

The Hiker

STEPHEN COPELAND
Founder of Big Sur Guides

If there's anyone in all of Big Sur who knows its wild areas like the back of their hand, it's Stephen Copeland. As the founder of hiking guide service Big Sur Guides, Copeland is a John Muir of sorts on the Central Coast, having spent every free moment exploring the trails, forests, and coasts of this wild and beautiful area for the past 39 years. "When I first arrived in Big Sur in 1970, I had spent most of my life in Beverly Hills, where there was little access to nature," the 62-year-old recalls. "Curiosity led me into the redwoods, and I fell in love."

On any one of Copeland's guided hikes, hikers fall in love with the redwoods, too—and the waterfalls, beaches, and vistas. Copeland shows visitors through the wilderness with detail and care, as he knows an incredible amount about the flora, fauna, geology, and history of the area. "I took photos of all the plants I didn't know, and then would look those plants up and learn their medicinal properties," he says of his early days in Big Sur. When Copeland befriended Lolly Fassett, the founder of Big Sur's Nepenthe, she showed him the region's trails. "She knew so many people and would introduce me to them as we spent many Mondays together—the one day a week she would leave Nepenthe. She told me when I was 24 that it was my destiny to show Big Sur to the world," he explains.

His first guided hikes were for friends and relatives who showed up from Beverly Hills wanting to see the forests and learn from Copeland. With his knack for teaching and his friendly demeanor, the business thrived. "I've run Big Sur Guides for 32 years," Copeland explains. "But it's not about me at all—it's about this," he adds, referring to the gorgeous landscape. "I'm just here to facilitate people experiencing this and all the good that is here." With this much humility, Copeland is reluctant to spout about his incredible roster of hiking clientele, which includes VIPs from President Bush to Oprah Winfrey and more.

To all Big Sur hikers' delight, Copeland continues his tours, which are more important than ever now given that many of the region's state parks have been closed. Because of Copeland's positive relationships with many private landowners, he is able to show hikers areas of the coastline that are not open to the public.

This scratch golfer is also back on the links, and he continues to zip up and down Highway One in his signature Porsche each day, saying hello to friends all along the coast. "In Big Sur, everyone is recognized by their car," he laughs. "If you are going to drive every day from Pebble Beach to Big Sur, it might as well be in a Porsche."

But don't be fooled by the flashy car—Copeland remains as humble as ever, constantly crediting Big Sur's wild beauty with the happiness he feels each day. "It is the greatest meeting of land and sea, and the beauty seems to touch everyone who visits the area," he says. "It keeps those of us who live here content, and it brings those people who visit back again and again. I am one with that beauty."

—LINDSAY SCHAUER

