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## The Secrets of Big Sur, Calif.

**One of the West's most beautiful stretches of coast charms hikers, bohemians, literary buffs, and foodies.**

By [Jennifer Reese](#) | [September/October 2012](#)

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The Santa Lucia Range and the blue Pacific create ravishing views.

### **IF YOU'RE GOING...**

Twenty-five years ago when I made my first trip to Big Sur, I had heard rapturous accounts of it, but had only the vaguest mental picture. Was Big Sur a town? Or was it a region? Did people live there?

One spring day, a friend and I drove south on a two-lane stretch of California's Highway 1 and found ourselves on a skinny shelf cut into the side of the Santa Lucia Range as it plunges thousands of feet to the Pacific.

We stopped at a legendary cliff-top restaurant called Nepenthe, where we ate burgers on sourdough rolls and looked *down* on gulls soaring over the sea. I've visited Big Sur a half-dozen times in the decades since, and the stunning 90-mile drive and great burger always seemed like pretty much all there was. It also seemed like plenty.

While it is indeed plenty, it is by no means all there is, as I discovered on a recent long weekend. The marquee attraction may be the ocean views, but the area holds other treasures tucked away in redwood groves and behind gas stations.

To start with, it has a number of parks that would take weeks to explore. Point Sur State Historic Park is the most dramatic, oriented around an 1889 lighthouse that perches on a hummock. Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park encompasses a handful of rugged trails and a waterfall that drops into a Caribbean-blue cove. But the best park for discovering the heart of Big Sur is Andrew Molera State Park, where you can get a glimpse of both the natural splendor and the human history of the region. Big Sur's beaches are famously remote, but Molera Beach is relatively easy to reach by the three-mile roundtrip Beach Trail—assuming, at certain times of the year, you don't mind wading across Big Sur River. After that, a path leads to a wide, sandy, driftwood-strewn beach.

This land was once owned by the cattle-ranching Molera family, and the foreman's house has been converted into a museum. Exhibit items include historical artifacts such as a 19th-century map that marks a few scattered settlements surrounded by "Impassable Mountains."

The whole coast became somewhat more passable between 1919 and 1937, when prisoners from San Quentin built Highway 1, the region's north-south corridor. The novelist Henry Miller (*Tropic of Cancer*) moved into an abandoned prisoner encampment in the 1940s.

Many colorful scenes from Miller's life unfolded at Nepenthe, where he was known to turn up in his bathrobe. The roadhouse, which opened in 1949, was named after a mythical drug that induces forgetfulness, and indeed, much forgetfulness was induced at Nepenthe by artists and writers such as Dylan Thomas, Salvador Dalí, Man Ray, and Jack Kerouac. One of Big Sur's most beloved attractions, Nepenthe boasts a broad terrace with views of a craggy coastline and the endless sea, though it is no longer the bohemian hangout it once was.

The Henry Miller Memorial Library, set in a sequoia grove near Nepenthe, is a snug, well-stocked bookshop that carries Miller's oeuvre and displays memorabilia—including a scathing editorial rejection letter.

Farther south, a more meditative life survives at New Camaldoli Hermitage, home to a branch of a 1,000-year-old Italian monastic order. As you switchback up a road lined with electric-blue ceanothus and yellow bush lupine, you feel as if you're ascending to heaven. At the end of the road sits a simple cinder-block chapel, so austere it seems to hint that no human creation could

compete with the view of sea and sky from this perch. The monks support themselves by offering retreats and selling fruitcake packed with pineapple, nuts, and jammy dates.

But here's the sweetest Big Sur treat: the glazed doughnuts, crispy on the outside, tender and yeasty within, that can be found at the Big Sur Bakery & Restaurant. In 2001, Michelle Rizzolo and Phil Wojtowicz refurbished a cabin behind a Shell gas station and started selling pastries and wood oven-baked pizzas. The bakery adjoins a cactus garden, and I sat there one morning, eating a doughnut and watching a hummingbird collect nectar. The Santa Lucia Range loomed to the east, soft and green, offering an altogether quieter perspective on Big Sur than the familiar oceanscape. I will always love those views of the Pacific and will always love Nepenthe, but I've got a new Big Sur touchstone. Actually, a handful of them.

*Photography by [David H. Collier](#)*

This article was first published in September 2012. Some facts may have aged gracefully. Please call ahead to verify information.

If You're Going:

Request the *Northern California TourBook* and the *Monterey Bay & Fresno-Kings Counties* map at [AAA.com](#) or any AAA branch. To find a place to stay, visit [AAA.com/hotels](#). For more information, contact the Big Sur Chamber of Commerce: (831) 667-2100, [bigsurcalifornia.org](#). Area code is 831.

To do and see

**Andrew Molera State Park** 667-2315, [parks.ca.gov](#). **Henry Miller Memorial Library** 48603 Hwy. 1, 667-2574, [henrymiller.org](#). **Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park** 667-2315, [parks.ca.gov](#). **New Camaldoli Hermitage** 62475 Hwy. 1, 667-2456, [contemplation.com](#). **Point Sur Lightstation** Guided tours. 625-4419, [pointsur.org](#).

Shopping

**Local Color** Tie-dyed clothes and pendants made from beach glass. 46840 Hwy. 1, 667-0481, [bigsurlocalcolor.com](#). **The Phoenix** Pick up Mexican silver jewelry or a cap crocheted by a local artisan. 48510 Hwy. 1, 667-2347, [phoenixshopbigsur.com](#).

Eats

**Big Sur Bakery & Restaurant** 47540 Hwy. 1, 667-0520, [bigsurbakery.com](#). **Big Sur Deli** 47520 Hwy. 1, 667-2225, [bigsurdeli.com](#). **Nepenthe** 48510 Hwy. 1, 667-2345, [nepenthebigsur.com](#).