

# California Dreamin'

Sequoia National Park and Santa Monica, California

10-11 October 2022

“Huge  
Trees”





# *Tree huggers*

*Sequoiadendron giganteum*  
Giant Forest  
Sequoia National Park

# Huge trees & hot dogs

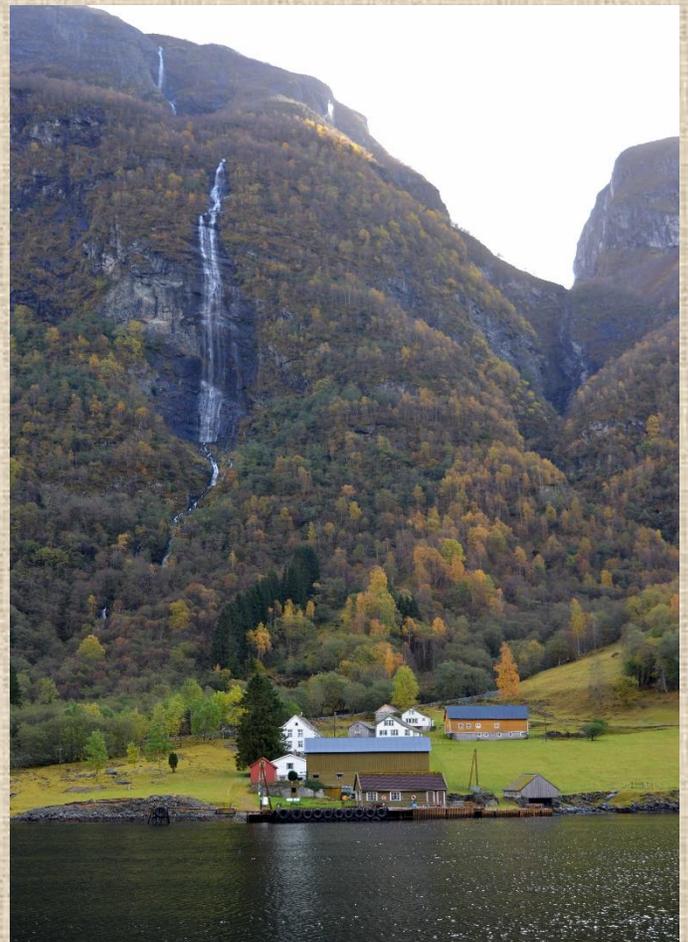
“Huge trees” were one of the two items on the must-see list that Per and Olav had for their first California visit. Perhaps I over-thought the best way to check this item off their list.

California is known world-wide for having the “hugest” trees in the world. But what does that mean? The tallest known tree in the world is the [Hyperion redwood](#) — 380 feet / 116 meters tall — which is taller than London’s Big Ben clock tower. It lives in an unmarked location (to protect it from the kind of people activated by “Wet Paint” signs) within Redwood National Park in the far northwest corner of the state. Yet not only would we not know if we were seeing Hyperion even if we stood beside it, going up to that park near Crescent City would take us to the opposite end of the state and add a couple of days’ driving time to the trip to Per and Olav’s other must-see place. We spent enough time in the car as it was.

The huge tree alternative was the [giant sequoia](#), another, related, species but one whose name often is mistakenly interchanged with redwoods. They live in 81 scattered groves on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada between 4,600 and 7,050 ft / 1,400-2,150 m elevation. Many international visitors see sequoias in the Mariposa Grove in Yosemite National Park, the best-known national park in California.

But I didn’t plan Yosemite for a couple of reasons. One is that despite the beauty of Yosemite Valley and its waterfalls, for which the park is primarily known, glacial valleys aren’t so rare in Europe. The Alps are full of them, and in some, the glaciers are still there. The waterfalls flow all year. All 1,700 of Norway’s named fjords are glacial valleys with the ocean at the bottom. For a significant number of Norwegians, glacial valleys and waterfalls are simply “my back yard.”

So, I picked Sequoia National Park, which is named for what we wanted to see because it’s named for what the park is created to protect: the most massive tree in the world, meaning the greatest volume of wood. The [General Sherman tree](#) is estimated to be as old as 2,700 years and is 275 ft / 31.3 m tall. If you walked around its base, you’d cover more than a third of the length of a football gridiron or soccer pitch.



A farm on the Nærøfjord that I shot on our visit in 2017.

Bottom line: I did not want the boys to go back to their classmates in Åsa with a picture showing them at the base of some random, absurdly huge tree. I wanted them to be able to show the Oskars and Ingrids back home a picture of a tree that, by some validated measure, was the hugest on our planet. That’s what the cover photo on this newsletter shows: Olav, Per and General Sherman.

Moving directly from a roadtrip to see America’s trees brings me to hot dogs, [an immigrant street food](#) that embedded itself in our culture and is celebrated as a [pillar of the nation in this 1970s TV commercial](#).

But the status of hot dogs, baseball, apple pie and Chevrolets has changed since that commercial was made. You can still buy a hot dog at a baseball game or find one on a grill on the Fourth of July. But try to find one at a roadside pitstop, where hamburgers and tacos dominate the fast-food landscape. Go ahead. Get in the car, head out on the road, and ask Siri to find the nearest freeway exit with a hot dog stand.

That's the dilemma we faced when we were on the road with our Norwegian visitors. Whether they got the hot dog-loving gene from Germany or America, Norwegians eat about [100 hot dogs per person each year](#) and they are a fixture on the menu of their national day, the 17<sup>th</sup> of May. Per and Olav grilled hot dogs on a stick over a fire built in the snow [on my visit to their house three years ago](#).

So when they wanted a hot dog on the road, it took a major detour to find a place where they could eat one. In our case, the kids' menu at the Black Bear Diner in Bakersfield had corn dogs.

San Jose has a couple of places in the annals of American hot dog history. The first is through San Jose State University, alma mater of [Joey "Jaws" Chestnut, who won the annual Fourth of July Nathans Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest in Coney Island, New York](#) for the 15<sup>th</sup> time this year by downing 63 hot dogs in 10 minutes.

We ran into the other on the last full day of the Norwegians' visit when we took a shopping mall trip for Legos. One of the boys spotted an Umai Savory Hot Dogs place in the food court, where we had lunch. The story of this new hot dog restaurant's birth ([third item down on this page](#)) is San Jose's contribution to the all-American story.



*Three on a beach*

Santa Monica State Beach  
Santa Monica, California



*I'll have some of yours*

Foot of Grapevine Canyon  
Kern County



*SoCal afternoon*

Santa Monica State Beach  
Santa Monica, California

# Notes on photos

**Cover and Tree huggers** — One of the things that immediately struck me as we drove into Sequoia National Park was the amount of fire damage since I was last in the park in 2015, when I did two hikes and wrote about them [here](#) and [here](#). Although they don't appear in the photos I used in this newsletter, there are black fire scars all over from the Castle Fire in 2020 and the KNP Complex and Windy fires last year. That's when firefighters wrapped the base of some of the more significant trees in a special silvery foil to protect them. Downed trees, felled either by fires or firefighters, litter much of the forest floor. The [San Francisco Chronicle](#) reported last June that the Castle Fire alone killed 10% to 14% of the mature sequoias in the park including the world's ninth-largest, the King Arthur tree. As many as 3,600 sequoias 4 ft / 1.2 m or more in diameter were killed or are expected to die within the next three to five years as a result of the subsequent fires in summer 2021, a [National Park Service report says](#). Once a species found in Europe and North America before the last Ice Age confined the sequoias' range to the Sierra Nevada, the report says the fire damage in those two years "represent[s] a significant threat to large sequoia persistence." It's an irony that a species once endangered by ice is now threatened by extinction due to fire, which the trees actually rely on to burst open their cones and spread their seeds. The report blames the increased severity of California's wildfires for turning the sequoia's dependence on fire into fire as an existential threat. That's due to "interaction of these climate-driven trends [i.e., global warming] with elevated fuel loads [i.e., [Smokey the Bear-style](#) fire suppression that allowed too much undergrowth]."

**Three on a beach** — In addition to Per and Olav's list of must-sees, Hanne told me during trip planning that "Norwegians love beaches," and that if we could stop at one somewhere in our travels, the boys would want to swim. On this day they swam in a motel pool and in the Pacific. Mission accomplished.

**I'll have some of yours** — Eating out is not a big feature of Norwegian life, which Hanne attributed to the expense of restaurants there and that most of the 5.5 million Norwegians live in towns too small to support good restaurants. "We usually pack sandwiches," she said. I'd add that outside the biggest cities, Norwegian roads can be poor — sometimes just one lane with periodic wide spots to allow opposing traffic to pass — and American-style road trips that require restaurant support can be arduous. A roadside monument to American car culture like [this complex at the Kern County end of the Grapevine](#) on Interstate 5, where we ate at the pictured Denny's, simply doesn't exist in Norway. That, and cheap airfares, help explain why [there are more domestic airline flights per capita in Norway than any European country and the routes between the Oslo, the capital, and the cities of Bergen, Stavanger and Trondheim — each a rather small city — rank among the 10 busiest air routes on the continent](#). Oil-rich but clean-air Norway is already the world's second-largest market for electric cars (Hanne just bought a used Tesla) and now the [government is considering whether to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from airlines](#) by requiring electric planes.

**SoCal afternoon and Beachcombers** — Per and Olav, who are in the picture on the next page with Hanne and Emily, swim in the ocean during their summer vacation trips to a family cabin on the Norwegian coast. Last winter, Hanne told me about a swimming party with friends at a nearby lake in which they cut through the ice. She has a "spa date" before Christmas with friends on a floating sauna in Oslo harbor where they will alternately sizzle inside and swim in the winter water.



# *Beachcombers*

Santa Monica State Beach  
Santa Monica, California