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Road Trip With Huell Howser

Basking in Bakersfield

Story and Photographs by Huell Howser

I started off looking at tule elk. And ended up listening to Buck Owens. In between, I enjoyed authentic Basque food, historic pioneer buildings, delicious homemade candy, and a stop at the Alley Cat. You see, I found out firsthand: When you visit Bakersfield on a road trip, anything can happen.

My first stop was the Tule Elk State Reserve, about 15 miles west of town, near the community of Buttonwillow. At one time, vast herds of tule elk roamed this part of our state. They almost became extinct in the late 1800s because of hunting and loss of habitat. Today, the elk are back, and the reserve lets you see them up close and personal. The state park folks have set up a viewing platform, and you can sit all day just watching these magnificent animals walking around, eating, and visiting with one another.



The Beale Memorial Clock Tower was re-created at the Kern County Museum.

Leaving the tule elk

behind, I headed into downtown Bakersfield, where my first stop was the Kern County Museum. This is an amazing place, covering 16 acres, with more than 50 buildings representing local life in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Most of the buildings — everything from churches to schools to a funeral parlor — were saved from the wrecking ball and, over the years, were moved to the museum site. One of the highlights is a replica of the Beale Memorial Clock Tower, which was Bakersfield's best-known landmark and stood for almost 50 years. It was severely damaged by earthquakes in 1952, torn down, and, a dozen years later, re-created on the museum property.

If you like to eat, Bakersfield is the place for you. And my new favorite hangout is the famous Wool Growers Restaurant. Owned and operated by the Maitia family since 1954, this is an authentic Basque restaurant that serves up hearty portions of home-cooked food. I especially liked the lamb and the vegetable soup with pinto beans. But more than the food, this place is filled with positive energy and a feeling of friendliness and hospitality. This old-time family restaurant is a Bakersfield icon.

Speaking of icons, it doesn't get any more authentic than Dewar's Candy Shop. When you walk into this place in downtown Bakersfield, you're truly going back in time. This is a local institution, started in 1909 and still owned by the Dewar

family. It's famous for homemade ice cream and candy and a specialty called Dewar's Chews. All of this is served up at an original soda fountain, complete with 26 pink leather-topped stools.



I am with Rosie Anderson at Dewar's Candy Shop. She's owner George Dewar's aunt and has worked here for 54 years.

and this is one fun way to spend an evening. Oh, I almost forgot to mention the full-size 1972 Pontiac Grand Ville convertible covered in silver dollars that's been installed above the main bar. It definitely makes a statement.

We ended our road trip in an alley — actually, in a historic downtown alley where, many years ago, you'd have found a blacksmith and a livery stable. These days, one of the most famous and colorful watering holes in all of Kern County is

Bakersfield is also known for its music, and no one represents that better than Buck Owens. He's been writing and performing country music all over the world for years. And now he's made a home in Bakersfield.

And what a home — Buck Owens's Crystal Palace, a huge restaurant with a stage and dance floor. Name performers come here (Buck himself is a regular),

located there. Guthrie's Alley Cat is crowded with locals and clued-in tourists alike in search of a cool one and some local flavor.

And flavor is indeed what Bakersfield is all about. Because, as we discovered on this road trip, whether it's the places we visited or the locals we met, it doesn't get any more genuine than Bakersfield.

Watch Road Trip With Huell Howser, sponsored by the Auto Club, on your local PBS station. Call KCET (L.A.), KOCE (Huntington Beach), KPBS (San Diego), or KVCR (San Bernardino) for more information.

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