

# California

I was born and raised in California and rarely recognize that in many ways it is unique, in particular because there are many Californias.

From the immigrant perspective, all non-indigenous residents of California (and all other states of the USA) are technically immigrants or the descendants of immigrants.

California was the home of many tribes of indigenous people at the time it was “discovered” by the Spanish in 1542. The Spanish colonized the coast of California as far north as modern San Francisco. In 1821 Mexico won independence from Spain; Baja California and Alta California became territories of the nation of Mexico (formally the United Mexican States), and the Spanish residents became known to foreigners as “Mexicans.” In 1848 the Territory of Alta California was sold to the United States as a condition of the treaty ending the Mexican-American War. In 1850 California became a state of the USA.

Geographically, California is located on the Pacific coast of North America, It is the third largest state in the USA with almost 164 thousand square miles (Alaska has 665 thousand while Texas has 268 thousand).

It contains mountains, grasslands, deserts, rivers, and beaches. It contains the highest and lowest spots in the “Lower 48”: Mt. Whitney (14,505 feet above sea level) and Badwater Basin in Death Valley (282 feet below sea level); these two locations are 94 miles apart. Mt. Whitney gazes easterly across the Owens Valley at White Mountain Peak (14,252 feet above sea level), the second highest spot. There are a total of four mountains higher than 14,000 feet.

**Mountains.** There are a number of significant mountain ranges. Primary is the Sierra Nevada Mountains, these are located on the eastern side of the state, run north-south, and extend 400 miles north from Mt. Whitney to the southern end of the Cascade Range at Mt Lassen. The range has an average height of about 10,500 feet. Many of the Cascades mountains are volcanoes. The most recent eruption was Mount St. Helens in southern Washington in 1980. Previously Mt. Lassen erupted from 1915 to 1921. Mt. Shasta, which sits at the northern end of California’s central valley is a potentially active volcano, it has an elevation of 14,179 feet and is believed to have last erupted in 1786.

The second principal ranges are the Coast Ranges, these span 400 miles from Del Norte or Humboldt County south to Santa Barbara County. The Northern Coast Ranges run parallel to the Pacific Coast from the North San Francisco Bay Area to coastal Del Norte County. The Klamath Mountains, including the Siskiyou Mountains sub-range, lie to the north and northeast. The Southern Coast Ranges run north and south, parallel to the Pacific Coast in north-central through north-southern California; they begin on the San Francisco Peninsula and in the East San Francisco Bay Area, and run south into Santa Barbara County.

**Roads.** California’s scenery is perhaps its biggest attraction. It is best experienced by car. One can drive the length of the state in two long days. One can drive the width of the state in one full day. Along the way you will see the seemingly endless variety of land and plants. These drives are made possible by a system of well-maintained roads: California state highways, US highways, and Interstate highways. In places, some roads have a 25 miles-per-hour (MPH) speed limit while others can be safely driven at 70 MPH (or more). Most roads are well-signed for hazards and speed limits.

**Plant life.** Botanically, California is gold. The California Floristic Province, a geographical area that covers most of California and portions of neighboring Oregon, Nevada, and Baja California (Mexico), is

regarded as a “world hotspot” of biodiversity. It has been estimated that California is home to 4,693 native species and 1,169 native subspecies or varieties, including 1,416 endemic species. A 2001 study by the California Native Plant Society estimated 6,300 native plants.

The USDA defines eleven zones of plant hardiness; California hosts zones 5 through 11. The *Sunset Western Garden Book* identifies 24 climate zones, 20 of which are found in California.

California is home to some of the world's most exceptional trees: the tallest (coast redwood, *Sequoia sempervirens*), most massive (giant sequoia, *Sequoiadendron giganteum*), and oldest (bristlecone pine, *Pinus longaeva*). Many coast redwoods exceed 400 feet in height, have a diameter greater than 20 feet, and are older than 1,200 years. Giant sequoias grow to an average height of 164–279 feet and 20–26 feet in diameter; the oldest is 3,500 years old. A specimen bristlecone pine in the White Mountains is 5,066 years old.

**Wildlife.** Many wildlife survived the European immigrants. California is home to large carnivores like the wolf, coyote, mountain lion, bobcat, and brown bear; the grizzly bear was hunted to extinction in the late 1800s. There are elk, deer, pronghorn (technically not an antelope), and the occasional moose. And a multitude of smaller mammals. There are also 665 bird species, including birds of prey (hawks, eagles, kites, vultures, osprey), owls, gamebirds, water fowl, etc.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_birds\\_of\\_California](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_birds_of_California) has a list of the species.

**Rivers.** Few rivers have eluded the Army Corps of Engineers in their determination to build dams for hydroelectric generation and water storage. There are few natural lakes. There is one river—the Sacramento River—that runs mostly free from a dam near its source near Mount Shasta some 400 miles south to the San Francisco Bay. The dam is Shasta Dam. The city of Sacramento, in the central valley, is technically a port, as there is a ship channel (the Sacramento River Deep Water Ship Channel) paralleling the river between the San Francisco Bay and the city.

**Cities.** California is home to two iconic cities: San Francisco and Los Angeles. The state capital is Sacramento.

**Sightseeing.** With such size and diversity, any list of “must see” places is both a work in progress and subject to disagreement. I recommend you see:

- A Southern California desert like Joshua Tree National Park.
- A Southern California beach like Newport Beach.
- A remote coastal range like Big Sur.
- A Northern California forest of coastal redwoods like Muir Woods National Monument and Redwood National Park.
- A Northern California slow drive through a coastal redwood forest on the Avenue of the Giants.
- A Northern California beach like Sonoma Coast State Park beaches at Salmon Creek and Goat Rock.
- A Sierra Nevada masterpiece like Yosemite National Park.
- The Sierra Escarpment from along US Highway 395 near Lee Vining and Mono Lake.
- A volcanic hydrothermal area like Bumpass Hell at Lassen Volcanic National Park.
- A drive through the Central Valley like along Interstate 5 between Sacramento and Lake Shasta.
- An oak savanna like the headwaters area of Yulupa Creek in Annadel State Park, between Santa Rosa and Kenwood (this area is cited as one of the best remaining examples of California oak savanna).

**Natural disasters.** California is subject to an abundance of natural disasters:

- Wildfire. This is common in dry mountainous areas in the fall.

- Mudslides. These are common in the winter in areas that were previously subject to wildfire.
- Floods. An exceptionally wet winter can cause flooding, in many places.
- Droughts. Water is an endless issue. Too much and too little. Drought seems to be a regular occurrence throughout the state. California is largely considered to have a Mediterranean climate in that it “only” rains in the winter. Some years it rarely rains.
- Earthquakes. Oh yes, we have lots of earthquake fault lines and earthquakes. Few quakes are destructive, but we all live in fear of the next “big one.”
- Volcanic eruptions. There are eight volcanoes; more than 500 volcanic vents have been identified in the state.
- Sand storms. Southern California experiences every November-ish and early winter the westerly hot dry winds that originate in the eastern Mojave Desert and blow to the Pacific Ocean; these are locally called “Santa Anas”. They contain lots of sand. These limit travel, at the least. They bring warm-to-hot weather at a time that has become cool, thus cheering up the locals.

**Color.** The rainfall pattern controls the color of the grasslands. During the rainy winter, the grasslands are green. The grasslands turn gold-colored beginning three weeks after the last rain and remain that color until the next rainy season is well underway.

When I was a child, there was a joke that my parents taught me: keep California green, bring money.