



# El Camino Real

## Three boys, three bikes, three missions

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN VORSTER



We watched my youngest son Caleb weaving side to side on the narrow mountain road as he negotiated its eight-percent gradient in that rapid twiddling motion of the granny gear. As he approached us, his elder brother Luke chuckled beside me and hollered, “What are you doing?” Caleb retorted, “Getting up here on my bike!”

“Who got here first?” asked Luke. “You did,” said Caleb, “but you were walking, and I was riding my bike!”

I had to admire the boy’s sheer doggedness — he was not going to walk, even if it meant he would arrive last at the top. Luke had pushed his bike in a straight line, and Caleb had ridden in the same time-tested style that all kids try when confronted with their first big climb. But he absolutely refused to walk.

We had departed the Santa Barbara Mission earlier that day, riding north through Goleta and onto Highway 101 to approach the Refugio Pass turnoff after enjoying monster breakfast burritos at El Capitan Canyon. From the turnoff we were faced with a seven-mile ride from sea level to around 1,500 feet, where we were to spend a night in a friend’s cottage nestled in a crook of California that was part of the early kingdom of Alta California. We were far from the first to travel this particular route.

### MISTS OF TIME

Early in the summer of 1771, a party led by three *padres* stumbled into an exquisite oak-studded valley in central California. They made camp and, according to custom, began to prepare for the end-of-day devotional — called the vesper hour. A large bronze bell was lifted from a mule pack and hung from the low branch of a nearby tree. A short while later, one of the *padres* leaped up and rang the bell with astonishing vigor. The site had been selected for a new mission.

With similar spirit, a series of Franciscan missions was established throughout coastal California. The road linking them became an artery of industry and civilization for the state well before California would become a part of the U.S. A number of the original 21 missions are in excellent repair today, and together they comprise what became known simply as *El Camino Real* or the Royal Highway, a route that has threaded its way through the mists of time to linger in the contemporary consciousness.

Its origins date back to the time of the American Revolution, when a series of small, self-reliant religious outposts was built a day’s travel apart from San Diego extending as far north as San Francisco. The track that linked them connected *missions* (religious ministries), *pueblos* (communities of adobe homes), and four *presidios* (military posts), one of which still exists in a refurbished state in Santa Barbara.

The Santa Barbara Mission enjoyed early prosperity and favor with the Native Americans, becoming the center of life for about 1,700 “neophytes” or converts who lived in 250 adobe homes. Their lives included prayer and lessons but were also practical, focusing largely on agricultural and economic training and advancement.

The inevitable decline in this relationship was partly due

to the tension that existed between the state and the church, and how each viewed the natives and the land. The Franciscans saw the Chumash as landowners under the Spanish King. The Spaniards considered them sub-humans on Spanish land. Father Junipero Serra, the founder of the California mission system, sincerely loved the Chumash people, but they ended up with the standard raw deal of the day, receiving little more than beatings and disease from the soldiers in return for the loss of their way of life. Neophytes subsequently revolted *en masse* at each of the Santa Inés, Santa Barbara, and La Purisima missions in 1824, an event that was sparked by the beating of a convert by a soldier.

### CLASSIC CALIFORNIA

Following a chilly night, we were welcomed by a crisp, clear start to the day as we pedaled over the cusp of the climb along a gravel forest road and down into the Santa Ynez Valley. “This is classic California,” said Luke as we bumped our way beneath the arc of indigenous oak. I knew what he meant. Gaps in the growth offered glimpses of picturesque ranchland and the distant tumbling Transverse Range, spectacular as it always is with a coating of emerald green spring growth.

The charm of El Camino Real for today’s travelers still rests strongly in the two cornerstones of the original highway — the missions and the presidios. Spain exerted its control through the presidios and continually tried to do the same through the missions, although the Franciscans apparently resisted these attempts quite vigorously. Because of their remoteness, life in the old missions was remarkably self-reliant. In time their self-reliance became a threat to the Spanish government.







Halfway up Refugio Pass, Dad's bike waits for the two boys. The group found accommodation in a cabin at the crest of the climb.

Mission Santa Inés in present-day Solvang was originally called “Mission of the Passes” because travelers had to negotiate the San Marcos Pass, Refugio Pass, or the Gaviota Pass to cross the Santa Ynez Range. Their isolation discouraged visitors, but their self-reliance was on my mind as we glided down the long entrance avenue into Mission Santa Inés. After taking a break to rehydrate and soak up some sunshine, we took a stroll through the inner courtyard.

Two creeks passed through the mission lands, and water was channeled via an elaborate system of canals into two stone-lined reservoirs — both the *lavanderia* and a mill complex are still standing. Although it operated under the Franciscans for only 32 years with a neophyte population of almost 800 people, this provision of water made it possible for the mission to produce over

10,000 bushels of grain and run nearly 10,000 head of cattle in two seasons alone.

#### AEBLESKIVER TO VAQUERO

Solvang might be described today as a part Danish, part boutique, part unpretentious town, but it's most certainly all-American. Flaunting cutesy tourism slogans like ‘sip, savor, and swirl,’ or ‘from grape to glass,’ it's the essential marketing success story. Combining the history of the old stagecoach route with the origins of winemaking — the first vine was planted by a Franciscan padre — the city has hosted the Tour of California and a number of professional cycling teams for their annual spring training camps each year for the last 15 years.

After enjoying an *aebleskiver* brunch, a traditional sphere-shaped pancake soaked in syrup (the name means apple

slices), we set off with somewhat less enthusiasm for the windy ride along Santa Rosa Road, which follows the Santa Ynez River toward Lompoc. It remains a beautiful agrarian route, but the valley catches near gale-force winds coming up from the Pacific Ocean. I noticed that the boys had begun to struggle as we pedaled past pretty almond orchards, vegetable farms, and wineries, and I finally decided to halt the discomfort. We took a break in front of the Sanford Winery with about seven miles to go, not long before both boys were reduced to near exhaustion. Alas, there is no “side to side” when you are head down into a Force Five headwind.

We set up our tents at Lompoc's River Park campground before riding down to the nearby La Purisima Mission. “I can make anything from the mission period,” said blacksmith

Moises Soliz. “Anything!”

As we watched him craft a bolt of metal into a nail, we listened, we smelt, and we dwelt in the clamor, the acrid aroma, and the vision of a long-lost skill. Learning the trade from his father at the age of 14, Moises had been a traditional metal crafter for 55 years. “Nails, strap hinges, locks, bells, turn hinges, rifle barrels, breeches, knives, machetes ... anything, I can make it all.” I listened quietly and with a deep sense of respect for the man who has worked at La Purisima Mission for decades — he fashioned most of the restoration pieces out of raw iron for this California State Historic Park.

In 1834, following the order to secularize the missions, assets were administered civilly, landholdings were divided among the inhabitants, and the neophytes were released from supervision. In 1845, La Purisima was sold to Juan Temple of Los Angeles, after which it changed hands a few times before the end of the century. Mexico's independence from Spain marked the beginning of the end for the entire system, and Mexico began to divide the spoils. Governor Pio Pico and his brother appropriated 90,000 acres of land from Mission San Luis Rey alone. By 1846 mission life had disappeared.

Due to neglect, the La Purisima buildings eventually began to collapse, and by 1933, when the property was given to public ownership by Union Oil Company, the mission was in ruins. Thanks to the County of Santa Barbara, the State of California, the National Park Service, and the Civilian Conservation Corps, the renovation



Luke on the left, and Caleb on the right cycle through an avenue of old California oaks on the second morning.

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The Queen of missions looms large and stately behind a twist of twirly cactus in Santa Barbara.

of La Purisima began in 1934, with the grounds being restored and the rooms furnished to appear as they had in 1820. This was the only California mission not built in the shape of a quadrangle. The mission leaders had chosen a linear layout because they felt the local Chumash, a compliant group, wouldn't need to be contained within a fortress-like quadrangle.

Having enjoyed a quiet, if wet, night at Lompoc's River Park campground, we started down Highway 1 back to

Santa Barbara. As we passed the old Rancho San Julian, owned by the Dibblee family since the mid-19th century, I thought of the changes that had occurred since the missions were built. The rancho period followed the mission period, both part of the Spanish era, with the natives then seeking work on the large land grants as *vaqueros*, or cowboys. The vaquero tradition today is a cherished part of the American West.

Rancho San Julian rests in grassy

ranges that were put to good use by Spanish-born ranchers such as Don Jose de la Guerra. As commandante of the presidio at Santa Barbara, he was granted the right to graze cattle on the 48,221-acre ranch in 1816. A poem entitled *En El Rancho de San Julian* by Inez de la Guerra Dibblee is richly adorned with the fragrance of those days:

"Work is over for the day. From the old adobe kitchen smoke and the good odor of roasting beef. Looking up from



#### NUTS & BOLTS El Camino Real

##### WHEN TO GO

March is the best time to go for the sheer beauty of many of the places along the full ride from San Diego to San Francisco, but it can be done at any time of the year — even in the winter. The missions were founded along a track moving from San Diego northwards, but you could ride them in the opposite direction to get the benefit of the prevailing summer wind direction.

##### GEAR

With the incredible photographic potential of

each mission, be sure to take a camera. And if you are into night photography, you may want to include at least a strong flashlight to practice some light-painting techniques. If you enjoy journaling or sketching, definitely include a Moleskine or Rite in the Rain notebook, pencils, and eraser. There are some remarkable architectural structures to sketch.

##### BOOKS AND MAPS

A combination of *Bicycling the Pacific Coast* by Vicky Spring and Tom

Kirkendall and the website [missionscalifornia.com](http://missionscalifornia.com) would be the place to start. Once you have identified which missions you want to visit, be sure to google each of them because many have their own websites. One example is La Purisima Mission at [lapurisimamission.org](http://lapurisimamission.org). And, if you still enjoy guidebooks, take along a copy of the *California Mission Guide* by Bob Nicholson. It has a companion website at [CaliforniaMissionGuide.com](http://CaliforniaMissionGuide.com).

my book, I see the men sitting around on the bunkhouse step and benches against the wall waiting with clean hands and shining faces for the clang of the supper bell."

In 1822, the ranch was taken over by the Mexican government to function as a meat- and wool-producing "kitchen ranch," to supply the presidio garrison with beef, tallow, and horses.

Although most people today only visit one mission at a time, by choosing to bike from mission to mission, connecting as many as possible, cyclists should be able to cobble together a route that, in the north

and south sections of El Camino Real, relies on Adventure Cycling's Pacific Coast Route. The bells mark the route, and when we reached each mission, we lingered in the shade of the old porticos. "I just love the spirit of this place," Luke whispered as we walked through La Purisima's grounds. I knew what he meant. So did I. **AG**

Ian Vorster has been bike camping since he first rode into the South African bush in 1975. A 10-year triathlon career was followed by a lot of early-style bikepacking in southern African wilderness areas before he immigrated to the U.S. Ian operates his own environmental communications consultancy — you can see more at [dragonflyec.com](http://dragonflyec.com).



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