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BIG SUR • HOLIDAY PARTY TIPS • GIVING EXPERIENCES AS GIFTS

Silver Linings

Big Sur Rebounds After Fire and Flood

BY MIKE HALE





Photo: Shutterstock

W

here there blessings—disguised or otherwise—following the wrath that nature unleashed on Big Sur last winter? Could

someone really find silver linings in those dark clouds that dumped torrents of rain and misery on a close-knit community?

Given the sheer destruction, the turmoil, the unemployment, the personal hardships, the beleaguered businesses and economic losses, it's difficult to admit to blessings. But there certainly was quiet reflection. Plenty of that. And strong fellowship. And lessons learned. And maybe the dawn of a new day as we all finally learn to tread more lightly on this rugged yet somehow fragile land.

Following last winter's unprecedented rainfall on a region still scarred from wildfires, Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge buckled and failed, forcing Caltrans to tear it down in March. With landslides to the south, around 500 hearty souls living between the coastal flanks of the Santa Lucia Mountains and the chilly Pacific found themselves stranded on a virtual island.

Then in May, a million tons of soil and rock tumbled over the highway south of Big Sur at Mud Creek. The largest debris slide in the state's history — adding 13 acres to the coastline—shut the door with a slam, separating kids from school, workers from jobs, residents from basic necessities of life.

Until a hastily constructed switchback foot trail opened last summer, inhabitants of the island hunkered down to support one another:

"I can honestly say this is the worst disaster we've ever had down here, because it was back to back," says Sharen Carey, executive director of the Big Sur Health Center. "I don't think we'd really recovered from the fires (the Soberanes Fire scorched more than 130,000 acres and destroyed 57 homes in the summer and fall of 2016).

For some folks, Carey says, the sheer isolation was the final wound, and they packed up and moved on. "For others," she says, "it amazed me and reminded me in every disaster how resilient this community is, how everyone came together, creating shared transportation, picking up supplies for one another, really caring about neighbors."

For many Big Sur residents, the health center provides their only medical care, but it closed for 10 days when a storm knocked out all power and water:

Fortunately, BSHC had switched patient medical records to a cloud-based system, and call-forwarding options allowed patients to connect with doctors. The staff didn't miss a beat, filling prescriptions at mainland pharmacies and delivering them by medical helicopter. Once the trail opened, able-bodied patients were able to walk to their appointments or get prescriptions.



After major wildfires and subsequent heavy rains, the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge in Big Sur collapsed from a slide and had to be replaced. From March to October, 2017, access to Big Sur was severely restricted.



Ventana Inn has morphed into Ventana Big Sur, with glamping that provides luxurious tents nestled amongst the Redwoods, a teak bath house and “a more refined way to connect with the outdoors.”



Photo: Kelli Uidall



The Henry Miller Memorial Library (above) and Deetjen's Big Sur Inn (below) were both hit hard by the Highway 1 road closures. The Library had a temporary home in The Barnyard in Carmel.

Another silver lining: Carey says the staff noticed dramatic health improvements. "Patients walked the trail twice a day, going to work, getting prescriptions," she says. "They found they had more energy, they lost weight, slept better at night."

Now that the bridge has opened, Carey hopes for a re-awakening.

"Maybe the lessons we all learned will resonate," she says.

One of those lessons involved easing life's pace. Quiet island life reminded residents how it used to be.

"Being on the island is kind of what you initially wanted it to be when you came to Big Sur," says Magnus Toren, director of the Henry Miller Library. "It showed the face you fell in love with, accentuated by the silence. It's the quality of the place you don't have when it's busy."

Kenny Wright, for decades one of two CHP resident officers in Big Sur, felt like he jumped into a time machine. "I remember in the '70s getting into the patrol car after Labor Day and driving up to the north end and driving back and not seeing more than 10 cars all day," he says.

Wright hated to see the bridge come down, of course, but he has fond memories of walking the trail and gathering with his neighbors at the post office, or the Taphouse, or a quiet spot along the highway.

"It was an incredible opportunity for this community to bond," says Wright, who lives north of the bridge with wife Mary. "We walked that trail a lot, at least twice a week, just to see friends and be supportive. We could all slow way down."

The favorite place for that Zen experience was the deck at Nepenthe, the iconic Big Sur restaurant named after a fictional medicine for sorrow—a drug of forgetfulness. Residents from each side of the bridge gathered there and it became Big Sur's new living room.

"I can't tell you how many afternoons we hung out and visited with people, having a glass of wine, playing ping pong, hanging out, reflecting on how wonderful it was," Wright says.

Kirk Gafill, who manages the restaurant his family launched in 1947, called it "a pause in the day-to-day jumble."

"We've all found silver linings, which is almost psychologically necessary to get through something like that," says Gafill, whose efforts in serving his neighbors and employees earned him 2017 Small Business of the Year award from Senator Bill Monning (D-Carmel). "You don't have a choice. Anger doesn't accomplish anything."

In a statement, Monning acknowledged Gafill and his staff with "going



Iconic Nepenthe Restaurant, perched over the stunning Pacific with views of the Santa Lucia Mountains, became a gathering place for the Big Sur residents who were isolated by the Highway 1 road slides.



On Friday, October 13, 2017, a ribbon cutting celebrated the reopening of the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge, which had been closed for eight months. Caltrans Director Malcolm Dougherty said, "This route...[is] a national treasure."

above and beyond by playing a leadership role in aiding the community... They worked tirelessly to help locals stay informed about the situation, and worked to find solutions."

For some businesses, the only options were renovation and reinvention. The storms battered Deetjen's Big Sur Inn, forcing closure of the resort (a member of the National Register of Historic Places). The Deetjen's Big Sur Inn Preservation Foundation started a Go Fund Me campaign to help continue its not-for-profit mission to provide an affordable Big Sur experience.

In late September before the bridge opened, the restaurant at Deetjen's served its first breakfast, and local residents (along with a few hearty hikers) gathered for eggs Benedict and a side of community spirit.

Staff members who had worked tirelessly for nearly seven months to clean and repair the buildings once again served customers.

"Deetjen's will persevere," says Matt Glazer, hired last summer. "It knows how to be Deetjen's. My job is to help preserve its history and help share it with everyone."

Toren had to share his Henry Miller Library at The Barnyard in Carmel, where a satellite facility helped spread the gospel. "It's a different perspective there, of course, but really fun," he says.

Ventana Inn underwent a \$17 million remodel, and is now open as Ventana Big Sur, with a new glamping program offering 15 safari-style tents with plush amenities—effectively reinventing Big Sur camping.

Glen Oaks Big Sur has taken a more minimalist approach, offering rustic-yet-modern eco-friendly rooms with adobe walls, beds crafted from recycled wood and bamboo side tables, while strongly encour-

aging its guests to commune with nature (rooms have no TVs, and several cottages sit surrounded by an ancient redwood grove).

The message to visitors now: Proceed with caution.

"There's been a sense of entitlement to do what you want without thinking about impacts," says Wright, referring to traffic, pollution, illegal campfires, stress on flora and fauna. "Public agencies need to educate folks and do a better job of managing the lands."

Gaffill wants to keep the giant chess board, the cornhole games and the relaxed pace on the Nepenthe patio. But with the bridge open, a different kind of flood looms.

"We all loved the quiet and the solitude," says Glazer, "but that will change. People will come. And anyone who runs a business struggles to reconcile that."

One of those lessons involved easing life's pace. Quiet island life reminded residents how it used to be.