

# Travel

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## WELCOME TO THE INSTACOAST

*Instagram tourism has fueled frustration in Big Sur. But you can be a respectful traveler and get your selfies, too. Page 4*



**OUTDOORS** DEAD TREES HAVE FIRE EXPERTS ON ALERT. **PAGE 2**

**TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER** QUOTED ONE PRICE, CHARGED ANOTHER. **PAGE 3**

**GUIDE** HOW TO DO BIG SUR THE RIGHT WAY. **PAGE 5**



Photos by Nic Coury / Special to The Chronicle

From top: Pastries and avocado toast are among the offerings at Big Sur Bakery. Deetjen's Big Sur Inn has been welcoming visitors to Castro Canyon since the 1930s.

## Doing Big Sur the right way

By Sarah Feldberg

On a drizzly Wednesday in February, I did the most cliché thing possible in Big Sur. I pulled into a parking spot next to the Bixby Creek Bridge, shrugged on a poppy-red raincoat and positioned myself so the graceful concrete arch appeared over my left shoulder. Then — disappointed in myself for succumbing to the most basic Millennial impulse — I took an extremely mediocre selfie.

Instagram tourism has become a serious problem in Big Sur, evident from the second you hit that famous bridge. It has brought a wave of visitors drawn by portraits in front of waterfalls and purple-sand beaches and scattered them in a remote landscape with little infrastructure and only a single through road.

That travelers want to capture a bit of the natural beauty for their cell-phone memories or their social media feeds is fine. That they sometimes do so with little regard for residents, business owners, fellow visitors and the environment is less so.

Rick Aldinger, the general manager of the Big Sur River Inn who has worked in the region for 30 years, says the attitude of travelers has changed. Before the advent of social media, people came to the area because “there was this mystique or magical quality and allure to Big Sur. People wanted to feel it.”

Today, he says, many arrive with a photographic to-do list. “They’re motivated to check the three boxes: Bixby Creek Bridge, Pfeiffer Beach and McWay Falls.”

That’s a shame, not because those three aren’t breathtakingly photogenic — they are — but because there’s so much more to absorb in this 90-mile stretch of rugged Pacific coastline. If you zip down Highway 1 stopping only for selfies and bathroom breaks, have you really seen Big Sur at all?

It’s not hard to do Big Sur the right way. Slow down and step away from your car, and you’ll find ravines bristling with

redwoods and turquoise coves free of crowds. This is your guide to being a respectful guest and soaking in Big Sur, so you leave with more than Instagram likes.

### Come prepared.

Big Sur’s isolation is a key ingredient in its enduring appeal, but it also presents some logistical challenges. Cell service is spotty at best. Bathrooms are few and far between. Gas, where available, is very expensive. Before you cruise through Carmel, make sure you have a full tank, an empty bladder, Google maps downloaded and any important destinations pinned on your phone.

### Mind your impact.

Much of the frustration with tourism stems from small acts of self-importance — parking in the roadway to grab a quick photo or trampling delicate plant life to get a better view of the bluffs. Before you indulge those impulses, don’t. Don’t pose for a picture on the double yellow line. Don’t block traffic to wait for a parking spot. Don’t blaze your own trail through the natural environment. You don’t have to. Around every bend in Big Sur, there’s another pull-off spot for another vista. If one is full, just head to the next.

### Go for a hike.

Once you cross the Bixby Creek Bridge, your first stop should be Big Sur Station, where volunteers from the Los Padres Forest Association give

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out maps of the local wilderness areas and expert intel on what's open, closed and worth doing. (There's also a public restroom.)

Two years after an extremely wet winter in 2017 caused flooding and landslides, some popular trails remain closed, but you can still follow a valley of calla lilies to the beach at Garrapata State Park or hike Andrew Molera's 6-mile survey of coastal scenery. Climb through mist-cloaked redwoods on the Buzzard's Roost trail at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, or stroll a section of the Waterfall Overlook trail at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park for a vantage point of McWay Falls, perennially pouring onto a sliver of idyllic beachfront.

**Grab a bite.**

While large sections of Big Sur are blessedly free of development, there are plenty of restaurants ready to feed you. For grab and go, think burritos from the Big Sur River Inn general store or made-to-order sandwiches at Big Sur Deli. Big Sur Bakery serves three meals a day, from can't-miss ginger scones in the morning to wood-fired pizza topped with duck confit at dinner. Just next door, Big Sur Taphouse is a local favorite with a rotating beer list and hearty sandwiches. Chef Nick Balla, formerly of Bar Tartine, recently took over the kitchen at Coast Gallery, offering light bites and picnic supplies in a repurposed redwood water tank, while the famed Nepenthe has been drawing crowds for decades with its coastal

views and Ambrosia Burger.

**Spend the night.**

Big Sur is best appreciated slowly, less as a thru-way and more as a destination in its own right, and that means spending the night. Pitch a tent at one of the many campgrounds or cozy up in a hillside yurt at Treebones, which has been offering glamorous camping since well before someone coined the clever portmanteau. For more traditional accommodations, consider historic hotels like Deetjen's Big Sur Inn and Big Sur River Inn, where summer Sundays mean live concerts and barbecues on the riverside lawn, or splurge on a luxury tent at Ventana Big Sur or one of Post Ranch Inn's signature tree houses.

**Embrace improvisation.**

Ask Big Sur locals for their favorite spots, and they'll name mile markers instead of landmarks. Mostly they'll tell you to explore without an itinerary, that unsigned pull-offs lead to secret waterfalls and redwood groves, that you're best served by taking your time and wandering. It's good advice. Let it lead you to the oddball sculptures and lazy cats of the Henry Miller Memorial Library or to Partington Cove's quiet beauty. Every patch of roadside dirt is a possibility. Imagine sprinting through Big Sur and missing it.

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Sources: Google Maps, Nextzen, OpenStreetMap

Todd Trumbull / The Chronicle



Nic Courty / Special to The Chronicle

The Bixby Creek Bridge on the Big Sur coast is a magnet for photographers.