything?

I ponder these questions over a beef wellington at *Café Claude*, with a glass of Qupe syrah, as they call shiraz, followed by a glass of Storr's zinfandel, which is fragrant, complex, and more interesting than the syrah. I am sure the man with putative AIDS would like to know that. Well fed, and happy with my explorations of Californian wine, I walk back to the hotel to collect my stuff and head for the airport. On the way I notice three different lots of beggars rummage in rubbish bins, seeking succulent scraps, which they promptly eat.

Something is wrong with the USA and its priorities – and no doubt some would say with my priorities too.

