Physiography is the shape of the land surface. California has 12 very distinct physiographic regions. Most of the state is made up of high mountains and low valleys that orient north to south. The Great Central Valley is an enormous and level valley between the Coast Ranges and the Sierra Nevada. More mountains and small valleys form the Basin and Range region on the eastern border. The Mojave and Colorado Deserts comprise the vast southeast quarter of California. Mountains also rise above the coastline from the Klamath Mountains at the Oregon border, to the Southern Coast Range. South of Point Conception, a broad coastal plain extends from the Pacific Ocean to the Transverse and Peninsular Ranges of Southern California.

California Missions
El Camino Real, or The Royal Road, connects 21 Spanish missions that were built in Alta California. Beginning in San Diego in 1769, Spain continued to build mission settlements up the coast until 1823. Each mission site was carefully selected, and located no more than a long day’s ride by horse apart. The Spanish looked for land that was close to the coast, had fresh water sources, and supplied wood for fires and construction. They also looked for level fields with good soil for crops and livestock. The natural landscapes on mission lands were soon replaced with agriculture and other businesses. These settlements forever changed the Indian way of life.

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