

PACIFIC

'HERE AT BIG SUR, AT A CERTAIN TIME OF THE YEAR

AND A CERTAIN TIME OF THE DAY ONLY, A PALE BLUE-GREEN HUE PERVADES THE DISTANT HILLS.

It is an old, nostalgic hue, it is a mystical phenomenon, or so I like to think, born of a certain way of looking at the world,' wrote Henry Miller in the late 20th century. Since then a number of American authors have immortalised this rugged coastal stretch, inspired by its majesty. But the number one Big Sur fan is, and will always be, the road-tripper.

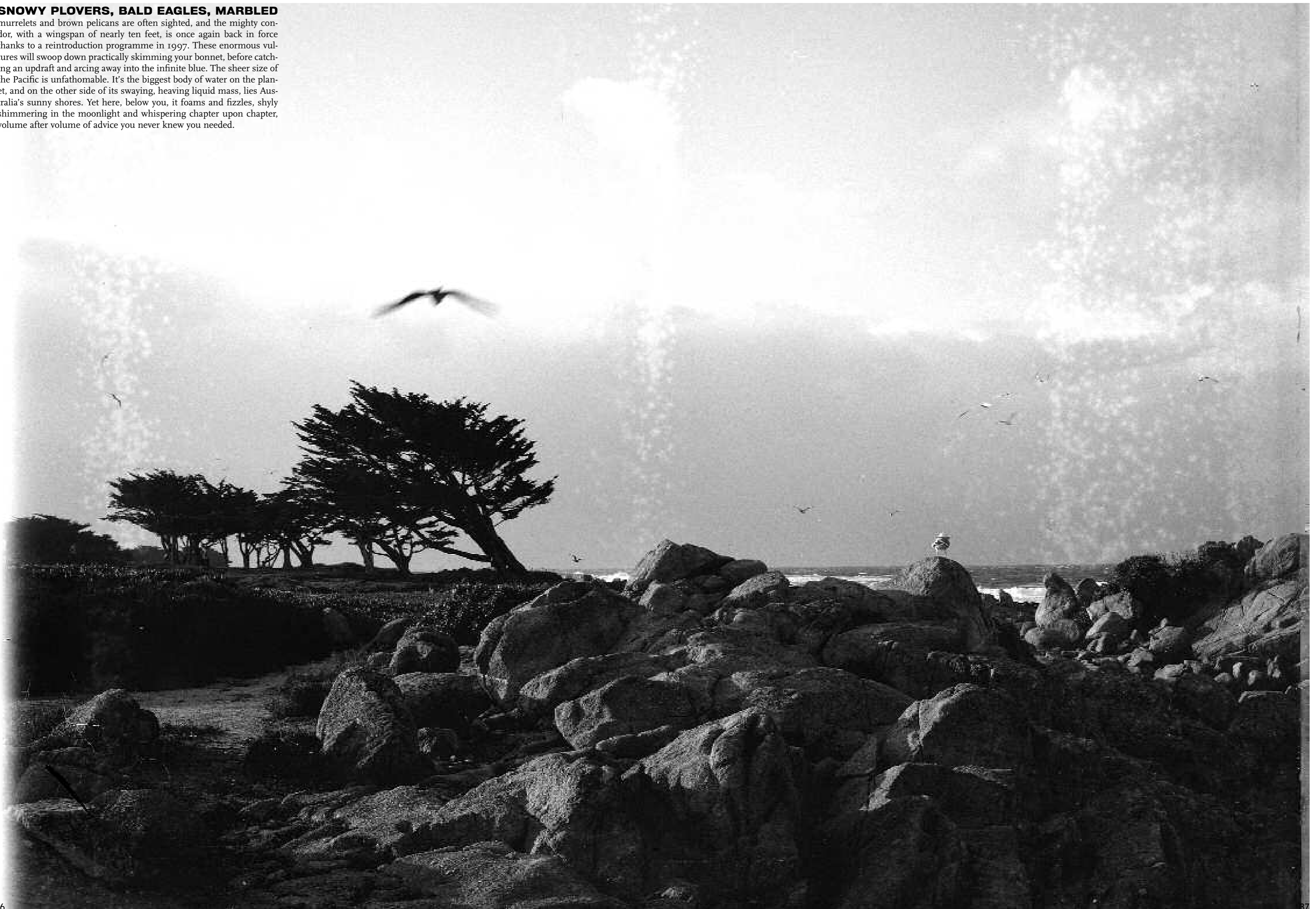
Caressing California's coastline, with its windswept cypress trees and the crashing surf of the deep-blue ocean, the 485-mile-long Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) spans from San Francisco to Los Angeles, providing the world's best-loved stretch of tarmac. The curvy dual-lane road isn't intended for speedy travel, it's for those who like to sit back and watch one breathtaking vista rise up after another. It's an easy road to dream on. No need to take a companion – certainly not a chatty one.

The laid-back town of Santa Cruz, nicknamed 'surf city', is a good starting point for this all-American adventure. Here you can wear yourself out wrestling the waves or cracking open crayfish in any one of the salt-sprayed harbour restaurants, before sinking into your leather seat for the long journey south. Wildlife enthusiasts should keep their binocs at the ready on the PCH, you never know when a migrating whale, elephant seal, dolphin or sea otter might make an appearance. Certainly at Moss Landing you won't be short of a sea lion photo opportunity, there are masses of the hulking beauties competing to hump and grunt at you. Turn your attention skywards and there are more than 400 species of birds circling the open skies.



SNOWY PLOVERS, BALD EAGLES, MARBLED

murrelets and brown pelicans are often sighted, and the mighty condor, with a wingspan of nearly ten feet, is once again back in force thanks to a reintroduction programme in 1997. These enormous vultures will swoop down practically skimming your bonnet, before catching an updraft and arcing away into the infinite blue. The sheer size of the Pacific is unfathomable. It's the biggest body of water on the planet, and on the other side of its swaying, heaving liquid mass, lies Australia's sunny shores. Yet here, below you, it foams and fizzles, shyly shimmering in the moonlight and whispering chapter upon chapter, volume after volume of advice you never knew you needed.



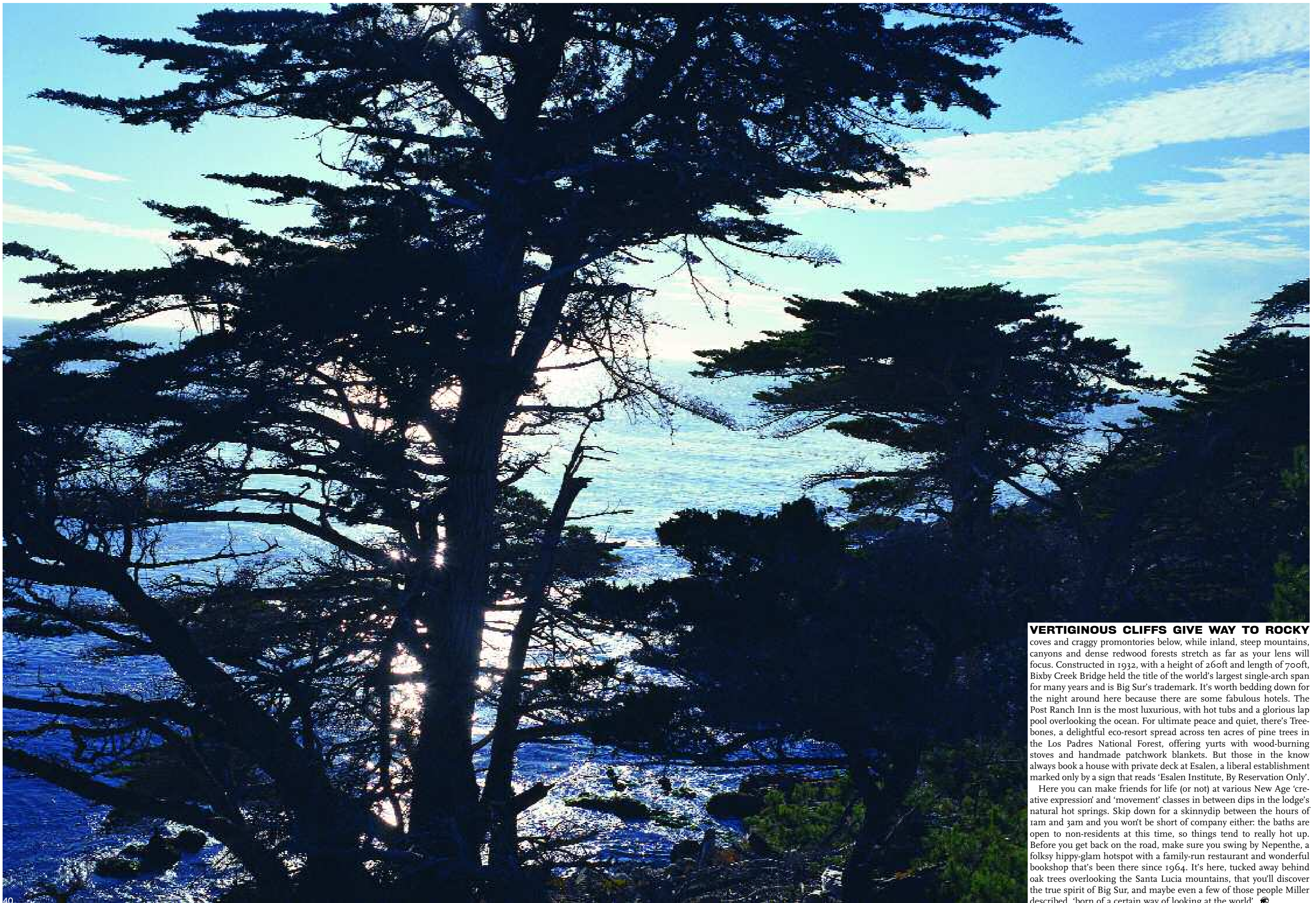


TAKE IT SLOW BETWEEN CARMEL AND BIG

Sur to make the most of the breathtaking natural vistas. This is where the scenery is most dramatic. It's worth stopping in Carmel, a charming bohemian enclave where Clint Eastwood once served a term as mayor. In a bid to preserve the town's character, things such as parking meters, streetlamps and chain restaurants have been banned, and the result is a picturesque town with plenty of designer shops and art galleries. Head for the Weston Gallery on Sixth Street with works by photographers such as Ansel Adams and former resident Edward Weston.

Keep going south and the highlight of this classic roadtrip will be revealed: Big Sur. Here, the PCH narrows into a tunnel carved out of rock with hairpin turns requiring navigation of the highest skill level.





VERTIGINOUS CLIFFS GIVE WAY TO ROCKY

coves and craggy promontories below, while inland, steep mountains, canyons and dense redwood forests stretch as far as your lens will focus. Constructed in 1932, with a height of 260ft and length of 700ft, Bixby Creek Bridge held the title of the world's largest single-arch span for many years and is Big Sur's trademark. It's worth bedding down for the night around here because there are some fabulous hotels. The Post Ranch Inn is the most luxurious, with hot tubs and a glorious lap pool overlooking the ocean. For ultimate peace and quiet, there's Treebones, a delightful eco-resort spread across ten acres of pine trees in the Los Padres National Forest, offering yurts with wood-burning stoves and handmade patchwork blankets. But those in the know always book a house with private deck at Esalen, a liberal establishment marked only by a sign that reads 'Esalen Institute, By Reservation Only'.

Here you can make friends for life (or not) at various New Age 'creative expression' and 'movement' classes in between dips in the lodge's natural hot springs. Skip down for a skinnydip between the hours of 1am and 3am and you won't be short of company either: the baths are open to non-residents at this time, so things tend to really hot up. Before you get back on the road, make sure you swing by Nepenthe, a folksy hippy-glam hotspot with a family-run restaurant and wonderful bookshop that's been there since 1964. It's here, tucked away behind oak trees overlooking the Santa Lucia mountains, that you'll discover the true spirit of Big Sur, and maybe even a few of those people Miller described, 'born of a certain way of looking at the world'. ☺