

Home on the Road

It's the biggest vehicle ever tested by *Automotive Traveler*, a 34-foot-long Georgetown motorhome from Forrest River. Courtesy of Apollo Campers, this is Richard Truesdell's home for the next two weeks. Join him as he uses his insider's knowledge to explore the deserts of Southern California and the city of San Diego.



It comes as no secret to regular readers of *Automotive Traveler* that I have an interest in vintage RVs, especially the landmark 1973-1978 [GMC MotorHomes](#) and classic Airstream Travel Trailers.

But when setting out for two weeks on the road, covering the deserts of Southern California and the tourist attractions of San Diego, there's something to be said for making the trip in a fully equipped and self-contained modern motor coach. Specifically, a [34-foot Georgetown motorhome](#) manufactured by Forest River, equipped with a slide-out that expands the living and dining room by 18 inches on the

driver's side and a second, smaller slide-out for the master bedroom.

The Georgetown comes courtesy of [Apollo Campers](#), an Australian-based RV rental organization with offices in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Las Vegas, and Denver. Their rates on almost every classification of coach, from van-based Class-C models to a Class-A rig like the Georgetown, were as much as 40 percent lower than other RV rental places. Renting a home on wheels from such a travel company is a cost-effective way to take an extended vacation.

My agenda for this RV road trip was powered by a desire to map out

an off-the-beaten-path Southern California itinerary for overseas visitors. We would put ourselves in the place of visitors from the United Kingdom flying in to LAX to spend up to four weeks in the sunny Golden State. We're producing this for a twice-annual British publication, [Discover Touring](#) (available at Barnes



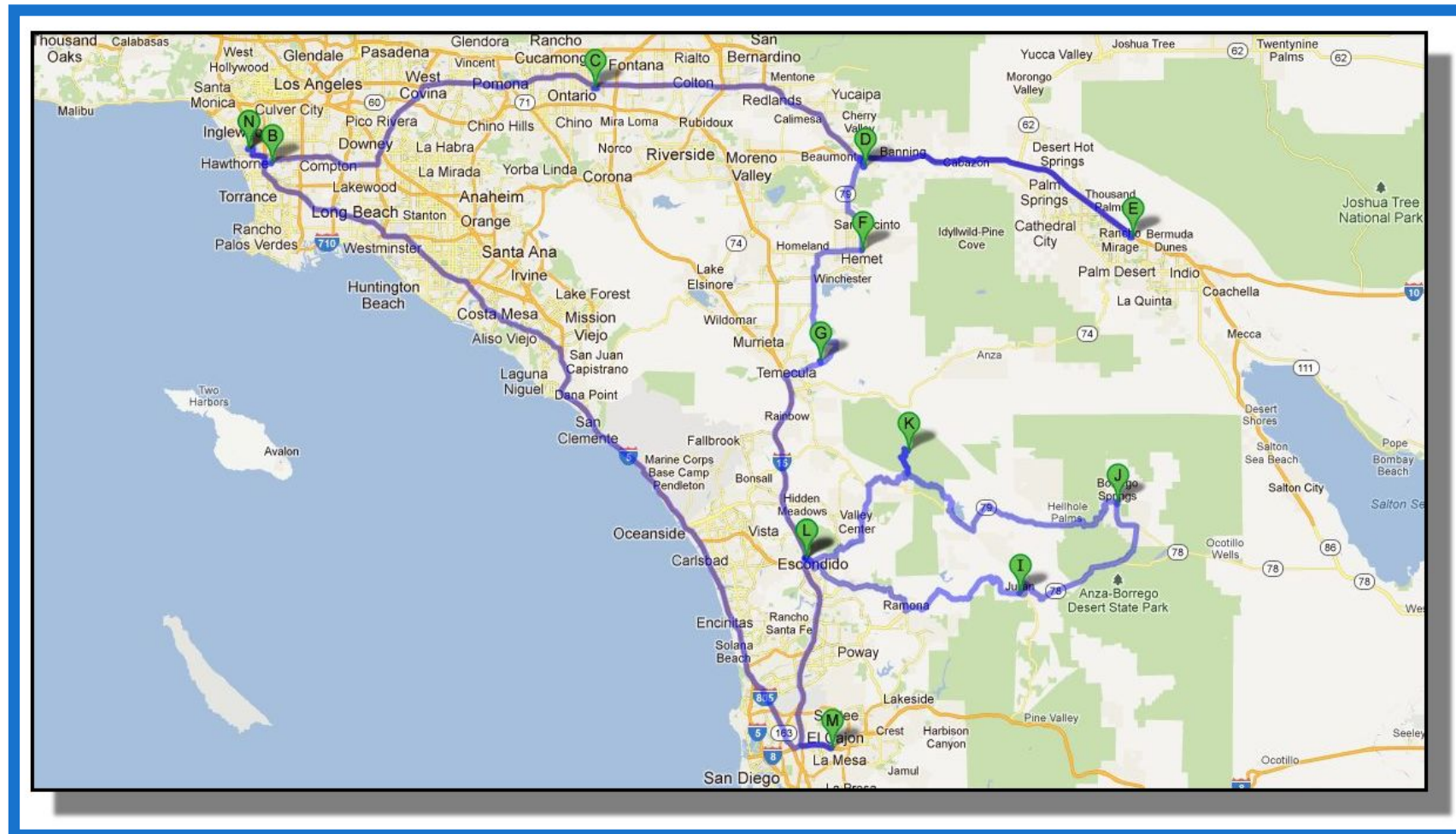
& Noble bookstores coast to coast).

The plan was simple. My travel companion, Susan Convery, would fly in from New Jersey, and we would head north to [Death Valley](#) National Park for the first few days. While there, we'd give up the comforts of the Georgetown for a night in order to stay in the historic [Furnace Creek Inn](#), the same spot I stake out each summer in search of automotive prototypes.

The Itinerary: 800 Miles Through the Deserts of Southern California

(A and N) Start and finish, Los Angeles International Airport; (B) Apollo Campers, Hawthorne; (C) Ontario International Airport; (D) Country Hills RV Park, Beaumont; (E) Emerald Desert RV Resort, Palm Desert; (F) Hemet; (G) Falkner Winery, Temecula; (H and L) Escondido RV Resort; (I) Julian Pie Company, Julian; (J) Borrego Springs; (K) Palomar Observatory, Palomar Mountain; (M) San Diego RV Resort, La Mesa.

Map Enlarges for Easy Reference 



What We Missed: The Death Valley National Park Loop

Forced to cut three days from our original itinerary, we had to eliminate the 500-mile loop north from Ontario International Airport (A) to Death Valley National Park and a one-night stay at the historic [Furnace Creek Resort](#) (C).

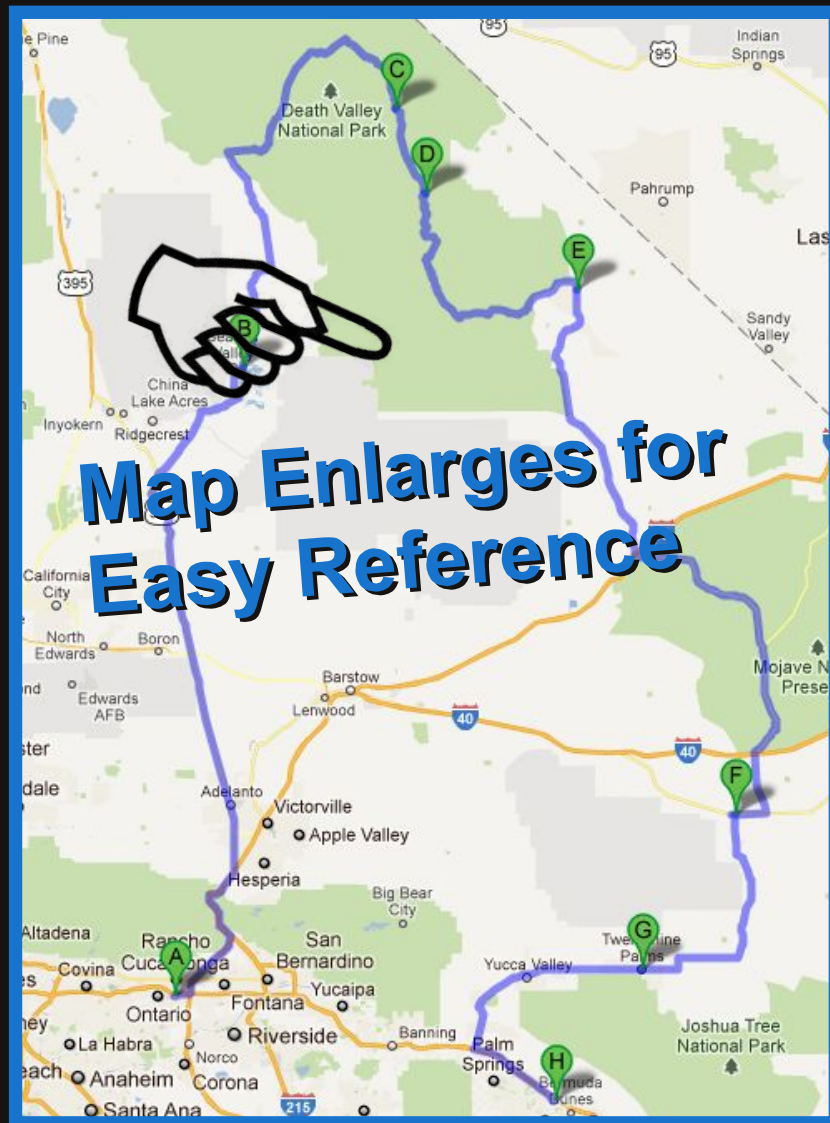
Furnace Creek features a Perry Dye-designed golf course, 216 feet below sea level. As balls do not travel too far in Death Valley, Furnace Creek ranks as one of the 50 toughest courses in the United States. And yes, there are water hazards.

While most GPS units will direct you up I-15 towards Las Vegas, I recommend heading north on U.S. 395 in the direction of Ridgecrest instead. Once en route, set Trona, California (B) as a waypoint, and top off your rig there.

Gas and diesel are \$1.50/gallon cheaper there than filling up at one of the two service stations within the boundaries of [Death Valley National Park](#).

The lowest point in the Western Hemisphere is [Badwater Basin](#) (D), 282 feet below sea level. Heading south, stop in Shoshone at the [Crowbar Café](#) (E) for the best prime rib between L.A.

and Las Vegas. The route south passes through [Amboy](#) (F) and [Roy's](#), a Route 66 landmark, as well as [Joshua Tree National Park](#) (G) before you arrive at the Emerald Desert RV Resort (H).



From Death Valley, we'd head south to Palm Springs, Escondido, and San Diego, staying at three different RV parks operated by [Sunland RV Resorts](#). Unfortunately, last-minute scheduling conflicts eliminated the first two days' camping in Death Valley and, with Susan's flight from the East Coast ending up delayed, we were forced to change our plans. (One of the great advantages of RV travel is the flexibility.)

So, instead of heading north up U.S. 395, we opted to drive east on I-10 and stay one night in Beaumont at the family-owned-and-operated [Country Hills RV Park](#). On-site managers Jamie and Rick Brower threw out the red carpet for us despite a late arrival. (We had stopped to eat

at [The Farmhouse](#) on the east side of Beaumont. Taking advantage of all-you-can-eat, fall-off-the-bone beef ribs at \$15.99, we were set with enough leftovers for lunch the next day.)

The park's rustic setting in the foothills overlooking Beaumont made for a beautiful sunrise. While giving me a tour that morning, Rick pointed out a pair of mating hawks and noted that they have their own resident mountain lion, as well as coyotes and rattlesnakes. Small domestic animals often serve as tasty appetizers for the area's predators.

While our RV rental came equipped with such essentials as bed linens, dishes, utensils, and pots and pans, we did need to pick up a few things: laundry detergent, hangers, plastic bowls for food storage. Where to go?



The Dollar Tree store was an economical one-stop-shop for both hard goods and the food items we wanted for our next destination, the Emerald Desert [RV Resort](#) in Palm Desert.

Where Country Hills was rustic, Emerald Desert was downright luxurious, a five-star resort with every expected amenity and easy freeway access, just a mile south of I-10 at the Cook Street exit. A concierge guided us to our spot, helping me back into our parking space before reviewing all the Georgetown's systems with me – including the hook-up for the waste hose from the coach's grey (sinks and showers) and black (toilet) water storage tanks. (We only hooked up to electricity on our first night.)

With two pools and hot tubs, a fully equipped exercise room, a large clubhouse, lighted tennis courts, and a driving range, you can't complain of "nothing to do" at Emerald Desert. Like many high-end RV resorts, the place is designed for outdoor activities and relaxed socialization against a beautiful natural backdrop.

And if you do find yourself at loose ends, activities director Michelle Graham will no doubt offer a few suggestions. Tennis clinic? Billiards competition? Pickle ball?! (Think ping pong combined with tennis.) And while the place is geared to snowbirds 55

and older with Class-A rigs 40 feet or longer, a few smaller C-Class RVs and younger families could be seen.

Susan and I thought we were pretty high on the RV food chain with our rig, however, we didn't realize just how spacious RVs can be until our next-door neighbors invited us in. Jim and Susan Kirk made the trip south from Kamloops, British Columbia in a 42-foot [Kountry Star](#). The Georgetown was perfectly comfortable for our needs (and those of any typical RVing family), but stepping inside the Kirk's rig made me feel like NASCAR royalty.

Our new friends invited us to dinner. Not wanting to arrive empty handed, I cooked up some chicken and pork pot stickers for appetizers. Jim grilled a healthy serving of Jack Daniels beef ribs with potatoes and onions. With the sun setting on the nearby San Jacinto Mountains, our first full day of RVing ended on a high note.

The Palm Desert area has a number of attractions for travelers, especially those with an interest in automobiles and architecture. Numerous collections of mid-century cars are to be found out here, and, living less than an hour away in Riverside County, I've been fortunate to photograph many of them for *Cars and Parts* and other magazines over the years.



Drawing classic car fans from near and far is the annual [Desert Classic](#) Concours, nine days of automotive activities, including track events at nearby Chuckwalla Raceway (this year's dates are 17-26 February).

Held concurrently is Modernism Week, a [celebration](#) of the architecture, art, and popular culture of the Thirties, Forties, Fifties, and Sixties when Palm Desert hosted Hollywood royalty. Organized tours, including one on a double-decker bus, let visitors see firsthand some of the best-preserved examples of mid-century architecture around. One such structure is the [Elrod House](#), designed by John Lautner. The pool

on this property – currently on the market for just under \$14 million – played a part in the 1971 Bond adventure *Diamonds Are Forever*.

Of course, golf is a major attraction around here, too, with more than 100 courses. While many are private, members-only courses, others accept guests. It is certainly possible to play on some of the same championship-caliber courses as your favorite pros.

After an early nine holes of golf the following morning, we returned the favor by inviting the Kirks to a Sunday brunch featuring my world-famous Eggs Benedicto. In my Italian-inspired variation on this classic dish, I replace Canadian bacon with prosciutto,

thickly sliced and sautéed, and Hollandaise with Alfredo sauce.

After three enjoyable days at Emerald Desert, it was time to leave. As we began the morning's drive south to [Temecula Wine Country](#), Susan – who's never been RVing before – commented that she was pleasantly surprised at just how friendly everyone you meet seems to be. I, too, had noticed the genuine sense of community prevalent at such campgrounds on previous RV adventures of my own.

And, in the case of the Kirks, I believe we've struck a lifelong friendship with our neighbors from north of the border. They've already

extended an invitation to visit them in Kamloops and tour the Canadian Rockies. (Anyone at Apollo listening?)

I had also noticed at Emerald Desert that nine out of 10 of the RVers were towing a car. Without the convenience of the kind of on-site general store found in most campgrounds, a car is definitely helpful when staying at an RV park not within walking distance of a store. (Or at least a bike, according to one of the many helpful [tips for first-time RVers](#) in our recent *Automotive Traveler* feature.)

High-wind warnings that day meant our preferred route south of Palm Springs on CA-74 to CA-79 would not be a safe drive in an RV. So, we



decided to make the trip going west on I-10 to Beaumont, then CA-79 through Hemet to the [Falkner Winery](#). This would allow us to take advantage of my membership in Harvest Hosts, a national association of wineries, farms, and other agricultural-related destinations that allow free overnight parking for a limited number of self-contained RVs (i.e., no hook-ups).

Before setting up camp for the evening, we ate at the [Pinnacle Restaurant](#), which serves lunch and hosts special events. We shared an appetizer of baked brie, and then Susan had a spicy chicken wrap while I dug into lobster mac and cheese. Everything was excellent. We spoke later with Chef Gianni Cicilot who hails from Allentown, Pennsylvania, less than an hour from where Susan and I grew up.

Without an electrical hook-up, we were roughing it compared to our three nights at Emerald Desert. Not a problem in the fully equipped Georgetown. And when we awoke the next morning, Valentine's Day, the sky was filled with hot air balloons, affording us some great photo opportunities.

One of the pilots shouted down to me to see if I wanted him to get his balloon closer to our rig. "Go for it!" I called back. As he maneuvered to within 10 feet above the roof of the

Georgetown, I got a series of spectacular shots (including the one on the first page of this article).

From the Falkner Winery, we headed south to Escondido, stopping at a Starbucks (to catch up on e-mail) and at a Vons supermarket (where we scored some New York strip steaks for just \$4.49 a pound). Plans to grill them for dinner changed after an impromptu call to my good friend Larry Weiner, who lives just north of Escondido. He and his wife Debbie were attending a performance of [Britain's Finest](#), a Beatles tribute band, that evening at the Welk Resort Theater just off I-15. Did we want to come along?

After dinner together in San Marcos at the [Old California Mining Company](#), the four of us thoroughly enjoyed a spirited two-hour set that covered both early hits and many post-Sgt. Pepper classics. The performance wrapped up with the John Lennon character, Tyson Kelly, and a solo rendition of *Imagine*, before Bennie Chadwick (playing Sir Paul McCartney) launched into *Get Back* supported by the ensemble. What a great evening. **AT**

In Part Two of our 13-day RV road trip, we visit Borrego Springs, the Julian Pie Co., and such San Diego attractions as the U.S.S. Midway, Little Italy, and the Gaslamp Quarter.

