

ADVENTURES IN LUCASLAND

In my continued quest to visit the location sites from the *Star Wars* saga, my latest adventure took me to Northern California to see the Redwood sites used to double for the Forest Moon of Endor, home to those pesky Ewoks in *Return of the Jedi*.

Deciding to start at the Northern most point of California and drive south, ultimately ending up in Los Angeles, the trip allowed me to take in far more than just the Endor sites, affording me the opportunity to visit other key Lucas related venues.

Day 1

The Redwood sites of Northern California that were used for JEDI are actually very spread out and separated by hundreds of miles but the most logical place to start is Crescent City, which is the most widely known of places connected to the movie.

It is not possible to get a direct flight to Crescent City from the UK so I flew to San Francisco and then got a connecting flight onto Crescent City, or so we thought.

Crescent City airport is tiny, akin to basically a field with a landing strip and large shed acting as the terminal. Northern California is often blighted by fog and bad weather and my flight was one of many affected. After many delays and schedule changes we took off on our very small plane, just 12 passengers and headed to Crescent City to be told, halfway through the flight that we couldn't land at Crescent City and were being diverted to Arcata, an equally tiny airstrip just north of Eureka. It took about an hour and a half to be driven from Arcata to Crescent City but finally arrived tired and hungry after a very long day.

Crescent City is not the most exciting place I've ever been to but had enough of what you needed in terms of accommodation and shops/restaurants to make a short trip bearable.

Day 2

Awaking to heavy fog it was off to the airport to pick up the hire car and begin the task of visiting the varied sites I had set my mind on.

First up was a short drive of about 10 miles north of Crescent City to Smith River to visit the *Ship Ashore Motel*. This was the place used for the main cast and crew to stay in during filming in the spring of 1982.

I had tried to make reservations at this motel, so as to actually stay there to begin my trip but they do not take on line bookings and when ever I phoned I only got an ansaphone message so ultimately gave up and opted to stay in Crescent City.

It turned out to be a wise decision. The motel is in the middle of nowhere along the side of the main highway 101. Although a fairly pretty site with the shoreline behind the motel, the motel now has a huge trailer park immediately in front of it between itself and the highway. There really is nothing around the motel and you would need to drive into Crescent City to find civilisation.



Above left: The Ship Ashore Motel in all it's glory, "Dogs & Ewoks not allowed"
 Above right: The "Ship" ashore, hence the name, in front of the motel.



Inside the motel reception they don't make reference to the movie unlike the Hotel 1222 in Finse, Norway does regarding Empire, but you can buy some nice postcards of the area and even a souvenir bar of *Ship Ashore* soap.

I spoke with the receptionist but she hadn't worked there very long and had no stories to relay from the days of filming. No scandal uncovered, sadly. The "ship" itself was supposed to house a museum and gift shop but unfortunately this had all vacated when I was there. The whole thing was shut up and empty, maybe it was off season and they re-open again in high season but there was nothing doing the day I was there.

There really isn't much to see once you have wondered around the motel and grounds but it was a starting point and somewhere I wanted see and satisfy my own curiosity.

Leaving the motel behind I drove south on the 101 and headed into Jedediah Smith State Park. This is one of many Redwood Parks in Northern California that feature the enormous and ancient Redwood trees that grow as tall as 90 meters and feature prominently in *Return of the Jedi* as part of the Endor scenery.

Northern California is home to many Redwood parks but a large part of the location filming for JEDI was done on private land which was felled and cleared immediately after the production had moved on. So it isn't possible to see the spot where the Imperial Bunker sat, as it was when filming took place, but just wandering around the amazing forests gives you a real sense of Ewok country.

Despite heavy fog each morning, this cleared by late morning/mid-day and the skies changed to brilliant blue. The Redwoods on a warm sunny day really are beautiful and one of the most unspoilt places I have ever been.

It's worth doing as I did and have a guided walk through the forest with one of the Park Rangers. The tour was free and information and times can be gained from the various Ranger stations in all the parks.



Above left: Dwarfed by a small portion of a mighty Redwood.
Above right: A tiny part of the natural beauty of the forests.

The forest can actually be a dangerous place with poisonous plants, wildlife and the danger of getting lost (as nearly happened to me) if you wander from the designated trails, so a guided walk is advisable.



After a lovely day out in the Redwoods it was back to Crescent City and the Travelodge motel I was staying at. This is another of the several hotels used by the production in 1982.

In the evening I attempted to find another place of interest, *Jims Restaurant*, somewhere that Harrison Ford had taken a shine to whilst staying in the area and frequented on many occasions. Well it seems either “Jim” is dead and buried or the credit crunch has put the place out of business. I could find no trace of it and the few locals I spoke to had no idea what I was talking about. There was no listing for a *Jims Restaurant* of any kind in the local area phonebook. It is possible that it has changed hands and therefore name but I didn’t have the inclination to investigate further, it was a case of “if it’s there great, if not, no big deal”

Day 3

Next morning I left Crescent City behind and headed south to Grizzly Creek State Park. This is a fairly long drive of about 150 miles give or take and is south east of the town of Eureka.

Grizzly Creek is the place where you can actually still find “screen seen” elements from *Return of the Jedi*, which is amazing after 26 years. Dennis Muren and the team from ILM used this place to film the back plate for the famous speeder bike chase, upon which the bluescreen elements of Luke, Leia and the Biker Scouts were composited.



Above: 26 years on the criss-cross fallen trees look exactly the same as when Luke and Leia flew by them. The negative was flipped in the movie for some reason so on screen they appear to face the opposite way.

The actual place you need to find is called “Owen R Cheatham Grove”. Many years ago when the Redwoods were taken over by the state and protected, sponsors were approached and many areas or groves are named after people. You will see numerous groves named after benefactors of the Redwoods as you drive through the park.

Driving south from Crescent City using the 101 you will take the Highway 36 on your left and stay on this road which takes you right into Grizzly Creek State Park. The drive took about two and a half hours from Crescent City, the roads can be slow in places. The grove itself is very easy to miss and if you get to the Tourist/Ranger station you have gone past it, as I did. Basically you will cross two concrete bridges in

fairly quick succession and the grove is immediately on the left after the second bridge.

I asked at the Ranger station and they knew exactly what I was looking for. Upon seeing my *Star Wars* T shirt the ranger said “Oh yeah, the *Star Wars* tree” and sent me back up the road a couple of miles and I found it no problem. I guess they get plenty of SW fans in them there parts.



Above: The famous “*Star Wars* tree” seen on screen in JEDI during the Speeder Bike sequence.

The grove itself is fairly small and features a circular trail that if followed will take in all the bits you need. It was great to be there on a hot and sunny day with the sunlight filtering through the trees and the sounds of the forest echoing around me. I was truly transported into another world and for a brief moment a feeling of affection for the Ewoks flowed through my body. Now it’s not often you’ll find a SW fan of my age having kind thoughts towards those furry little critters, so it was a moment to remember.

You can spend hours or even days in the park if you wanted as it’s enormous. On the other side of the road from the grove, the land drops away to reveal a beautiful valley with a shallow wide river winding through. A perfect spot to sit, rest and take in the splendour.



Clockwise from top left: Giant tree stump, no bike remains found nearby, That famous tree again. “A river runs through it” and entrance to the grove.

After another great day in Big Foot country it was time to head off and find a place to stay for the night before starting the long drive to San Francisco the next day.

Fort Bragg was the small town we finally ended up.

Day 4

Driving south on the 101 again the journey to San Francisco took in some wonderful scenery and as we got nearer to SF the next place of interest was approaching. A few miles north of SF is Marin County, favoured place of the great man himself, Mr George Lucas and home to Skywalker Ranch.

As you drive towards San Francisco on the 101 you will come across the exit for Lucas Valley Road. The exit was duly taken and off to find the Ranch I went. Now obviously I wasn't expecting to go in and have a tour of the Ranch but as I was there I simply wanted to see the entrance and surrounding area. Just to say I'd been there really.

You come off the freeway and turn left at the junction and drive for quite a few miles along a steep and winding road, through beautiful hills before you come to a very understated entrance to the ranch. It does not draw any attention to itself for obvious reasons.



Above left: On the road to Mandalay, um Skywalker Ranch I mean.
Above right: View of a small part of Lucas' Ranch property.

At the entrance to the Ranch I pulled up and quickly took a picture before being spotted on the security cameras and asked to leave by a burly security guard. In actual fact it seemed very quiet and nobody was around but I didn't want to push my luck. The famous main house is obviously set well back from the road and couldn't be seen from the entrance.



Oh how I longed to go through those gates and into the hallowed land and visit the main house, or take in a viewing of *The Clone Wars* in the state of the art screening room. I guess that one's going to remain a dream, for now.

Curiosity satisfied, it was onto San Francisco, over the still (after numerous trips) spectacular Golden Gate bridge.

Day 5 + 6

Among the usual touristy type things, one of the key places I wanted to visit was The Presidio, home to Lucasfilm's new complex.

The Presidio is a large area close to the Golden Gate Bridge that used to be a military installation but has now been taken over by corporate business. It's a wonderful setting in which to work, with fantastic views of the bay and city.

I spent a lovely half hour walking from my hotel down to the complex but you could just as easily take public transport.



Above: Entrance to The Presidio and the Lucasfilm buildings.

Outside the entrance to the Lucasfilm building is the wonderful bronze statue of Yoda, sculpted by artist Lawrence Noble, of which a second stands in the grounds of Skywalker Ranch.





Inside the reception lobby was a large collection of *Star Wars* related memorabilia together with a collection of awards that *Star Wars* and Lucasfilm related ventures had accrued over the years.



Above: Original costume as worn by David Prowse, of Darth Vader used during production of the original trilogy.



Above: Collection of four lifesize busts of the principals from *Attack of the Clones*. If only Gentle Giant mini busts were this quality.

The security guard was very friendly and allowed me to take as many pictures as I wanted within the reception area. Seeing how enthusiastic I was he very kindly gave me a very brief tour behind closed doors of the office area of which I was strictly not allowed to take photos. It wasn't that interesting, lots of people in rooms off the main corridor, beavering away on whatever. Plenty of SW related material around, much of it to do with *The Force Unleashed* video game. The best thing though was I got a name badge printed up saying I was a guest of Lucasfilm. A nice little souvenir.

Later that day I went to the launch party for *The Force Unleashed* which was attended by George Lucas and a host of actors and creative team members. *See my separate feature for Aficionado for full details.*

Day 7

After two great days in San Francisco, we took a detour from the 101 and headed east out of the city towards the town of Modesto, birthplace and childhood hometown of George Lucas. Lucas's time growing up here was the inspiration for *American Graffiti* and some filming was done there as well as in the town of Petaluma several miles away.

Now I had visions of Modesto being a very small, old fashioned type of town and didn't envisage any problems finding the monument to George Lucas and *American Graffiti*. Oh how wrong I was. What ensued upon our arrival in Modesto was akin to some sort of "Carry On" farce, as we drove round for nearly two hours, asking directions and being sent one way then the other.

The majority of Modesto seems to be made up of very large areas of residential homes with small amounts of commercial buildings interspersed.

Anyway just as we were about to call it quits we finally came across what we were looking for. Nothing that brilliant at the end of the day but I didn't realistically expect to ever be back in Modesto, so I am glad I found it and visited the birthplace of the man who has had the biggest impact on my life.



Above: Statue commemorating *American Graffiti* and George Lucas in what is now called "George Lucas Plaza"

This monument is located at a place called "Six Points" which appropriately enough is where six streets converge, with the plaza consisting of a small green area with the statue sitting on the southern point.



By now it was time to head off to Monterey, our next stop before finally making our way to Los Angeles to stay with my family there.

Modesto was the last Lucas related stop on my Northern California adventure and was a fitting place to end things.

The whole experience had been brilliant, I had seen far more than I expected to, driven over a thousand miles and been very lucky with the weather, with the exception of the first day hitch landing at Crescent City.

I cannot recommend enough a trip to the sights of Endor, not only is the Redwoods a place of outstanding natural beauty if you don't mind driving and take the time, you can discover so much more linked to Lucas.

After all these years thinking about doing the trip, I couldn't be happier that I finally went and did it.

Ian Trussler