



Bond with Mother Nature in Big Sur

Aftermath of summer fire barely felt

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My great-nephews aren't so great. Their idea of having their hands full means one hand for the mouse and the other for the remote. They are mesmerized by anything with a screen, except a screen door that leads to the outside world.

So my wife and I decided to kick them out of the house, screaming and yelling if necessary, and into a tent for a camping trip to Big Sur. Thankfully, the little rough-riders rode down with their mom and cousins, so we saved a buck on earplugs.

We were hopeful they would bond with Mother Nature, warts and all. And we were curious how Big Sur's newest and most conspicuous wart, the aftermath of the Basin Complex wildfire, would mar the beauty that draws millions of tourists annually to the Big Sur coast.

It was dark when we arrived, so we had to set up our tent by the headlights of our car. Good thing the rookie-campers wouldn't arrive until the next afternoon. By then we would have scouted out our campground in Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. It's one of California's southernmost redwood parks. Located in

the heart of Big Sur, the campground has 214 family campsites with picnic tables, fire pits and hot showers.

Big Sur is not a town. Sparsely populated and with no specific boundaries, it's more a district with a frontier mystique where the Santa Lucia Mountains encounter the Pacific. The section of Highway 1 running through Big Sur is considered one of the most scenic drives in America. There aren't any chain hotels, supermarkets, or fast-food outlets to be found: just clusters of gas stations, campgrounds, rustic motels and cafes, along with a few fancy inns and restaurants priced well above our budget.

Picking up pieces

Most of the tourists who visit Big Sur each year never wander far off Highway 1. But they still get an eyeful of beauty. Today, that beauty is slightly blackened due to the July fire. In all, the fire destroyed 27 homes and thousands of acres of wild land. When views of the Santa Lucia Mountains and the Ventana Wilderness open up, you can see that entire hillsides were devoured by the inferno. But from the highway and along the coast of Big Sur, the views are still spectacular. The flames spared everything west of the highway along the coast, and most of the land just east of the highway.

The next morning, we started our scouting mission by driving south to Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. Highway 1 runs through this 3,700-acre park, which extends from the ocean to about 1,500 feet above sea level. The park is crawling with hiking trails, but the singed hillsides are still off-limits to hikers. And with winter rains looming on the horizon, the devastated area will probably remain that way until next year.

Although gung-ho hikers and backpackers are out

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of luck, the vast majority of visitors to Big Sur go to see the wild, woolly coastline and sweeping ocean views. Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park's most popular hike was untouched by fire. Overlook Waterfall Trail, a mere 0.3 miles each way from the parking lot to the overlook, ends with a cliff-top view of McWay Falls and the Pacific Ocean. The falls drop into a cove, which is open to wildlife only.

Dining with a view

After scouting out beaches and cafes that are child- and budget-friendly, we decided on one more splurge before the wrecking crew arrived. Nepenthe, one of the most picturesque dining spots in California, overlooks miles of coastline with a cliff-top perch, 800 feet above the Pacific. Along with a bird's-eye view, this fabled dining spot has a party personality that attracts tourists and locals.

We dined in the open-air patio where we watched the sun set between bites of grilled Castroville artichoke and skewers of grilled wild shrimp in Champagne beurre blanc. But we couldn't linger long; we were the welcoming committee for the family who was fighting Friday getaway traffic.

The following morning, we skipped the campground grub for a late breakfast at the Big Sur River Inn, located just a few minutes' drive from our tents. Set amid the redwoods, the historic inn is steeped in nostalgia. Guests can steep themselves by sitting in one of the chairs that the inn has planted in the middle of the Big Sur River.

We opted for seats on the sun-dappled deck overlooking the Big Sur River. The kids played on the lawn beside the river until their lumberjack breakfast arrived. A pile of pancakes with a lemonade chaser put them in a good mood.

Behind the scenes

Sadly, that good mood melted away like the morning fog when they heard that a hike was next. We had made plans to meet Steve Copeland, owner of Big Sur Guides, for a hike along the edges of Andrew Molera State Park, located a little north of our camp site.

Copeland has been showing visitors the hidden gems of the Big Sur area for decades. And he was wise and prudent enough to interpret the look on our great-nephews' faces. He guided us on a beautiful but short hike. We parked along Highway 1, about a quarter mile north of the entrance to Andrew Molera State Park, and strolled along the Big Sur River to an overlook with views of the park and the Pacific.

Copeland said that later in the fall millions of migrating monarch butterflies would make their home in the eucalyptus trees along the trail.

From the overlook, we could see the highest mountain in Big Sur, Pico Blanco, at almost 4,000 feet above sea level. Its majesty was still intact despite its burnt flanks. It was clear, after talking to Copeland and looking around, that Big Sur's beautiful coastline is just as awesome as ever, despite the fire.

Copeland said that all of his excursions along the east side of Highway 1 were on hold until the area opens up in the spring. He has 11 different hikes that head east off Highway 1. But he's still offering seven hikes on the ocean side of the highway.

He was an ocean of information, and I wished we could have talked longer, but my great-nephews were giving new meanings to mosey. Only a cattle prod or a promise of hitting the beach could get them going.

Coastal break

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We drove south to Big Sur's most popular coastal access point, Pfeiffer Beach. The trick is locating the beach, which can be found at the end of unmarked Sycamore Canyon Road. The road is the only paved, ungated road west of Highway 1, a bit south of Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. From Highway 1 it's a two-mile drive to the parking lot and a short stroll to the beach.

High cliffs tower above this stretch of sand, and large arch-shaped rock formations just offshore prod photographers to get a little snap-happy. At twilight, a sea-carved tunnel in one of the rock formations is especially photogenic as the sun is the biggest light at the end of the tunnel you'll ever see.

We all loved the beach, a beautiful break from the rocky coast, where the adults could poke around the tide pools and the kids could play tag with the surf. But don't get caught; the water's cold, the surf capricious and the currents tricky.

Thankfully, by the time we got the campfire roaring, all the roars in the kids had mellowed. A few toasted marshmallows later, they were almost contemplative. For a moment, I thought that they had transcended normality for nature — until I read the ingredients on the bag of marshmallows.

Jay Solmonson is a former Bay Area News Group-East Bay photographer. Reach him at jks3737@gmail.com .

If you go When: Fall and winter bring reduced crowds, migrating monarch butterflies and migrating whales. Camping: Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park reservations are available at ReserveAmerica (www.reserveamerica.com). Where to eat: Nepenthe, located 28 miles south of Carmel, can be contacted at 831-667-2345 or www.nepenthebigsur.com . Big

Sur River Inn at 831-667-2700 or www.bigsurriverinn.com . Info: Big Sur Chamber of Commerce at www.bigsurcalifornia.org .; parks at www.parks.ca.gov. Guided walking tours: Steve Copeland at Big Sur Guides, 831-594-1742 or www.bigsurguides.com .

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