California's Big Sur coast is a classic scenic drive, but it's an even better place to stop and explore.

By Matthew Jaffe • Photographs by Catherine Karnow

I love the sound of the name Big Sur. El Pase Grande del Sur, the Big Country of the South. Shortened and only partially translated, it is all cool hipster brevity, both light on the ear and heavy with associations. Big Sur conjures it all: redwoods, waterfalls, hot tubs, hippies, beanies, Jack Kerouac, and Henry Miller, in no particular order. If ever a place represented the freedom and beauty of California, this is it.

South of Big Sur, Highway 1 runs along a broad marine terrace cut by coves and edged by giant boulders washed by a restless Pacific. I get behind
the wheel, and as the road leaves the towns of the Central Coast behind, I pick up speed, settling in about 100 yards behind a motorcyclist. He’s riding a vintage Triumph, a stark contrast to the generic, white midsize rental I’m driving. The radio is tuned to KOTR, known locally as the Otter. Canned Heat’s 1969 back-to-the-land anthem “Going up the Country” is playing. Except for the Triumph, up ahead, the road is empty.

The flute solo kicks in and the Santa Lucia Mountains rise on the east. A heavy fog hides its true form, although a thin veil of mist has already started to shape the land. The boulders and sea stacks near Point Piedras Blancas lose their definition, as sky, water, and land begin to dissolve into one another.

The highway dips and weaves as it follows the contours of the terrain; the motorcyclist disappears in the swales only to reappear again as he crests a rise. A few seconds later I emerge from an arroyo, and with the road now traveling due north, the Santa Lucias loom directly ahead, a great shrouded wall plunging down to meet the Pacific.

Crossing San Carpoforo Creek and navigating switchbacks that snake up the mountain, there’s a sense of entering an untamed California. There’s also a strong pull to keep driving, to see what’s just ahead and still hidden from view—to see this legendary Big Sur, as well as its northern neighbor, Point Lobos.

I know the feeling, but I have to stop and start taking it in: the air infused by the iodine scent of kelp mixed with the spice incense of the forest, the hiss of spray blowing off the tops of waves in the still moment before they crest and break on the reef.

The motorcyclist disappears around a bend and into the fog, 70 miles of Big Sur—the most breathtakingly beautiful coast in the world—to go.

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Be here now

In the campground at Limekiln State Park, there’s an old green Chevy truck with Colorado plates. Its bumper stickers proclaim its driver’s expressions of spiritual enlightenment, one especially appropriate to a Big Sur visit: “There’s only now.” Feel free to dismiss it as just so much New Age claptrap. But Big Sur is a place to banish outside concerns, at least for a time.

And as author and former Big Sur resident Henry Miller suggests, “Be so kind as to check your neuroses and psychoses at the gate.” That goes for all of us. You could spend a lifetime here and in the end still plead for one more day in this place where Carmel poet Robinson Jeffers wrote, “There is wind in the tree, and the grey ocean’s music on the rock.”

At first it is the Pacific that seduces you. Most of us are accustomed to seeing the ocean from the beach level. But as Highway 1 edges the mountains, it looks down hundreds of feet of cliff and out across miles of open ocean that seems to breathe as it rises and falls.

But then the waves strike the nearshore granite rocks. When they do there is, as Jeffers suggests, music in the impact itself—like a gong being struck. And in the soaring chorale that your mind fills in, white spray rises, peaks, and disappears, to be resurrected moments later with the next wave.

As with so many things at Big Sur, geography is destiny. Big Sur marks the southern extent of the coast redwoods, a species that 50 million years ago grew widely but is now restricted to a narrow sliver along the Pacific. Offshore, the cold, nutrient-rich water is pushed to the surface by currents. When this cool water comes into contact with the warmer air at the coast, condensation occurs, forming fog. This fog is blocked from moving inland by the high mountain wall that defines Big Sur. As the fog builds up along the coast, it slides its way into the valleys between canyons.

This is where the redwoods grow. Big Sur’s canyons receive as much as 60 inches of rain per year, almost all of which falls in winter. During the dry season, fog can add another 10 inches of water created by condensation.
that forms on the redwoods’ flat needles before dripping to the ground.

Beneath the mixed hardwood and redwood forest canopy, the light is dim, broken in places into shafts that highlight clusters of maidenhair ferns and lush beds of redwood sorrel, a cute little ground cover. There is music in the forest too. The wind whistles through the branches, and the creeks flow with the sweet, lilting timbre of chimes.

Morning’s due

I awoke my first morning in this fog-drenched forest looking out through columns of redwood trunks. They sway slightly with the breeze and range in hue from cinnamon to dusky violet.

I am 30 feet off the ground, not in a treehouse but in a redwood cabin perched on a slope at Deerjets Big Sur Inn. It dates to the 1950s, when it was built by Norwegian immigrant Helmut Dorr. It’s the sort of place that has inspired generations of Big Sur visitors, many of them artists and writers.

For years, the base premise has been to make the pilgrimage to Big Sur come clean, and with the guides of a wood stove. In Jack Kerouac’s novel Big Sur, the writer’s alter ego, Jack Duluoz, is on the verge of a breakdown and talks of going to a cabin “in the Big Sur woods where I would be alone and undiscovered for six weeks just chopping wood, drawing water, writing, sleeping, hiking.”

That’s pretty much what author Henry Miller did. After years of living in Europe, Miller came to Big Sur in 1944 at the invitation of a friend named Jean Varda and stayed for 18 years. Miller lived on Partington Ridge, where the Brooklyn native found both isolation and community, a place where he could pick up his mail in the morning, get engaged in conversation, and not return home till dusk. A place so beautiful that he had to turn his desk toward the wall in order to get any work done.

“Ah, those first days on Partington Ridge!” Miller wrote. “On rising I would go to the cabin door and, casting my eyes over the valley, rolling hills, such a feeling of contentment, such a feeling of gratitude was mine that instinctively my hand went up in benediction.”

The Big Sur that Miller would bless on those mornings was still a recently opened frontier. Big Sur’s 19th-century pioneers came over the Santa Lucías from the Salinas Valley or down from Monterey with their mules and wagons on a precarious route carved out in 1872.

The area remained remote enough that a band of California sea otters survived in these waters decades after the rest of the world assumed they

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had been hunted to extinction. When bonds to finance highway construction were approved in 1919, a frequently washed-out gravel road ran south from Carmel for 35 dangerous miles. The road, Highway 1, was complete in June 1937, and coastal Southern California was finally connected to the north.

The opening of the highway widened Big Sur's appeal. The area drew creative types like Miller and Kerouac, who followed photographers such as Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. In 1944, the same year Miller arrived, Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth bought a modest cabin and a patch of land with a sweeping view of the Pacific with a down payment of only $167, then sold it for not much more in the late 1940s to a couple named Lolly and Bill Fassett.

Services were minimal along the coast, so the Fassett's were routinely approached by travelers looking for meals. Bill wanted to open a hamburger stand but Lolly had a different vision, which grew into Nepenthe, one of Big Sur's most enduring institutions. Named for a remedy in the Odyssey that was said to cure sorrow and pain, the restaurant and terrace 808 feet above the ocean evolved into a combination roadhouse, artist salon, family business, and perpetual haven.

The Fassett's granddaughter Erin Gaill grew up at Nepenthe. It was, by the standards of the world beyond Big Sur, an untraditional upbringing. The scent of patchouli oil, Gaill says, seemed everyday, but a wrapped slice of American cheese was incredibly exotic.

Like many area residents, Gaill finds artistic inspiration in the land and sea. "Big Sur is almost like a mirage," she says. "A perfect day is surreal; beautiful. You look in the rearview mirror and see a painting."

**Kissed by mist**

Unlike most people, Magnus Toren, now curator at the Henry Miller Memorial Library, didn't first see Big Sur by highway 1. While working as a professional sailor in 1978, the native of Sweden saw Big Sur from the ocean, a view barely changed since Cabrillo sailed along here in 1542.

Like Nepenthe, the library is a connection to an older and in some ways purer Big Sur. That era of communes, cheap land, and community has given way to expensive real estate and absentee owners. Still, there's little doubt that Toren and many others believe that Big Sur is stronger than the temporal forces that bump up against it.

"I love this place," he says. "It is the fresh air. The water. The quiet. The nightsky. The community. Those things truly are important. And my son has the creeks, the trees. I do feel privileged to be here. And I love this place for all its romantic potential."

After leaving the library, I head over to McWay Canyon at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. I look down at McWay Falls, which plunges from the cliffs directly onto the sand, the ocean bright and almost jade green, the surf zone white with foam. On the way back, there are some people gathered for a wedding, the bride smiling and holding a bouquet of calla lilies.

Driving north, I pass the oncoming parade: an old Corvette and a vintage Mercedes. Impatient Porsches, massive RVs, an Austin Mini, and pannier-bagging bicyclists—everybody has to do Big Sur.

But there's no one at the Partington Cove turnout, so I pull over and head inland on foot, hiking along the creek, then climbing up the switchbacks above the tops of the redwoods and onto the high open slopes.

I follow the trail back down through the forest, past glades of ferns glistening with the mist of slow-running falls on their way back to the ocean. Along the shoreline, the creek runs out of land, tumbles over the rocks, and disappears into the ocean. The low sun lights the waves to a translucent green before they break loudly against the rocks, each crash as emphatic as an early-morning, Henry Miller homily.