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Following Robinson Jeffers' poetic path in Big Sur

He was taken with Big Sur's natural beauty and ruggedness. We let his writings be our tour guide.

September 06, 2009 | Scott Timberg

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BIG SUR, CALIF. — Big Sur, the 90 or so miles of rugged Pacific coast that unfurls south of Monterey, is known for pricey, reservations-only restaurants and as a capital of the New Age movement. It's a place, then, for well-fed people to get in touch with their inner selves in a spectacular natural setting.

But before the arrival of \$120 prix fixe dinners, before the human potential movement was founded at the Esalen Institute, Big Sur was associated with one of America's most austere and, for a while, famous artists. He settled just north of the coastal stretch, in a foggy, barely inhabited area he loved for its remoteness. And even when Robinson Jeffers became so celebrated that he landed on the cover of Time magazine for his poems about hawks, stallions, sex and imperial decline, he kept working on his poetry and on the rough stone tower he built himself.

It was this vision of Big Sur -- an older generation of Bohemia that was about rigorous creativity and not hipster posing, a worship of nature rather than narcissism -- that my wife, Sara, and I drove up the coast in July to meet. We wanted to get deeper into Jeffers' life and terroir -- there's probably no American poet more specifically associated with a single location -- and the period of his heyday.

For The Record

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The 1930s, when the poet's reputation was at its zenith and just before a decline as steep as the Big Sur cliffs, were also when the outside world began to make contact with this once-forbidding stretch between the ocean and the Santa Lucia Mountains.

That's when Pacific Coast Highway was extended to what it is now, a simple two-lane road that winds through a canopy of trees. A huge patch of wilderness -- what is now the 1,000-acre Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, where the son of the region's first European settlers lived in a log cabin -- was sold to the state for public use. This was, of course, a period of lavish public spending, much of it intended to jolt the nation

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out of the Great Depression: The spectacular Bixby Bridge, which offers overhead views of the waves crashing into beaches and rocks, was completed in 1932, the same year as Jeffers' Time cover.

I suspect Jeffers was difficult to get along with. Photographer Edward Weston called him aloof, a man who "belongs to stormy skies and heavy seas." But as a posthumous guide to one of the nation's prettiest places -- to what the Monterey-based Spanish called el pais grande del sur, or "the big country of the south" -- we thought Jeffers would be an almost-ideal guide.

Rugged coast

Driving along the precarious, twisty coastline north of San Simeon, we felt as though we were already in Jeffers country: The tableau of rough waves, towering redwoods and bent cypress trees, cows and horses grazing alongside PCH, is the landscape of his work.

It was just this scene that attracted Jeffers, a Pittsburgh native who had moved to Southern California as a teenager with his family. He graduated from Occidental College at 17 before studying at the University of Southern California and in Zurich, where course work was as varied as geology and medicine to Old English and Dante.

Happenstance brought him here in his 20s. Jeffers and his wife, Una, had considered a move to England's Dorset Coast, known as Thomas Hardy country, but they reconsidered when World War I broke out. A friend told them Big Sur was similarly rugged, and they settled in a place where, as Jeffers later wrote, "for the first time in my life I could see people living -- amid magnificently unspoiled scenery -- essentially as they did in the Idyls or the Sagas, or in Homer's 'Ithaca.'

"Here was life purged of its ephemeral accretions," he wrote in the forward to "Selected Poetry." "Men were riding after cattle, or plowing the headland, hovered by white sea-gulls, as they have done for thousands of years, and will do for thousands of years to come."

With that as our introduction, we thought it incongruous to stay in one of the region's pampering hotels. We settled on Ripplewood Resort, a series of rustic bare-bones cabins, some alongside PCH or, like ours, beside the Big Sur River. Jeffers' work could be passionate to a fault, and I find some of it overheated and long-winded. But sitting beside the river or at the wooden table under the redwoods was a heavenly place to revisit his work. Our favorite place in town, where we could not get a reservation, was Deetjen's Big Sur Inn, built in the '30s by a Norwegian settler I imagine as having a touch of the spirit of Jeffers, a rugged individualist who respected nature and solitude.

We could have happily spent large stretches of our stay in and around our cabin, especially because the combination of ocean fog and sheltering trees made the grove around our cabin cool, shady and fragrant with peat.

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To the extent that there's a real village here, it's spread out along PCH, and from our cabin we were easily able to get to the first-rate Big Sur Bakery & Restaurant, to striking, sparsely populated beaches and to hiking, a department where Big Sur offers a wealth of options.

Tor House

Some of what we did was inspired by Jeffers' life and work more or less directly.

The first real event of the trip (besides a memorable dinner at the casual Big Sur Bakery & Restaurant) was a visit to Jeffers' Tor House. He built the home in the late 1910s, and a few years later, he rolled stones up from the Pacific, a few dozen feet away, to construct Hawk Tower for his Irish American wife.

Tor House is among the best writers' homes I've visited. Guided tours are offered only on Fridays and Saturdays, so it's crucial to book early: You get an entree into the life of one of the few American poets to create his own mythology, embodied in the place he lived. The quality of docents can vary here as elsewhere, but my guide, teacher and poet George Lober had a combination of deep knowledge and humor not always found in those attracted to literary shrines.

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The compound is built mostly from local stones. But I was struck by the odds and ends Jeffers added to the house, walls and tower: a stone cross from a cemetery in Ireland, a Hawaiian lava rock, an ancient Roman statue that once belonged to painter John Singer Sargent, a shard of the Great Wall of China, ballast and portholes from ships that had run aground nearby.

This isolate who spent much of his life rooted in one place brought the world to him. George Gershwin, Martha Graham and Langston Hughes visited the poet at Tor House.

We toured a low-ceilinged main room, lined with redwood, where Una played Irish songs on the piano and the family (they had twin sons) would pass around Shakespeare plays to read parts; a dining room designed to look like a British pub, and the guest room where the poet died in 1962.

My favorite part of the tour was the story of the young Jeffers' prying Una away from her first husband, a respectable Southland lawyer. I won't spoil the tale, except to say that Edward Kuster became so obsessed with winning his wife back that he moved virtually next-door to the couple and built a larger, better-appointed stone house of his own. Hollywood has so far neglected this star-crossed love affair.

The most eccentric part of Tor House is the tower Jeffers built largely with his own hands. It's not easy to reach the top, but from the roof you can see the beach, with its jagged rock outcroppings and, the day I was there, a great deal of windblown fog. You can also see some of the 2,000 cypress and eucalyptus trees Jeffers planted and hand watered.

Natural wonder

Much of Carmel has been overtaken with development and commercialism the poet came to detest, but the mission, founded in 1770, is beautiful. Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo was once the headquarters of the California mission system and is often claimed as the prettiest.

We also stopped at the tasting room of the Morgan winery, just off PCH. Jeffers was reportedly a red drinker, so I limited myself to the Pinot Noir, Grenache and Syrah, much of it from vineyards in the Santa Lucia highlands. I think the poet would have approved.

But the main event in the Big Sur area is probably hiking, some of which ends at stunning beaches or waterfalls. There are many good options, but inspired by Jeffers, we concentrated, the day of Tor House, on Point Lobos.

The park, the setting for his poem "Point Pinos and Point Lobos," reminded me that even though Jeffers' reputation has risen and fallen, whether because of changes in literary taste, his distance from cultural capitals or his provocative politics, he has long been a patron saint of environmentalists.

Our animal-loving 3-year-old son, Ian, was with us, so we took the hike to Sea Lion Point, a short distance over sloping layers of rock, with rough inlets and tide pools and an island where sea lions gather to sun themselves. We also got as close as we could to the aptly named Bird Island -- tiny with no bridge to get to it -- on a nearby Point Lobos hike. Walking along the ledge of Point Lobos, I felt Jeffers' wonder at Western civilization's dramatic conclusion as the continent slams into the Pacific, with its undulating rocks and crashing waves. (Though I'm not sure the brooding poet would have smiled at a 3-year-old wearing a red cowboy hat and shouting "Faster! Faster!")

We also hiked at Andrew Molera State Park, the largest of the local parks, with a windy and beautiful beach on which you can ride horses; a waterfall trail in Pfeiffer park, through redwoods still scorched from last year's fires; and to Pfeiffer Beach, the stretch of white sand where the surf pounds iconic rock formations.

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Jeffers inspired novelist Henry Miller to move to Big Sur in 1944, and Miller lived here until the poet's death. The Henry Miller Library is a kind of shrine to Jeffers: By day it's mostly an excellent small bookstore, heavy on volumes of California history and literature, but it also offers a short-film series, projected outside on summer nights, and an occasional music series that has included Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Bonnie "Prince" Billy. (Indie rocker Stephen Malkmus performed the week after I visited.)

After Miller settled here, much of American Bohemia descended on the coast, with Ken Kesey, Hunter Thompson and others living nearby or visiting. Indie rock bands the Thrills and Death Cab for Cutie have named songs for Big Sur, and the area as well as a Jack Kerouac novel set here (part of "The Dharma Bums") inspired composer John Adams' "The Dharma at Big Sur," a violin concerto composed for the opening of L.A.'s Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Jeffers hated the encroachment of the modern world, but Big Sur isn't ruined either. The restaurants are surely better. The local landowning families, the state coastal commission and the difficulty of building on mountain and coast have cooperated to keep it underpopulated. Fires last year destroyed 180,000 acres, but they didn't kill Big Sur.

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There's another reason for the area's persistence. A few years after Jeffers' death, when the fate of the region was unclear, the Sierra Club published a folio of his poetry with landscape photographs by Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and others. The book drew environmental and preservationist attention to Big Sur, helping ensure the area remained unspoiled.

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In a sense, it's all Robinson Jeffers' Big Sur: The rest of us are just passing through.

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travel@latimes.com

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

If you go

WHERE TO STAY

Ripplewood Resort, 47047 Highway 1, Big Sur; (831) 667-2242, www.ripplewoodresort.com. Cabins are bare-bones but nicely situated. Small cafe, gas station and store for essentials along the Pacific Coast Highway. Rates \$95 to \$185.

Deetjen's Big Sur Inn, 48865 Highway 1, Big Sur; (831) 667-2377, www.deetjens.com. Among the oldest of the local inns, eschewing luxury for redwood cabins with wood-burning stoves and thin walls, all tucked into a shady grove. Rates \$80 to \$200.

Big Sur River Inn, Highway 1 at Pheneger Creek, Big Sur; (831) 667-2700, www.bigsurriverinn.com. Good, solid place for families. The shaded wooden chairs by the river are a great place to sit and contemplate nature. Rates \$125 to \$260.

WHERE TO EAT

Big Sur Bakery & Restaurant, 47540 Highway 1, Big Sur; (831) 667-0520. www.bigsurbakery.com. Unpretentious but serious eatery run by a couple with roots at L.A.'s Campanile restaurant; relies on local and seasonal ingredients and innovative pizzas. A recent cookbook is drawing national attention. Entrees \$15 to \$35.

Big Sur Roadhouse, 32893 Highway 1, Big Sur; (831) 667-2264, www.bigsurroadhouse.com. Casual place with good, affordable Mexican food. Cellphones sometimes work here, which is not often the case in town. Entrees \$12.95 to \$25.95.

Big Sur River Inn Restaurant, Highway 1 at Pheneger Creek, Big Sur; (831) 667-2700, www.bigsurriverinn.com. Simple, robust, slightly overpriced meals in large redwood hall or on patios alongside the river. (Inexpensive Habanero Burrito Bar next door, with limited hours.) Entrees \$10.50 to \$36.50.

Deetjen's Restaurant (see above). Sample the inn's old-school ambience in a restaurant dedicated to fresh ingredients and complete with fireplace and recorded chamber music. Entrees \$11 to \$32.

TO LEARN MORE

Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation, www.torhouse.org.

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EXCERPTS FROM THE WORKS OF ROBINSON JEFFERS

"Fire on the Hills"

The deer were bounding like blown leaves Under the smoke in front of the roaring wave of the brushfire;

I thought of the smaller lives that were caught.

Beauty is not always lovely. . . .

--

"TorHouse"

If you should look for this place after a handful of lifetimes:

Perhaps of my planted forest a few

May stand yet, dark leaved Australians or the coast cypress, haggard

With storm-drift; but fire and the axe are devils.

--

"Shine, Republic"

The quality of these trees, green height; of the sky, shining; of water, a clear flow; of the rock, hardness

And reticence: each is noble in its quality. The love of freedom has been the quality of Western man.

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