

A Walk to REMEMBER

Big Sur Guides will take you off the highway and into a wild coastal region well worth exploring.

for all the hikes, then pauses. "I've run Big Sur Guides for 32 years, but it's not about me at all. It's about this," he says, looking out at the ocean. "I'm just here to facilitate people experiencing this and all the good that is here. There's just so much good here."

It's a modest statement from someone who has taken every VIP from President Bush to Oprah Winfrey on a hike and been nationally recognized for his services. But, after experiencing the Big Sur Copeland shows to his hikers, one can understand why this area facilitates humility. Whether you visit

PHOTO: DAVID GUBERNICK

As the founder of hiking guide service Big Sur Guides, Stephen Copeland shows visitors around Big Sur's forests and coastline the way one would show guests through their own immaculately decorated home: gesturing toward each familiar detail, explaining what's around each new corner. As he leads a small group of hikers away from Highway One and down a rocky trail one crisp winter day, Copeland points out one of his favorite local plants growing near the trailhead. "Take some of this in your palm, hold it to your nose, and take a deep breath in," he instructs, dropping pinches of it in everyone's palm. "This is California sage, one of the signature scents of Big Sur." Such a full-sensory experience, in which the sounds, sights, and history of Big Sur come to life, is handed to hikers on each of Big Sur Guides' 21 different walks, be it the Bluff Trail Hike or the Jack Kerouac Experience.

Farther down the trail, toward a waterfall few visitors ever get to see, Copeland points out some wild fennel, a patch of heart-shaped clover, and his favorite things of all—Big Sur's signature redwood trees. They tower overhead, stretching their furry bark toward the canopy above. "But just wait," he warns. "If you think this is beautiful, wait until you see the blue. It's the blue that sticks in people's minds when they come to Big Sur."

As his hikers emerge from the forest onto a rocky coastline, Big Sur's blue greets them—a sparkling carpet of cyan water stretching toward the horizon. Copeland passes around the *Gourmet Magazine*-worthy picnic lunches a local deli packs up

the eucalyptus groves filled with migrating butterflies or walk alongside an ocean dotted with migrating whales, Big Sur's nature is indeed immense. And, according to Copeland, those who experience Big Sur's dramatic landscape can't help but come back. "This place touches something in people's consciousness that isn't touched in everyday life, and they've got to come back," he says. "People need to experience this."

For those looking to experience Big Sur on foot, Copeland and his team of guides lead hikes of varying difficulty year-round and recommend visiting at any time. In January the monarch butterflies migrate through the area, February marks whale migration season, and springtime brings about a whole new season of Copeland's favorite flora and fauna. So you may consider heading to Big Sur throughout the year because, as Copeland claims, chances are that once you come here, you'll want to come back again. www.bigsurguides.com ■

—LINDSAY SCHAUER

Hang Your Hat Here

To access the Big Sur experience, Big Sur Guides suggests looking to the area's most luxurious hilltop resort and spa, Ventana Inn. Not only do the guides use the resort as a base for their hiking and walking tours, guests can enjoy ocean views from nearly every room and take garden strolls to sitting benches overlooking the dramatic geography around the property. Ventana's spa incorporates the best local scents and ingredients in every treatment, and their restaurant, Cielo, tops off all its gourmet dishes with a stunning view. Call 831.667.2331 or visit www.ventanainn.com.