AN ALL-AMERICAN SUMMER

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Your Own Private Big Sur

Simple and, yes, defiantly minimal, the Post House is all about location, location, location.

By RICHARD DAVID STORY
Photographs by KODIAK GREENWOOD
LAST MONTH IN THE LAST SCENE IN THE FINAL EPISODE OF MAD MEN, WE FOUND OUR TROUBLED HERO, DON DRAPER, IN THE LOTUS POSITION, A FEEL-GOOD COCA-COLA JINGLE PLAYING IN HIS HEAD. THE YEAR WAS 1971—INTERESTINGLY, ALSO THE YEAR CIGARETTE ADS WERE BANNED ON TV.

Offscreen and in real life, a very different soul-searching nomad also discovered Big Sur that very same year: Mickey Muennig, a rogue architect out of the University of Oklahoma, landed at the wooey-New Age Esalen Institute where Draper crossed his legs for that Nielson-rated come-to-Jesus fade-out. Like Jack Kerouac, Edward Weston, Henry Miller, and, yes, I suppose, even Don Draper—though who knows?—Muennig had also found deeper meaning and inspiration in the rugged poetry and tie-dye style of that stretch of the Pacific Coast Highway beginning in Carmel and ending 80 miles south in San Luis Obispo.

In 1984 Muennig, who had never designed a hotel, was approached by San Francisco lawyer Michael Freed to "have a go" at creating a new kind of hotel—the now legendary, forever futuristic-looking Post Ranch Inn. The New York Times had compared Muennig's work to that of "the first environmentalists, the animals, who know enough to protect themselves by building their homes either into the ground or up in the trees." Muennig would do both: Some rooms are perched on stilts; others are literally built into the...
Clockwise from top left: A view of the restaurant Sierra Mar; the Post House’s dining area; the private outside deck; the spacious bathroom. Opposite: The outdoor hot tub overlooking the Pacific Ocean.
earth, their sod-covered roofs blooming with flowers. The story of how Freed, now 64, befriended ranchers Billy and Luci Post (who had owned the 95 acres upon which Post Ranch is built), sealed the deal over Jack Daniels and a handshake, and then overcame seemingly insurmountable environmental engineering and zoning challenges is legendary.

Six months ago, I paid my first visit to the Post Ranch, driving, also for the very first time, the Pacific Coast Highway, where I met up with Freed, who, with Peter Heineman, also has the incredible and too little-known, Cavallo Point, an old army barracks rejuggered into a first-rate and one-of-a-kind 142-room property just over the Golden Gate Bridge toward Sausalito.

The Ross Room, where I stayed, was typical of the six prized Pacific Suites: ocean views, wood-burning fireplace, and the most attractive hot tub ever—I'm wincing as hot-tubbing is not a regular habit for me—finished in stainless steel and filled with warm bubbles, overlooking what seemed like the rest of the world. The interior paneling came from recycled redwood wine vats. Nice.

But the latest addition to the property is truly the showstopper: Called the Post House after the original pioneers of this property, it is the toughest weekend room—that is to say, a private house within driving distance of Silicon Valley—to book. Not surprisingly, DUTIs (Digitals Under Thirty) have embraced the Post Ranch with the fervor of true new-New Age fanatics. The Post House was built by the property's original owners/ranchers in 1967. "It was," says Freed, "considered the most modern house in Big Sur." FYI: Big Sur coastal properties, when available, now fetch between $3 and $8 million, as new building is practically nonexistent.

Originally built as a three-bedroom, the house was converted into a one-bedroom last year and is now available for a night, a week, or a month. The structure is simple, almost humble, but it is also almost entirely glass-walled, which means incredible views of the ocean and mountains. The entire place is accessible by glass sliding doors leading to an expansive "backyard" overlooking the Pacific and a backdrop of mountains and, yes, the ubiquitous 55-inch flat-screen and, of course, the hot tub.

"From an environmental standpoint," says Freed, "we made the decision that it was more important to save the house than to tear it down and start over."

As one who has driven the Amalfi Coast for the past 12 summers, even I had to admit that this most all-American of vistas was worth the wait.

The Post House is at 47900 Highway 1, Big Sur, California; 831-667-2200, postranchinn.com.
The entire place is accessible by glass sliding doors leading to amazing views.