

Central Coast: Past, present, future

Big Sur - beautiful, wonderful, mysterious



By Mark James Miller, August 12, 2018

“On soft spring nights I’ll stand in the yard under the stars — something good will come out of all things yet — and it will be golden and eternal ...”
Jack Kerouac, “Big Sur.”

From the breathtaking vistas of the Pacific Ocean along Highway 1, to the towering Monterey pines, to the many mysteries and legends, this is a place like no other.

Here people come to write novels, compose music or seek enlightenment. Here Native Americans worshipped fog spirits and left handprints in caves 4,000 years ago. Here visitors claim to have seen “Little People” playing in the mist of a waterfall, and others say they have heard angels singing near the sea.

Weird, mysterious lights have been reported over the ocean, lights that hover and then fly away. UFOs? A natural phenomenon? No one knows. This is Big Sur, a place of beauty, mystery and wonder.

The magic of Big Sur was once again on display during a recent journey north on Highway 1. As the hills get greener and the trees taller and more

plentiful, a sense of uniqueness takes hold. There is no other place in the world like this.

Perhaps that is why Big Sur has for so long attracted artists, writers, musicians, eccentrics and seekers of every variety, each coming for their own reason. Novelist Henry Miller lived here from 1944 to 1962. Poet Robinson Jeffers wrote of Big Sur's natural beauty. Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson worked as a security guard at the site where the Esalen Institute now stands. Jack Kerouac wrote a novel titled "Big Sur." Poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti was once a Big Sur resident. Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth bought a cabin in Big Sur, forcing Henry Miller, who was living there rent-free, to find no-cost housing a bit further south. Ansel Adams also lived in Big Sur.

But as is true wherever you go in these United States, someone else was living there first — the Esselen.

One of the smallest of the California Native American tribes, the Esselen are believed to have numbered no more than 1,200 individuals when Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino encountered them in 1602.

"A very gentle and peaceful people," Vizcaino wrote. But the Esselen had the misfortune of living close to three missions — San Carlos, Soledad and San Antonio — and during the Mission Period they were nearly wiped out. Esselen children were forcibly removed from their parents to be baptized, while adults were taken for forced labor. Disease, starvation and overwork took their toll, and the Esselen almost went extinct.

The Esselen were a deeply religious people, believing everything was alive, and there was no difference between the physical world and the spiritual.

Perhaps it is their lingering influence that has made Big Sur a haven for people seeking spiritual guidance. Henry Miller said, “It was here in Big Sur that I first learned to say ‘amen.’”

But there also is a darker side to Big Sur. Legends of the spirits of the Esselen who want the intruders to leave their sacred land, an all-consuming dread called “The Terror” that engulfs hikers on the back trails, and a dark, winged beast hovering near the cliffs along the shoreline.

Everyone who comes to Big Sur does so for their own reason. For some it is the awe-inspiring beauty, for others it is to seek spiritual guidance, a chance, perhaps, to be closer to the spirits that dwell here. Others are looking for self-knowledge. As Hunter Thompson said, one of the important facets of Big Sur is “the simple art of living your own life.”

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