



United States CALIFORNIA DREAMING

James Mason takes off from the beaten track to fulfill a long-held wish to explore some stunning scenery and great golf



Northern California has some of the world's most acclaimed courses, such as Pebble Beach, Cypress Point, Olympic Club and Spanish Bay. But I have always wanted to explore its lesser-known tracks, so I planned a 12-day trip off the beaten track in which I could play 19 layouts. It started with a 7am tee time at the Ocean Course at Half Moon Bay...

I was first out and two-and-three-quarter hours later I was holing out on the stunning clifftop 18th green part of the famed finishing stretch of holes from the 16th. The changes in elevation offer some great views of the ocean and all of the par 3s are strong.

Harding Park hosted the Presidents Cup in 2009 – perhaps appropriately as this course, was named after President Warren Harding. Strategy is key here and if you're on the wrong part of the fairway you'll have some tough shots into very narrow target areas.

Until 1996 you could only play Presidio if you were in the armed forces or a guest of someone who was. The original course was designed in 1895 and has had several re-designs since. This is one of the most beautiful courses I've played.

Standing on the elevated 1st tee at

Wente Vineyard, I was filled with a sense of awe. The contrast between the brown surrounding hills and lush green fairways sends a shudder down my spine. The vistas all around show off the beauty of the area, and it's jaw-dropping stuff. It's another course where all of the par 3s are well-designed, and apart from the 3rd, have elevated tees.

Dr Alistair Mackenzie carved the nine-hole beauty that is Northwood through the tall redwoods for, it is said, the living presidents of the US to play when they got together nearby for their annual pow-wow.

If I was going to build a nine-hole course this is exactly how I'd want it to be. You have to make sure you're in the right areas to give yourself a shot at the green – and what beautiful greens they are. The dampness from the fog lay above those majestic reds, making the greens so bright and lush, the colour is so vibrant.

If you took the route I did from Northwood, you end up on a beautiful coastal road leading down to Bodega Bay. This is where part of Hitchcock's *The Birds* was filmed, and I must admit I feel like screaming myself while playing the stunning Links at Bodega Bay. There are some

spectacular views, none more so than when you're standing on the 5th tee overlooking the 4th green and looking out to the Pacific Ocean and Bodega Bay. But that beauty has been somewhat tarnished by the properties that line 11 of the holes, sometimes claustrophobically so.

Adobe Creek is a good design with plenty of mounding along the sides of the fairways, which frame each of the holes. I really enjoyed the back nine with its great views of the hills that surround the city.

Windsor is so tough that two of the holes, the 2nd and 7th, were ranked in the top 10 toughest on the Nike Tour and they moved the tees up on the 432-yard 2nd because it was too hard for the pros from the tips!

I would very much recommend you play Sonoma if you're out here. Sam Whiting, who lists the Olympic Club among his many achievements, designed it. I'm standing on the first tee while the starter runs through a few details about how the front nine runs round the outside of the course and the back nine runs inside, just in case I get lost along the way. But it's like white noise – I'm looking down the fairway thinking: wow, that is beautiful. I just want to hit my ball.

When he lets me loose I pull out the driver and the impact echoes through the trees. I love that sound. The ball sails down the fairway and I'm off. I feel like a kid at Christmas. I just want to get out there, it looks so immaculate. There must be at least two people looking after every hole, or at least it feels that way. Later on I see guys heading out to fill divots. I thought Windsor was in great condition, but Sonoma takes it up another level.

There are two courses at Silverado. I play the North course and I've never seen holes cut so sharp, not even when I played in good amateur golf tournaments. They have machines that rake the bunkers; machines to blow leaves off the cart paths.

A 25-minute drive from Silverado is the Arnold Palmer-designed Hiddenbrooke, rated in the top five of public golf courses in the US. There are some fantastic par 3s here, none more so than the 151-yard 13th from an elevated tee across a valley. It's an even better hole from the very back tee, but they have closed that down now due to the effort it took to get a mower up there and maintain it. But do go and have a look.

At 7am on the seventh day was a breathtaking moment as I step onto the first tee at Chardonnay. The sun is still rising and the mist lies low on the ground. With the course meandering through the vineyards of Napa, the colours were perfect: the green of the leaves, brown of the trees and early-morning orange of the rising sun. It was one of Mother Nature's special moments.

Like most courses in this part of the world you're going to need a buggy and you'll find

most green fees do include the buggy hire. There is a lot of walking between holes.

Greenhorn Creek has the 'Caddyshack' that sleeps up to 12 with its own barbecue area, living room and kitchen. The course sits in the Sierra foothills and you will see lots of evidence of 'grinding rocks' which were used by the Miwuk Indians. There are also lots of reminders of the rock mines that used to be in the area. Both leave their unique mark on this beautiful little track.

What a stunning design the track at Saddle Creek Resort is. The course opened for play in 1996 and has already racked up plenty of awards. It has sensational views from some well-designed elevated tees, and add numerous lakes and creeks it becomes not only a great design but also a challenging course.

Stevinson Ranch has been voted No1 Quality Course in California and No3 in the United States, and No1 Best Conditions in California. It is somewhat remote but you'd be glad you made the journey.

Bayonet sits on the site of Fort Ord and was designed by General Robert B McClure. It is named after the Army's 7th Infantry Division, the first unit to occupy Fort Ord, and nicknamed the 'Bayonet Division'. Like Presidio in downtown San Francisco it's now open to the public. Its greens are probably the best I've putted on. They are fast and true – but the wrong speed or read will see you struggling not to four-putt. The motto of the 7th Infantry Division was 'Light, Silent and Deadly' and these greens have kept that motto alive.

Carmel Valley Ranch is a terrific venue and, as with most Pete Dye courses, a tough test of golf. Five minutes down the road is Quail Lodge. This is the place that Bobby Clampett grew up on and where Doris Day's beautiful home looks down on the 17th green and 18th tee. When tournaments were played at Pebble Beach 1960s and 70s a lot of the top pros used to stay and practise at Quail Lodge.

Pacific Grove Golf Links may be known locally as 'the poor man's Pebble Beach' but the only relationship it shares with that course is that some holes run along the Pacific Ocean. If you don't get one of the early tee times you could be in for a long day similar to the five-hour rounds that go on at Pebble. The bonus here is that you're not paying the \$500 Pebble Beach charge!

It's not the longest course but it's fun and this is the reaction from most people when you talk about the track. You'll hear so many times when you are in the States that the course is based on a Scottish links, and when you get out there you find that they are not like a links course at all. But the back nine and especially the run of holes from the 11th to 16th do resemble the links holes you'd find in Britain and Ireland. ■

ESSENTIALS

i VISIT CALIFORNIA
W: visitcalifornia.co.uk

STAY
Half Moon Bay Lodge

W: halfmoonbaylodge.com

Stanford Court Hotel

W: marriott.com

Inn Above Tide

W: innabovetide.com

Bodega Bay Lodge

W: bodegabaylodge.com

Hampton Inn & Suites

W: hamptoninn3.hilton.com

Meritage

W: themeritageresort.com

Citizen Hotel

W: jdvhoteles.com

Greenhorn Creek Resort (W: See below)

Saddle Creek Resort (W: See below)

Stevinson Ranch (W: See below)

Sanctuary Beach Resort

W: thesanctuarybeachresort.com

Gosby House Inn

W: gosbyhouseinn.com

PLAY
Stevinson Ranch GC

W: stevinsonranch.com

Greenhorn Creek GC

W: greenhorncreek.com

Bayonet GC

W: bayonetblackhorse.com

Saddle Creek GC

W: saddlecreek.com

Carmel Valley Ranch GC

W: carmelvalleyranch.com

Quail Lodge GC

W: quailodge.com

Pacific Grove Golf Links

W: pggolfinks.com

Silverado (North)

W: silveradoresort.com

Ocean Course At Half Moon Bay

W: halfmoonbaygolf.com

Links At Bodega Harbour

W: bodegaharbourgolf.com

Hiddenbrooke GC

W: hiddenbrookegolf.com

TPC Harding Park GC

W: tpc.com/tpc-harding-park

Adobe Creek GC

W: adobecreek.com

Chardonnay GC

W: chardonnaygolfclub.com

Presidio GC

W: presidiojgolf.com

Windsor GC

W: windsorgolf.com

Course at Wente Vineyards

W: wentevineyards.com

Sonoma GC

W: sonomagolfclub.com

Northwood GC

W: northwoodgolf.com