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travel

# Striking gold in California: How to plan the ultimate US Route 49 road trip...

Once used by prospectors hoping to get rich, this iconic highway is packed with adventure, history and fun, says **Jonjo Maudsley**

**W**HEN James William Marshall discovered the first nugget of gold at Sutter's Mill halfway through the 19th century, word spread and sparked the Californian Gold Rush of 1848.

Today, remnants of this period can be found throughout the Golden State, and nowhere more so than along Route 49 (which gets its name from the '49ers' – the Gold Rush-era settlers of California who arrived in 1849), running for 300 miles from Vinton to Oakhurst via Sacramento, and connecting travellers to world-renowned sites like Yosemite National Park, Big Trees State Park and Lake Tahoe.

Any stretch of Route 49 is worth tackling, but to combine a snapshot of Californian history with some audacious outdoor pursuits, here's the six-day itinerary I'd recommend...

**THIS OLE HOUSE**

Visit Folsom, where Johnny Cash famously sang at the jail



**HITTING THE HEIGHTS**  
Jonjo and friends at Foresthill Bridge in Auburn

**DAY 1: START YOUR JOURNEY IN CALIFORNIA'S STATE CAPITAL, SACRAMENTO**

Sacramento owes its origins to the Gold Rush. John Sutter Jr and Samuel Brannan designed the town to cater to travelling gold hunters. Today it is a thriving city of 500,000 people and the state capital, but its Wild West history is alive and well in Old Sacramento.

As a travelling companion is on driving duty the next day, I spend my evening at Fanny Ann's Saloon enjoying a rootin'-tootin' good time with the locals.

**DAY 2: FOLSOM, THE SPIRITUAL HOME OF JOHNNY CASH**

The next morning, we head for the historic town of Folsom and the start of Route 49.

When news of the gold rush spread, Joseph Folsom commissioned a railway connecting the town to Sacramento.

Thus it became a gateway for thousands of travellers heading to Gold Country.

Today, Folsom is a quiet suburb of Sacramento, but has plenty to offer intrepid travellers.

I take a walk through it, absorbing the hazy Western atmosphere, admiring the authentic facades of shops down Sutter Street and following the numbered obelisks around town to learn about its history.

Folsom owes much of its popularity to country music sensation Johnny Cash, whose hit single Folsom Prison Blues was based on the federal penitentiary in the centre of town.

The recent installation, the Johnny Cash Trail, honours him in the form of a 1.5-mile long cycle route which winds past famous sites such as the Folsom Dam and the Rainbow Bridge.

**DAY 3: AUBURN, AN OUTDOOR ADVENTURE PARADISE**

Our next stop is Auburn, a small town with big character, 25 minutes' drive from Folsom.

While the town centre is whimsical

**ANOTHER TOWER BRIDGE**  
dominates downtown Sacramento







and charming with a hipster feel, most of Auburn lies sprawled out across the sweeping green hills of the Placer County countryside.

Here we find awe-inspiring sites such as the Foresthill Bridge – the tallest bridge in California and a staggering example of American engineering.

Feeling brave, we make our way to Auburn State Recreation Area for a spot of bouldering.

If you're inexperienced and a bit out of shape, like me, you might like to hire Petch of Lover's Leap Guides. With his expertise, groups of all ages can make short work of the craggy cliff-faces in this idyllic little corner of the world. Hire him for half a day at \$180/£142 ([loversleap.net](http://loversleap.net)).

**DAY 4: COLOMA COUNTY – WHERE THE GOLD RUSH BEGAN**

No trip through Gold Country would be complete without a stop off at Sutter's Mill in Coloma County where, in 1848, James William Marshall discovered that first nugget of gold.

Back then, people came from all over the world to find their fortune on the American River. But today's visitors are after a different type of loot – trout.

We catch nothing, so to cheer ourselves up, we head to Mother Lode River Center ([malode.com](http://malode.com)) for something more dynamic – white water rafting through the Category 3 rapids on the American River. Up to eight people over eight years old can ride, with prices starting at \$109/£86 for a four-hour Express Trip. But be warned: We got absolutely drenched!

To warm up, Kary at Lotus Pub introduces me to his selection of local IPAs. I find a personal favourite in the Track 7 Left Eye Right Eye Double IPA from Sacramento, with its buttery, bitter flavour. The food is good, too. Visit [thelotuspub.com](http://thelotuspub.com)

**DAY 5: SEE THE GIANT SEQUOIAS IN CALAVERAS COUNTY**

Heading in the direction of Calaveras County, our first stop is Big Trees State Park, where we walk through 1.5 miles of California's world-famous giant sequoias – the largest living things on Earth.

Traversing the canopies of these mammoth trees is my personal highlight of the trip.

From here we head to Moaning Caverns, a system of limestone caves beneath the Sierra Nevada hills. When miners failed to strike gold, they established these as a tourist destination instead, by installing a spiral staircase to the bottom of a 165ft cavern. Group tours leave every hour and cost \$20/£16. Visit [moaningcaverns.com](http://moaningcaverns.com)



**CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN?**  
Jonjo in Auburn Recreation Park

**DAY 6: ANGELS CAMP AND THE OTHER HALF OF CALAVERAS COUNTY**

In the southern half of Calaveras County, California opens up into feral landscapes, wavy hills and wild greenery – it's hard to take a bad photo anywhere around here.

We start the day with a tour of a gigantic man-made lake. The good people of New Melones Lake Marina ([newmeloneslakemarina.com](http://newmeloneslakemarina.com)) provide us with a 24ft Bennington sport pontoon (from \$187/£148 per hour), which seats 12 passengers and travels up to 40mph across the water.

Our final stop is the quaint town of Angels Camp, where photographer Dave Bunnell ([underearth.us](http://underearth.us)) offers us a tour of Natural Bridges – although it's also possible to do the two-mile round trip on your own.

This rock cavern is the perfect treat after a week on the road – the trickling water leads to an organically-carved cave that invites us to frolic in the swimming hole and bathe beneath its natural cascades.

**HOW TO GET THERE**

For more information on the destinations, see [visitalifornia.co.uk](http://visitalifornia.co.uk)  
You can hire a car through Avis at [avis.co.uk](http://avis.co.uk)



**GREEN, GREEN GRASS OF HOME**  
E-biking along the Johnny Cash Trail in Folsom

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