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

Picture 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 ocean-side 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
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 Corten 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...
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
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 seviche—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-repelling hotels with discreet staffs, have already sniffed out the Post Ranch. As if testing the waters, guest Robert Redford strolled into the dining room 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 hotel but was nevertheless game. Muennig set about communicating with the building site in a big way—living on the land before starting his dictatorial room modules, positioning each to best capture the views without running afield 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 views of one of those immovable redwood trees, and the room's large windows are easily 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 staffs, 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)
as much. And avoid "cabs" whose lit-up signs read "TAXI" or "FAX"; their prices, even their meters, are equally deceptive. A reliable radio-cab firm—often, though not always, with English-speaking dispatchers—is Microlux (telephone 35-03-20 or 35-04-91). Public transport is the best buy: A tourist ticket (turistická ždánka) can be bought at terminal newsstands and ticket windows labeled "D.P." It affords unlimited riding for one to five days ($1 to $3) on trolleys, buses, subways, and even a cable car from Malá Strana to the Strahov district; no photo is required.

**BOHEMIAN'S ADDRESS BOOK:** Here are the addresses and telephone numbers of the city's best theaters, cabarets and beer halls.

- **Golden Tiger** (U zlatého tygra), 17 Husova; 26-52-19.
- **Pinkas' Tavern** (U Pinkasů), 15 Jungmannovo nám; 26-18-04.
- **At St. Thomas'** (U Svatého Tomáše), 12 Letenská; 53-00-64.
- **American Hospitality Center**, 14 Malé nám.; 236-74-86.
- **Press Jazz Club**, 9 Pařížská; 232-62-82.
- **Theater-Expresso Loveka-A '90**, 1 Novotného lávka; 54-38-93.

**PRAVAGUEMATISM:** For up-to-the-minute listings of restaurants and cultural events in town, check the English-language weekly newspaper I now joyfully edit here, the Prague Post, or the biweekly, Prognosis, also in English.

Among currently popular souvenirs: Gorby dolls, with Brezhnev, Khrushchev, Stalin and a tiny Lenin inside—lately with Yeltsin swallowing up all five—and Red Army fur hats sold by departing troops to vendors now operating in the Old Town.

Neither smog in the downtown basin formed by Prague’s seven hills nor outdated water purification for some districts should bother the short-term tourist. Exchange currency and travelers cheques at your hotel (2 percent commission) or a bank (1 percent and a wait in line) or at the American Hospitality Center—not at the ubiquitous Chequepoints that claim "Best Rates" but don’t give them. Avoid the black market. Its rates are only slightly better than the legal one; the penalties for illicit exchanges are harsh; and, even if not caught by the police, you’re likely to be victimized with obsolete Czechoslovak crowns and semi-worthless Polish zlotys and ex-Soviet rubles.

Theft is endemic in Prague, but most crime is nonviolent. Some 80 percent of the pickpocketing and purse-snatching is perpetrated by Gypsies, say the police, who lost—during the transition from police state to liberal democracy—personnel, morale and effectiveness in the war on nonviolent crime and instead let local skinheads do the job, viciously. This situation has improved, but because Vietnamese are another skinhead target (some 25,000 Southeast Asians have chosen not to go home), a visitor of Asian descent would be wise to dress like a tourist.

On the whole, though, these precautions are merely frayed fringes of an otherwise safe and welcoming society.

**BY THE BOOKS: PRAGUE**

Cadogan City Guides: Prague (Globe Pequot Press) is the most up-to-date guidebook. Sadakat Kadri’s five walking tours explore the treasures of the Old Town; his comprehensive hotel and restaurant listings assure the visitor of being well rested and well fed. If you’re traveling beyond Prague, choose Real Guide: Czechoslovakia (Pentice Hall) by Rob Humphreys; it is filled with essential practical and cultural information.

In Beyond the Chestnut Trees (Overlook Press) Marcia Baur returns to her birthplace after an exile of 40 years, recalling the glamour and brilliance of Prague between the wars. How I Came to Know Fish (New Directions) is a collection of personal stories chronicling Ota Pavel’s pastoral childhood and his harsh coming-of-age as World War II engulfed Czechoslovakia. And Alan Levy’s own book So Many Heroes (Second Chance Press) covers the background of the Velvet Revolution.

Full of authentic Baroque and Rococo buildings, Prague’s Old Town proved to be the ideal Vienna for Amadeus. Miloš Forman’s Academy Award–winning film based on the life of Mozart. —MARTIN RAPP

BIG SUR

(Continued from page 93)

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