

## The Absolute Toughest Drive I Ever Drove in an RV

I well remember the day I turned left, away from the coast, and headed east. With that turn, I ended the absolute toughest drive I have ever taken in an RV—and I've been RVing on wheels since 1962 and driven our big RV in every one of the lower 48 plus much of Canada! It was a spectacular drive, but tough.

### Define "Tough"

Let me define "tough"—curving, twisting, tight turns, numerous switchbacks, narrow lanes, 500-foot drop-offs straight down, rarely any shoulder, a few sparse guardrails, rock abutments sticking out into my lane on inside curves, bushes and trees so close you must brush them, some mostly bunched-up traffic, a few fully-loaded log trucks, and fog—yes, fog! Would I recommend this drive? Well, yes, but not for the faint-hearted and not in an RV. Allow me to explain.

Going south on US 101 through northern California is a wonderful drive and highly recommended. This drive is most spectacular along the coast and through the redwood forests prevalent there and, coincidentally, only grow along this stretch of coast—no place else in the world. There are a number of coastal towns where you can stay for very reasonable overnight rates, the campgrounds are great, and the number of excellent seafood restaurants is sometimes overwhelming. (Rule #1 is always try the clam chowder.) But I digress...

### First Hint

Below Eureka, California, US 101 heads inland and stays away from the coast all the way to San Francisco. We wanted to be on the coast. So, at Legget, California (about Mile Marker 616) we decided to take California Highway 1 (Shoreline Highway). After all, it hugs the coast, ends up in San Francisco, and is a "red" road on the map. RVers know that the red roads are typically okay. What we didn't know was that this highway

is one of the official [“California Restricted Routes”](#) (click to see my article entitled, California Restricted Routes).

We turned that 42-foot Dynasty towing a Saturn Vue onto Highway 1, heading west toward the coast, and within a mile, were into the curvy, twisty, narrow lane, easing around large rock abutments sticking out—i.e., seemed to be reaching out—for the passenger side of my coach while I was concentrating on the potential surprise of an oncoming vehicle possibly crowding my lane. We only planned to go to Fort Bragg, a wimpy 42 miles but now we were averaging a whopping 15-20 mph!

Luckily, there were numerous turnouts, with some large enough for me to pull off with our 63-foot coach and toad combination. When a turnout was available, we usually stopped for a short rest. The concentration and constant extensive turning of the steering wheel was tiring. I don't get rattled or nervous. This was a challenge. And no, it was not possible to turn around even if we unhooked. We were committed. We joked that we should have been committed for turning onto this route. The first 20-or-so miles took us to the coast over a small mountain range where we were always in the woods. Finally, we got to the coast. Our moment. Life was good. But, I was really glad we did not have to backtrack. Now, I wish I had.

## Campground Ahead

Since our drive took us twice as long as planned, it was late evening (mostly dark) when we stumbled onto Westport-Union State Beach (a California State Park) about 15 miles north of Fort Bragg. It was dusk, foggy, and hard to see, but there appeared to be small “groups” of 3-4 RVs sort of parked together. We passed one group, saw another about a 1/4-mile down the road, and a couple of others after that.



This seemed a bit strange so we pulled in, found someone, and asked. We were told this was a fee-based state camping area for anyone (RVs and tents), \$13.00 per night, no hookups, a central water faucet, some toilets, trash bins, and each site had a picnic table and fire ring, but nothing else. It was a pick-your-spot, fill-out-the-form, put-the-money-in-the-Iron-Ranger, and enjoy-your-stay kind of place. The good news... the nose of our coach was 30 feet from the cliff looking down on the waves rolling in on the Pacific Ocean. What a spectacular view! You can see our view out of our windshield (yes, those are my wipers in the picture). Facing due west, watching the sunset in the water, and then sitting around a campfire at night is hard to beat. Oh, yes, those small groups of RVs were simply gathered in the various accessible camping areas along the coast in this state park.



### **I Can't Take a Hint**

During the time we were parked here, we made a couple of car trips into Fort Bragg to check out places to eat and grocery stores. That fifteen-mile, one-way trip always took 35–45 minutes. The highway was curving, twisting, with a couple of switchbacks.

After being in this wonderful campground for 5 days and not being one who can take a hint, we decided to keep meandering south along this route to San Francisco (our original plan) especially since we had driven that other difficult road just to get here! Five days later we left our cliff-side perch and meandered south. We made it to a commercial campground (there are several) and spent that night. We had driven 49 miles that day.

## The View

The view along the drive was spectacular and one of the most awe-inspiring even after a lifetime of traveling—definitely in my top ten! Great expanses of beach, craggy cliffs dropping off—virtually straight down—hundreds of feet to the pounding waves of the Pacific ocean. There were giant rocks jutting out of the water—some the size of cars, some the size of buildings—seals, sea lions, pelicans, and gulls were everywhere. With a great number of places to pull off, you find yourself stopping often—sometimes just around the next curve. On this highway, those “next curves” were usually only a few hundred yards ahead!

Frequently the shoulder of the highway was only a couple of feet wide and guardrails were mostly nonexistent. You had to really drive—not just float along on the standard joyride as all of us sometimes do—you had to really drive this one. To not pay attention could easily cost you a coach or a life! As shown here, switchbacks were common. After the switchback, the highway either meandered up the big hill or down the big hill. Either way, it was a challenge to drive



We spent the next night in some small town. We stopped at the tiny visitor's center and asked where we could park the coach overnight (boondock). She didn't know. When we asked where we could find the local police (to ask them the same question), the lady in the visitor's center jokingly replied, "This is a small village. We don't have any police here. We don't even have any laws here!"

With that, she spotted a local resident walking by and told him what we wanted. He directed us to an empty lot, at the edge of town, and next to the recommended restaurant. He told us the lot was owned by a logging/timber company and was used for temporary parking by just about anyone for just about any reason. He also said that the logging/timber company had, for all he knew, not checked on the lot for years.

Fine. We parked there. The good news, the passenger side of our coach was next to the bay and we, again, looked out over the Pacific Ocean to the waves lapping the shore. Plus, it was only 40 steps to the recommended restaurant and, as promised, a wonderful, inexpensive meal—with clam chowder.

### **I Scratched My Coach**

The next day, the drive seemed to take us into an even more mountainous coastline with taller, steeper hills (small mountains), and drop-offs distinctly farther and more vertical. I don't think the highway was any different (more narrow, etc.) but the turns/curves were just tighter than before. This portion of the highway was actually the worst part of a bad drive and it was here, I scratched my coach. You have to know that I really hate to scratch my coach... hate it!

We were continuing to go south, the ocean was on our right, and we entered a tight, tight switchback to the right. It put me on the inside and I was going dead slow—I'm sure less than 5 mph. There was a guardrail. I met several cars and one log truck inside that switchback. I just couldn't make that tight turn without crossing into the oncoming lane and wiping out a couple of the oncoming cars or facing the log truck. I didn't want the cars and thought the log truck was a poor choice so I hugged the inside of the curve. It was all I could do.

One of my compartment doors rubbed the guardrail—it just rubbed the paint—there was no tearing or holes. I hate to scratch my coach. There was simply nothing else

to do. It was the best of two bad choices—hit the guardrail or the other vehicles. I hate to scratch my coach.

We stopped at the next pull-off. The scenery was breathtaking. The 18-inch-long scratch looked awful. What a tradeoff. We made the decision to get off this route and headed back to US 101.

### **Great Scenery. Tough Drive**

I would love to take that drive again—but only in a car—not in an RV. I would be leery about taking a Class C over that route. The big trucks would often crowd those narrow switchback turns and the leftover room was minimal.

Be safe.