

# TRAVEL *ET* LEISURE

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**BIG NEWS**  
FROM  
**BIG SUR**  
THE MOST  
SPECTACULAR  
HOTEL ON  
THE PACIFIC  
COAST



PRAGUE, GET THERE NOW ■ SEASIDE, AN INSTANT FLORIDA CLASSIC ■ EURO DISNEY, WORTH A DETOUR?





The best seat on the Pacific Rim, here outside the Post Ranch Inn's restaurant.

# BIG NEWS FROM BIG SUR

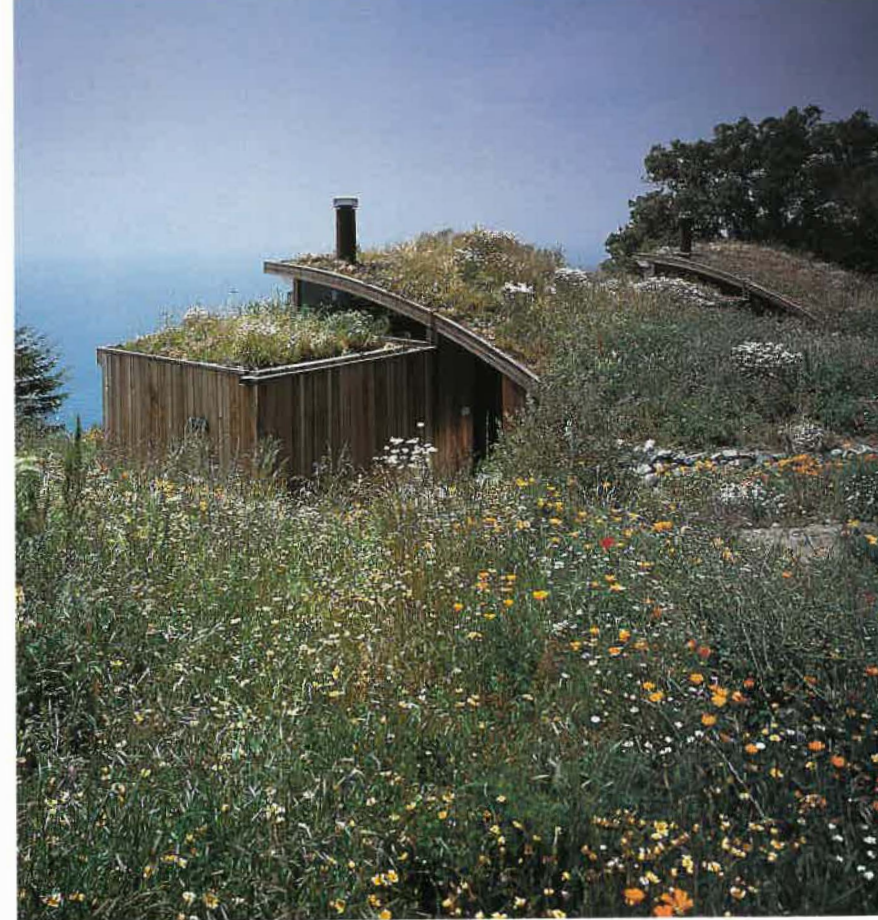
THE LAST  
GREAT  
RESORT  
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OF  
COAST

**P**icture a pristine coastline populated with fervent isolationists, where the word *development* is a call to arms. Now imagine building a luxury hotel on that stretch of land—a resort that practically clings to the edges of the oceanside cliffs and somehow manages not to offend the locals or send the zoning commission into apoplexy. Difficult? Definitely. Impossible? Well, just ask the owners of the Post Ranch Inn, which opened its doors late last spring on one of the choicest pieces of real estate in Big Sur, the wondrous 80-mile stretch of California coastline between San Simeon and Carmel. © The Post Ranch Inn, about a three-hour drive south of San Francisco, is the first hotel built in Big Sur since its neighbor across Highway 1, the Ventana Inn, hideaway to the rich and famous, opened in 1975. (It's also the only Big Sur hotel actually on the ocean's edge.) Against considerable odds—particularly a piece of legislation known as the California Coastal Act, which for 20 years has kept Big Sur free from all but the most

BY  
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PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY  
TIM  
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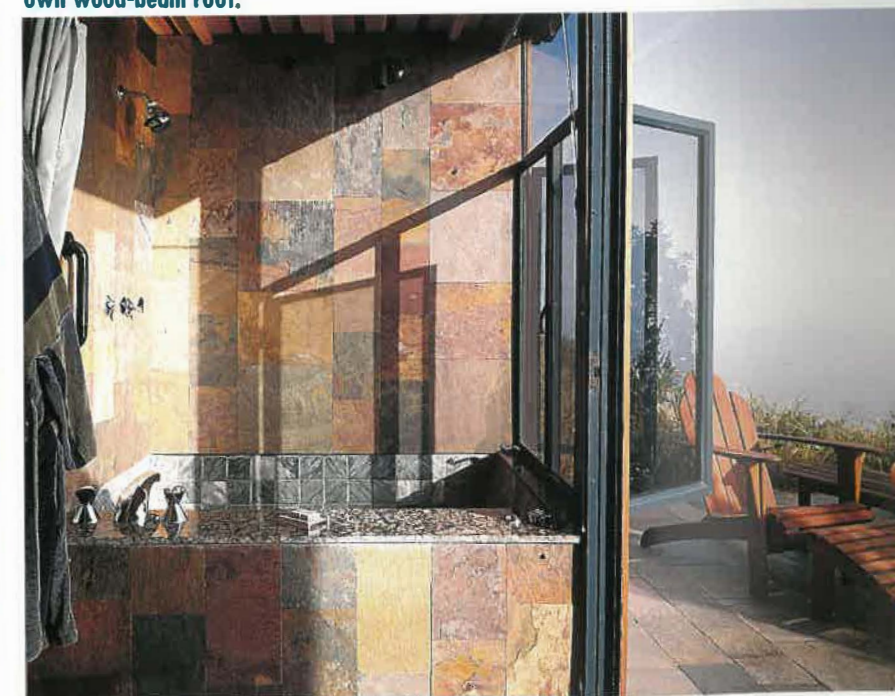
circumspect development—the Post Ranch has conjured a minor miracle by exploiting its jaw-dropping setting without rending the area's fiercely defended environmental fabric.

During check-in at the parking-and-registration lodge (guests are shuttled up a billy-goat-steep ridge to their accommodations), it's clear that the Post Ranch is no log-cabin retreat with a stuffed trout on the wall. The hotel's 30 rooms, each with a fireplace, deck and views of the ocean or the Big Sur mountains, are housed in futuristic-looking redwood structures touched up with industrial Cor-Ten steel, which is in the process of rusting to a natural earthy tone. The resort tries hard to disappear into its surroundings. It certainly respects them. Only one tree was removed during 10 months of construction, and that one was felled somewhat reluctantly to widen the main drive.

Some of the guest units are perched on stilts to protect nearby tree roots; others are dug into bluffs overlooking the Pacific, their sod-covered sloping roofs ablaze with



**Clockwise from opposite page: One room has the corner on forest views; oceanfront property goes underground; baths soak in the great outdoors; a bedroom is thrown a curve under its own wood-beam roof.**







wildflowers. One fills a butterfly-shaped, Eero Saarinen-like structure, while others occupy two-story cylinders that recall the massive trunks of the region's ancient redwoods.

Rooms are marked by incredibly comfortable beds—the denim covers emblazoned with the Post Ranch brand—armoires and sideboards constructed of African woods from non-endangered trees; windows placed strategically to frame a view or lasso the sun's shifting rays; and baths armored in polychromatic Rajah slate imported from India. Alexander Julian terry robes in dusty hues hang in closets. An agreeably loose and friendly staff stands at the ready to administer massages (collapsible massage tables are tucked under beds), deliver breakfast baskets or tweak the knobs on the somewhat daunting Nakamachi stereo gear stowed in each room.

Then there's the restaurant, Sierra Mar, all sweeping angles and green glass, cantilevered over the ocean like a Frank Lloyd Wright vision reborn. Inside is a library alcove and an honest-to-goodness martini-dispensing bar. The four-course, \$45 prix

**Grazing and gazing, at the Sierra Mar restaurant.**





fixe dinner (the bill for two, with wine and tip, easily tops \$150) is prepared by chef Wendy Little, late of Napa Valley's celebrated Mustard Grill. The menu, which changes daily, features a limited selection of tenderly prepared Cal cuisine—fish, fowl and lean meats, with an emphasis on fresh herbs and vegetables from the hotel's private gardens. For now, appetizers—including free dollops of sevice—are the strongest suit, and the wine list is noteworthy. The tables provide everybody with a suitably awe-inducing view of the sun sinking into the Pacific. Here and there, tiny balconies jut from the walls, inviting stalwart diners to step out and take the air as surf pounds the rocky shore 1,100 feet below.

High prices (\$450 a day for the best rooms), a service-intensive staff and a low-key ambience practically dictate a high-rolling clientele; during one of the hotel's inaugural weekends, the gravel parking lot was spotted with Jaguars and even a Rolls. Elements of the film industry's ruling class, ever in search of rabble-reductive hotels with discreet staffs, have already sniffed out the Post Ranch. As if testing the waters, guest Robert Redford strolled into the dining room *en famille* on Easter Sunday for an early supper. Nobody batted an eye.

That the Post Ranch exists at all is a testament to shrewd planning and a bit of luck. The latter emerged in the person of Bill Post III, a retiree who, through a quirk in the zoning laws, was able to enter into partnership with the hotel's developers. Post Ranch partner Myles Williams, who retreated to Big Sur 21 years ago after a stint as lead singer for the New Christy Minstrels, and Michael Freed, a San Francisco attorney, carefully cultivated the community with their environmentally sensitive plan. Eight years passed between the handshake deal the two worked out with Post and the commencement of the \$8 million project on a priceless, 98-acre parcel of his family's ranch.

After running through three architects, the partners hired Big Sur denizen Mickey Muennig, who had never designed a ho-



tel but was nevertheless game. Muennig set about communing with the building site in a big way—living on the land before designing his idiosyncratic room modules, positioning each to best capture the views without running afoul of the restrictive building codes.

Though startling at first glance—the stilt-legged “tree houses” vaguely resemble a swarm of giant praying mantises—Muennig's creations are restful and filled with small surprises, though not all of them end up being ultimately pleasant. From the deck of Room 105, for example, the view is of one of those immovable redwood trees, and the room's large windows are readily visible from the gravel path that all guests pass on their way to and from the restaurant. Oddly, a room that would be considered sublime elsewhere can easily be rendered second-best here, once you spot the accommodations with the glorious views. In the end, though, finding your forest-view room less appealing is a bit like complaining that the caviar isn't cold enough.

Nevertheless, sticking to the higher-priced spreads may be a better bet. For privacy, the hoganlike Ocean Houses—Nos. 116, 117 and 118—are completely detached affairs that have the feel of a villa with the requisite drop-dead views. The upper-level accommodations of the cylindrical Coast Houses, which also face the sea, offer what may be the Post Ranch's most pleasing floor plan—gently curving walls, a generous living area by the fireplace, and capacious bathrooms containing deep-dish whirlpools.

This same floor plan is found in No. 114, the less expensive Upper Mountain House. The room, at the very end of a walkway, earned top honors in a straw poll of several staffers, thanks in no small part to the magnificent prospect of the mountains and partial peek at the ocean from its wraparound deck.

Mercifully absent from the Post Ranch is a distracting chorus of ancillary activities, although in time the resort will add an Olympic-size pool. For now, there's hiking (the staff will pack a picnic lunch), lazing in the outdoor whirlpool on the terrace beside the restaurant and, if all else fails, a massage at two (*Continued on page 109*)

Among the trees—and heads above the rest—with the ocean close at hand.



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# BIG SUR

(Continued from page 93)

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in the afternoon on your private deck overlooking the Pacific.

But what the Post Ranch does best is let you sample one of the world's last great chunks of natural splendor, relatively secure in the knowledge that you're in no way contributing to its downfall. Unless there is a calamitous about-face anytime soon in Big Sur's ingrained anti-development stance, the Post Ranch will be the only hotel in town with a show of virgin oceanfront. As Williams points out, speaking as much for his hotel as its irreplaceable setting: "This is going to be here forever."

Rates range from \$245 for the canyon-view rooms to \$450 for the cliff-hanging oceanside accommodations, including a generous continental breakfast. Call 800-527-2200 for reservations. ◀◀

## BY THE BOOKS: BIG SUR

In *Magnificent Monterey and the Big Sur Peninsula* (Lexikos), Maxine Knox and Mary Rodriguez have joined forces to produce an informative guide and a readable short history of California's Central Coast. Anyone who wants to explore the area's dramatic natural beauty will appreciate Jeffrey P. Schaffer's *Hiking the Big Sur Country* (Wilderness Press), a wonderful assortment of easy day hikes and longer backpack treks along the coast and in the Ventana Wilderness; it's accompanied by detailed topographical maps.

Rosalind Sharpe Wall's *A Wild Coast and Lonely—Big Sur Pioneers* (Wide World Publishing) is an engaging collection of local legends, oral histories and vintage photographs that trace the region's story from pioneer days.

In 1947 Henry Miller fell under the spell of Big Sur, settled there for 17 years and immortalized its hypnotic ambience in *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (New Directions).

The well-composed Big Sur settings and Oscar-winning song "The Shadow of Your Smile" make *The Sandpiper*, starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, worth renting.

—MARTIN RAPP