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140 HOLIDAY IDEAS

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PARTY MENU
for a
CROWD

—
ULTIMATE
GUIDE
to growing
CITRUS

RETURN TO

BIG
SUR

REDWOOD
CANYON GLAMPSITES
AT VENTANA

+

THE PERFECT GIFTS

*for campers,
cooks & more*

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BEST OF THE WEST



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GF: Gluten-free; LC: Low calorie; LS: Low sodium; V: Vegetarian; VG: Vegan

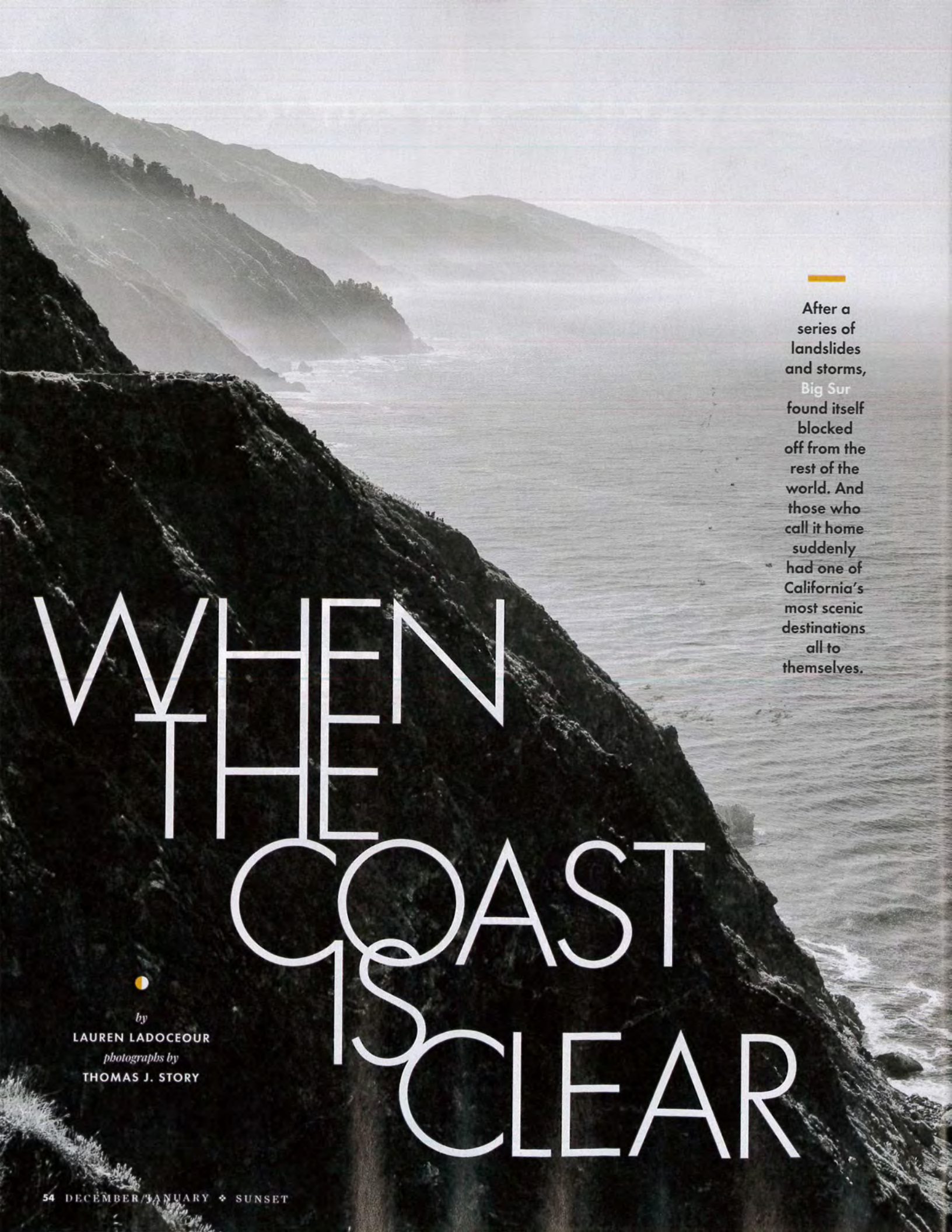
Our full guide to nutrition and good cooking: sunset.com/cookingguide.

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Tucked into 20 acres of tall trees off Highway 1, Ventana Big Sur's 15 new Redwood Canyon Glampsites offer quiet luxury in safari-style canvas tents. Campers Nick Gallant and Kendra Baker (pictured) got married in Big Sur and were back to celebrate their 10th anniversary. Photograph by Thomas J. Story; prop styling by Emma Star Jensen





After a series of landslides and storms, Big Sur found itself blocked off from the rest of the world. And those who call it home suddenly had one of California's most scenic destinations all to themselves.

WHEN THE COAST IS CLEAR

by
LAUREN LADOCEUR
photographs by
THOMAS J. STORY



PROP STYLING: EMMA STAR JENSEN

Left: Big Sur's craggy cliffs. Right: Ventana Big Sur's glampground, which opened in October.

S

COTT AND MOLLY

Moffat were down to their last cans of sardines and crackers. With the roads

leading to the nearest stores blocked, the young couple needed to figure out how to keep their three children, pets, and horses fed. And fast. "We were close to running out of food," says Scott, a scruffy Big Sur native and carpenter who moved back here five years ago with Molly. "So we grabbed our backpacks and started bushwhacking our way out." The kids stayed with a friend, and their parents returned after a daylong trek with 120 pounds of shelf items and produce. "Lesson learned: Always have a month's worth of food on hand," says Scott. "And build out a vegetable garden."

This happened in March, weeks after the crumbling Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge to the north officially closed, dividing the coastal hamlet of Big Sur in two. Throughout the winter, a series of landslides had rendered parts of Highway 1 a few miles to the south unsafe to drive. It was a one-two punch that effectively severed the bottom half of the town from stores, schools, medicine, and mail service. With no access in or out, Big Sur's south side had become an island of sorts, one with an empty Highway 1 running down its spine. And stranded at the top of a ridgeway were the Moffats.

Their 400-or-so neighbors were in much the same position, having already emptied out the local deli and the walk-in fridges of the restaurants where many of them worked. Smaller roads leading into residential areas, like the dirt one-way that the Moffats would normally take from their home down to the main highway, were impassable, thanks to a streak of record-breaking rains and felled trees. "In the beginning, it was actually fun and sweet. There was no traffic, it was quiet, and the wildlife really came out of the backwoods,"

says Molly, a petite horse trainer with a singsongy voice. "But when people started running out of their supplies, they got a little bit anxious about when the next meal's going to come in."

CARVED AMONG its dramatic cliffs, booming surf, and thick redwoods, Big Sur has long inspired writers and a stream of visitors

taking roadside selfies. The community, which has sheltered no more than 1,000 permanent residents at a time since artists, ranchers, and solitude seekers began settling here, has also been the stage for gob-smacking fires and slides for most of its modern history. In fact, the town has seen regular highway closures every few years since it was completed in 1937. But for those



Scott and Molly Moffat with their three kids, Scarlet, 7, Tiger Lily, 2, and Roman, 5.



who live here, and visitors like me who come through, it is paradise.

I've spent the better part of a decade making the trek from the Bay Area—to camp, tune in and drop out at yoga retreats, or to just immerse myself in the trees and then sneak up to the Big Sur Bakery. Watching the marine layer burn off, I've spent mornings here dreaming up plans to make a permanent move. But every time I hear news of another megastorm or devastating fire striking the area, that fantasy jolts to a halt.

These past few months have been extreme even by longtime residents' standards. With parts of Highway 1 and Nacimiento-Fergusson Road (the only public road that winds through the mountains east to west) closed for a time, helicopters flew in to rescue residents and some lingering vacationers, and food air-drops followed. The posh hotels that make up most of the economy here—like Ventana Big Sur and Deetjen's Big Sur Inn—had to go on sabbatical. And some of the residents and workers who commuted from coastal communities from the north cut bait. Those who remained have spent the better part of 2017 rebuilding the community, its roads, and the hotels.

Though no official numbers have been tallied yet, early estimates note \$300,000 lost every day to the local economy since the "island" formed. Couples who were once separated by just a few miles suddenly found themselves in long-distance relationships. And families with children were forced to leave their homes and crash with friends on the north end so kids could attend school.

"It's put a lot of things in perspective," says Molly, noting that while what happened in Big Sur by no means compares to the Mother Nature-led destruction that's hit Puerto Rico, Texas, and California Wine Country this year, it has given her a taste of what it's like to be stranded. "It's made me think a lot about the millions of people who have trouble getting food and supplies right now. It's insane."

IN THE PROCESS OF TRYING to knit life back to normal again, the south siders have created a new kind of Big Sur, one where residents ride bikes and horses on a shockingly empty highway and rely on each other like never before. "If Big Sur ever needed a detox, she got it," says Jamie Siebold, a special projects manager at Ventana who stayed on to rebuild the resort's campground after a creek washed it away. "For the past few months, we've had it to ourselves. I'm not going to lie: It's been pretty nice."

By the end of February, most businesses on the south side of the bridge and all but one resort had gone on hiatus. Transportation officials worked to clear the eastward entrance of Nacimiento-Fergusson Road, and dozens of locals alongside workers from California State Parks and the American Conservation Experience began etching a steep mile-long trail out to the north end of the downed bridge. Even by the fall, during my first visit to the area since the devastation, the trail was still serving as the community's main thoroughfare.

Throughout the week, Steve Mayer, whose family owns the Big Sur Taphouse and Deli on the south side, takes turns with his employees doing the hike to the north so they can load up a 105-liter bag with newspapers, ice cream, and whatever else is needed to stock the south side's only general store. "Sunday is no fun," says 27-year-old Mayer, who only gets a few days off to go home to his wife in Monterey. "Sunday is newspaper day, and those papers are the heaviest."

Over a beer one afternoon, Mayer takes a break from behind the taps and lets me try on the bag, which is nearly as tall as he is when it's fully stuffed. Nope, I think, no way, no how—I'd topple over on the final ascent. "You do what you got to do," he says, returning to his place behind the bar to serve a couple of longtime residents who've come in for fish tacos.

For others, such as Heather and Marcus Foster, the trail was a path for return. After the bridge closed, the couple made the tough decision to split up—she took the kids to a friend's home up north, where their school was, while he stayed behind to continue looking after the ranch. A month after the trail debuted, the family reunited in the south, and the Fosters began their weekday ritual of taking the kids to the trailhead to school. "When I came back, it just felt deserted," says Heather. "On the north side, everything was changing and reopening. And on this side, it was like, screech! All the pullouts were full of dirt. I was like, did we do the right thing coming back?"

BY THE END OF SPRING, with plans to reopen the southern highway entrance in the works, the community was, in its own way, energized. Destination-restaurant Nepenthe was in business again (albeit serving 30 meals a day instead of 300 to locals and

"In the beginning, it was actually fun and sweet. There was no traffic, it was quiet, and the wildlife really came out of the backwoods,"

says Molly Moffat.

intrepid tourists who took the Nacimiento-Fergusson Road in). At Ventana Big Sur, the chef worked out a deal to have ingredients delivered to the resort via that same winding road—10 miles of which can take up to one hour to drive—in order to feed the workers helping renovate the hotel. And locals had gotten resourceful. A couple of guys improvised a CrossFit gym using a drill rig, while Scott Moffat transformed felled trees into flooring and furniture for homes that were being rebuilt.

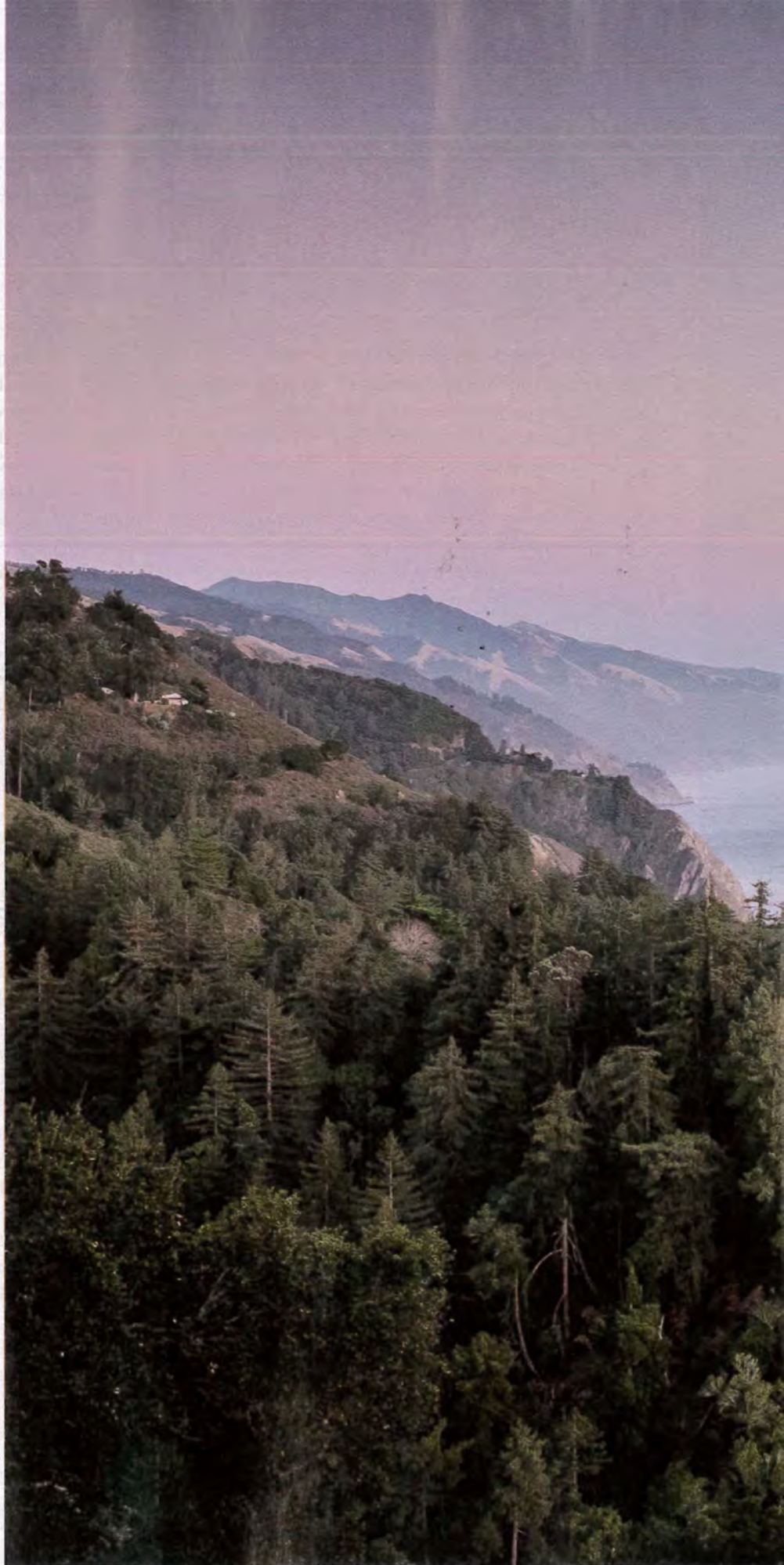
With the post office still closed, an engineering crew delivered a few residents' mail to the deli, using a private road they maintained (they were thanked with six-packs). And another company began offering electric bike rentals as a way to ride 20 miles of the now-quiet coastline road. Some people rode naked.

In many ways, it was Big Sur as it used to be—or at least the way author Henry Miller painted it in *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, the 1957 book that attracted writers like Jack Kerouac with its descriptions of a community that was equally scrappy, collaborative, and creative in how it made day-to-day life work on the edge of the world.

Then in May, with earth-shaking gusto, another landslide at Mud Creek, farther south of the already blocked-off road, buried Highway 1 in a million tons of unsettled earth. The California Department of Transportation estimates that section of the highway, which will need to be rebuilt before it can once again serve as Big Sur's lower access point, won't be ready until the end of this coming summer, at the earliest.

That, coupled with several delays in the new bridge construction to the north, should have solidified the south end's landlocked status. But over the summer, the community bypass trail opened to the public, bringing with it an increase of tourists and road cyclists hiking up with their wheels over their shoulders, hoping to see how far down the highway they could get. In response, the Henry Miller Memorial Library, which had set up a temporary storefront in Carmel, began turning on the lights

Rancho Grande,
taken from the deck at Nepenthe.





In many ways, it was Big Sur as it used to be ...
a community that was equally scrappy,
collaborative, and creative in how it made day-to-
day life work on the edge of the world.

during the week back in its original location; Deetjen's devised plans to rebuild the cabins that fell during storms; and Ventana put the finishing touches on its glampground nestled in a lush redwood canyon.

Word had gotten out online about the new trail allowing visitors to access the island. And, yes, I was one of them, taking 20 minutes to do the walk and counting one tourist for every dozen or so locals I encountered along the way. It was clear who the outsiders were: We were all a little sweatier, a little more unsure of the way than those who follow the trail on a regular basis.

Not all the locals were eager to see us. One afternoon, when I came across a roadside pullout where a set of local 20-somethings were parked and taking in the view, a sense of territorialism peaked. "Twenty dollars for a picture. Twenty-five! Forty-five!" snarked one man sitting with his friend in the bed of a pickup. They were covered in a thin layer of mud they'd presumably found in an in-the-know clay deposit by a natural spring not too far off. Classic acid rock pumped through the speakers, and their bodies danced like shadows against the late-day light. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a jerk, but this is the one time we get this place to ourselves. Can we have this moment?"

At first I was taken aback. But then, I thought, can I blame them? Big Sur is a place for those who love untouched beauty and know how to be at the mercy of it. And for the better part of this past year, it's been something of a reserve for those who can.

"It's a lot like it was 20 years ago now, where you'd go into a store and see your neighbors. There's creativity in coming together," says Scott Moffat, who has since planted a garden full of watermelon, peas, squash, herbs, and tomatoes in case of the next months-long isolation. "People from the outside may look in and say it's really beautiful or it's really tragic, but what they don't see is the in-between. We're thriving."

Clockwise, from top left: Ventana's roasted carrots; The Sur House executive chef Paul Corsentino; Ventana's glampground bathhouse; Big Sur Tap-house's Steve Mayer; the meadow at Ventana; Scott and Tiger Lily Moffat.





To Sur, with love

Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge reopened in mid-October, freeing up the south-bound route into town from Monterey. To get the most up-to-date information on the bridge and future road closures, check sunset.com/bigsurclosure and dot.ca.gov. Once you're there, be sure to hit these favorite spots.

EAT

At the Big Sur Taphouse, go straight for the spicy fish tacos and a pint or two of sour beer. (You'll most likely be trading rounds with your bar mates anyway.) bigsur-taphouse.com.

STAY

You don't really need to pack much for a night at Ventana Big Sur's new super-luxe glampsites. Safari-style tents come with a plush bed, a gas-and-wood firepit, electricity, maps, and walking sticks for exploring the area's trails and creeks. (Bonus: Guests can use the resort's Japanese bathhouse and pool!) From \$325; ventanabigsur.com.

SHOP

The Henry Miller Memorial Library has long drawn artists and Miller fans to its simple wooden cabin, filled with his complete works. Its backyard stage has seen the likes of Neil Young and Cat Power through the popular folkYEAH! concert series. henrymiller.org.

EXPLORE

About 6 miles south of Nepenthe restaurant is the Partington Cove trailhead. The 15-minute hike takes you through a redwood canyon to a rocky beach and into a tunnel, where on the other side is the sunset-worthy beach cove. bigsurcalifornia.org.