



The Road Trip of the Future

Cruising up the California coast with his daughter, a father wonders how that drive—and driving itself—will change by the time she grows up.

By [Josh Sens](#) | September 2017



PHOTO: DAVID H. COLLIER
The serenity of Highway 1 at Scott's Creek heading towards Half Moon Bay.



PHOTO: DAVID H. COLLIER
The Pigeon Point Lighthouse dates to 1872.



PHOTO: DAVID H. COLLIER
The wild, open coast seems a world away from Silicon Valley.

HIGH-TECH FUTURE, RUSTIC PAST

At the moment, I'm a very happy driver. We've left Santa Cruz behind and we're heading north. This swath of California is called the Slow Coast, and these aren't the kind of vistas you want to rush: wooded hills rising on the right, green farms and sparkling ocean stretching out on the left.

The only other car in view is a vintage red Corvette convertible, the sort of boutique ride that once caused my own father to swoon. His generation celebrated driving for its own sake— not just to get from one place to another, but also for the pure pleasure of handling a car on a sunny day in a pretty place. In the future, such driving could become more like horseback riding: What was once a common mode of transportation will be reserved for hobbyists.

In the coming years, as fully automated cars gain traction, experts envision highways with designated lanes for self-driving vehicles. Eventually, such lanes will become the norm. Only enthusiasts will do their own driving, in special lanes or on separate, private roads, perhaps for a fee.

Maybe Highway 1 will become one such road. For now, though, it's home to a gentler kind of commerce. In the sleepy town of Davenport, Scarlett and I stop at [Swanton Berry Farm](#), where verdant fields spread behind a roadside shop and barn. Swanton's practices are pioneering—in 1987, it became the first certified organic strawberry farm in California—but its policies are a throwback: You pay by the honor system. We grab a flat of fresh, sweet berries at the farm stand, sample a few, drop some cash in a box by the counter, and drive on toward [Pigeon Point](#).

Perched on a promontory, the lighthouse at the point started guiding ships in 1872. It still lights up the coast, but its keeper's quarters long ago became a hostel. The lamp in its lantern room, which originally burned lard and later kerosene, is illuminated today by electricity. Even the coolest technology eventually becomes obsolete.

When I bring this up to Scarlett, trying to sound profound, she says, as if on cue, "I spy something that starts with a T."

It's a [Tesla Model X](#), in the Pigeon Point parking lot. Anywhere we travel, Scarlett loves to call them out. The parent of one of her school friends drives a Tesla, so she knows the car can do things automatically that her own father doesn't like to, such as parallel park and navigate rush-hour bottlenecks.

Not long ago, I test-drove a Model X—or, rather, it drove me, its Autopilot engaged in heavy freeway traffic (but my hands still firmly on the wheel). While I think nothing of planes flying themselves, this stop-and-go excursion sent my mind racing.

I couldn't shake the feeling that ceding control to a self-driving car is lot like parenting a teen: You want to trust but can't completely let go.

BUMPS IN THE ROAD

Such anxiety is not the only uncertainty surrounding self-driving cars. Lawmakers all over the United States are struggling to formulate regulations that will keep citizens safe without stifling innovation. The rules for such cars vary widely from state to state. Throw in looming questions

about insurance coverage—if a robot is driving, who's liable in a crash?—and you see how unsettled the automated future still is.

In the meantime, the technology barrels forward. One afternoon, I visit [GoMentum Station](#) in Concord, Calif., where a 5,000-acre decommissioned naval station has been transformed into a test site for autonomous vehicles.

"It's great out here because you can do almost anything and not put anyone at risk," says Randy Iwasaki, executive director of the Contra Costa Transportation Authority, which helps manage the testing program. "You can do doughnuts. You can bomb around at 100 miles per hour."

We're standing at a paved intersection, one of many in the station's 20-mile grid of roads. Weathered barracks and rusted Quonset huts give the site the look of an abandoned movie set—albeit one with futuristic vehicles cruising around.

One of them is rolling slowly toward us, a driverless shuttle called [EasyMile](#). Designed to carry passengers short distances, EasyMile shuttles are already being tested in a pilot program in a nearby business park. By early 2019, they're expected to hit the streets of the city of San Ramon, down the freeway from where we're standing.

"Let's do a little experiment," Iwasaki says. "Step out in front of it." Wisely or not, I do as instructed. The EasyMile comes to an immediate halt, and Iwasaki breaks out in an instant grin.

As pedestrians and drivers, humans can be unpredictable. Understanding our behavior is just one of the technical hurdles automated vehicles must clear. They'll also have to learn how to read traffic lights, handle lousy weather and poor visibility, and manage unmapped obstacles such as construction. The quality of roads, the clarity of signs, and the strength of wireless signals will have an impact, too.

For these reasons, road trips of the future might require multiple cars. You might start with a fully autonomous vehicle in the city, where the infrastructure is well mapped and well marked. But as you move into the countryside, where the roads are less uniform and the network signals weaker, you might have to switch to a less automated vehicle.

Back on Highway 1, my cell phone once again has four full bars, but Scarlett and I are running out of gas. Our car is, too. As I stop to fill its tank in Half Moon Bay, one of the rare commercial hubs along this stretch of coast, I turn the tables on my bossy rental by telling its voice-activated navigation system to "find nearby restaurants." The car obliges with a list of suggestions.

We choose [Dad's Luncheonette](#), a diner in an old red train caboose run by a chef who's worked in Michelin-starred kitchens. We order two burgers and a Coke with two straws, and we snack and sip facing each other. Twilight has fallen by the time we walk back to the car. Scarlett grabs my hand.

"That was fun," she says.

Tomorrow will arrive before I know it. But no matter what amazing things it brings, it'll be hard to beat my here and now.