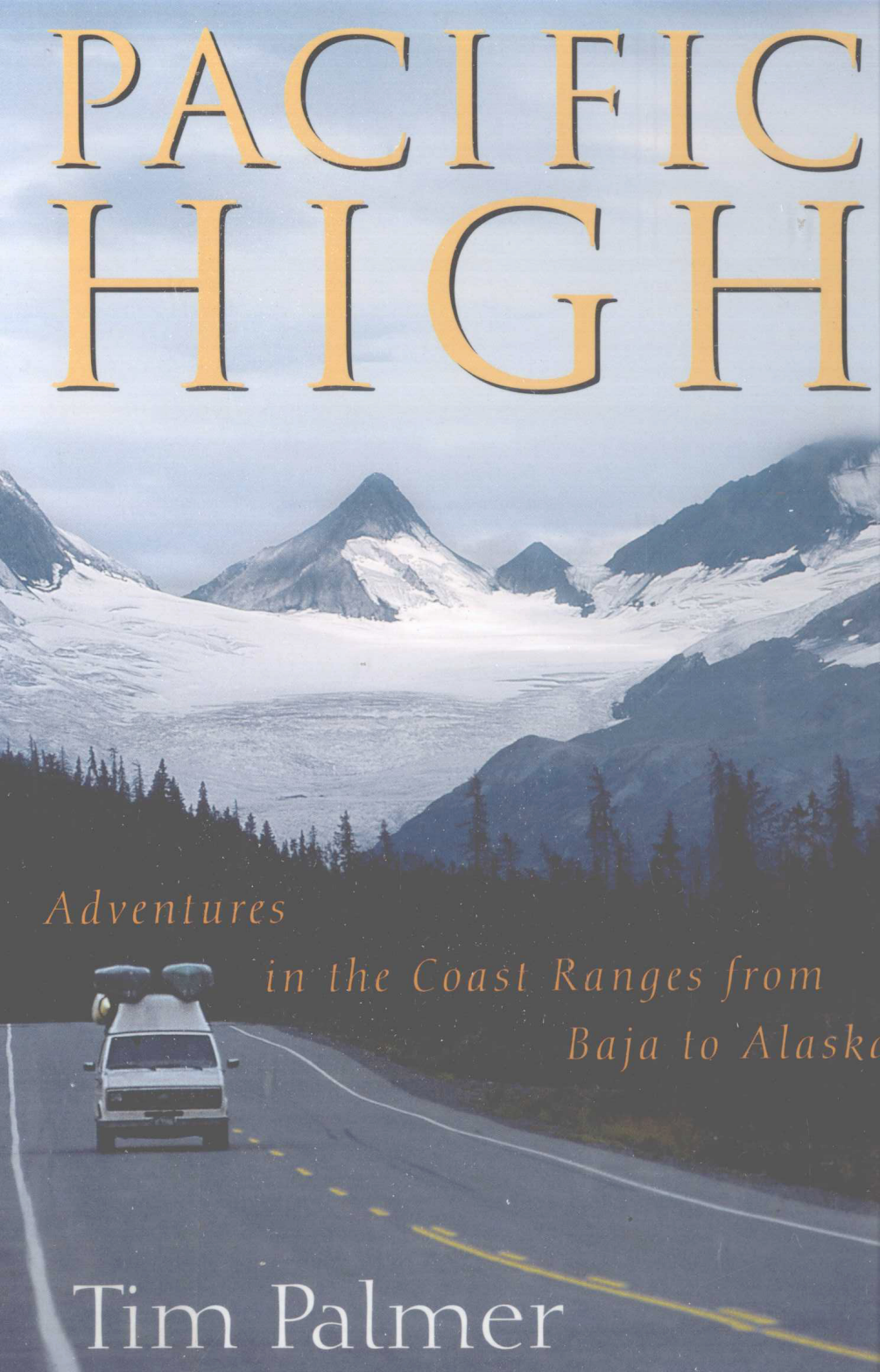
PACIFIC HIGH



Adventures in the Coast Ranges from Baja to Alaska

Tim Palmer

PACIFIC HIGH

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To Ann

A Shearwater Book
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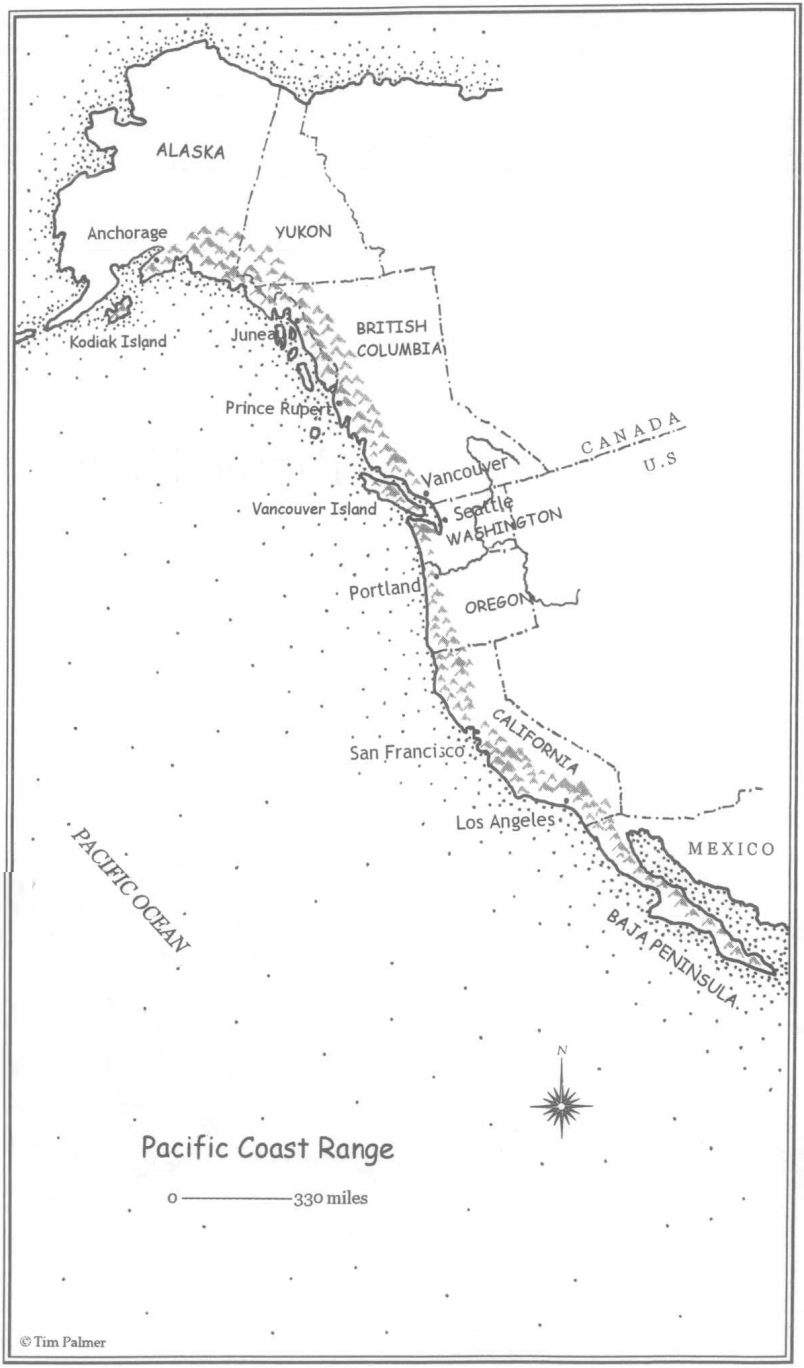
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Prologue: Between the Sea and the Sky

ON THE FIRST of January, at dawn, with winter rain pounding on the windshield, we set out on a journey of nine months from Baja to Kodiak, a tour of North America's coastal mountains high above the Pacific.

We began with a sense of discovery, allowing ourselves to wander where impulse would take us. I foresaw little of the path ahead, but, trying to understand the world, I would explore, identify, interview, read, photograph, dig in the dirt, and climb to the next horizon, all the time searching, all the time hunting, hunting. I wanted to see for myself, to learn by doing, to realize what was happening by being there. But mostly, my wife, Ann, and I looked forward to simply delighting ourselves day after day in new and extraordinary places.

Exceptional by any measure, America's longest nearly continuous mountain mass stretches for 3,600 miles as a marathoner crow might wing his way from the southern Baja Peninsula in Mexico to Kodiak Island in Alaska. Within this reach, 740 miles lie in Baja, 790 in California, 290 in Oregon, 150 in Washington, 530 in British Columbia, and 1,130 in Alaska. It's like driving from San Francisco to Miami and then up the Atlantic coast to Philadelphia and having it *all* be mountains.

Though I knew that hills and steep slopes rise up behind Los Angeles, and in San Francisco, and from the rugged seashore almost anywhere along the Pacific, my awareness of the Coast Range as a continuous chain of mountains with its own identity was vague at best. I think this is the case with most people, including those who live along the way. Yet all I had to do to grasp the bigger picture was look at a relief map of the continent. Right away the darkly shaded slope at the border of our western ocean popped out as the boldest, most continuously definable feature anywhere to be found. In that moment when my eye followed the crescendo course of the mountains up the Pacific coast, the concept for our trip was born.

Most often known by the familiar names of its subranges—Santa Monica, Olympic, Saint Elias, and many more—this collection of mountains is usually referred to in the plural: the Pacific Coast Ranges. But after traveling the whole way, southeast to northwest, I now recognize the mountains' continuity and so use the singular: the Pacific Coast Range. Along this length measuring the whole sunset edge of North America, the subranges link together like the ends of interwoven ropes. For Ann and me, the months ahead and the revealing stories of adventure and belonging would be linked in the same way.

If the West Coast were only a matter of soil meeting sea, it could be a New Jersey, a Louisiana, a Bangladesh. But the land here at the Pacific shore is rugged and uplifted. The mountains give the place its character and a certain magnetism that has attracted pilgrims and pioneers, refugees and escapees, seekers of opportunity, beauty, and love.

For generation after generation, people have packed up and headed west, and beyond the seaward slant of the Coast Range, you can't go any farther. So here they stayed. Others emigrated from the south, still others from the west, across the water. Some thirty-six million people now live on North America's Pacific edge, most of them in seven large cities within sight of the mountain country I would explore. Here where high expectations collide with capricious reality, the continental plates also collide, setting off earthquakes that rupture the earth into some of the world's most dramatic scenery.

The legendary storms of the Pacific mercilessly hammer this shoreline, and the mountains force clouds up over ridgelines and summits, agitating the weather even more. Rainforests, snowfields, and glaciers result, and the rivers carve valleys and canyons unlike any others on earth—spectacular landforms that I could only begin to picture from what showed on the maps.

Nature thrives here in ever changing arrays of life. Consider the ancient trees, the whales' migrations, the cry of eagles, the bugling of elk. Yet nature is also under attack here as viciously as anywhere, maybe more. Just look at the clearcutting, the oil spills, the smog, the engines of urban growth. I knew that the prognosis was grim for much of what I cared deeply about, and the more I learned about the problems, the more I was inclined toward despair. Yet having hope is essential, so I aimed to search out special people who seemed connected to their native or adopted ground—people who loved their place and strived for better stewardship. I wanted to see what they were doing to face the future in uncertain, troubled times.

Starting out, my mind and spirit were open to the mystery of foreign cultures, the spareness of aridity, the tension of seismicity, the heat of fire, the exuberance of the vast, the abundance of rot and rebirth, the kindness of strangers, the indomitable rules of climate, the triumph of life, the limits of the earth. I wanted to see it all, Mexico through Alaska, an idea at once challenging and playful.

It excited Ann as well. An adventurous soul, she had been leading educational wilderness trips for Outward Bound when we met on a river in Idaho six years before. Immediately we knew we had much in common and much to hold us tightly together. After a youth spent in New England, the Rockies had become her adopted home, but the draw of the Pacific, and the unknown, pulled on her as they did on me. "I love mountains, and I love the ocean," she said. "So, sure, I'd love to see it all."

Ann was writing a book that had demanded her attention for three years. Work remained, but she ached to cut loose. And this was the year to do the trip, we both agreed. We had no children of our own, no mortgage to burden us, no rent coming due the first of the month, no home to tend except for our well-equipped van and the big, round

earth under our feet. Ann's manuscript was easily portable, and in another year she would start a new book with a challenging plan for research. Plus, our van had already clocked 90,000 miles, and with an eye on reliability, I hesitated to sojourn to the distant deserts in Mexico or the far North once it topped the 100,000 mark. "Can you finish your book while we travel?" I asked my wife.

"I'll be jealous of you having fun while I'm sitting and writing," she answered honestly, "but let's give it a try. If I work as we go, I should be done before we hit Alaska."

With the critical spousal go-ahead, my heart began to leap at the possibilities before us.

With great care we loaded the van. When I had bought it seven years before, I customized the well-windowed rig by raising the roof so I could stand up inside. Behind the driver's seat, alongside a long window, I built a table for writing, cooking, and other work or projects. Wired under the hood, an extra battery powered two lights and a computer for typing. Crawling underneath, I bolted a propane tank to the chassis to fuel a miniature furnace inside. Our two canoes and kayak lay lashed to the roof rack, and a whitewater raft hid, rolled up, inside. Cross-country skis and a mountain bike rounded out our fleet. We carried clothes for all seasons and a full complement of kitchen gear. Plus books, lots of books. Maxing out the van for this trip, we added an extra six-gallon water jug and several crates of nonperishable food. I stocked up on fuel for the Coleman stove and filled the propane tank for cold mornings, long sieges of bitter dampness, and the possibility of snow.

The whole setup was comfortable, efficient, and satisfying in both physical and metaphysical ways. In it, we own and consume little but see and experience much.

I was all puffed up with feelings of freedom and self-sufficiency and motivated by the promise of the open road. The words of Henry David Thoreau, written so long ago, inspired me still: "Rise free from care before dawn, and seek adventures. Let the noon find thee by other lakes, and the night overtake thee everywhere at home."

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PACIFIC HIGH

to the processes of the land, it can become, as Frost says in "West-Running Brook," "a tribute of the current to the source." For me, reading and rereading "Directive" has been like a reiterated hike up the spines of two mountains running south to north, end to end, through the middle of Bristol. In the same way, each time I turn my boots up those trails, I am swept back into the circulation of Frost's poem. The seasons, boulders, trees, and animals of the Green Mountains deepen its meaning, image by image and line by line.

Though South Mountain and North Mountain once constituted a single, uninterrupted crest, first the glaciers and then the New Haven River intervened. Twenty thousand years ago, a mile-thick wedge of ice advanced into Vermont with the scourings of the North. The centuries of its melting deposited sediments for a plateau on which the village of Bristol stands today. In "Directive," Frost watches the glaciers come and go and waits for them to come again. While waiting, he calmly regards the forest's own flicker of disappearance and return. The landscape's largest cycles thus inform the poet's perspective on the small farms that also have appeared and disappeared among these heights. The forests along our ridge were in fact mostly cleared, midway through the nineteenth century, because of the charcoal kilns and sheep-pasturing that brought in hill-farmers' main supply of cash. But only a few cellar holes and tumbled stone walls now remain, far in the resurgent woods. Frost incorporates this human reversal—of pioneer families who were defeated by the stony soil and abandoned their homesteads—into his comprehensive vision of succession. He suggests deeper possibilities for communion, both with the land and with one another. "Directive" leads a reader into the hard walking of cut-over and reforested slopes, on a perplexing path toward wholeness.

This book pursues a sequence of hikes, each of which is framed by several lines from "Directive." The first chapter relates an excur-

sion near the southern end of South Mountain, in late September of 1994. Subsequent hikes progress northward, as well as through the seasons, until arriving at mid-summer of 1995 and the conclusion of Frost's poem. Topographic maps for South Mountain and North Mountain precede the two major parts of the book, in order to delineate the rising and falling contours over which the poem has guided me. One of my goals in the narrative of each hike is to describe the features of our family's home landscape concretely, and to evoke what it feels like to be out in these mountains at a particular time of year. I proceed digressively, frequently checking my bearings in the poem and the maps but often in the end bushwhacking across suspect terrain. I have always had a certain tendency to leave the trail, and consequently to get lost. In this regard, too, "Directive" has been my guide. At the poem's heart is a meditation about getting lost enough "to find yourself" in Vermont's surprising woods.

When preparing for this project of hiking through the poem and along the ridge, I did not foresee the deeper losses and disorientation that the year would bring to me. My father died in California just as I was about to begin, and his kindly image accompanied me on the autumn trails. Immediately after his death, my mother had to undergo major surgery from which recovery was slow. Here in Vermont, one of our children swerved into a phase of adolescence that cut off communication and left our family frightened and confused. In a season such as this, loss among the mountains changed from a literary theme into an urgent and personal story. Thus, although "Directive" enters into each of my chapters, another aspect of the book's continuity has turned out to be its familial narrative. This was not a story I expected to write, but it turned out to be the one that my year brought, that the land accommodated, and that the poem helped me start to shape.

Frost's poem looks past personal losses, though, and moves beyond offering guidance for an individual trying to make a home on earth and raise a family amid the reversals of a life. It also addresses

At the edge of the one-lane dirt road, cobbles and sharp-sided stones had accumulated from both directions: some raked off by road graders, others thrown out of people's gardens, each an effort to bring human order to a harsh and resistant land. I left the road and struck out cross-country.

The gray, unshadowed light began to glow on the swollen, pleated skin of the cardón—cacti up to forty feet tall with bold trunks pointing toward the heavens. Their stubby arms jutted out or curved up, a signpost of the Sonoran Desert in Mexico. A close relative to the saguaro cactus of old TV westerns, these charismatic cacti seemed to welcome me, but underfoot and too close for comfort lurked pincushions, protruding nails, spiked trip wires, and the snakepit twinings of curled cacti with nasty barbs ready to pierce me at the slightest misstep.

Where I walked there was no trail, so I tried to be careful, and wondered, Is growing old a matter of becoming ever more cautious? I hoped not. I was forty-eight that winter and still felt the reckless indomitability of youth. Like many fools, I failed to recognize myself as middle-aged, though I had been so for some time. I didn't really like being careful, but out in that desert, greater knowledge definitely bred greater care.

This morning my yearning had to do with beginnings. I wanted to be on the first mountaintop of my Coast Range exploration for the opening moment of the day.

Beginnings are fragile things, promising, portentous, consequential, painful. But my goal seemed simple enough at face value: I wanted to stand on top of the mountain for sunrise. Deep into Baja, I wanted to sense the beginning of the day, of the trip, and of the mountains that run nearly nonstop through Alaska. By climbing to a high point of ground, I hoped to sense the power of the place, to feel its life and its history in my bones, to imagine its future, and mainly to belong there in some satisfying way. If I didn't feel all those emotions today, maybe I would on some other mountain before the end of our Baja adventure. And I knew that some of my grander ambitions would have to wait for their own good time during the nine months to come.

The arid slopes opened a bit more enticingly, and with soil and

stone crunching underfoot, I moved up quickly into the spreading light. I found a goat path along the ridge. After twisting around the clutches of catclaw acacia, scrambling over basaltic rocks, and breathing heavily as I broke into a heavy sweat, I set foot on top of the mountain just before the fireball of sun pierced the horizon.

Propped against a rock and resting there after my prickly climb, I happily soaked in the scene of roughcut mesas while the light seeped down the east-facing mountainside next to me. In shades of brown, it was not a colorful mountain range, nor shapely in the sense of having sharp peaks or undulant and sensuous forms. Rather, I looked at a vast desert topography populated by domestic goats, a white cross propped on the next mountain, and a black flurry of vultures.

Though I couldn't see the ocean, this was part of the greater Coast Range. The Baja Peninsula, seven hundred forty miles long, seventy miles wide on average, is the third-longest peninsula in the world behind the Malay in Southeast Asia and the Antarctic, but it's the skinniest and most peninsular of the group. Mountains form the backbone of Baja, a seismically shifting, volcanically active land. Here, in the largest subrange, aptly named Sierra de la Giganta—Mountains of the Giantess—the view was typical, with harsh, dry country everywhere evident.

The fiery sphere of sun was doing its incandescent job, and with a dusty shine down below it illuminated the dome of a church, a three-story stone bastion of faith built by Indians long ago at the direction of Spanish missionaries. I tried to imagine those people, who had lived all their lives in wholly adequate houses of stick or thatch, suddenly confronting orders to cut, quarry, and haul rocks that might have weighed a ton in order to build this smooth-walled, high-roofed mission for the worship of a brand-new god.

Three centuries later it still stands as the centerpiece of the village of San Javier, made up of thirty houses or so from this vulture's-eye view. The church is considered a healing mission, so icons of body parts, such as little painted arms and legs and hearts made of wood, are left there in hopes of *milagros*—miracles.

Beyond the mission, the town's ditch system outlined small fields of onions with a border of green. The modest irrigation network was also built by Indians under the supervision of Spanish missionaries.