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At Big Sur, the coast is clear -- but many trails are closed

By Jay Solmonson
for the Mercury News

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BIG SUR — My great-nephews' idea of having their hands full means one hand on the mouse and the other on 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 take them on a camping trip to Big Sur. We hoped they would bond with Mother Nature, warts and all. And we were curious how the summertime Basin Complex wildfire had marred the beauty that draws millions of tourists annually to this mystical destination along the Monterey County coast. In all, the fire destroyed 27 homes and scorched thousands of acres of wildland.

A drive down the portion of Highway 1, long considered one of America's most scenic drives, still offers spectacular views of the Pacific Ocean and the coastline: The flames spared everything west of the highway and much of the land just east of the highway. But when views of the Santa Lucia Mountains and the Ventana Wilderness open up, you can see that entire hillsides were devoured by the inferno.

We set up our tent by the headlights of our car at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, which has 214 family campsites with picnic tables, fire pits and hot showers.

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 probably will remain that way until next year.

Although gung-ho hikers and backpackers are out of luck, the vast majority of visitors to Big Sur go to see the wild and woolly coastline and sweeping ocean views. Julia Pfeiffer Burns' most popular hike, the Overlook Waterfall Trail — with its cliff-top view of McWay Falls and the Pacific Ocean — is open.

Also untouched was the restaurant perched 800 feet above the Pacific — the fabled Nepenthe, one of California's most picturesque dining spots. Between bites of grilled Castroville artichoke and skewers of grilled wild shrimp in champagne beurre blanc, we could see that the ocean and coastline views remain as stunning as ever. The eastern sightline, however, has changed.

"The landscape is more exposed, but the new views are incredible," says Kirk Gafill, manager of Nepenthe and president of the Big Sur Chamber of Commerce. Long gone are the years of overgrowth, leaving a new landscape where creeks he didn't know existed reflect a setting sun like never before. And new green tree shoots are already poking through the ash, he says.

Throughout Big Sur, business is above average, Gafill says, with the strong euro providing a "silver lining" after the fire — a record number of European tourists.

The following morning, we skipped the campground grub for a late breakfast at the Big Sur

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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 great-nephews 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.

Sadly, their high spirits 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.

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 burned flanks.

"The rebirth has already started," he said. "There's new life everywhere, new redwood sorrel, iris and green shoots popping out of the burn area."

Soon, Copeland said, millions of migrating monarch butterflies will make their home in the eucalyptus trees along the trail.

All 11 of Copeland's excursions along the east side of Highway 1 are on hold until the area opens up in the spring. But he's still offering seven hikes on the ocean side of the highway.

Later, 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.

Cliffs that 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. And in quiet voices they both admitted that camping wasn't so bad after all.

Jay Solmonson is a former Bay Area News Group photographer. Contact him at travel@mercurynews.com

What's open to hikers, campers

All state park trails and campgrounds east of Highway 1 remain closed. There are soil stability concerns in and near the fire zone.

OPEN

Andrew Molera State Park

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McWay Falls Overlook Trail, Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park

Buzzards Roost Trail, Pfeiffer Big Sur

CLOSED

Most of Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park

Limekiln State Park (closed by another blaze, this month's Chalk Fire)

Pico Blanco Trail

OPEN LATER THIS WEEK

The Ventana Inn, which was closed by the July fire and then suffered a restaurant fire Aug. 10, plans to reopen Oct. 31. Details: www.ventanainn.com.

MORE NATURE IN ACTION

Now: Monarch butterfly migration.

December: The migration of gray whales begins.

IF YOU GO

Tourism/camping: Find information from the Big Sur Chamber of Commerce at www.bigsurcalifornia.org.

Parks/camping info at www.parks.ca.gov.

Guided walking tours: Steve Copeland at Big Sur Guides, (831) 594-1742 or www.bigsurguides.com.

Dining details: 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.

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