

# BIG SUR: BEYOND THE HIGHWAY

## GRAB YOUR BOOTS, BIKE AND BOARD TO EXPLORE EL SUR GRANDE

*Photos and story by Chandler Harris*



The most fitting description of Big Sur I found was at the bottom of the Pfeifer waterfall, etched into the sand next to a giant peace sign made of rocks that read, “THIS IS ART.”

With the rugged Santa Lucia Mountains pressing up against the unruly Pacific, Big Sur is a dramatic stretch of carved land that is more of an experience than a tangible place. The grandeur of the landscape harbors an innate ability to foster self-reflection and inspiration that has attracted artists, writers and spiritual seekers through the years, to this day.

“God was showing off when he made this,” commented the actor Laurence Fishburne, looking off into the broad expanse of the Pacific Ocean, his baritone voice lingering in the air. I ran into Fishburne on a trip to Big Sur in July. He was there to soak in the spectacular cliff-side hot spring baths at Esalen Institute and escape the concrete sprawl of Los Angeles.

Fishburne follows in the footsteps of a medley of historical luminaries from the world of art, literature, and music – from Aldous Huxley and Joseph Campbell to Beat poet Alan Ginsberg and folk icon Joan Baez. The writer Henry Miller lived in Big Sur for 18 years and described the locale as “a place of grandeur and eloquent silence.” One of Jack Kerouac’s later books, *Big Sur*, detailed the writer’s retreat to Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s Big Sur cabin to escape from fame and alcoholism.

Yet to many visitors, Big Sur is merely thought of as a stunningly scenic drive along Highway 1. While it’s certainly that, for more adventurous nomads there are scores of outdoor activities and hidden treasures to discover by parking the car and setting out on foot or bike. And there is perhaps no better time to visit and play in Big Sur than during late summer and fall. The coastal fog typically recedes – as well as the summer tourist traffic – leaving warm and sunny days for playing at the beaches and in the surf, and milder temperatures for exploring the drier country inland.

Big Sur, or El Sur Grande (The Big South), as it was once called, has no specific boundaries but most descriptions confine it to the 90-mile stretch of precipitous coastline between Carmel in the north and San Simeon in the south. Despite its geographical inaccessibility, at the turn of the century Big Sur supported a larger population than it does today, brought in by the boom-and-bust industries of redwood logging, gold mining and limestone production.

It wasn’t until 1937 that Big Sur started to open up again. That was the year Highway 1, an ambitious cliff-hugging strip of asphalt funded by New Deal money and convict labor, was completed after 18 years of construction. A land of remote farms and ranches began to give way to tourism and second homes. When electricity finally came to Big Sur in the mid-’50s, it had become a quiet, fog-shrouded perch for writers and artists. Now,

with strict anti-growth laws and millions of acres of protected public land, Big Sur maintains its environment of rural sophistication. Accordingly, property values have reached heights loftier than the mountains that rise more than a mile from sea to summit.

To get a sense of Big Sur pre-Highway 1, I suggest you begin by driving, biking or hiking the Old Coast Road, a 10.5-mile detour from the north side of Bixby Bridge, perhaps the most photographed arch of concrete in the world, to Andrew Molera State Park (22 miles south of Carmel), where the Big Sur River empties into the sea. The spectacular dirt road rises above canyons, curves along creeks and over the Little Sur River, and cuts through redwood groves. There are a scattering of Big Sur residences and geodesic dome houses, but don’t expect to discover welcoming artist enclaves and hippy communes here; “Private Property” and “Beware of Dog” signs predominate.

Still, the Old Coast Road provides a great preview of the 167,000-plus acres in the Ventana Wilderness region of Los Padres





photo: Ramona d'Viola

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National Forest. More than 260 miles of trails lace the wilderness area. One of the most popular portals into Ventana is the Pine Ridge Trail, accessible from the parking lot at Big Sur Station (30 miles south of Carmel). Many hikers and backpackers are drawn to the trail because of the relaxing reward of Sykes Hot Springs, 10 miles inland, one of three hot spring baths in Big Sur.

The other two hot springs have been effectively funneled into man-made baths at Tassajara Buddhist monastery nestled deep in the Santa Lucia Mountains and the coastal retreat of the aforementioned Esalen.

Hikers need to be vigilant navigators when striking out for Sykes, since territorial locals have been known to remove signs pointing to the hot springs. From Big Sur Station, follow the trail down through the southern tip of Pfeiffer-Big Sur State Park. The trail then climbs up a slope and into a forest of coast live oak, madrone and manzanita. From here, it follows a ridge for several miles, past three camps (Ventana, Terrace Creek and Barlow Flat) on the way to Sykes.

On the trail to Sykes, I encountered some backpackers on a road trip from New York, Ronnie and Missy, who felt like they were in the middle of a *Lord of the Rings* forest.

"There is nothing like this on the East coast," Ronnie said. "Big Sur is just... big. The trees, the views, the ocean are big. It's like a dream ... A living dream."

Indeed, there's nothing quite like soaking in Sykes Hot Springs after a 10-mile hike. Sykes consists of three natural hot springs that have been lined with boulders to provide structure to the baths. On summer weekends, the clothing-optional springs can draw quite a crowd.

Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park (26 miles south of Carmel) is a heavily visited destination with a trail system that meanders through redwood groves and along mountain streams. The 20-minute climb to Pfeiffer Falls is worth taking, if you don't mind the crowds. On the same trail further up, a hiker is rewarded with a hawk's eye view of the ocean and Point Sur.

For a longer hike, check out the steep 4.5-mile, 3100-foot climb to Mount Manuel (3520 feet) for what some consider the most



spectacular views of the Big Sur area. Take adequate water; although the route starts in forest, the majority of the trail switchbacks up shadeless, chaparral-covered slopes.

Eleven miles further south on Highway 1 is Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park (37 miles south of Carmel), a smaller preserve that is far less crowded. Here, many visitors take the short paved trail to view the iconic Big Sur image of McWay Falls, which plummets 80 feet from a cliff directly onto the sand. Trails around the waterfall lead to enclaves where people ponder the ocean vista and a few may be sunbathing au naturale in McWay Cove.

For a more ambitious hike at Julia Pfeiffer Burns, the 4.3-mile Ewoldsen Loop Trail gives a better sense of what has drawn so many seekers to Big Sur over the years. The trail follows McWay Creek up through a redwood canyon and, like many hikes in Big Sur, transitions from a damp redwood microclimate to dry and scrubby hills inland. After a 1,600-foot ascent, a hiker is rewarded with a startling panoramic ocean view.

Nearby, Partington Point is a lesser-known hike that offers an opportunity to see piece of Big Sur history. Travel two miles north of Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park and stop at an unmarked fire road blocked by a metal gate. Take the footpath that branches off the fire road, crosses a bridge and heads through a

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*McWay Falls.*

50-foot tunnel cut into the rock hillside. The trail emerges into a secluded rocky cove that holds the rusty remains of a boat landing dating back to the turn of the century, when timber and cattle hide was loaded onto ships for export. During Prohibition days, the port was used to smuggle liquor.

If standing on top of high summits invigorates your spirit, head further down Highway 1, south of Limekiln State Park (52 miles south of Carmel), to tackle the trail up the coastside pinnacle of Cone Peak (5155 feet). Cone Peak is the most spectacular mountain on the Big Sur coast and the second highest peak in the Santa Lucia Range; only Junipero Serra Peak (5862 feet), inland, is higher. In fact, Cone

Peak, less than three miles from the ocean, has the steepest coastal elevation increase in the lower 48 states, rising at an average gradient of 33 percent.

The 360-degree view alone is worth the climb. Luckily, you don't have to start your hike at sea level. From Highway 1, opposite the Kirk Creek campground, turn east on Nacimiento-Fergusson Road and follow 7 miles to Cone Peak Road (dirt). Turn left and follow 5.5 miles to the Cone Peak Lookout trailhead. From here, it's only a 2.4 mile climb to the summit with a total elevation gain of 1,400 feet.

In contrast to the open exposure found up high on this mountain of eroded marble,

you can find dense stands of gorgeous coast redwoods in the deep canyons of Limekiln Creek, which flows from Cone Peak. The 1.8-mile trail begins in tiny Limekiln State Park, which opened in 1995. A spur trail leads to Limekiln Falls, a spectacular 100-foot waterfall that drops over a limestone face. The park offers camping and a glimpse into the historic industry of making bricks and concrete from limestone. A half mile up Limekiln Creek, there are four rusted steel and stone towers that were kilns that slaked lime for cement in the 1880s.

Seven miles south of Limekiln is the remarkable Sand Dollar Beach, a beautiful haven for beach goers and surfers. The white sand hugs a horseshoe cove of multi-hued turquoise water. A variety of surf breaks cater to wave riders and, sometimes, acrobatic pods of dolphins. Bonus: The crowds are often small.

Not surprisingly, Big Sur has an unusually high concentration of places that nurture spiritual reflection; Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, the coastal enclave of Esalen and the New Camaldoli Catholic Hermitage nestled in the mountains.

The Esalen Institute, named after the Esselen Native American tribe that performed sacred rituals and soaked in the natural hot springs at the 27-acre grounds, is the place where the "human potential movement" was born. Esalen's most prized possession is probably the most amazing baths in the world, built on a precipitous cliff overlooking the Pacific and filled

with natural mineral water. The original baths were destroyed by El Nino storms in February 1998; the restored baths opened four years ago. They are open to the general public by reservation only from 1-3 a.m. for a charge of \$20. For \$150 a day, you can sign up for a personal retreat, with round-the-clock access to the baths.

However, before you open your wallet, you'll likely find a visit to any of the soaring peaks, redwood grottos, tucked-away beaches, and majestic waterfalls of Big Sur to be a personal retreat in itself, more than enough to rejuvenate the soul and inspire the mind. Just get off the highway and out of the car. **ASJ**

