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Returning to our Roots

When heeding the call of wide-open spaces becomes a necessity.

By Laysea Hughes
Photography by Travis Burke



Sweaty palms. Blood flowing quickly through our veins. Butterflies blooming in our bellies. We were Yosemite bound. The thought of being suspended thousands of feet over the valley floor, balancing on webbing no thicker than a thumb, began to consume our minds with each passing mile. Since departing sea level, we'd been eastbound for the high desert, redwood forests, and everything in between. We'd set out to put the new rig, our Toyota Tacoma Xtra Cab Limited Edition Four Wheel Camper, to the test on a classic California overlanding expedition.

After each of us spent four years living full-time on the road (Travis in his 1994 Dodge Ram van and me in my 1983 VW Westfalia), we paused our travel-centric lifestyles to explore new avenues of opportunity—city life. They say you never know what you like or dislike until you try it. I felt overwhelmingly confident as I recommitted to the vagabond lifestyle, knowing without a doubt that this was my desired path. At this point, we had each attempted the modern-day routine for roughly one year, and it was around this time we met. Travis had come to the same conclusion that I had, and there was no other comprehensible solution other than to hit the road together. The truck was packed with surfboards, highlines, skateboards, hiking boots, and any other adventure accessories that would fit, including my furry four-legged companion, Koda. Days later, we departed Southern California in search of routes accessible only by 4WD, and summit views only seen by those willing to put in the effort to get there.

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The first hours of our excursion brought us on dusty desert roads which quickly became snow-covered mountain passes approaching the summit of the White Mountains. This desolate lunar landscape is home to some of the oldest trees in the world, the ancient bristlecone pines. After watching the featured educational film—an obligatory first stop upon arriving at any visitor center—we made the drive up to the grove, arriving with just enough time to explore during sunset. In years past, I remember scoffing at the tricked-out campers with all the bells and whistles, whose inhabitants couldn't leave city life truly behind. But as we woke up at our mountainside campsite at 9,000 feet to violent winds and snow flurries, appreciation for being

Taking the long road through Big Sur.
Opening spread: Securing a campsite at sunset in the Alabama Hills.



Clockwise from top right: Exploring the ancient bristlecone pine grove. We stopped for a skate break after departing Pinnacles National Park. Laysea, admiring nature's architecture. Descending the White Mountains via the 4WD track. **Opposite:** We departed camp, headed for Route 395 northbound.



nestled within the resilience of our climate-controlled camper set in. Omitting the lengthy stretch of pavement, we quickly descended a steep 4WD trail en route to our next adventure. Trading favorite tunes, laughing at stand-up comedy, and diving deep into discussions circulating what drives our passion for life filled the air; it felt incredibly natural to be back on the road.

California's Route 395 is one of my favorite stretches of asphalt in the US; the scenery dramatically changes as the highway ascends paralleling the Sierra Nevada. Pastels painted the sky above Mount Whitney as we explored the trails through the iconic Alabama Hills. Sunrise called for a brisk morning run beyond our spacious BLM campsite at the Buttermilk Boulders. Before departing town, we seized the opportunity to reconnect to the outside world, capitalizing on fast WiFi and fresh coffee in Bishop's local town hub. Countless weeks could be spent here, re-exploring some of our favorite coordinates or discovering new spaces entirely.

The sensation of driving up the steep grade of Tioga Pass—being greeted by the golden alpine meadows and cool streams, then slowly descending into the heart of Yosemite National

Park surrounded by towering pine trees and impressive granite walls—produced the feeling of a shift upon arrival. Contrary to what our internet research and trifold brochures stated, the colors of fall vibrantly decorated the valley floor. Our skateboards made a perfect means of transportation for playfully cruising the paths after establishing camp. The first day hiking was spent beyond the top of Vernal Falls to the apex of Nevada Falls, where the John Muir Trail meets the Mist Trail; whether it was intentional, or entirely subconscious, we were postponing our walk in the sky.

Friends had gathered together before dawn at Taft Point to rig highlines over the vacant space in the granite. Each line varied in distance ranging from 50 feet to upward of 300. If you've ever hiked out to visit the exposed cliffs at the point, you know there isn't anything but air between you and the valley floor. The sensation is adrenaline filling even for an experienced hiker. For those unfamiliar, highlining is an extreme sport in which athletes traverse dynamic webbing only an inch wide suspended high above the ground. Participants wear a climbing harness tethered to a leash that is secured to the line in the case of a fall.





While it is an activity made for thrill-seekers, each component of the equipment (harness, leash, and anchors of the line) is redundantly backed up for ultimate safety.

Nothing in the world can prepare you for highlining—no amount of gymnastics, yoga, surfing, skating, or any other orientation of balancing sports can ready your body. Beyond the physical skill, it requires extreme concentration, focus, and determination, blended with an array of breath work and mental strength to delicately center your being.

Before I had the opportunity to scoot out on the highline, I thought I had a reasonable understanding of the necessary procedures in order to successfully walk a line. I was wrong. Highlining is quite certainly the most humbling thing I have ever tried. I dismounted, aching from the whiplash my body sustained after standing, fighting, yet falling time after time. It was the kind of soreness that left me with a sort of painful inspiration to push myself further, to get out there again. This would not be my last attempt; I exhaled a deep, exhausted breath as I told myself I would one day conquer my fears. I stood in awe as I watched Travis approach the line with confidence. Stopping to double-check the anchors, he secured his harness to the leash and received an obligatory buddy check on his knot before proceeding. Though his mouth said he was terrified, his body expressed nothing other than calmness. He mounted the line, stood up effortlessly, and walked its length, pausing in the middle to open his body 90 degrees toward the expansive valley opposing Yosemite Falls, standing in “exposure” with his hands behind his back—an advanced posture. Tourists who’d stumbled upon the event, friends, and myself included, all watched in amazement. He rejoined me on the

Clockwise from right: Travis, walking a highline over Yosemite Valley. The moon illuminated the face of El Capitan, along with the climbers camped on the wall. Finding our freedom in the off-the-grid tracks at Pinnacles National Park. **Opposite:** Travis, soaking in the views from Taft Point.



Reminiscing on his high walk, Travis walks along Big Sur's iconic Bigsby Creek Bridge. **Opposite:** Travis in his happy place, taking photos of the Milky Way galaxy.

rock, and we began our trek back as the glow of the sun faded, casting shadows where the warm light once was.

A soothing night beneath the expansive sky is what we were both craving. Glacier Point, located atop the valley with a generous view of Yosemite's most popular feature, Half Dome, created the perfect environment for us to nerd out. Travis is an avid astronomer; using the smooth slope of a large boulder as a couch, we reclined back, and he began to depict the story behind his favorite constellation—Orion. This night, the Orionid meteor shower was taking place—a stargazing event that has been a personal favorite for years. Fireballs traced across the twinkling night canvas leaving trails that lasted for what felt like minutes. The deep coolness began to creep into our bones, and our eyes grew tired. We rejoined the rig and made our way back down to camp, stopping to admire the climbers camped precariously on the face of El Capitan. Headlamps decorated the wall as if to blend in with the starry night sky.

Though departing from an adventurer's paradise is never easy, we turned the truck westward and began our descent toward the coast. Santa Cruz remains a community we relish coming back to. It wasn't long before the familiar smell of the salty ocean spray and curl of glassy waves peeling off the point greeted us. Surfing has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember; Travis and I zealously enjoyed the mornings in the ocean together. We prioritized time to be productive in the local library, clean the camper, and resupply before continuing on.

With our home base of San Diego being a half-day's drive, the choice was made to take our time and savor one last evening on the road. In lieu of the ever-popular Highway 1, we banked inland after admiring the morning light cascading over Bixby Bridge. The option for a single-lane dirt track will always suit us better. The trail toured through dense groves of redwood giants, giving us glimpses of the ocean's turquoise tones. Travis expertly sourced a campsite atop a hillside with eloquent views where the water met the mountainside. While I would normally be sad to be completing an adventure, we had already marked our calendars for the next excursion, departing again in only a few days for the annual highlining festival in Moab, Utah. I quickly cooked our favorite blend of veggies mixed with vegan sausage, and we ran off to the top of the vista to soak in the sight of the setting sun. Colors danced, illuminating wispy clouds that hung low within the tips of the trees. The evening sky was exceptionally magical, easily the most remarkable sunset of the trip. As the curtain of the night drew across the horizon, it was clear this was the perfect close to our maiden voyage. Trekking back toward the camper, smiles carved into our cheeks, Travis pointed up at the constellation that brightly shone above the camper—Orion had just risen over the horizon.

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While for some people, the consistency of conventional life feels comfortably reliable, this structured way of living is precisely what drew us away from it in the first place. For us, the inconsistency and the wildness of life on the road, discovering places across the globe while simultaneously recognizing a more profound connection within ourselves—this is what truly nourishes our souls. Seeking narrow backroads, off-the-grid campsites, and vistas without another human in sight are the fuel for our fire. And having the freedom to spontaneously choose routes with no distinguished timeframe, purposefully selecting tracks requiring 4WD, hunting for dirt void of tracks ignites the flame. We rolled back into San Diego with an eagerness to shower, launder our clothes, and hastily repack to continue the pursuit of our life's passions. Returning to our roots has flowed effortlessly, creating a source of realignment with what calls to our beings on a deeper level. This choice has infused us with confidence and excitement to chase our dreams, as well as to explore uncharted passages in our new adventure mobile, Orion the Rig. 🌐

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Foggy mornings shroud the sea along the coastline at dawn on California's iconic Highway 1. We enjoyed a slow morning under our shade awning at our final campsite for the trip.



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