Stunning and mythic Big Sur, reached down the coast on a cliffside journey from Carmel via Highway 1, has been described by many as, “the greatest meeting of land and sea.”

Photo: Kelli Uldall
LET’S GET ONE THING OUT OF THE WAY: ANY DAY IN BIG SUR, WHETHER THE WEATHER IS FOGGY AND DAMP, OR THE DESTINATION IS TRICKY OR TRAFFICKY, IS A GOOD DAY. NOT TO GO ALL WOO-WOO, BUT BIG SUR IS A PLACE THAT’S BOTH EXTRAORDINARILY LOVELY AND A STATE OF MIND. ANYONE CAN FEEL THE DIFFERENCE—even if going from comparably appealing CARMEL or MONTEREY—BY SIMPLY OPENING THE SENSES TO THE UNIQUE CHARACTER OF THE BIG SUR COAST.

BUT WHY SETTLE FOR THE EASY SCORE: THAT MERELY PLEASANT BIG SUR DAY? WHY NOT GO FOR THE ONE THAT HAS OOHS, AHHS AND WOWS NONSTOP? THAT’S A STRAIGHTFORWARD GOAL (THOUGH IN BIG SUR SOMETIMES A HILLY ONE), AND THE CHOICES ARE MANY. THE FIRST DECISIONS BEGIN AT HOME: PACK SOME HIKING CLOTHES. BIG SUR COASTAL VISTAS ARE DAZZLING AND VARIED, AND EARNING A STUNNING VIEW IS WORTH A FEW HILLS. BUT UNLESS THOSE HIKING TOGS ARE A STYLE MAVEN’S, BRING A CHANGE OF CLOTHES AS WELL, BECAUSE THERE ARE SOME DINING SPOTS THAT ARE WORTH A BUTTON-DOWN.
Head for the Hills

For the sheer variety of hikes, some of which are more like strolls, a great place to put legs in motion is Andrew Molera State Park. There are a couple of sweet and easy walks to the beach alongside a river, and the beach cove is welcoming, with its driftwood sculptures and handsome background hills.

But go for the gold: get the map at the entrance station and trek along the Ridge Trail/Hidden Trail/River Trail loop, which shifts from shady oak glens to a 360-degree view from Molera Ridge of canyons and coast and then back down to the river.

There’s a bit of climbing over the 3.6-mile loop, but the hike’s rewarding. Lots of other hikes are in the park, but for other fun (and shorter) ones outside, try Partington Cove Trail, some miles south of town (“town” being a bit of an exaggeration).

Or enjoy the quick-but-wondrous Canyon Trail to Canyon Falls view at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park to see that willing water jump from cliff to shore.

Sit a Spell and Nosh

There are plenty of beguiling places to reward that exertion with a lunch bite, but a fine choice is the Big Sur Roadhouse. It’s a comfortably hip spot with locally sourced and carefully prepared California cuisine, a full bar and a visually
intriguing atmosphere. Also consider the River Inn for its riverside dining and charming old-lodge feel.

**Spellbound Shopping Above the Sea**

The merchandiser that seems so quintessentially Big Sur is the Phoenix Shop—the breathtaking views of the ocean wiggling far below are reward plenty, but inside there’s an eclectic (and often exceptional) assemblage of handcrafted jewelry and other artworks, unique clothing and books, salves and scents and some Big Sur kookiness.

There are great views and good grub from Café Kevah above, and even better (and pricier) views, drinks and dining from historic Nepenthe restaurant above that.

**Get a Cuppa**

Tired from trying to figure out where the Bali curio from Phoenix will fit on the mantle? Try some bracing joe from the Big Sur Bakery, where if God is in heaven, they’ll have some of their fabulous chocolate cake (earned from that hike) as well as their stout range of coffee drinks. They have inventive meals for lunch and dinner too.

**Galleries Galore (But There’s More)**

Coast Galleries is always worth a stop when in Big Sur. The setting alone is unique, since the original shops were carved out of giant redwood water tanks, placed in a
streamside canyon setting.

The gallery features lots of American arts and crafts, including sculptures, paintings and jewelry; there’s always something eye-catching and unusual.

The Henry Miller Library isn’t really a gallery, though there’s intriguing (and often eccentric) art scattered about its grounds. Miller made Big Sur his home for almost 20 years beginning in the ’40s, and the library (with its vinyl albums and books of Beat Generation and earlier heroes), its performance grounds and its oddball sensibilities are welcoming and uniquely Big Sur.

**Dining Where the Condors Cruise**

OK, so there’s a day of it in Big Sur, and it’s been dandy. Why leave? Grab that change of clothes and take the road up to the restaurant at Ventana, where the savory food competes with the views from the expansive patio. It boasts a civilized menu, good drinks and attentive service.

Worth the journey to this frou-frou little store, for original sleepwear and robes made in Carmel.

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But for truly pulling out the stops, go across the street for a meal at Sierra Mar at Post Ranch Inn. By evening, the waves crashing on the cliffs below might be unseen, but the dining room is a fantastic glass-walled experience nonetheless. There’s a four-course prix fixe dinner, but why not shoot for the stars and go for the nine-course Taste of Big Sur menu? There won’t be hiking shorts in sight, but nobody’s stuffy here.

**Big Sur Goes All In**

The recipe for a perfect day does call for some sun, but if there are a few scudding clouds in the sky, they make for great shadows on those ocean views below. Bring some sunblock, a camera and binoculars too—there are several vista pullouts on Highway 1 that are hair-tinglingly beautiful, and many spots in town where sitting a spell and contemplating all that’s good with nature is as fine a gift as can be gotten.

Here’s to Big Sur: it conjures up one perfect day after another, without even trying.