California’s North Coast

Some of the best photography in Northern California is found along Highway One, called the Shoreline Highway. I recently drove north from the Golden Gate Bridge through Marin, Sonoma, and Mendocino counties, to follow Highway One as far north as it goes before it leaves the coast and heads inland. The Shoreline Highway is California’s slow and scenic route north along the coast—one of the most beautiful highways in America.

I’ve driven Highway One many times in the past. I returned to my favorite spots and explored places new to me. My ten-day trip was about photographing beaches, parks, coastal villages, and lighthouses I’d never photographed before.
My favorite season to make this trip is mid-winter. The streams and waterfalls are full, and lighting conditions are always changing, skies are filled with interesting cloud formations, the trails are free of summer tourists, and motel rates are at their lowest. Watch the weather forecasts for a whole week of dry days. Fog or cloudy weather can be an advantage.

I started this photo trip at the Golden Gate Bridge, a local landmark I've photographed from almost every angle. There is one angle on the Golden Gate that I have never photographed—the Point Bonita Lighthouse. Out on the northwestern tip of the opening into San Francisco Bay, Point Bonita is the most dramatic setting for a lighthouse I've ever seen.

On August 2, 2013, the 132-foot suspension bridge to the Point Bonita Lighthouse was reopened to the public. I wanted to photograph the new million-dollar bridge built of exotic hardwood that will outlive the cast iron bridges that have rusted away in the past.

If you plan to visit San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge, pick up your rental car at the airport and head north. After crossing the bridge, stay in the right lane and exit the highway onto Alexander Avenue. At the stop sign turn left and pass under the highway, heading back toward the bridge. Just before merging onto the Golden Gate Bridge again, take the sharp right turn onto Conzelman Road toward Battery Spencer and drive to the parking area at the top of the hill. This is the parking area for the best tripod spot for a close-up photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge, the perfect starting point for a trip following the coast line northward.

Follow Conzelman Road westward to the top of the highest overlook on Hawk Hill. It looks like the road ends there at a closed gate, but it actually makes a sharp left turn and continues as a one-way road out to the intersection with Field Road where you turn left to the parking lot at the end of the pavement. There are several viewpoints worth a stop along this route. The best is at the trail to Point Bonita—sticking out into the opening to San Francisco Bay—three miles west of the Golden Gate Bridge.

From the trailhead, a fairly steep, half-mile paved trail follows the ridgeline of a narrow promontory then levels off to enter a 118-foot tunnel passing behind steep cliffs. Coming out of the tunnel at the end of the trail, you'll see the new suspension bridge spanning the gap between the mainland and the lighthouse sitting on a rocky point. From the trailhead at the top of the hill, this lighthouse is hidden from view. You must make the hike down the hill and through
the tunnel to photograph it. I packed a 10 mm wide-angle and a 24-120 mm lens with my camera on a monopod. Other tourists on the walkway around the tower make it too narrow for a tripod. A gate at the near entrance to the tunnel is opened only during visiting hours—Saturday, Sunday and Monday from 12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. The new wooden suspension bridge, replacing an old and rusting steel bridge, was completed, and the lighthouse was reopened to the public on August 2, 2013. Most photos of this lighthouse include the suspension bridge that resembles the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance, three miles to the east.

Point Bonita Lighthouse was the third lighthouse built on the West Coast and was completed in 1877. Originally built on a nearby ridge that was so high that dense fogs often blocked the view of the light, the lighthouse was moved to a lower ledge, down near the surf. Despite several lighthouses operating at the entrance to San Francisco Bay, over 300 ships ran aground while sailing through the Golden Gate during the mid-1800s.

You can find another view of the Point Bonita Lighthouse by walking past the historic gun emplacement called Battery Mendell to the north end of the trail above Bird Rock. Looking south from this point, you can see a distant view of the flashing light on Point Bonita.

From the Point Bonita Trailhead parking area, drive down Field Road to Bunker Road and head west to Rodeo Beach, the first beach on this coastal trip. On the hillside above Rodeo Beach is the California Marine Mammal Center where injured creatures from the sea are rehabilitated and then sent back home.

To return to Highway 101 heading north, drive east to the one-way tunnel under the highway. Stop at the red/green light and wait your turn. On the east side of Highway 101, you can turn left to drive through the town of Sausalito or turn right to the onramp onto Highway 101, the freeway heading north. The freeway passes through the Rainbow Tunnel and, in a few miles, drops down to the edge of Richardson Bay where signs point to the freeway exit and Highway One bears right, cuts under the freeway and then heads west, back to the coast.

If you are ready for a moderately-easy hike out to a spectacular cove a few miles north of Point Bonita, watch for the left turn off Highway One onto Tennessee Valley Road—a 1.7-mile drive to the parking lot at the Tennessee Valley Trailhead. Walk out 1.6-miles to the beach on an almost level trail surrounded by chaparral-covered hills. A half-mile in, take the left fork to a lower (easier) trail along a creek that fills small ponds (watch for herons on the...
ponds) above the beach. Out on the coarse-sand beach are views north and south of headlands, off shore rocks, and heavy surf. A side trail above the beach climbs to a higher view of the cove.

Back at the parking lot, turn left at the traffic light onto Highway One. Follow the signs at the next traffic light and make a left turn to continue along Highway One. The road narrows and you soon become used to the hairpin turns through the forests of Mt. Tamalpais State Park. The last steep downhill stretch ends at the small town of Stinson Beach where a long white sand beach on Bolinas Bay is covered with sunbathers on sunny days. You’ll find cafés and a gas station here. Better photography is farther north.

From Stinson Beach, the Shoreline Highway hugs the edge of Bolinas Lagoon for seven miles to the Audubon Canyon Ranch, an egret and heron nesting preserve in the redwoods above the lagoon. Just beyond the Audubon sign is an unmarked left turn to the village of Bolinas.

For years, the state has been replacing the direction signs pointing the way to Bolinas and locals have been removing them, hoping to keep the tourists away.

Continuing north on Highway One, you’ll reach the left turn at the entrance into Point Reyes National Seashore just south of the small town of Point Reyes Station. Point Reyes deserves a week-long exploration. This time I passed right by. Read my newsletter #87 for details on photographing this part of California’s north coast.

Highway One skirts the edge of Tomales Bay through Marshall, past restaurants with bay views, oyster farms, and views of Hog Island. The road heads inland to follow Walker Creek, then heads north through the village of Tomales to the intersection with Valley Ford where Highway One heads west again on the way to Bodega Bay.

There are some good fish restaurants on Bodega Bay. The best photography is out at Bodega Head on the tip of the peninsula. Continue one mile north of the harbor to a sign pointing left to East Shore Road and Spud Marina. It’s 3.8 miles to the end of the road where stairs lead down to a small sandy beach. Or follow the trail south from the parking lot along the edge of cliffs above a spectacular view of headlands above a distant cove with offshore rocks being pounded by surf.

Just north of the fishing harbor town of Bodega Bay, at an overlook above the mouth of Salmon Creek, is a great view northward. Hundreds of offshore rocks can be framed with a long telephoto lens. Afternoon light is best for this location.
Along this 8-mile stretch of the **Sonoma County coastline** from Bodega Bay, north to the Russian River, are a dozen wide overlooks, some with parking lots on the edge of cliffs above this rocky coastline. This is not a good place for swimming. The sandy beaches drop off steeply and swimmers can easily get sucked into the undertow. On a windy winter day, the surf is churning and salt spray obscures distant views. Stop and park at any of these overlooks and you’ll find different variations of the same dramatic Pacific coastline:

- Salmon Creek
- Marshall Gulch
- Arch Rock
- Schoolhouse Beach
- Portuguese Beach
- Scotty Creek
- Duncan’s Landing
- Wright’s Beach

A half-mile north of Wright’s Beach is the parking lot at the trailhead to **Shell Beach**. It’s a five-minute walk down a trail that’s half trail and half stairs. In morning light, the best spot for your tripod is a short distance north from the end of the trail. My morning sun was diffused by a “mackerel sky,” rippled clouds resembling fish scales, reflecting in a pool.

At the north end of this part of the Sonoma Coast, **Goat Rock** is the place to set up your tripod. Pick a high spot on a clear day to see Bodega Head to the south of a very scenic coastline. Then drive down the steep and winding paved road to a fork. Turn left to the large parking lot at the base of Goat Rock. In the distance, to the south, is Arch Rock. Trails lead both north and south if you want to walk the beach. To reach the south side of the Russian River, make a right turn at the fork in the road and drive to the end of the parking lot, park, and climb over the grass-covered dunes. Follow the dunes north to the mouth of the Russian River where hundreds of seals can usually be photographed sunning themselves on their favorite private beach. Just across the river and hundreds of feet up at the top of the cliffs is a restaurant where you can look down on these creatures while having lunch.

Continuing north on Highway One, you’ll have a view of Penny Island midstream near the mouth of the **Russian River**, a home to many hundreds of birds, both migratory and permanent residents. In the village, you can rent a kayak or canoe to reach the island.

Two miles north of Jenner, Highway One dips to cross **Russian Gulch**. Park at the trailhead on the Pacific side of the road and follow a trail out to a beautiful cove where a narrow stream flows to a sandy beach walled in by towering cliffs.

For a classic panoramic view of the Sonoma Coast, the mouth of the Russian River and Highway One winding down into Russian Gulch, continue driving north and climb
the winding Shoreline Highway for one mile as it switchbacks up to a spot where you’ll see a wide pull-off on the right.

With a 24-120 mm zoom on my Nikon attached to my tripod, I crossed the road, carefully watching for RVs and motorhomes speeding down the steep hill, hopped over the guard rail, and followed a faint trail that ended at the perfect spot—out on the edge. Russian Gulch was a long way down.

Another mile to the north is a junction with Myers Grade Road, one of my favorite locations for photographing open coastal meadows rolling off into the hazy distance toward the Pacific. Myers Grade climbs to the northeast and follows ridgelines to the Kruse Rhododendron State Natural Reserve. During the last week of May, wild rhododendrons bloom in this canyon. This time, I stayed on Highway One.

Twelve miles north of Jenner is the entrance to Fort Ross State Historic Park where a reconstructed Russian fort, a chapel, and other structures were built on an ocean-side site. Here, Russian fur traders established an outpost in 1812 to raise food to supply their settlements in Alaska, then part of Russia. The history here is fascinating and you’ll find interesting relics to photograph. There are many more scenic coves to the north, along the stretch of coast road between Fort Ross and Sea Ranch.

Stillwater Cove, three miles north of Fort Ross, is one of my favorites. This 210-acre regional park has picnic and camping facilities as well as a parking lot at the beach access trail to the cove. Turn right at the park entrance and follow the signs to the parking lot at the trailhead, where a narrow trail winds down through dense redwoods to Stockhoff Creek. Follow the creek downstream to the pavement of Highway One. Watch out for traffic as you cross the road to follow the beach trail to the right. Red alders line the creek, and ferns line the trail to a small beach. Late in the afternoon the setting sun reflects in the creek as it spreads out into the surf. Sculpted rock formations climb the left side of the cove. A very wide-angle lens can capture this whole vista. Make multiple exposures to capture the extreme range of light from sun to shadows.

Less than a mile north of Stillwater Cove is Ocean Cove, where you’ll find a general store, a motel and a restaurant. Check at the General Store for campsites and day-use fees.

Gerstle Cove is seven miles north of Fort Ross. A paved road winds down to water’s edge where divers launch their boats. Sandstone rocks along the cove are covered with honeycomb patterns called tafoni. These unusual formations fascinate most photographers.
**Stump Beach** is located in Salt Point State Park. Cormorants nest in cracks along the top of cliffs on the right side of this cove. The trail is short and a few stairs make it easy to reach this cove.

The next cove to the north is at **Stewarts Point**, the site of a 19th century lumber mill where cut lumber was lowered by cable from cliff tops to schooners in the cove below to be shipped to San Francisco. Stewarts Point was one of the busier “doghole” lumber ports in this coast. A doghole lumber port was just large enough for a dog to turn around in.

Just north of Stewarts Point is **Sea Ranch**, an exclusive community of modern/rustic homes designed to blend into the gray-green seaside forest. Extending along both sides of Highway One for ten miles, between Stewarts Point and the town of Gualala, the roads and trails through this privately-owned community are closed to the public except for five well-marked public access parking areas where trails lead down to some very scenic beaches. These trails close at sunset and a small fee is charged. This list of trailhead parking areas is from south to north:

**Black Point** - 0.25 miles each way to a long beach with a steep stairway. The old wooden fence at the top of the stairs makes a great foreground for photos of this cove.

**Pebble Beach** - 0.27 miles each way to a sandy cove via stairs.

**Stengal Beach** - 0.12 miles each way down a short cypress-lined trail to a small beach where winter rains create waterfalls dropping from cliffs.

**Shell Beach** - 0.65 miles each way to a wide, sandy beach with offshore rocks and tidepools.

**Walk-On Beach** - 0.25 miles each way through a large cypress grove to a long beach but no stairway. This trail does lead to the south end of the “Bluff Top Trail” that runs three miles north to the mouth of the Gaulala River.

North of the spreading community of Sea Ranch is the small town of **Gualala**. Here you’ll find gas stations, lodgings and restaurants. The Gualala Supermarket makes custom sandwiches at their deli counter—a quick place to pick up a picnic lunch.

The stretch of coastline from Gualala to Point Arena is mostly private land with beach-view homes and only a few opportunities for photography. The best spot is called Bowling Ball Beach, included in my Newsletter #57 - Back Roads of California.

**Bowling Ball Beach** is covered with large, round polished stones, arranged in rows along a sandy beach three miles south of the

38.24.9867N 123.6.3029W  Kelp on Shell Beach
town of **Point Arena**. Not visible at high tide, they are best photographed during the lowest tides of the year that usually occur during December and January. Check online tide tables and enter “Point Arena” to find the dates and times of minus tides that are -1.0 ft. or lower for the best tidepool photography. Mark your calendar for a session on Bowling Ball Beach.

Two miles north of Schooner Cove Road is a small airstrip on a private ranch, the H-H Ranch on the mountainside of Highway One. At the north end of the long white fence is a long row of wind-blown cypress that makes an interesting photograph. Park on the west side of the highway and cross the pavement at the spot where the wooden fence ends and a wire fence continues northward. It’s an awkward spot to set up a tripod on the steep shoulder of the highway with one shortened tripod leg forward and two fully extended legs to the rear. A 100 mm or longer lens works well for this composition. The scene I photographed was backlit in the morning.

Heading north through the small town of Point Arena, you may see a few cafés open, depending on the season. You will find lodgings and restaurants located at the far end of Iverson Street on the edge of a small working fishing boat harbor.

Beside Bowling Ball Beach, another reason for an overnight stay here is the **Point Arena Lighthouse**, the tallest on the west coast. Point Arena Lighthouse is three miles north of the town on the west side of Highway One. Watch for a sign pointing the way for another mile to the parking lot. Except for major holidays, the gates are open from 10 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. (winter) and until 4:30 P.M. (summer).

The earthquake of 1906 that almost destroyed San Francisco destroyed the first Point Arena lighthouse built here in 1870 of brick and mortar. The town of Point Arena was leveled at the same time. The San Andreas Fault runs through this part of California.

A long roadside parking area is located on Highway One directly opposite Schooner Cove Road, three miles south of Point Arena. There are two trailheads here. The trailhead directly across from the intersection goes to Bowling Ball Beach. Recent storms have washed out the last 15 feet of this trail. In mid-January, 2015, this trail was too difficult for anyone packing a tripod and camera gear.

The other trailhead, at the south end of the parking area, also heads to the same beach down a shorter and easier trail. To reach Bowling Ball Beach, you can take this other route to the beach. Head north and then climb over some low rock formations. From there, it’s a half-mile beach walk to the half-buried stone beach balls.

Point Arena Lighthouse  38.57.0472N  123.44.2426W
After the earthquake, the light tower was rebuilt of steel-reinforced concrete poured into round forms. The straight-sided tower was built by an Oakland company experienced in building factory smokestacks that were strong enough to withstand future earthquakes. A private non-profit outfit called The Point Arena Lighthouse Keepers now owns the property, including three rental vacation homes that help to support the upkeep of the lighthouse.

There are many viewpoints for photographs, mainly from the edge of cliffs to the south where hundreds of tilted offshore rocks make a great foreground for telephoto shots. Move close to the lighthouse tower with a very wide-angle lens pointed upward to create a perspective effect that will make the sides of this lighthouse tilt inward a bit.

You can climb to the top on the original cast-iron circular stairway. It still makes me dizzy remembering that climb, but the views in all directions were worth it. From the top, a panoramic view looking east includes both sides of the narrow peninsula.

Nearby Stornetta Dairy Ranch property is open to hikers. A water’s-edge trail starts here and leads south along the coast to the fishing harbor at the south side of Point Arena. Ask at the lighthouse for directions to the trailhead if you are ready for a long walk along a coastline—a great place for whale watching in February or November.

From December to March, fields and lagoons north of the lighthouse to Brush Creek are the winter home of hundreds of migrating tundra swans every year.

Thirty-five miles north of Point Arena is the historic town of Mendocino. Plan to stay at least one night in the village at one of the many lodgings in the area. Stay long enough to discover the many things to photograph—streets lined with a mix of colorful Victorians and weathered-wood rustic architecture surrounded by flower gardens in the spring. Photograph white lilies along the stream behind the Visitor Center and bulletin boards covered with New Age messages and upcoming rock concert posters.

Walk down to the top of cliffs above deep coves above the sea and follow trails along this coastline. Just south of the bridge over the Big River, take Brewery Gulch Road where you will find the best spot to shoot a telephoto image of Mendocino’s Main Street across the small bay.

Point Cabrillo Light Station is two miles north of Mendocino. Watch for a sign pointing to the left turn off Highway One. Then make an immediate right turn onto Pt. Cabrillo Drive. In another two miles, you’ll see a sign at the entry road. Park in the big lot and walk a half-mile down the paved road to the handicapped parking area, located a short walk from the lighthouse.
The view looking toward the sea is the best angle on the lighthouse. It faces direct morning light. Sunset photos will silhouette the building. Try a few HDR exposures to lower the extreme exposure range you’ll get shooting into the sun. Fog or rain will create a mood here, if you don’t mind walking out to the lighthouse in the rain.

Don’t miss the guided tours. The volunteers are very helpful and know their history.

The beach has long since been cleaned up but countless bits of broken glass bottles remain. All this broken glass has been polished by the action of the surf for over a hundred years. Small pieces of red, blue, and green glass sparkle in the sun and look extra colorful when wet.

A sign blocks the entrance to Glass Beach on the west end of Elm Street, pointing out that trails are being rebuilt and improvements to this part of the shoreline are part of a plan to connect Glass Beach to MacKerricher Beach State Park to the north and the mouth of the Noyo River to the south. The city is working on a route for the Coastal Trail and public open space at the site of the old Union Lumber Company mill. The grand opening is scheduled for August of 2015. Until then, Glass Beach is closed to the public.

Three miles north of Fort Bragg is the entrance to MacKerricher Beach State Park. This eight-mile stretch of beaches, dunes and rocky shoreline extends north from Glass beach to Ten Mile River.

Like Point Arena, Point Cabrillo rents two vacation cottages and two original light keepers house. All are restored with updated interiors.

Nine miles north of Mendocino, Fort Bragg was the largest lumber town on California’s north coast until the last mill was shut down in 2003. It’s still the biggest town on this stretch of California’s coastline. You’ll find all the budget-priced chain motels and a good selection of restaurants, making Fort Bragg a useful overnight stop for traveling photographers.

One of my favorite spots for photography in the Fort Bragg area is Glass Beach. Back in 1905, this spot was the town dump.

Point Cabrillo Lighthouse  39.20.9223N  123.49.5592W

MacKerricher Beach State Park. This eight-mile stretch of beaches, dunes and rocky shoreline extends north from Glass beach to Ten Mile River.

Turn left at the entrance sign and drive to the end of the road, past all the campgrounds and park at the last parking spot. Walk past the restrooms and follow wooden boardwalks beyond the cypress groves to some of California’s best accessible tidepools. Long stairways lead down to small sandy beaches at the edge of rocky tidepools extending out to sea, especially during the lowest tides of the year. For tidepool photography, drive your RV to MacKerricher Beach and camp out for a few days.
This spot is on my list of **Ten Best Tidepools** on the California Coast. Arrive here ready for some tidepool photography sometime in December or January during a low of minus-one-foot or lower. Pack a long macro lens of 100 - 200 mm or a short telephoto zoom with close focusing. You’ll want a polarizing filter, too. Because of the rough and rocky terrain a monopod is easier to maneuver than a tripod. Rubber boots and wool socks are better than going bare foot and freezing your toes.

Eight miles north of Fort Bragg, Highway One crosses a bridge over the Ten Mile River, then swings inland and climbs into a dense grove of old cypress. The tops of these trees have spread so far that they have created a canopy that covers the road. On my way north, rays of the morning sun, streaming through openings in the canopy of cypress were lighting up a low cloud of ocean salt spray. It looked like a forest illuminated with light from heaven.

This spot is located just north of Ten Mile River in Mendocino County between mileposts 70 and 71 near the community of Ocean Meadows. The tunnel extends fairly straight for almost a mile. The south end curves toward the ocean at Seaside Beach, making a more interesting composition. This photograph is on the cover.

Four miles farther north along Highway One is **Westport** (pop. 60), the last coastal community with a few shops, a gas station, and an inn. This place on the edge of ocean bluffs is at the end of a long drive.

Beyond Westport, for the next ten miles, Highway One climbs to overlooks high above the surf, then turns inland and drops into deep canyons to cross bridges over small streams before returning to the sea. From every overlook, looking north or south, are hundreds of offshore rocks and small islands, some with a few trees clinging to a little soil.

Looking farther north, you will see no road, only distant cliffs rising from the sea. Stop at **Abalone Point** and point your camera to the south for the afternoon light on Westport.

Just beyond Union Landing, at Juan Creek, the Shoreline Highway heads inland for 29 miles to join Highway 101 at Leggett, on the east side of the coastal range. Here you’ll have the choice of continuing northward or turning south toward San Francisco.

Early California highway engineers gave up when given the task of building a coastal road north of Westport. There is a hundred-mile stretch where the paved road skirts to the east and avoids steep cliffs notched by countless coves and mountains too rugged to conquer. The King Range is crossed by only a few rough and winding unpaved tracks through the woods.
You may want to keep going, following the western edge of California, as far as possible. My newsletter #57 covers a photo trip from Garberville to Shelter Cove and north to Honeydew and Petrolia then out to Cape Mendocino and east to Ferndale, a winding all-day route through the remote north end of the King Range.

Instead of heading inland to Highway 101 for a quick trip home, I turned around at Union Landing Beach and returned back down Highway One to photograph beaches I had missed.

My life-long career in photography began at San Jose State University in 1957. After college, I enlisted in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, serving as a photographer and darkroom technician. In Germany, my skills and experience with equipment and lab work were developed and polished. I took the opportunity to photograph the beauty of nature in the Black Forest. Returning to California in 1965, I produced industrial and military training films for Raytheon Electronics and began showing my color nature prints. From 1969 through 1981, my photography was exhibited and sold in West Coast galleries. During the early 1980’s, I taught color darkroom workshops, then expanded to include field trips. Former customers, who had purchased my framed photographs, wanted to learn photography. My Pacific Image Photography Workshops offered adventures to the Pacific Coast, the Southwest deserts, national parks, Hawaii, New England, Canada, England, and the South Pacific. The workshops evolved into writing and sharing my adventures with others. Photograph America Newsletter provides information on where, when, and how to discover the best nature photography in North America.

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