Much of the present highway system duplicates ancient American Indian trails. However, their foot-friendly trade routes stayed close to water, and followed a straight line up one side of a mountain pass and then down the other side. For the highways and motor vehicles that followed, some changes were necessary.

For example, to protect them from floods and farm the rich soils, the two major highways in the Central Valley are located away from the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers. Likewise, roads across the Sierra Nevada often follow along ridge tops because the inner canyons below are too steep and narrow for cars.

Interstate Highways in California are built and maintained by the federal government. They stretch across multiple states and always keep the same highway number. For example, Interstate 80 runs 2,899 miles between San Francisco and New Jersey. The state government builds and maintains the California State Highways. The state highway numbers often change when the road extends into a neighboring state.

Odd numbers designate highways that run in a north and south direction. Even numbers designate highways that run in an east and west direction. The highways in California carry some of the highest traffic volume in the world.