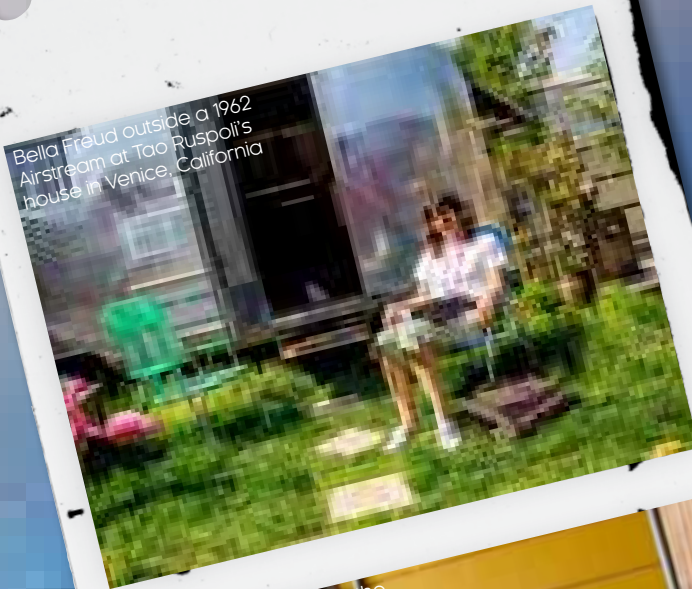


The twilight zone

James Fox and his family hit the road in the California desert – a parallel universe of alien landscapes, surreal ghost towns and close encounters with folk who've followed a very different route

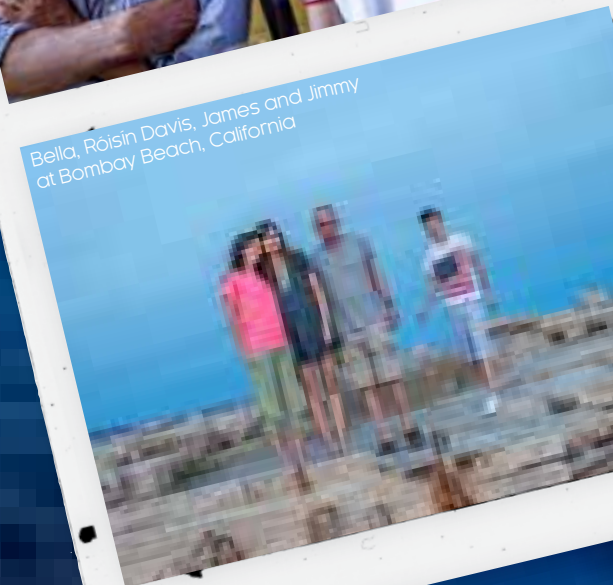
Bella Freud outside a 1962 Airstream at Tao Ruspoli's house in Venice, California



James and Jimmy Fox at the Crossroads Cafe, Joshua Tree



Bella, Róisín Davis, James and Jimmy at Bombay Beach, California



A Beetle and blue skies in the town of Joshua Tree





Róisín, Jimmy and James on Tao Ruspoli's porch in the town of Bombay Beach, on the Salton Sea



Parked up and camped out in the Mojave desert

It started as a boys' trip: taking my 12-year-old son across the California deserts, camping out. Then others piled in. My wife Bella; friends Tao (filmmaker) and Róisín (PhD student) of Venice, California. We hired a Cruise America C30 camper that slept seven, with generator and aircon – the desert's already hot in spring. We plotted a ragged circle from LA, with Las Vegas the farthest point: the Mojave first, on the southern swing, and Death Valley on the northern return. Those seven days took us to the most immense and beautiful landscapes I have seen outside East Africa – into a new Wild West of lost utopias and reinhabited ghost towns, a 1,200-mile eye-opener on Californian boom and bust, and a 12-year-old's dream.

First, a convergence at the finely re-Deco'd Beverley Hills Hotel. The power players in the Polo Lounge talk loudly. 'I'll tell you what the show's about,' booms one to a pair of crestfallen listeners. The director Guy Ritchie, whom I meet in the circular lobby, heard this too.

We head for Palm Springs, a walled and gated Republican redoubt, only because of the hipster modernist Ace Hotel & Swim Club, which is cool indeed. At breakfast beside the curving pool, our first image of the West: John Wayne mountains, the colour of bleached cow dung, rise sheer behind the palm trees, very close by.

'I'm going to take you to one of the weirdest places in America, if not the world,' says Tao. He has a house – two trailers banged together with added porch – at Bombay Beach, 65 miles to the south-east on Route 111. This is a town built, it seems, on salt-rusted car-kill, though back in the Fifties it was a glamorous resort beside the Salton Sea, the 400-square-mile lake created by a flood accident on the Colorado river in 1905. It's too salty now for most fish life. A relic of bust hopes, the North Shore Beach and Yacht Club, with its Commodore Room where Hollywood once came, has been pointlessly restored, facing a yachtless, glassy expanse of ghost lake. The town has a population of 300, mostly on benefits or pensions. It is a romantic place where Jimmy, our son, wants to live, mostly because of its silence. Only cockerels at dawn, the odd dog and the whistle from the Union Pacific, hauling trains of 100 boxcars beside the highway. At night Jimmy cooks us chilli, on the porch furnished with cupids holding flower baskets.

Nearby, a sign says: 'Slab City. Almost There. The last free place.' This trailer and shack park, built on the slabs of a demolished Army camp, has no water, sewage or electricity. On its edge is the 'suburb' of East Jesus, something of a fugitive artist's colony with fantastic

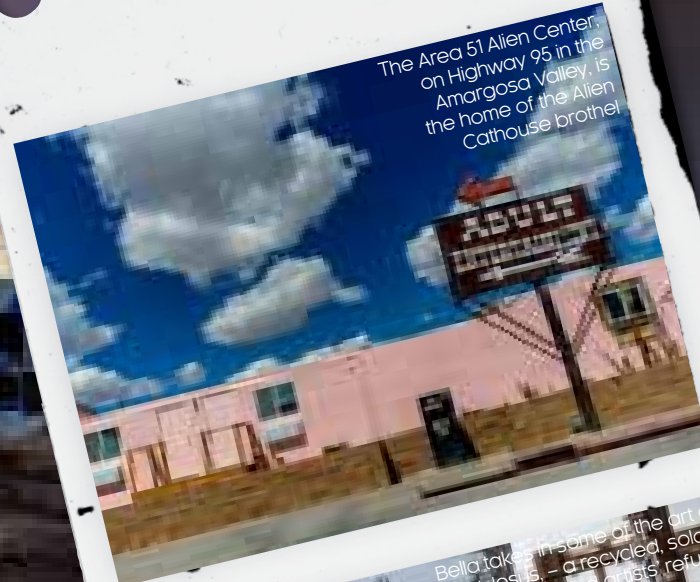
sculptures and installations, a little forbidding. An otherwise friendly man called Marty Owens wears the warning 'Armed and bitter libertarian drunkards live here'. Armed, certainly. I ask how communal disputes are settled. 'We have a shotgun,' says Owens. 'It's survival of the fittest here, but also we have respect.' He was a furniture maker in Buffalo when the jobs ran out. 'I didn't want to sit there and freeze,' he says. 'So I hit the road.'

Further around Slab City is the Lizard Tree Library, its ramshackle aisles, crammed with books, set down on the desert floor, its roof made of sacking and tin. An old man bangs on the side of the RV. He's from the East End of London, now aged 87, spry and sharp. 'I was in the Army in the war, 1488276 fusilier Kitchings G (for Geoff),' he reels off. 'Some interesting people here. Some dropped out, couldn't quite make it in the world today. Some are wanted by police. They melt into the scenery. Nobody bothers them.' I ask him how they deal with trouble. He turns to his neighbour. 'What's the word for burning someone's trailer down, Steve?' he says.

Joshua Tree National Park, our first real taste of desert, is in spring bloom – yellow goldenbush and scarlet ocotillo light up the grey-green landscape. We find a magical campsite just off the road – a disused pony stockade with a water tank, surrounded by the Dr Seuss-lookalike Joshuas. Jimmy collects hollow Joshua logs for a fire, keeping an eye for the dreaded Mojave rattlesnake.

The town of Joshua Tree, 15 miles away, flies the flag for the hippie spirit and has the best breakfast we eat – at the Crossroads Cafe. Cornbread so light and tasty, burrito with black beans. (Yelp.com, the people's word of mouth, also gets us to the tastiest meatball sandwich ever made – Jimmy concurring – in KC's Outpost Eatery & Saloon in Beatty, Nevada, on 95, and to the sublime Clint Eastwood's Skillet in the Alabama Hills Café and Bakery in Lone Pine, CA, on 395.) I make a pilgrimage to the Joshua Tree Inn, the motel where Gram Parsons, the buddy of Keith Richards who put country heartbreak into rock, overdosed in 1973. Its owner Margo Paolucci has kept the place almost intact, including that small, breeze-blocked Room 8, with the same painting and mirror on the wall.

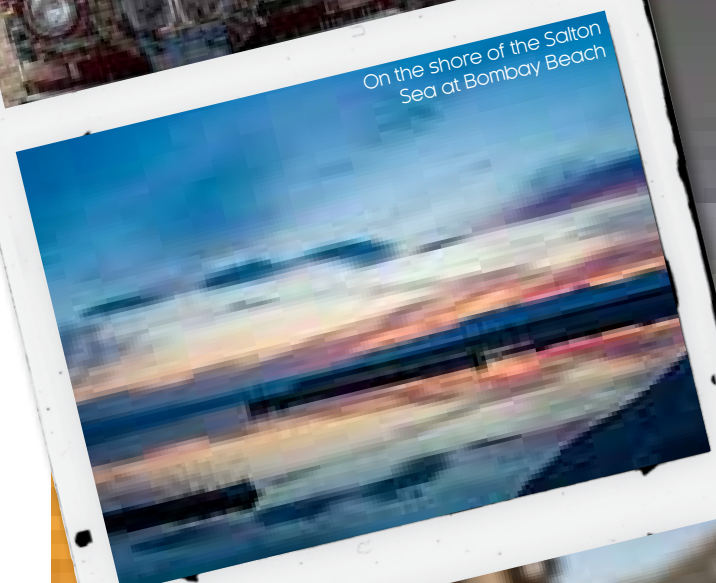
We cut north through the Mojave National Preserve, towards the isolated rail depot of Kelso – built 1923 – with its original bedrooms for the rail crews and a classic old diner, still functioning. This is the middle of the wilderness, next to the Devil's Playground – a landscape



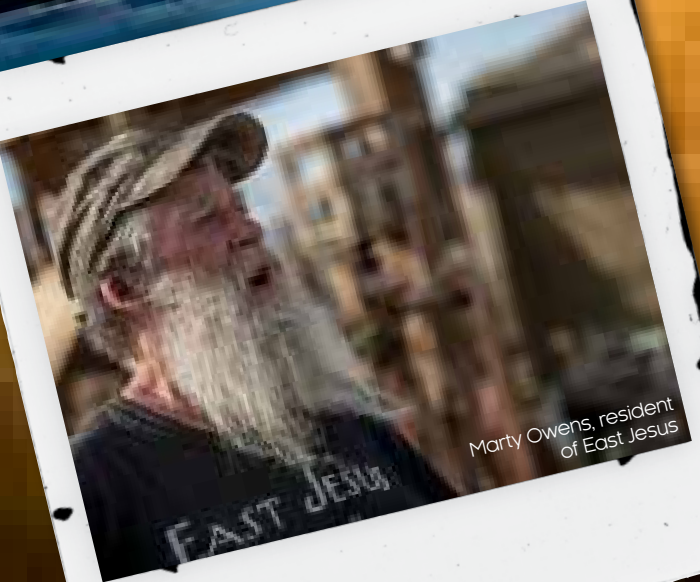
The Area 51 Alien Center, on Highway 95 in the Amargosa Valley, is the home of the Alien Cathouse brothel



Bella takes in some of the art at East Jesus – a recycled, solar-powered artists' refuge



On the shore of the Salton Sea at Bombay Beach



Marty Owens, resident of East Jesus

