

escaping



The evocative Bixby Bridge is one of the most photographed views in the country.

California dreaming

Following in Henry Miller's footsteps offers renewed creativity and an escape from day-to-day life, says Lisa Kjellsson

There are a fair few destinations on my travel bucket list that I first discovered through my love of reading. This was certainly the case with Big Sur, considered one of California's – and indeed America's – most spectacular nature spots, and the subject of many literary works. The writer most closely linked to it is Henry Miller. The great American author's memoir *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, published in 1957, is a tribute to his home for nearly two decades. The rugged beauty of Miller's coastal utopia also inspired Jack Kerouac, John Steinbeck and, before them, the poet Robinson Jeffers – to name just a few.

So, then, how could I not be intrigued by this place of seemingly endless inspiration? I wondered if it would have a similar effect on me, and set off on a road trip from Los Angeles to find out. The iconic Highway 1, with majestic views of the Californian coast,

reopened in July having been closed for more than a year following a major mudslide that buried part of the road near Big Sur. The culmination of hundreds of miles of dreamy scenery is the view of Bixby Bridge – 260 feet above a craggy canyon and probably the most Instagrammed landmark along the highway.

When Miller wrote his homage to Big Sur, he had been living there for 11 years. Back then, he resided in a community of around a dozen families, but the number of sightseers and visitors in the area was steadily increasing, partly due to his good friend Emil White's Big Sur guide books, but mainly due to Miller's fame. Publicity surrounding his semi-autobiographical novels – several of which were banned for decades both in the US and the UK on grounds of obscenity – brought the first wave of tourists to the area. Would-be writers were forever pitching up >

escaping

at his home on Partington Ridge, wanting to join ‘the cult of sex and anarchy’ they had read about. Their incredulity when Miller told them there was no such thing was always the same.

Bothersome fans were not what troubled Miller the most, however. He worried that, as the ageing early settlers eventually passed away, his utopia would be threatened. “Should their tracts of land be broken up into small holdings,” he wrote, “Big Sur may rapidly develop into a suburb of Monterey, with bus service, barbecue stands, petrol stations, chain stores and all the odious clap-trap that makes suburbia horrendous.”

Luckily his nightmare hasn’t materialised. No chain stores have been allowed to take hold of the area and it could never be described as suburbia – the resident population is actually smaller today than in Miller’s era. As a result, there’s no real centre to Big Sur, a 90-mile stretch from Carmel to San Simeon, and you won’t find much in the way of shops and amenities. Apart from two hidden-away luxury hotels frequented by Hollywood stars, the

only places to stay are a few campsites, motor lodges and cabins such as the Glen Oaks site (ideal for hikers), and a quirky guest house dating back to the 1930s, where I found myself on my visit.

Deetjen’s Big Sur Inn was built by Norwegian settler Helmuth Deetjen and was home to him and his wife, Helen Haight. As travellers would stop by and enjoy their hospitality, over time

it evolved into a local institution and a favourite haunt for resident artists and writers, including Miller, and has also welcomed a string of celebrities including The Beach Boys, Steve McQueen and Robert Redford. Today, guests enjoy much the same experience as when Helmuth and Helen were alive, as it is now run by a trust with the purpose of preserving it as it was. Don’t expect TV or WiFi – in fact, mobile



Photography: Josh, Rose Photography

reception is patchy at best throughout the area, making it perfect for a digital detox.

Having enjoyed a delicious dinner and a night’s restful sleep in what was formerly ‘Grandpa’ Deetjen’s own bedroom, I headed out into the wilderness. Nothing can prepare you for the magnificence of the redwoods. Their towering height and quiet presence is simply awe-inspiring and felt to me like an invitation to sit in stillness, gazing up at the sky and breathing in the fresh air. “To be alone, if only for a few minutes, and to realize it with all one’s being, is a blessing we seldom think to implore,” wrote Miller, who did much reflecting on the benefits of solitude; as life in Big Sur was in sharp contrast to the one he had led during his years as a struggling writer in Europe. He saw the value in the peace and serenity that came with his “humdrum life in an out-of-the-way place” like Big Sur, where he could lose himself in his writing and his other great love – painting.

My curiosity about Miller’s celebrated watercolours led me to Gary Koeppel, his



Photography: Lisa Kjellson

FOOD WITH A VIEW

Miller was a regular at legendary cliff-top eatery Nepenthe – its trademark Ambrosia burger is a big hit with the artists, writers and musicians that flock there. nepenthe.com



Clockwise from top: the iconic McWay Falls; take a walking tour of Point Sur lighthouse; Lisa admires a towering redwood; Deetjen's Big Sur Inn offers quirky charm.



Photography: Carol O'Neil

Plan your Big Sur break

WHAT TO DO AND WHERE TO GO

EXPLORE

* POINT SUR LIGHTHOUSE

An impressive working lighthouse and lightstation buildings atop a volcanic rock just off-shore.

www.pointsur.org

* ANDREW MOLERA STATE PARK

Miles of trails wind through meadows, bluffs, beaches and hilltops in this beautiful state park.

www.parks.ca.gov

* JULIA PFEIFFER BURNS STATE PARK

Stretching from the coastline into nearby 3,000-foot ridges, the park features an impressive 80-foot waterfall.

SLEEP

* DEETJEN'S BIG SUR INN

Step back in time in rustic chic cottages set amid towering redwoods – be sure to also visit the atmospheric restaurant.

www.deetjens.com

* GLEN OAKS

Get up close and personal with nature without forsaking any creature comforts in one of their riverside cabins.

www.glenoaksbigsur.com

EAT

* BIG SUR BAKERY & RESTAURANT

Irresistible cakes from this famous bakery and superb food in the restaurant – perfect for an intimate dinner.

www.bigsurbakery.com

* THE SUR HOUSE, VENTANA INN

Fine dining in a breathtakingly beautiful setting – sample the gourmet menu on the patio overlooking the coastline.

www.alilahotels.com/ventana/the-sur-house

TRAVEL

* Fly to Los Angeles or San Francisco and then rent a car to take an iconic road trip along Highway 1.

www.visitcalifornia.co.uk / www.rentalcars.com

escaping

art dealer and the former owner of the Coast Gallery (www.bigsurcoastgallery.com), which displays some of Miller's artworks. "Henry always used to say 'When I write, I work; when I paint, I play,'"

WISE WORDS

"This is the way life goes on in Big Sur... working at whatever it is you came here to work on...painting, writing, gardening, or the simple art of living your own life."

Hunter S Thompson

recalled Koeppel, and this childlike enthusiasm is evident in the modern impressionistic style Miller favoured. The gallery is now being renovated by its new owner, but is due to reopen this autumn.

I then stopped by at the Henry Miller Memorial

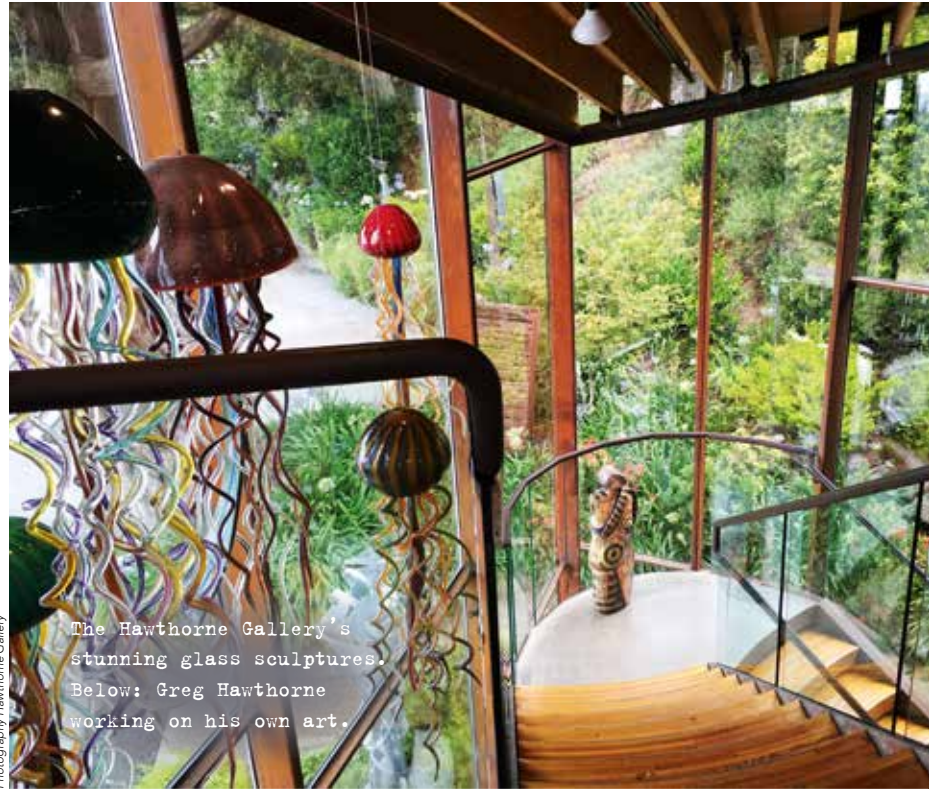
Library (www.henrymiller.org),

a cultural venue that hosts workshops,

signings, lectures and screenings in what used to be Emil White's home. From there I moved on to visit the Hawthorne Gallery (www.hawthornegallery.com), which showcases paintings, sculptures and glass pieces including colourful jellyfish that hang suspended from the ceiling.

Greg Hawthorne, who very kindly showed me around the gallery as well as his equally beautiful home, not only brought me up to speed on life in Big Sur today, but also made me see that perhaps I had harboured a slightly romanticised idea of it. "Big Sur, like any other place in the world, does not stay the same, and anybody that thinks it was better in the past... it's baloney. I've been here for 36 years and I think it's a very interesting time here now," he said, adding that the area attracts all kinds of pioneering people. I knew he was right – celebrating cultural heritage is important, and it's natural to want what we love to remain intact, but what keeps it alive is innovation.

Greg's words stuck with me; having spent just a few days exploring this beautiful part of California, I found myself brimming with ideas and creative inspiration. Big Sur may have evolved since those early days, but it holds an unmistakable magic and provides plenty of opportunities for moments of solitude in an 'out-of-the-way place'. ☁



The Hawthorne Gallery's stunning glass sculptures. Below: Greg Hawthorne working on his own art.



Photography: Lisa Kjellsson