

Opinion: Welcome to California (Not!)

By Joe Mathews

When you cross from Oregon into California on Interstate 5, you will not be greeted by any welcoming party or grand gate.

The first sign of California civilization is the giant All Star Liquors store, in tiny Hilt. And if you enter California from Oregon along Highway 101, you'll get the same greeting: All Star Liquors' other outlet, in Smith River.



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The store's slogan? "The Party Starts Here." Except, at California's borders, the party starts slowly.

Over the past year, I've made a point of exploring California's four land borders—with Oregon, Nevada, Arizona, and Mexico. What I've seen, again and again, would deflate the pride of the proudest Californian. Along these divides, ours is consistently the shabbier side of the border.

The juxtaposition is most jarring along our southern border with Mexico. Tijuana, one of the great urban success stories of North America, is dynamic and fast-paced, while, on the California side, the San Ysidro section of San Diego is shabby, with a particularly dismal McDonald's. Farther east, Calexico, population 39,000, is dwarfed by the cross-border

cosmopolitan sophistication of 700,000-strong Mexicali, with its restaurants, theater, and university.

California's neighboring states also offer more welcoming border regions than ours.

Along the Arizona border, Lake Havasu City, with the London Bridge, outshines the settlements on the California side of the Colorado River. Farther south, Yuma, Ariz., population 91,000, sits across from not very much at all.

Along the far northern coast, Brookings, Ore., is a more prosperous place than beautiful, but poor, Crescent City. Inland, Ashland, Ore., home of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, is far lovelier than Siskiyou County, which shows up in California newspapers mostly as the unofficial headquarters for a secession movement. Along Interstate 15, the lights of Vegas outshine anything in the California border desert. Up in Tahoe, the streets on the California side of the lake are noticeably rougher than the Nevada thoroughfares. No place on the lake gleams like Nevada's Incline Village, a haven for Californians avoiding Golden State taxes.

California's unwelcoming Mexican border can be blamed on the U.S. government, which is held hostage by the political obsession with border security. Walking from California into Mexico takes less than five minutes. But I routinely encounter three-hour waits to cross back, because of federal border enforcement. Facing long delays crossing back from Tijuana, I recently paid \$6 to ride in a van seven miles east to the less crowded Otay Mesa crossing. There it took 40 minutes to cross, and I then was picked up by the same van at a California-side sandwich shop and driven to San Ysidro so I could get the trolley back to downtown San Diego.

California has a reputation for regulation and big government, but at our borders, we're the side that seems ungoverned. Needles, Calif., which borders Arizona (and is near Nevada),

is one of the bleakest places I've encountered in the state. Trains rumble through at all hours, and trash litters the streets. The first business I encountered on crossing into town from Arizona was a medical marijuana dispensary.

That's typical. On the borders, California businesses often profit from our permissiveness. That's why liquor stores greet people who come across our Oregon border.

The Golden State has long been distinguished by some of the nation's lowest taxes on beer, wine, and distilled spirits—a legacy of the liquor lobby's might that dates back to the famous powerbroker Artie Samish, the self-proclaimed "Secret Boss of California" in the early 20th century. Voters tell pollsters they'd be happy to raise liquor taxes, but the alcohol industry's spending and the state's two-thirds requirement for revenue increases have frustrated those efforts.

The locations of All Star Liquors on the California side of the border capitalize on these facts. Online, the store boasts "savings of up to 70 percent or more over Oregon, Washington, and Idaho pricing." The stores also have what customers assured me (I'm a teetotaler) is an incredibly large selection, and excellent customer service. When I dropped by, All Star Liquors staffers were loading up two customers' vehicles, neither of which had California license plates, as part of the store's "Road Trip Service" that allows people to order online and have the entire order ready for pickup.

The store's website promises: "You don't need to drive any further into California to find the best prices, best selection, and the friendliest staff this side of the Mississippi!"

That's not exactly an endorsement of the Golden State. But it's hardly surprising. Californians treat our borders like backwaters, even though millions of people enter California

this way. We could do better by our border communities, and by our state, if we thought of them as front doors.

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