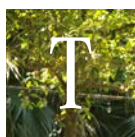


Open road

ON A ROAD TRIP across southern America, Sarah Lewis soaks up endless desert scenes, modern marvels in Palm Springs and the dining highlights of Austin, Las Vegas and New Orleans.



A GRAND SCALE
Hiking across Plateau Point
on the Bright Angel Trail,
Grand Canyon National
Park, Arizona



he great American road trip – it's been immortalised in countless books and films, made famous by names such as Jack Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson and Clark Griswold. And now we're here to chart our own little path across the land, crossing seven states of southern USA, from New Orleans to Palm Springs, via seemingly endless stretches of desert and grand natural monuments.

We kick off our trip in New Orleans, soaking up the colonial-chic French Quarter, and the vibrant jazz hub of Frenchmen Street. Today, you have to look hard to find the marks left by Hurricane Katrina. The French Quarter has been restored to its former glory: ornate heritage buildings boast brightly painted shutters and original gas lanterns that flicker by night. In the leafy Garden District, stately two-storey plantation homes line the streets, joined by antique stores, refined restaurants, and those striking above-ground cemeteries with their soul-stirring mausoleums.

Our first night sees us straight down to Bourbon Street, the brash home of Mardi Gras, voodoo shops and bucket-sized daiquiris. Live music bars fill the strip, but it's the streets fanning off this main artery that hold the most appeal. Here there's a mix of the old guard and fresh faces. Elegant bistros, such as Arnaud's, Galatoire's and Broussard's, have been serving rich Creole dishes and classic cocktails since the early 1920s, offering a fascinating snapshot into the New Orleans of the past.

That sense of history is palatable throughout the city. We sip Sazeracs in the art deco bar of the same name at the Roosevelt Hotel, where the cocktail was created in the 1800s. And we catch a performance by drumming master Herlin Riley at Snug Harbor, an intimate jazz club that's called Frenchmen Street home for more than 30 years.

The barbecue capital

From New Orleans, we drive through Louisiana into Texas, arriving in Austin eight hours later. Make no mistake: our main reason for visiting Austin is to eat. Over two days we cram in a week's worth of food, from breakfast tacos at Veracruz All Natural, to strawberry shortcake doughnuts at Gourdeough's, and an inventive multi-course meal at Qui.

But the real culinary high point comes when we venture 30 minutes south to Lockhart, the barbecue capital of Texas. We can smell this dusty town long before we see it, with the aroma of smoke and charred meats hanging in the air. Barbecue doesn't come more authentic than Smitty's Market. I step inside a dark warehouse and almost directly into the open fire pit that's heating the giant smoker. Fall-apart pork ribs, beef brisket and sausages are sliced to order, then piled onto sheets of brown paper and wrapped up like a Christmas gift. We nab a seat at a communal table in

below (left to right):

Commander's Palace,
New Orleans

Beef brisket and pork ribs
from Smitty's

The giant smoker at
Smitty's Market, Texas

facing page (left to right):

The French Quarter,
New Orleans

Miss Shortcake doughnut
from Gourdeough's, Austin
Blake's Lotaburger,
Albuquerque



Jackson Square
and St Louis
Cathedral,
New Orleans





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It's on this single-lane highway that we cross first into Arizona, then into Utah, steering through tumbleweeds and waves of red sand.

The Mittens,
Monument Valley

the adjoining dining hall, splash homemade barbecue sauce over everything, and then fall into a meaty mess – there's no fork, just a plastic knife and metres of paper towel.

The college hub of Austin is also America's live music capital, so you're never short of entertainment. Seek out the honky tonk saloons of the Red River District, or time a visit for one of the city's music festivals, such as SXSW or Austin City Limits. For a retail fix, buy bespoke cowboy boots and antique wares at the shops lining South Congress Avenue, or browse the chic boutiques of Second Street. One of Austin's more curious attractions is the nightly gathering on the riverfront to watch up to 1.5 million bats emerge from the Congress

Avenue Bridge each night. It certainly lives up to the city's credo to 'Keep Austin Weird'.

Into the desert

At this point we cheat a little, boarding a flight from Austin to Albuquerque. There's 1200 kilometres between the two cities, and the landscapes couldn't be more different. We spy our first tumbleweed within half an hour of hitting the road. Soon after, we're in the midst of a dust storm, and visibility drops to 20 metres – so much for photographing the desert landscapes.

Before we turn onto Route 550, however, our first pitstop is Blake's Lotaburger, a no-frills diner on the outskirts of town, where we dine

on cheeseburgers topped with jalapenos. We briefly debate making a detour to Walter White's house from *Breaking Bad*, but instead charge on towards Monument Valley, eager to make it to the rust-red Colorado Plateau before sunset.

It's on this single-lane highway that we cross first into Arizona, then into Utah, steering through tumbleweeds and waves of red sand, snapping blurry monoliths out the window. We pull into the View Hotel in Monument Valley with minutes to spare, setting up our tripod in the carpark to catch the sun as it falls behind the majestic Mittens, so named because they resemble thumb gloves.

Set in the Navajo Nation Tribal Park, the View Hotel blends seamlessly with the arid

environment, and makes the most of its prime position in the heart of Monument Valley. The Indian reserve is a dry (alcohol-free) zone, but the quiet night suits us just fine as we're up at 5.45am to catch the sunrise over the valley. After breakfast, we bundle into the 4WD for the drive around the Tribal Park. The 27-kilometre trip takes in the legendary sandstone buttes of the Totem Poles and Artist's Point. And although the park is open to all comers, it soon becomes clear this is SUV territory: within minutes we're helping push a sedan out of the soft sand.

Canyons great and small

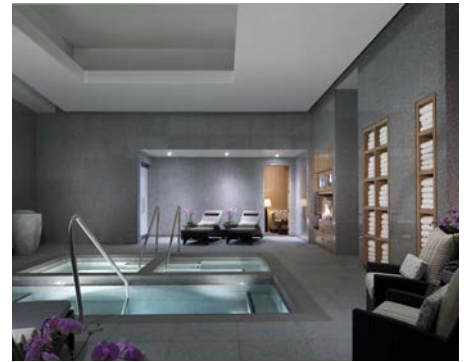
Having safely navigated the off-road route, we're back on the highway and heading towards Page, Arizona. Two hours through the blush-pink desert brings us to Lower Antelope Canyon, a little-known natural wonder in a land of grand scenes. Forged by centuries of flash flooding, the kilometre-long slot canyon is a series of striking, multi-hued sandstone chasms. As we squeeze between gaps in the walls, our Navajo guide points out animal shapes in the rock formations. It's breathtakingly beautiful.

below (left to right):

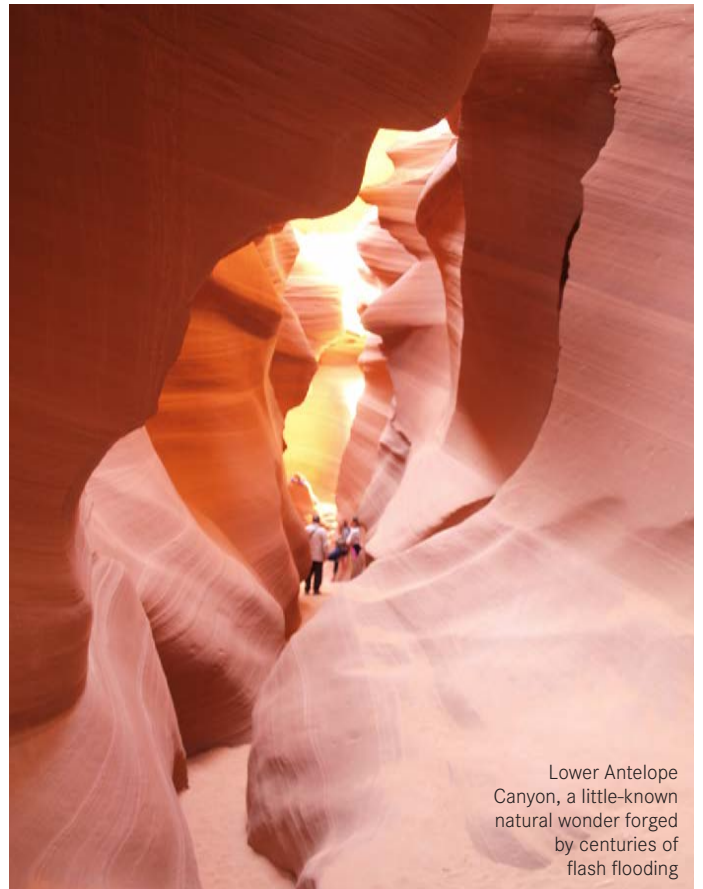
Picasso Restaurant, Las Vegas
Mandarin Terrace, Las Vegas
The Aria Spa, Las Vegas

facing page (left to right):

Mid-century Modern
architecture in Palm Springs
The Westin Mission Hills
Golf Resort and Spa,
Rancho Mirage



The Colorado River,
from Plateau Point in
the Grand Canyon



Lower Antelope
Canyon, a little-known
natural wonder forged
by centuries of
flash flooding



And it's in stark contrast to the canyon we're tackling the next day... We drive on to the El Tovar Lodge at the Grand Canyon National Park, avoiding curious deer in the muted dusk light. At 6am, we set off on our Grand Canyon hike down the Bright Angel Trail. It's a 20-kilometre round-trip to Plateau Point, overlooking the Colorado River. Even though we've trained for this walk, it's by far the most strenuous thing I've ever done. At various points I consider calling for emergency evacuation via mule (the only way, other than walking, to get back to the top), but the shame of it keeps me putting one foot in front of the other.

After seven hours of dust, sweat and tantrums, the luxury of Las Vegas can't come soon enough. We skip historic Route 66 in favour of the much speedier freeway, throwing in a quick detour to marvel at the Hoover Dam.

Bright lights

The lights of Las Vegas begin to twinkle as we pull into the strip. Here we split our time between Aria Resort & Casino and the Mandarin Oriental, neighbouring hotels that couldn't be more different. While Aria delivers a hedonistic hit list of gaming, shows and sleek eateries, the whisper-quiet Mandarin Oriental is one of the few hotels in town that isn't connected to a casino.

As indulgence is the order of the day, we kick off with dinner at Picasso Restaurant in the Bellagio Resort. Overlooking the resort's nightly water show, this lavish dining room is lined with original Picasso masterpieces, and boasts a world-class wine list of 1500 vintages. After a sublime meal of oysters and seared venison, we stroll back through the casino, before sinking into our luxurious king-size bed at Aria.

I'm up bright and early for a massage at the Aria Spa, where a nimble masseuse walks across my back for an hour of excruciating bliss. Then it's time to hit Carnevino, Mario Batali's much-lauded steak house in the Venetian. This is masculine dining at its best, with hefty dry-aged steaks and big, bold red wines. No trip to Vegas would be complete without taking in a show, however, so we prise ourselves from the club chairs to catch Cirque Du Soleil's jaw-dropping *Zarkana* performance.

Desert diva

From Vegas, it's a four-hour drive through the Mojave Desert to Palm Springs, our final destination. The journey takes us past abandoned casino towns, vast outlet malls, snow-capped peaks and sprawling wind farms, before arriving in the lush hub of Palm Springs. The one-time playground of Frank Sinatra, Cary Grant and Marilyn Monroe, this quirky town still clings to that sense of decadence.

Fans of mid-century modernist architecture will go mad for the low-slung marvels on every street, crafted by architectural heavyweights such as A. Quincy Jones and Albert Frey. We pick up a map from the Palm Springs Visitors Centre (itself a Modern icon), then take ourselves on a self-guided tour of the town, feeling slightly stalker-like as we snap private homes from the street.

Beyond those stylish abodes, the Design District of North Palm Canyon Drive beckons, lined with cutting-edge art galleries, gift shops and vintage fashion stores. Golf is also a major draw card here, with more than 120 courses dotted across the region. The Westin Mission Hills Golf Resort and Spa in Rancho Mirage offers a choice of two courses designed by Pete Dye and Gary Player.

The sprawling Spanish-style retreat also houses a host of pampering facilities, including relaxed restaurants, a day spa with outdoor jacuzzi, and a trio of swimming pools. We spend the day poolside, soaking up the sun and sipping the resort's signature Caliente margaritas, made with grapefruits from the onsite grove.

We venture out for an evening at Melvyn's, a delightfully old-school dining room at the Ingleside Inn. It was a Rat Pack favourite in the 1950s, and decades on much of the decor, menu and waitstaff remain unchanged. A tuxedoed man in his seventies prepares steak au poivre at our table, liberally sloshing in the Cognac. After dinner, we retire to the lounge to watch glamorous locals shimmy across the dance floor. En route to LAX the next day, we stop at the Desert Hills Premium Outlets mall, 40 minutes out of Palm Springs, for a spree on cut-price Coach, Kate Spade and Hugo Boss. Our last port of call is In-N-Out burger for one final American indulgence. Over cheeseburgers and fries, we do the calculations: that's seven states, 3500 kilometres, and a whole lot of calories, making for a memorable experience that will stay with us (quite literally) for years. <



Road trip highlights...

Where to eat, drink and stay along the way.



Aria Hotel

FOR AN ALL-IN-ONE Vegas experience, check in to Aria Resort & Casino, home to 4004 guest rooms, 568 luxury suites and a sprawling gaming floor. Feeling flush? Pop next door to shopping hub Crystals for your fill of luxury labels, such as Bally and Bulgari, Pucci and Gucci. ARIA.COM



The Mod squad

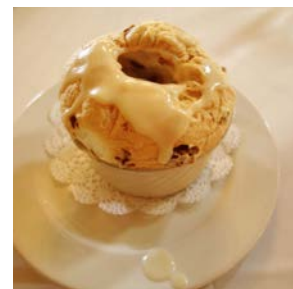
FOR A SELF-GUIDED tour of the town's mid-century marvels, download the Palm Springs Modern Committee's handy app and buy a map from the Palm Springs Visitors Centre (left).

VISITPALMSPRINGS.COM
PSMODCOM.ORG

Commander's Palace

BRUNCH IS an institution in New Orleans. During the week, linger over 25 cent martinis at Commander's Palace, or visit on the weekend when a roaming brass band serenades you as you dine on Creole classics, such as turtle soup, and bread-and-butter soufflé (right).

COMMANDERSPALACE.COM



The View Hotel

AT THIS BOUTIQUE retreat in the heart of Monument Valley, local chefs dish up authentic Navajo fare, including mild chicken and green chilli stew, and *posole*, a pork and maize soup flavoured with red chilli and lime. There's also a handful of tongue-in-cheek American favourites, such as the Clint Eastwood fried chicken and John Wayne burger, so named for the Hollywood stars who left their mark on this rugged region.

MONUMENTVALLEYVIEW.COM



Mandarin Oriental

FOR REFINED RESPITE in Las Vegas, seek out the elegant surrounds of the Mandarin Oriental. This Sino-sleek beauty offers contemporary rooms, a view-blessed bar and the chichi Tea Lounge, where you can detox with rejuvenating pu-erh and oolong brews, or retox with the Tea-tini of bourbon, jasmine tea, apple juice and agave nectar. MANDARINORIENTAL.COM/LASVEGAS



Workshop Kitchen & Bar

AN INDUSTRIAL-CHIC eatery in the design district of Palm Springs, Workshop Kitchen & Bar's farm-to-table ethos is writ large across the menu, with produce largely sourced from the surrounding Coachella Valley. For brunch, enjoy bottomless mimosas, lobster burritos or huevos rancheros topped with a fried duck egg.

WORKSHOPPALMSPRINGS.COM



The Westin Mission Hills

Caliente Margarita

45ml jalapeno tequila
(infuse your favourite tequila with fresh jalapeno peppers)
200ml freshly squeezed grapefruit juice
30ml triple sec liqueur
Salt

Mix all spirits and juice in a cocktail shaker with ice.

Dip the rim of a martini glass in salt, then strain the mixture into the glass.

WESTINMISSIONHILLS.COM

Po'boys in New Orleans

A CRUSTY BAGUETTE filled with fried seafood or roast beef, the po'boy is a New Orleans staple. Take your pick of the mod offerings at Killer Po'Boys, crammed with five-spice meatloaf or sticky pork belly, or the authentic catfish and oyster versions at Liuzza's by the Track (below).

KILLERPOBOYS.COM
LIUZZASNOLA.COM

