

An aerial photograph of a rugged coastline. On the left, a steep cliffside covered in dense evergreen trees features a waterfall cascading down to a small sandy beach. The ocean is a vibrant blue, with white foam from waves crashing against large, dark rock formations in the center and right. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

THE FOREVER MAGIC OF BIG SUR

Prized by poets, painters, and even Don Draper, California's fabled stretch of coast has long promised enlightenment and redemption. **PETER FISH** goes in search of whether that wonder still abides

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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WHERE BIG SUR HITS YOU WILL VARY. For me, it's usually around Soberanes Point. I follow two-lane Highway 1 south from Carmel and the little town's aura of well-bred charm retreats, bowing to a wilder beauty. Mountains rise, the coastline corrugates, and the ink blue Pacific pulses against rocky coves, cold and gorgeous. I can't do anything but stop the car and gape.

El país grande del sur, the big country to the south: that's how the 18th-century Spanish priests and soldiers in Monterey dubbed this coast. The name evolved in English to Big Sur. The stretch of California shoreline has been seducing travelers for generations. There are other lovely coasts in the world, but none wallop you like this one. The other coasts promise serenity, relaxation, peace. Big Sur promises transcendence and transformation. It's a coast of poets and painters, beat bards and Hollywood hipsters, not to mention Don Draper, who in the final scenes of *Mad Men* found New Age nirvana while chanting above a Big Sur cliff.

But coasts change. Magical realms lose their powers. In 2019, a place long famous for inspiring big questions about art, the universe, and life poses a big question of its own. In our frazzled, distracted, hyper-connected age, when transcendent moments can be instantly Instagrammed, can Big Sur still deliver on its promise to strike deep into your soul?

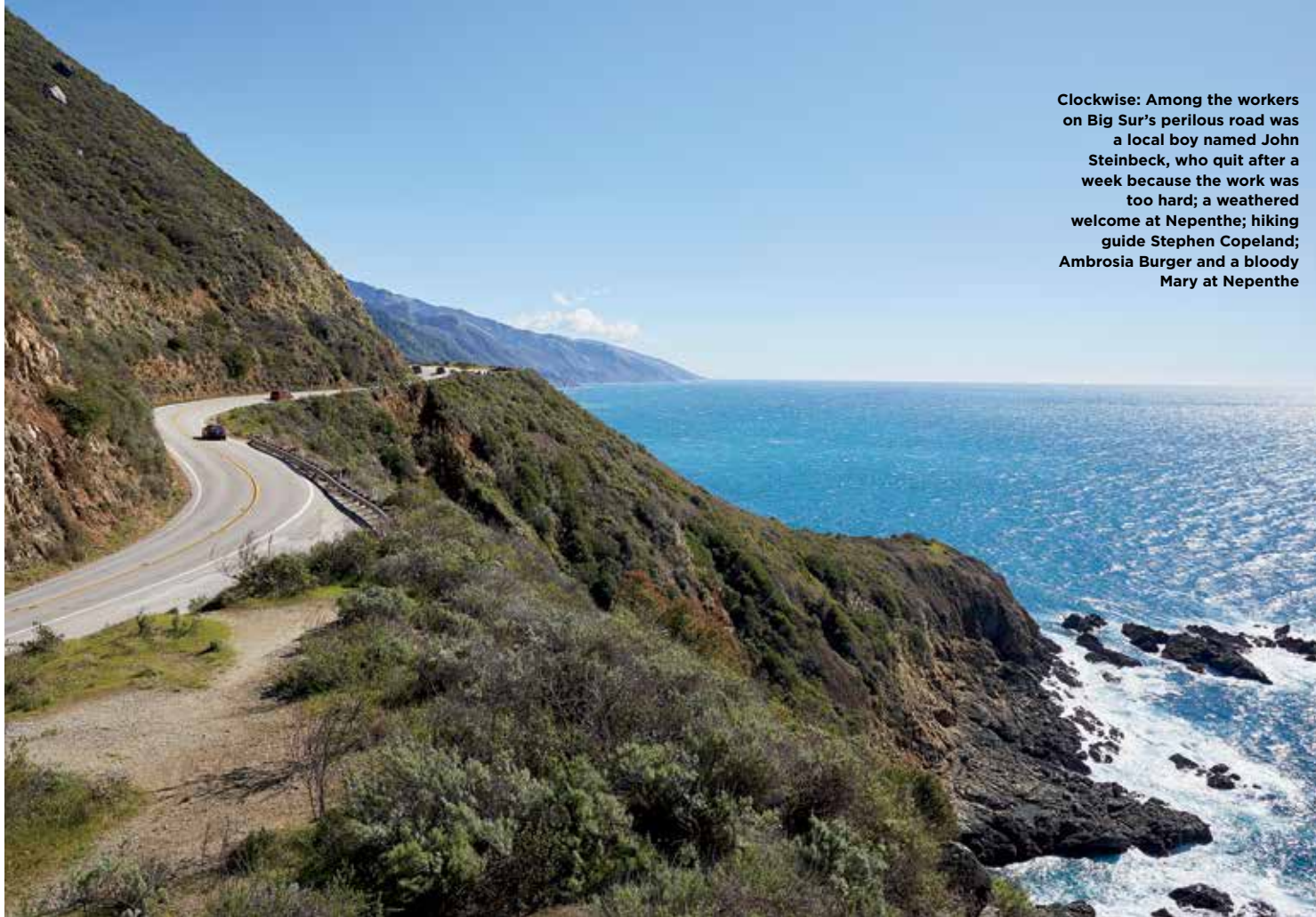
BIG SUR'S BOUNDARIES ARE FLUID—what could you expect from a place said to exist as much in your mind as on a map? A general consensus is that it starts around Malpas Creek in the north and continues south 90 miles to the Monterey–San Luis Obispo county line. What you experience in those miles is the North America continent colliding with the Pacific Ocean. Stand at, say, the highway pull-out at Hurricane Point. Behind you lift the Santa Lucia Mountains, forming the steepest coastal slope in the contiguous United States. In front, the Pacific sweeps west uninterrupted to Japan. Beneath the waves plunge some of the deepest submarine canyons on the planet.

The only way to travel this coast is California Highway 1, which was blasted and bridged across Big Sur's canyons and cliffs in the 1920s and '30s. It's a vital, fragile road, after winter rains vulnerable to landslides that can leave the coast isolated for months. Two years ago, the largest slide in Big Sur's history buried a southern stretch of highway beneath 40 feet of mud: It took 14 months and \$54 million to reopen it. The highway's twists and turns tax even expert drivers. I retain vivid childhood memories of our family's first venture on it, my father steering our new Ford Thunderbird and growing tenser by the mile—he was a former Air Force pilot, normally a masterful driver—before deciding it was time to stop for a hamburger and a martini at Nepenthe restaurant.

STOPPING AT NEPENTHE REMAINS A GOOD IDEA: There is no better place to begin understanding Big Sur. Nepenthe was born of a uniquely Big Sur mix of romance and misadventure. In 1944, world-famous movie director Orson Welles bought a hilltop cabin for his new, movie-star bride, Rita Hayworth. She hated it. She realized she hated Welles. Divorce. Hayworth sold the property to a young couple named Bill and Lolly Fassett. Bill wanted to turn the cabin into a roadside hot dog stand; Lolly wanted to build more cabins. They ended up, with the help of architect Rowan Maiden, building an accidental masterpiece—an elegant, redwood-beamed pavilion with the best views in Big Sur (which, yes, is saying a lot). Nepenthe became one of those mysterious places that makes all its guests attractive and interesting. Lolly Fassett became, for decades, Big Sur's matriarch and muse.

"Anybody could walk in at any time," says Erin Lee Gafill, Fassett's granddaughter and a well-regarded Big Sur artist. "She found the humanity in everybody. She was really exceptional that way." If the new arrival was an artist or musician, Lolly Fassett would get them a place to live cheap, or free. "Or," Gafill says, "somebody would come to her and say, 'I have a deep calling to learn how to levitate.' And she would say, 'If this is what you need to do, I'll help you.'"

Lolly and Nepenthe kindled the legend of Big Sur as a judgment-free Eden where you could discover your true self, with bonus points if you were young and glamorous. Steve McQueen rode his motorcycle up from Hollywood; Jimi



Clockwise: Among the workers on Big Sur's perilous road was a local boy named John Steinbeck, who quit after a week because the work was too hard; a weathered welcome at Nepenthe; hiking guide Stephen Copeland; Ambrosia Burger and a bloody Mary at Nepenthe



Hendrix, Joan Baez, Elizabeth Taylor, and Richard Burton hung out on Nepenthe's deck. Longtime hiking guide Stephen Copeland recalls that for years Nepenthe's red phone booth (which remains there still) was the coast's sole reliable connection with the outside world. People would line up outside it, he says, waiting to make the call that would initiate a breakup, a reconciliation, or a new affair.

It was a heady era, but Erin Gafill doesn't romanticize it. As a little girl, she loved working at the restaurant—she started at age 10 buttering the French rolls for Nepenthe's famed Ambrosia Burgers. But Big Sur could be a hard place for a kid to grow up. "There was an element of madness and magic both," she says. "And people wanting to have these personal experiences regardless of the cost to themselves and others."

Still, the coast set her path in life. Gafill left for college, moved north, but returned. Today she paints, exhibits, and teaches art classes in Big Sur and in Italy. She and her husband live in Lolly's old cabin, alongside the restaurant her family still owns.

For all of Big Sur's excesses, Gafill says, it remains incomparably inspiring for an artist. "Here you're so supported to enter the creative space. Because you're surrounded by this acutely beautiful natural world."

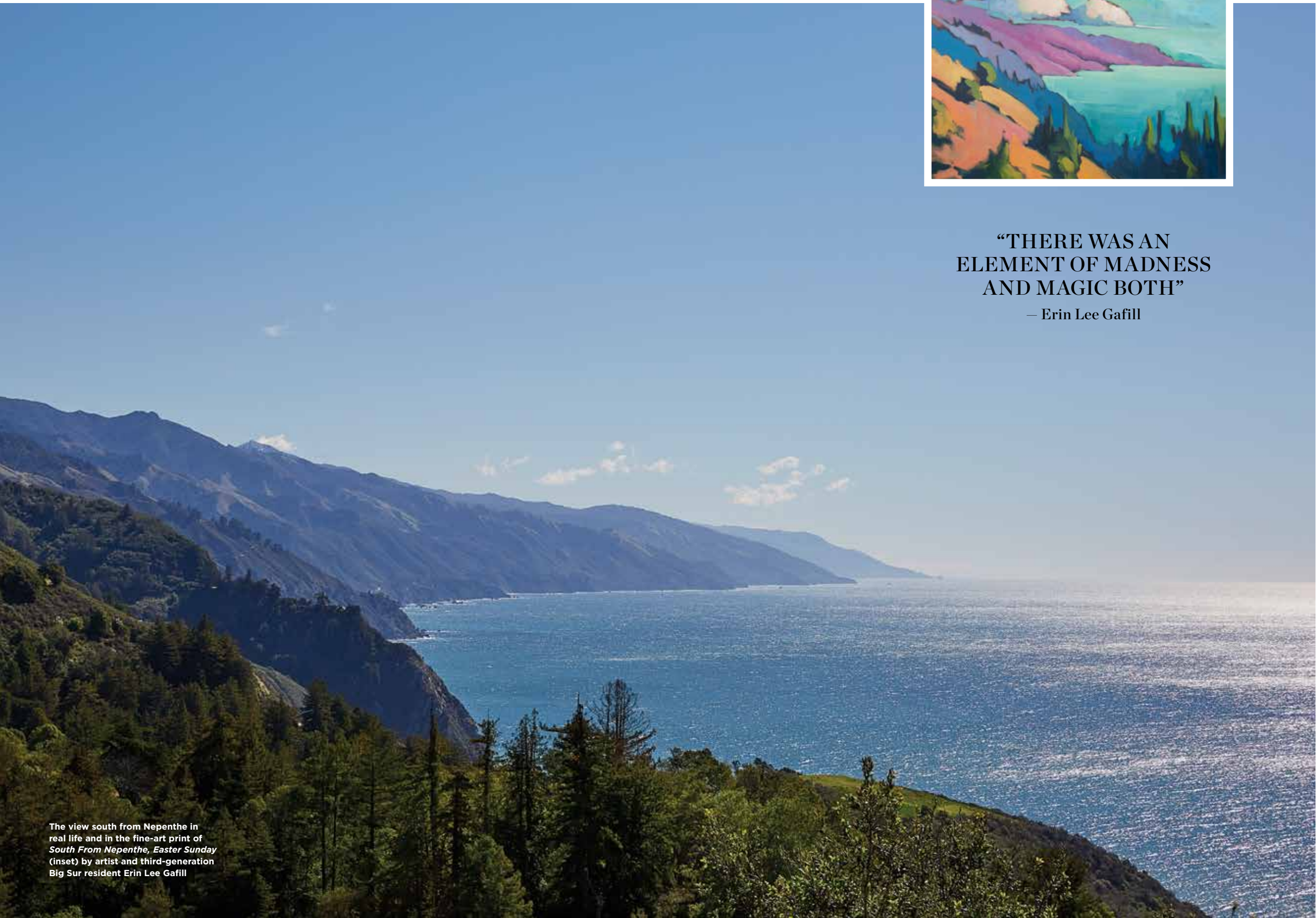
IT IS SO BEAUTIFUL. That is your first impression, and it deepens as you spend the days needed to truly see the coast. There's graceful Bixby Creek Bridge, lately the preferred backdrop for Big Sur selfies. There's McWay Falls

splashing into the Pacific, and the rough grandeur of Partington Cove, reached by following a trail out of a children's book—down a wildflower-dotted hillside across a bridge and through a tunnel to the sea. There are the redwoods of Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. And the harsher interior Big Sur you find taking Nacimiento Fergusson Road up into the Santa Lucias for views of knotted peaks and canyons and Pacific waves glinting like scattered sapphires far below you.

And there is another, homier Big Sur, which you bump into if you talk to locals (or at least eavesdrop on them) over morning coffee at a gathering spot like Big Sur Bakery. For all its scenic splendor, Big Sur is a small town. It has a population of 1,400. Its two most important civic organizations are the volunteer Big Sur Fire department and the community-run Big Sur Health Clinic. "They're the real touchstones here," says Basil Sanborn, a third-generation native who turned a '50s resort into the retro-chic Glen Oaks Big Sur. In a wildfire-prone region, the volunteer firepeople make the difference between disaster and salvation. The clinic is essential on a coast where, depending on weather conditions and roads, the hospital in Monterey can be hours away.

"We cover all the 90-mile coast," says Danielle Glazer, the clinic's family nurse practitioner. She grew up in Big Sur, left for college and nursing school, and then returned home. "People who live up dirt roads drive a couple of hours to see us."

Glazer says the clinic reveals something important about Big Sur. "There's a real dichotomy between people being solitary



“THERE WAS AN
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— Erin Lee Gaffill

The view south from Nepenthe in real life and in the fine-art print of *South From Nepenthe, Easter Sunday* (inset) by artist and third-generation Big Sur resident Erin Lee Gaffill

GET HERE

The Big Sur coast starts about 10 miles south of Monterey. The most convenient airports are Monterey Regional and San Jose International (85 miles north).

STAY HERE

Charmingly rickety cabins tucked into a fern-lined canyon, **Deetjen's Big Sur Inn** is for lovers of the cozy, eccentric, and bohemian: Think woodstoves and comfy quilts, not cell phones, TV, or Wi-Fi. Rates start at \$115 (shared bath) or \$225 (private bath); deetjens.com. On the edge of “downtown” Big Sur, native Basil Sanborn has transformed a '50s roadside motel into **Glen Oaks Big Sur**, a stylish motor lodge and, across Highway 1, retro-chic cabins shaded by towering coast redwoods. Rates start at \$225; glenoaksbigsur.com. “Glamping” barely does justice to **Treebones Resort**, toward the southern end of Big Sur: spacious, comfortable yurts with killer ocean views, plus massages and yoga. Yurt rates start at \$320; treebonesresort.com.

EAT HERE

If there's one must-not-miss Big Sur experience, it's lunch or dinner at **Nepenthe**, legendary for its cliffside setting and an atmosphere at once ethereal and earthy. Still owned by the family that founded it in 1949, the restaurant is most famous for its Ambrosia Burger, but the steaks and seafood are excellent, too. For breakfast, **Café Kevah** (lying just below Nepenthe) offers lattes, breakfast burritos, and stunning morning views. The dilemma at **Deetjen's Restaurant** is this: Do you go for breakfast (huevos rancheros, pancakes) or dinner (seafood paella, risotto)? The correct answer is both. Another local favorite, **Big Sur Bakery** has stellar baked goods for breakfast and lunch, and wood-fired pizzas for dinner. And for upscale dining, the **The Sur House** at Ventana Inn is one of the best on the California coast, with a particularly spectacular wine list of 10,000 bottles.



Clockwise: Bixby Creek Bridge; Danielle and Matt Glazer with the next Big Sur generation; cozy interiors at Deetjen's Big Sur Inn; the rustic charm of Deetjen's; Big Sur Bakery & Restaurant



and living off the land but at the same time coming together. Any time there's a real emergency, people shine." Erin Gaffill agrees. She admits she was doubtful about moving back to Big Sur to raise her family. Then she noticed that "the people who actually live and work here are really good neighbors. They look after each other. It's very wholesome here now."

Big Sur's small-town resilience protects it from losing its soul. It's not that the coast is immune to the pressures of the outside world. Traffic is an issue: On summer weekends, Highway 1 can slow to a crawl. Real estate prices are California crazy: Itinerant poets have been replaced by Silicon Valley tech tycoons—who, it's feared, will never love Big Sur the way it deserves.

And yet, says Danielle Glazer, Big Sur's essence remains: creative, independent, wild. It helps that there's not much space to build anything new. Much of the coast lies on California state park and national forest land or has been protected by the Big Sur Land Trust. Big Sur's vulnerability to natural disasters sets a high bar, too. "People come here, and it's magical," says Glazer. "And then the road slides and the fires burn. And only those who Big Sur truly wants will stay."

FOR ME, THE LANDMARK that most embodies Big Sur is a huddle of board-and-batten cottages just south of the Henry Miller Library. Deetjen's Big Sur Inn has stood among the redwoods of Castro Creek Canyon since the 1930s, when Norwegian immigrant Helmuth Deetjen and his San Francisco-born wife, Helen, built a barn and started welcoming occasional guests.

"This was the end of the road," says Deetjen's general manager, Matt Glazer (Danielle's husband). "Travelers would come through and say, 'I don't have any money,' and the Deetjens would let them work in exchange for a warm place to stay." A restaurant was added—today it serves some of the best food in Big Sur—and a series of cottages: Van Gogh, Chateau Fiasco, Far Away, more. All were built in Helmuth's signature Norwegian-fishing-boat-capsized-in-a-sea-of-wisteria architectural style that proclaims the unimportance of right angles and level floors.

As a longtime Deetjen's fan, I harbor doubts about Helmuth. "He was very metaphysical," a Deetjen's staff member once told me—that and the dining room portrait of a severe, pipe-smoking Helmuth makes me suspect he might not have been that much

fun to hang around with. Helen sounds far more welcoming, handing out cups of hot chocolate to children while they waited for the school bus. Together the couple created a Big Sur institution so beloved that after their deaths, the inn was rescued by a nonprofit community corporation that runs it still.

True to Big Sur, Deetjen's often flirts with natural disaster. Two years ago the same storms that closed Highway 1 toppled giant redwoods onto four of the cabins. They will be rebuilt—identical to the originals, says Matt Glazer, because Deetjen's is on the National Register of Historic Places—using timber harvested from the fallen trees.

It's important to all of Big Sur that Deetjen's remain just as it has always been. "People have transformational experiences here," says Glazer. "Whether it's processing a divorce, or surviving cancer, or just getting away and unplugging, everybody who steps on this property is transformed."

Each cabin contains a journal where guests can record their thoughts about the inn, Big Sur, their lives. On the day I stop by, Glazer lets me page through one of the books. Many entries are casual—*loved McWay Falls*. Others are yearning and raw:

I took to this weekend to be still and heal. My husband left me in January, so I've really been through the grief process. It's hard, but this weekend with mountains, sea, sky have been a balm ... If you're someone here tending to a broken heart, be kind to yourself and know that you'll come out on the other side.

These pages, I think, are what Big Sur is all about.

ALL BEAUTIFUL PLACES ARE HARD TO LEAVE, and Big Sur is harder than most. On my final day there, I cram in as many experiences as possible: breakfast at Deetjen's, a hike through redwoods, an afternoon glass of wine at Nepenthe.

And then, because I want to be where the continent slams into the ocean, I walk the storybook trail down to Partington Cove. Cliffs rise above me, the Pacific crashes against ragged rocks. Waves shimmer from deep blue to slate to jade. Big Sur's magic begins to work. You could do anything on a coast like this, I think. You could write a poem, paint a portrait. You could levitate. You could find the balm you need. Big Sur will still give you all these, if only you ask.