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Named by National Geographic Traveler as one of its 50 Places of Lifetime, California's Route 1 gets truly dramatic south of Carmel.

Coasting in California

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Big Sur gets billed as the US's most spectacular drive — as well it should

by JOSEPHINE MATYAS • March 2013

There once was a young university student who thought a hastily planned bike tour along the coast of California would be just the ticket to ease the pain of a broken heart. Her touring 10-speed was folded neatly into a heavy-duty shipping box. Panniers were stuffed with camping equipment. Maps were almost an afterthought. Find San Francisco and head south, right? How hard could it be?

It turns out that topographical maps may have been a better choice. Watching too many surfing flicks tricked me into thinking the California coastline was nothing but kilometres of flat sand. The joke, as it turned out, was on me.

Thirty years later and that same student — older, wiser, with a rental car and armed with proper maps — tackled the hilly and luxuriously sinuous route that wiggles its way from San Francisco, through the trendy communities of Monterey and Carmel and into what is inarguably one of the continent's most spectacular drives, Big Sur.

The Pacific Coast Highway, or California Route 1, is the stuff road-trip dreams are made of — a stretch of coastal blacktop that winds past stunning beaches, precipitous cliffs, picturesque towns and magnificent stands of old-growth forest. From "The City by the Bay," the road meandered gently, tossing in a few hills for good measure, just teasers of what was yet to come. My calf muscles seemed to have a very long memory, and they remembered the challenge of three decades past. Rental car: good decision.

ON CANNERY ROW

It was along this part of the coastal route that Spanish expeditions built missions and presidios to colonize the territory for Spain. Hispanic settlers soon followed and when Mexico asserted its independence, Monterey (seemonterey.com) was chosen as the region's capital. The area was

CALIFORNIA COASTING



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Air Canada (tel: 888-247-2262; aircanada.com) and **WestJet** (tel: 888-937-8538; westjet.com) both fly into Monterey, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Carmel Valley Ranch (1 Old Ranch Road, Carmel; carmelvalleyranch.com; suites from US\$275) has 139 luxurious suites and a funky philosophy of "summer camp meets resort." Look for enriched learning experiences, golf, tennis, spa and whimsical touches like evening bonfires and tree swings.

For a touch of California modern surrounded by redwoods, try the revamped motor lodge or cabins at **Glen Oaks Lodge** (47080 Route 1, Big Sur; glenoaksbigsur.com; doubles from US\$175).

For more travel information on the region, consult VisitCalifornia.com.

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constantly in dispute and by the mid-1800s the territory became California, the 31st state in the nation.

These days, Monterey is known for historic Cannery Row, a wharfside collection of renovated warehouses that were once the boomtown of the lucrative sardine industry. At the end of the street is the world-class **Monterey Bay Aquarium** (886 Cannery Row, Monterey; montereybayaquarium.org), home to 35,000 sea creatures in more than 200 exhibits. Two-storey glass tanks hold forests of swaying kelp, startlingly-blue jellyfish and thousands of silver sardines, swirling in what appears to be a fish tornado. There are rockfish and leopard sharks, wolf eels and sluggish green sea cucumbers.

Just spitting distance inland from the city of Monterey are hectares of rich, productive farmland. "Monterey County is considered the salad bowl of the world," the young farmhand at the roadside stand told me as he bagged my ridiculously cheap avocados and almost obscene haul of pistachios.

The Salinas Valley was immortalized in the novels of John Steinbeck, who captured the tales of migrant workers streaming in from Dust Bowl states to pick and pack the produce. And in this part of the country, they certainly haven't forgotten Steinbeck.

My route took me into Salinas and the **National Steinbeck Center** (1 South Main Street, Salinas; steinbeck.org). Multimedia displays of film, archival letters and photos illustrate how Steinbeck was a very controversial author for his time. Even books like *The Grapes of Wrath* were criticized as "Red propaganda."

Steinbeck rose above his critics and went on to win both the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature. Words he wrote half a century ago still ring true today: "Having too many things, they spend their hours and money on the couch, searching for a soul."

WHERE THE 1% ESCAPE

Naming the biggest claim to fame in **Carmel-by-the-Sea** (carmelcalifornia.com) is a toss up: former mayor Clint Eastwood, stylish and pricey shops and galleries, or the **Pebble Beach Golf Links** (700 17 Mile Drive, Del Monte Forest; pebblebeach.com/golf), one of the world's most popular golf destinations, also home of the spectacular, cliff-hugging 17 Mile Drive.

The residents, who don't bat an eye at multi-million dollar real estate, like to have things "just so," which may explain some of the quirky bylaws: no neon signs, no hot dog stands, no street addresses on display and no high heels over two inches without a proper permit (apparently it is considered dangerous in a quaint "urban forest setting").

The 2.5-square-kilometre seaside enclave has attracted celebrities and artists by the boatload for as long as anyone can recall. In the early days, it was notables like landscape photographer Ansel Adams, followed by Doris Day, John Denver, Brad Pitt and of course, Mr. Mayor, Clint Eastwood.

WILD THINGS

For road trip junkies, the 145-kilometre stretch along the Big Sur coastline is a rite of passage. Designated a National Scenic Byway, there are no words to prepare for the heart-stirring moments around every seductive bend in the road. Dramatic seascapes appear with such regularity that after a while pulling over to photograph is abandoned in order to actually complete the drive in daylight hours.

The imprint of wilderness leaves a lump in my throat. The land along this coastline is home to some of the oldest trees on the planet — the giant Coast Redwoods — and in the water are sea otters, pods of migrating gray whales and colonies of elephant seals.

For artists, poets and counterculture types, the pull of Big Sur has been a magnet since the area was first settled in the 1870s. Electricity did not make it to this stretch until the 1950s (and some of the more outback locations are still without). The rustic setting — from the towering forests to the pounding Pacific surf — shouts absolute getaway, off-the-map, ultimate recharge. There are no grocery stores, no gas stations and no tacky souvenir shops. Whoever was behind the planning process got this one right.

The wild side starts just a stone's throw from the boutiques of tony Carmel-by-the-Sea. Down the long laneway at the **Point Lobos State Reserve** (562 Route 1, Carmel; pointlobos.org), I bumped into what has been coined "the greatest meeting of land and water in the world:" a landscape produced millions of years ago and now respected and left largely undisturbed.

Rigorously protected, the trails, coves and sprawling headlands at Point Lobos are limited to a few hundred visitors at any one time. They tromp along the pebbled trails to lookouts like Sea Lion Point; binoculars at the ready to spot the misty spray of a massive gray whale or to watch



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PLACES MENTIONED

Monterey
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the frolicking of the endangered southern sea otters, lying on their backs, bobbing in the foamy surf. Or just to marvel in wonder at the magnificence of nature.

AMONG GIANTS

My own route continued south to **Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park** (*47555 Route 1, Big Sur; parks.ca.gov/?page_id=570*), one of the best places I know to just amble along the hiking trails in a chapel of ancient redwoods. The soft, reddish bark of the towering Coast Redwood is up to a foot thick, deeply furrowed and impressively fire resistant. Stop all conversation, embrace the quiet, and the spirit of the wilderness is overpowering.

A little further south, I wondered how many travellers zip around the bend and blow right by the very funky **Henry Miller Memorial Library** (*48603 Route 1, Big Sur; henrymiller.org*). Miller, one of America's most famous and controversial 20th-century authors, spent 18 years living in Big Sur and produced many of his works while calling the area home. The library is a non-profit arts centre and bookstore, advocating the free life and freedom of expression. Summertime events include art shows, theatre, lectures, book signings and live music.

The sun had set and I recalled the words of the late Big Sur resident. "It was here in Big Sur that I first learned to say 'Amen,'" wrote Miller. I realized my trip was over but, for a moment, I was tempted to turn the car around and drive it all again.

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