AMERICAN JOURNEYS:
Notes From the West
Written by Marta Gomez
Hollywood sign
Hollywood, California
AMERICAN JOURNEYS:

Notes From the West

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The West
Hola! That’s how you say hello in Spanish. My name is Marta, and I live in America’s West. I take lots of trips all over the West with my parents, so I decided to start a blog to tell my friends all about it!

The West is the biggest part of America. It has just about everything in it—the tallest mountains, the deepest valley, the driest deserts, and the wettest forests. The West includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.
Today I want to tell you a little about my state—California. More people live in California than any other state. It has 38 million people!

There are tons of interesting cities in California. We visited San Francisco this weekend. San Francisco is built on really steep hills. **Cable cars** take people up and down the hills.

San Francisco is one of the biggest **port** towns on the West Coast. Ships from all over the world come to trade.

We rode a cable car to Fisherman’s Wharf, where you can buy all sorts of seafood. We worked up an appetite walking around, so we got scoops of clam chowder served in a sourdough bread bowl. Did you know San Francisco is famous for its sourdough bread? The football team’s **mascot** is called Sourdough Sam! As we ate, we watched a group of sea lions right there by the docks. They were making a lot of noise. I think they hoped we would share some chowder with them!
San Francisco has a big beautiful bay. I saw giant ships and sailboats and all sorts of other boats on the bay. The famous Golden Gate Bridge stretches across the bay. The bridge isn’t actually gold, though. It’s bright orange! Turns out, the bridge is named for the water underneath it—the Golden Gate Strait. The bridge is one of the longest in the world. It’s awesome to see all the boats sail under it into the Pacific Ocean.

We also visited a neighborhood called Chinatown. I could smell delicious food from the restaurants and hear people speaking Chinese. There were pretty lanterns hanging in the streets. It was easy to imagine that I was actually in China! We visited the Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Company and saw workers making yummy-looking fortune cookies. Did you know fortune cookies were actually invented in California?
My favorite place to visit in San Francisco was the Exploratorium. It is a science museum where everything is hands-on. I made a giant soap bubble and did all kinds of experiments with magnets, mirrors, sound, and light!

I love San Francisco! Has anyone else visited there?

2 COMMENTS:

Frank | Tuesday, March 12, 2013
Hey, Marta! Great blog. I went to San Francisco too. My favorite place was Alcatraz Island. There’s a big prison there that’s no longer in use, but it’s really neat to tour!

Jen | Friday, March 29, 2013
I like your blog, Marta. Did you know that most Chinese-American people in San Francisco don’t live in Chinatown? Many Chinese immigrants lived there years ago, but it’s more for tourists now. But it’s still a lot of fun!
Cruisin’ Down the Coast

Tuesday, March 25, 2013

After we left San Francisco, we took a drive down the coast of California. The highway is right along the coast, so you get some incredible views of the Pacific Ocean.

The first place we stopped was San Jose. A lot of cities in California begin with San or Santa. These words are Spanish for saint. Before California joined the United States, it was part of Mexico. Before that, it was owned by Spain, so you can find Spanish influences all over California. Many city names are Spanish, and many homes are built in a Spanish style.

San Jose is in a region called Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley got its name because it is home to a lot of big technology and computer companies. Computers use chips made out of silicon. Computer-related companies, such as Apple, Google, and Facebook, are in Silicon Valley. We went to a museum called The Tech and learned all about technology and science.
The next place we visited was Los Angeles. *Los Angeles* is Spanish for *the angels*.

What does Los Angeles mean to you? I know what it means to me. Hollywood! That’s where most television shows and movies are made. We spent the entire trip learning about “the biz.” That’s what people in L.A. call show business. My mom got us tickets to see a show being filmed on a television set. It was not what I thought it would be like. Actors had to do each part of the show over and over again. On television, it looks like actors are in real houses and buildings, but in the studio, everything is fake. Rooms only have two or three walls so the audience and cameras can look in. It was cool to see how a TV show is made.

Our last stop was San Diego. San Diego was the first Spanish *settlement* in California. It is really close to Mexico. We visited a neighborhood called Old Town, where there are a lot of historic buildings. Old Town is a mix of Mexican and American cultures. We also went to Balboa Park, which is much more than just a park. There are many different gardens and museums in the park. The San Diego Zoo is there too. It has more than 4,000 animals and is one of the biggest zoos in the world.
2 COMMENTS:

Kayla | Wednesday, April 3, 2013
I’ve been to Hollywood! I walked along the Hollywood Walk of Fame, which is a long sidewalk that has brass stars all over it. Each star has the name of someone famous from Hollywood.

Greg | Monday, April 8, 2013
Did you go to Catalina Island? You can take a ferry from the mainland to get there. The water around Catalina Island is clear. Some boats have glass bottoms so you can see colorful fish without getting wet.

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2012
Trip to Paradise

Wednesday, April 24, 2013

Aloha, friends! I’m writing to you today from the beautiful state of Hawaii. My mom was born in Hawaii, so every few years we go to Hawaii to visit my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Did you know Hawaii was the last state to join the United States? Hawaii became a state in 1959. My grandparents were teenagers when that happened.

Hawaii is made up of hundreds of islands, but there are six big islands that most people live on. The main islands are Hawaii, Maui, Lanai, Molokai, Kauai, and Oahu. All the islands were formed from volcanic eruptions.
My family lives on Kauai. Kauai’s nickname is the Garden Isle. The island really does look like a garden. There is a rule that says buildings can’t be taller than a coconut tree!

Here, it’s warm all year round. There are hundreds of beaches to visit and a lot of great watersports to try. In some areas, the water is calm and clear blue. It is perfect for snorkeling. It’s so neat to see colorful fish swim among the coral reefs! In other areas, the water rises into huge waves. Surfers love the waves in Hawaii.

Exotic frangipani flowers grow abundantly on the Garden Isle.

Kee Beach on the island of Kauai
Hawaii has tons of incredible natural sites to visit. Check out this website to learn more about some of them!

Sorry to blog and run, but I want to make the most of my time here. We’re going to check out Wailua Falls, a big waterfall on the east side of the island. Rainbows often form around this waterfall. I hope I get to see one!

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2 COMMENTS:

Melania | Wednesday, April 24, 2013
Aloha, Marta! Did you know aloha also means goodbye?

Raschid | Thursday, April 25, 2013
Three of the Hawaiian volcanoes are still active. Kilauea Volcano on the Big Island has been erupting since January 1983—that’s more than thirty years of spewing lava and ash!

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2012
Driving Through the Desert

Sunday, June 16, 2013

Last week we went to the Grand Canyon. That’s in Arizona. On the way there, we drove through the Mojave Desert. The Mojave stretches through California, Nevada, and the top corner of Arizona. It also reaches to Utah, but we didn’t go that far north. There is a lot of desert in the western states. In fact, there are four huge deserts. The Mojave is the smallest of the four, but it seemed to stretch forever as we drove through it.
Have you seen a cactus? We saw many on the trip. Some cacti, like the barrel cactus, look like fat, prickly columns. The beavertail and prickly pear cacti look like flat, spiny ovals. But all cacti have big roots to help them get water from the dry earth. Cacti store water in their stems. We also saw a few coyote among the cacti. It is so hot that I don’t know how they can live there.

We stopped at Hoover Dam on our way. It’s on the border between Nevada and Arizona. The dam is like a power plant, except it makes power from water instead of coal or oil. When it was built, it was the tallest dam in the world. Taller dams have been built since then, but the Hoover Dam still looked huge to me.
Before we got to the Grand Canyon, I didn’t really know what to expect it to look like. The Grand Canyon was carved by the rushing waters of the Colorado River over many, many years. The canyon is 277 miles long and more than a mile deep in most places. If you’re afraid of heights, standing at the top and looking down is pretty scary. There’s a place called the Skywalk where you can stand on a glass bridge and look down to the bottom of the canyon. Mom and Dad were brave enough to do it, but there was no way I was doing that!
Have any of you been to the Grand Canyon? We hiked by foot, but we saw groups of people riding mules down the curvy paths. I bet that would have been fun.

Jorge | Wednesday, June 19, 2013
Lake Havasu is another great place to visit in Arizona! The lake is actually a reservoir for a big dam, but a lot of fish and wildlife live in it. If you go there, you can see the original London Bridge. The bridge got to be too small for the city of London, so it was sold to the founder of Lake Havasu City and moved to Arizona.

Tina | Sunday, July 28, 2013
When we visited the Grand Canyon, we came from the east. We stopped by Four Corners. It’s where Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah meet. If you stand the right way, you can actually be in four states at one time.
Chillin’ in Colorado

Monday, August 19, 2013

Dad is a huge sports buff, so we went to Colorado Springs, Colorado, to check out the U.S. Olympic Training Center. Athletes from all over the country train for the Olympics there with some of the best coaches in the world. We took a tour of the training center, and our tour guide was an actual Olympic athlete! She told us that the Olympic motto is “Citius, Altius, Fortius.” That’s Latin for “faster, higher, stronger.”

We couldn’t leave Colorado Springs without checking out Pikes Peak, which is a mountain in the Rocky Mountain chain. We took a small train from the bottom of the mountain all the way to the top. It was a pretty steep climb. We saw a lot of wildlife on the way up, including a few herds of bighorn sheep. When the train got to the top, the conductor let us get out and walk around. The views were incredible, but we couldn’t stay too long because of the high altitude. There is less air the higher up you go. That makes it harder to breathe and can make you feel sick.

The next day, we took a bigger train from Colorado Springs to the state capital, Denver. Denver’s nickname is the Mile High City. Can you guess why? The city is a mile above sea level.
People come from all over the world to ski in the Rockies. However, we were in Denver in August, so we weren’t able to ski. I have never been skiing, but I would love to learn how!

We’ve got one more day left here in Denver, and we haven’t decided what we should do next. Anyone have any suggestions?

2 COMMENTS:

Kylie | Monday, August 19, 2013
Go to the U.S. Mint. You can go on a tour and see how money is made. Ever noticed how some coins are stamped with a tiny D? That’s because those coins were made in Denver!

Adam | Monday, August 19, 2013
Go to the Buffalo Bill Museum! It’s a little outside of the city, but it’s worth the trip. Buffalo Bill starred in the famous Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show. His show brought the West to the rest of the country. The museum also has an amazing view of Denver.
Roaming the Rockies

Tuesday, September 24, 2013

I just came back from another totally cool trip to the Rocky Mountains.

The Rockies are really tall, and they’re also really long—about 3,000 miles long. They stretch through New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Montana, and even into Canada. We spent most of our time in Utah.

The Rocky Mountains have mines where people used to dig for gold, silver, and lead. We saw some old mining camps where the miners used to live. When a mine closed, everybody moved away. Now all that’s left is a **ghost town**. Ghost towns are towns that were abandoned. Sometimes people left in such a hurry that they left most of their belongings. We saw a few ghost towns. Some had many buildings, and one only had an old schoolhouse. Desks and books were in the same place they had been left years ago.
We also spent some time in Salt Lake City. The city is mostly surrounded by the Wasatch and Oquirrh mountain ranges. Where there aren’t mountains, there is **marshland**. The marshlands separate the city from the Great Salt Lake. The lake is very salty, too salty for fish to live there.

While we were in Salt Lake City, we went to the Natural History Museum of Utah and learned tons about the area’s history. There was an exhibit all about the Native American nations who lived in Utah long before the **pioneers** headed west. There was also an exhibit about the dinosaurs that used to roam Utah. Seeing their skeletons was wild!

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**3 COMMENTS:**

_Talia | Friday, September 27, 2013_
Did you stay in any of the national parks when you were in the Rockies? There are lots of parks with great camping out west. I’ve camped in Glacier National Park in Montana and in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado.

_Sun Ming | Friday, September 27, 2013_
The Bonneville Salt Flats are west of the Great Salt Lake. They look like a huge, flat desert covered in salt instead of sand. The flats were formed when another salty lake, Lake Bonneville, dried up, and all that was left was salt.

_Luke | Saturday, September 28, 2013_
If you’re interested in ghost towns, you should look up Bodie, California. Bodie is a big ghost town with about 100 buildings still standing. You can see pictures of the buildings online. The insides of the houses and stores are still filled with furniture, the same as the day their owners left them.
Hey, Dude!

Friday, November 29, 2013

Howdy! We’ve been staying at a **dude ranch** in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Jackson Hole is a **valley** in the Rocky Mountains. I know I’ve been blogging a lot about the Rockies, but you just can’t avoid them in the West!

I had to pack carefully for this trip because I knew we’d be doing some outdoor activities. The ranch owners told us to pack jeans and cowboy or riding boots for horseback riding. I also brought a jacket because we knew it would be chilly in the mornings and evenings.

We did lots of fun activities at the ranch. The ranch hands taught the guests how to line dance. Most of the dances were to country music songs. Some people call line dancing “boot scootin’” because you kind of scoot your boots along the floor as you dance.
My favorite part of the trip was when we got to see Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park. Old Faithful is a geyser that erupts about seventeen times a day. It’s called Old Faithful because people can count on it to erupt so frequently. When it erupts, hot water shoots more than 100 feet into the air! Yellowstone National Park sits atop a supervolcano. The incredible heat below the earth’s surface is what causes geysers to spray hot water. The park has some webcams of the geysers on its site—check them out here!

Dude ranches were places city folks would vacation and learn about the West. Did you know that the word dude used to describe an Easterner in the West? Did you see any bison in Yellowstone? It’s one of the best places to see them. I hope you didn’t get too close though. Full-grown bison are about six feet tall and weigh nearly 2,000 pounds. They are huge!
Mom and I went back in time yesterday. We visited the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center in Baker City, Oregon. We tried on pioneer clothing and climbed into a covered wagon called a prairie schooner. The actual wagon where people lived and stored all of their belongings was a lot smaller than I thought it would be. A sign told us that today’s average car is longer and wider than those wagons.

Volunteers at the center were dressed like pioneers. Some acted out doing chores, and others told stories about life on the trail. They all spoke about wagons and chores like it really was the 1800s.

We rented a car and drove from Baker City to Oregon’s largest city, Portland. The car ride was nearly five hours long. That sounds like a long time, but it would have taken pioneers several weeks to go that far in a covered wagon. It was a lot less bumpy than it would have been in a wagon too. Most pioneers actually walked the Oregon Trail because it was too bumpy and uncomfortable to sit in the wagons.

Dad was already waiting for us in Portland because of work meetings earlier in the week. On our way to meet him at the hotel, we passed Mill Ends Park. Mill Ends is the smallest park in the world. It’s a tiny circle only two feet across. My Portland guidebook told me that the park’s creator built the park for a leprechaun named Patrick O’Toole, and a lot of St. Patrick’s Day celebrations are actually held there.
It rains a lot in Portland, but that makes it a great place to grow flowers. It’s even called the Rose City. We visited a beautiful rose garden and a rhododendron garden. We went out to the Columbia River Gorge and saw Multnomah Falls. The waterfall drops 620 feet!

We have two more days here in Portland, and I’ve been scouring my guidebook to figure out what we should do. Any suggestions?

2 COMMENTS:

Enzo | Saturday, March 1, 2014
If you visit the southern part of Oregon, check out Crater Lake National Park. A huge group of volcanoes erupted thousands of years ago and created a big hole in the earth. The hole kind of looks like it was made by a meteor. Rainwater filled the hole, and now it’s called Crater Lake. It’s the deepest lake in the country.

Izzie | Sunday, March 2, 2014
The Pittock Mansion is in Portland. Henry and Georgina Pittock were both pioneers who traveled across the country on the Oregon Trail with their families. Henry was penniless when he made it to Oregon, but later he became one of the richest men in Portland! He and Georgina watched Portland change from a small lumber town to a big city. You can tour their mansion and see what their life was like.

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2012
I went to Seattle, Washington with my dad. Seattle is a big port in the Pacific Northwest. It is located on Puget Sound, which is an inlet of the Pacific Ocean. It’s really pretty. I liked watching all the boats going in and out. There was just one problem. It rained almost every day. It rains about 150 days a year in Seattle. That’s about three days a week. Dad told me it actually rains more frequently in Portland, and we were actually lucky to have such a sunny trip there in March. Even with Seattle’s rain, we had a great time. Every morning we walked over to the Pike Place Market for breakfast. The market is filled with shops, food stalls, and restaurants. One day we went to a rock-and-roll museum, where we got to play instruments, sing, and record our own CD.
On our last day, the sun finally came out. We took advantage of the sun and visited the Space Needle. It’s one of the tallest towers in the world. We rode the elevator to the top and looked at the city from the observation deck. We could see Mount Rainier in the distance.

We also walked through an incredible garden at the bottom of the Space Needle. The garden had trees and flowers, but it also had a bunch of sculptures made of colored glass. All the sculptures were made by an artist named Dale Chihuly.

Have you ever been to Seattle? What did you think?

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**1 COMMENT:**

Emily | Monday, May 19, 2014

We took an underground tour of Pioneer Square. A long time ago, a lot of Seattle was destroyed by a huge fire. Instead of knocking everything down to rebuild the city, the people simply built on top of the original city. If you go on an underground tour, you can see what Seattle looked like in the 1880s!
Hi, readers! Mom and Dad just told me they’re planning a big trip for next year. Can you guess where we’re going? I’ll give you some hints:

• This place has more than seventy volcanoes.
• It has three million lakes.
• It has 5,000 earthquakes every year.

Any guesses? I’ll give you one more hint: Its nickname is “The Last Frontier.”

It’s Alaska! The only problem is that they haven’t decided where in Alaska we should go. The state is huge! Seriously, it’s ginormous. Mom and Dad said I should do research on a few cities, and then we can make a family decision about which one to visit.
Have any of you faithful readers been to Alaska before? I’d love some advice.

5 COMMENTS:

Ava | Friday, July 11, 2014
Hi, Marta! You should come to my town, Anchorage! Anchorage is the biggest city in Alaska, and there’s always something exciting going on. The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race kicks off from here each March. There’s a big ceremony where you can watch the dog mushers and their teams of dogs begin the race.

William | Tuesday, July 15, 2014
Denali is in Alaska. You might know it by its other name, Mount McKinley. It’s the highest peak in all of North America.

Yifan | Wednesday, July 16, 2014
I’ve heard great things about the state capital, Juneau! You can see incredible glaciers, and you can take a whale-watching tour. Hundreds of humpback whales migrate to Juneau each summer. I’d love to see that!

Pia | Friday, August 1, 2014
If you come to Alaska during the summer months, the days are really long. In some places, the sun sets around 10 p.m. in the summer. In other places, it doesn’t set for weeks! In the winter, we only have a few hours of daylight because the state is so close to the Arctic Circle. It can be dark for days, but you get to see the northern lights. The sky lights up with bright streaks of color.

Marta | Wednesday, August 13, 2014
Thanks for all of your suggestions! Keep checking back to see where we decide to go on our Alaskan adventure.
Glossary

**altitude:** Height above earth or sea level.

**bay:** Water partially surrounded by land but connected to the sea.

**cable cars:** Vehicles pulled by cable.

**cactus:** A prickly plant that stores water and lives in hot, dry places.

**canyon:** A deep valley with steep sides and water flowing through it.

**capital:** The city where a state’s government is located.

**coast:** Land next to an ocean.

**dam:** A wall built across a river to stop water from flowing.

**desert:** A dry region with few plants.

**dude ranch:** A vacation resort on a ranch.

**ferry:** Boat that carries people and sometimes cars.

**frontier:** A settlement at the edge of the wilderness.

**geyser:** A spring that shoots hot water, steam, or mud into the air.

**ghost town:** A town that has been deserted.

**glaciers:** Big masses of slowly moving ice.

**immigrants:** People who move to a foreign country.

**inlet:** A body of water that comes in from the sea or ocean.

**mainland:** The main part of a country or continent; not an island.

**mansion:** A very large, expensive home.

**marshland:** Area made of marshes or swamps.

**mascot:** A person, animal, or thing that represents a group or place.

**mint:** A place where money is made.

**northern lights:** Colorful lights that appear in the sky near the North Pole.

**pioneers:** The first people to do something.

**port:** A place where ships load and unload.

**reservoir:** Place where water is collected and stored.

**settlement:** A colony.

**tourists:** People who travel to see a new place.

**valley:** Low land between mountains or hills.

**webcam:** Camera that sends pictures or videos over the Internet.
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Hiking above the clouds in Denali National Park on Mt. McKinley
Meerkat
San Diego Zoo
Look at all my pictures and blog entries from my trips to explore America’s West!

Thanks, Marta