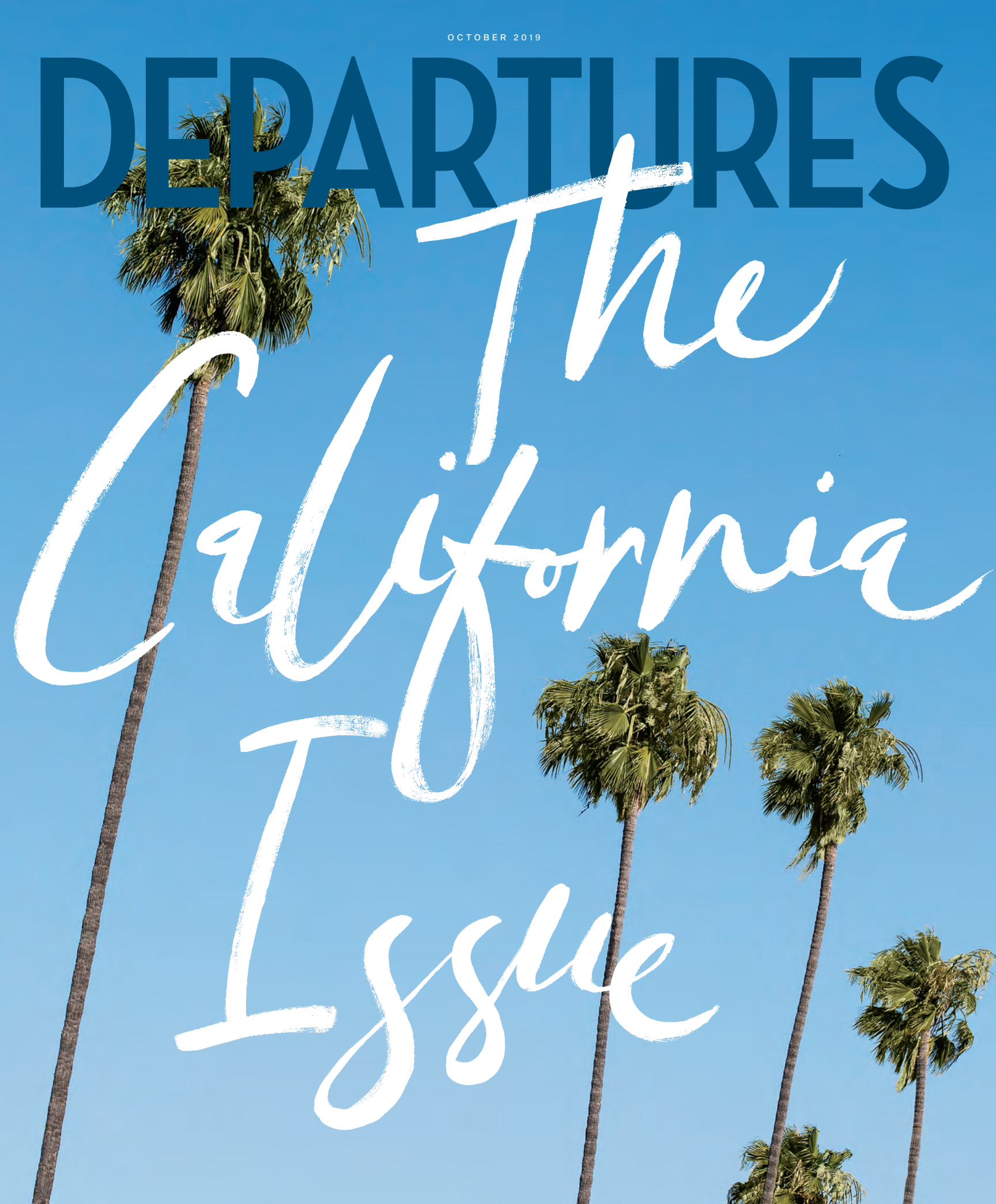


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# DEPARTURES

# The California Issue



The tree-house-like Post Ranch Inn, with views of the Pacific: "You feel tiny in the best way."

California's most mythic coastline has served as a spiritual energy boost for generations. *Abby Aguirre* soaks up the aura on a ride through the redwoods.

*Photographs by BRIAN FLAHERTY*

# To Big Sur with LOVE



Left: One of Carmel Valley Ranch's resident Swiss dairy goats. Below: Bixby Bridge, long the unofficial gateway to Big Sur, was most recently made famous by HBO's *Big Little Lies*.

**CHARLIE'S CHÈVRE** is pristine. It's cold and soft and as bright white as new snow, or the lone cloud hanging in Carmel's summer sky—a puffy, scallop-edged cumulus so comically perfect it looks like a cartoon drawing of a cloud. “The sweet goats really give sweet milk,” he says, spreading another dollop of cheese onto another piece of baguette. “This was the milk from yesterday.”

I'm in the creamery at Carmel Valley Ranch, a 500-acre idyll where pretty much everything is like that (comically perfect). Driving into the resort, a visitor passes through fields of fragrant lavender, an intoxicating Provençal entrance. The purple corridor soon gives way to olive trees and vineyards. A hillside apiary brims with bees. Up the ridge, in an organic garden, sunflowers and artichokes grow tall in the July sun.

Charlie Cascio, 72, is the ranch's cheese maker (and former head chef at Esalen, the storied hot springs-slash-retreat center). He learned the art of dairy from a shepherd in the French Alps and raised his goats himself, mostly at Sweetwater Farm, a 40-acre plot in Big Sur that he bought in the '70s for a song. After a wildfire leveled much of the farm in 2016, Charlie moved his goats and cheese operation to the ranch, at the urging of its head chef, Tim Wood.

This is my first stop on a five-day road trip through Monterey County, from Carmel to Big Sur, and though I don't know it yet, the naturalist theme will hold steady



At Ventana Big Sur, glamping under the redwoods includes the SurStream, a staffed snack bar.

fog, the valley is Carmel proper's sleepier, sunnier cousin. When ranch guests venture off-site, it's often to taste wine at a nearby winery (Parsonage is a favorite) or to eat at former mayor Clint Eastwood's restaurant-inn, Mission Ranch. In Carmel-by-the-Sea, there's excellent Tuscan food at La Balena; for a seasonal California tasting menu, turn to Aubergine, which recently earned the Central Coast's first Michelin star.

After leaving the valley and heading south toward Big Sur, I detour onto 17-Mile Drive, the sublime scenic loop. This stretch has lured road-trippers since the time of horse-drawn carriages, particularly the Lone Cypress, a 250-year-old Monterey cypress that grows improbably out of a granite outcrop. (You may know its silhouette as the logo for Pebble Beach Resorts, home of the famed golf course.)

The 30-mile drive to Big Sur is just as stunning: Highway 1 winds through the Point Lobos State Nature Reserve, then begins climbing the rugged slopes of the Santa Lucia Range, which give Big Sur its mountains-meet-ocean grandeur. The unofficial gateway is Bixby Bridge, an 87-year-old concrete arch that, I can't help noticing, suddenly draws an inordinate volume of roadside selfie-takers. “The *Big Little Lies* effect,” a local explains; the bridge appears in the show's opening credits.

The boundaries of Big Sur move depending on whom you ask—there is no incorporated town or village here, just 75 (or so) miles of highway and wilderness. But its cultural coordinates are well established. This place has exerted a pull on artists and seekers of every stripe since the first road builders blasted up these hills with dynamite. The faces may change, but the energy, if you believe in that sort of thing, does not.

You could measure these tidal shifts by the offerings at Esalen, which sits on 27 acres of Big Sur coastline between Route 1 and the Pacific. In the '60s, when

throughout, with every hotel and amenity designed to immerse guests in the ecology of the place.

The ranch's lavender is more than an aromatherapeutic greeting: It's harvested for all manner of products (honey, body scrub, shea butter). The olives are pressed into olive oil, the grapes into earthy Pinot Noirs and crisp rosés. Guests are encouraged to get their hands dirty—that's the whole point, really. John Pritzker, the Hyatt heir and head of Geolo Capital, bought the place a decade ago with the goal of transforming it into “a higher order of summer camp,” he tells me later. You can now sign up to throw hatchets

(“sobriety required,” the schedule warns reassuringly), plant seedlings in the garden, or visit the salt house, where sea salt harvested in Big Sur is infused with citrus, garlic, even sriracha. When you get a Bee Beautiful massage treatment, the royal jelly used comes from the ranch's own hives. By the time I hit the creamery on Day 2, I have already suited up and inspected thousands of the Italian honeybees who made it, and communed with four generations of Charlie's Swiss goats.

Carmel Valley is only eight miles east of Carmel-by-the-Sea, but it can feel like another world. Less overrun with tourists, and less susceptible to that sneaky coastal

the institute was founded, it played a key role in the psychedelic movement and what was then called “the religion of no religion.” Visitors included Buckminster Fuller, Aldous Huxley, Ram Dass. (The seaside lawn where Don Draper appears to have a meditative breakthrough in the final minutes of *Mad Men*? Widely understood to be an Esalen reference.) My mom attended seminars in the '80s, and when I text her to ask for sample topics, she responds: “Sensory perception, yoga, transcendence I think.” In today’s programming one can detect traces of Silicon Valley. Recent sessions considered the benefits of microdosing, and “consciousness hacking.”

Likewise, when you pull into Ventana Big Sur, a sign indicates where you can recharge your Tesla—the first clue that this longtime institution has also undergone some changes. Opened in 1975 by the Hollywood producer Larry Spector with money he earned from *Easy Rider*, the Ventana spent decades as a getaway for a Californian stew of film people and solitude-seeking eccentrics. John Pritzker was among those who stayed here in the early days; a few years ago, he bought the lodge and gave it a \$20 million refresh.

“It’s of the landscape,” Pritzker says of his affinity for the retreat, where rooms and villas are built mostly of raw cedar and tucked under old-growth redwoods. The aim of his renovation was “not to build anything more, but to spruce up what was there.” Thus a parking lot with a spectacular view of the Pacific was turned into a grassy meadow; elegant canvas tents were erected on the property’s 20-acre canyon campground; and enclosed Japanese baths were replaced with an infinity hot tub. The baths were then reconstructed next to the secluded, historically clothing-optional Mountain Pool. (On my first tour of the property, it was easy to spot who still partook in that particular tradition.)

Activities aren’t really needed in Big

Sur—you go to be mesmerized by the singular horizon, where, as Henry Miller once wrote, “the blue of the sea rivals the blue of the sky.” Yet there is so much to take in at Ventana that even two nights isn’t quite enough. I do morning yoga on an outdoor perch, surrounded by dewy chaparral. I tour the terraced garden, where alpine strawberries grow alongside Peruvian black corn. I eat juicy brisket at the Big Sur Smokehouse, the resort’s new barbecue restaurant. I get an Essence of Big Sur Herbal Massage, applied with

warm herbal compresses soaked in eucalyptus, pine, and sage. I meet a peregrine falcon named Lex Luther and four other exquisite birds of prey during a session with master falconer Antonio Balestreri, held in a sun-dappled grove known as the Redwood Cathedral. My stay is perhaps best summed up by a twentysomething guest who, mid-dinner with her boyfriend at the Sur House (the resort’s main restaurant), abruptly sets down her fork, stands up from their table, and walks toward the sunset panorama, like a moth to an



Above: At Sierra Mar, white sea bass crudo shares a plate with nectarine, almond, and gem marigold. Left: Sunset seekers flock to Pfeiffer Beach, which is tucked away in Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park.

orange-pink flame: “This is too much! It’s too much beauty!”

My third and final stop isn’t far; it’s directly across the highway. Post Ranch Inn is an object of obsession among many Californians—for those who’ve been and those who haven’t. I’m in the latter camp, and from the moment I catch my first hallucinatory glimpse of architect Mickey Muennig’s triangular tree houses nestled among towering redwoods, it’s clear that all the fuss is warranted.

Both Post Ranch and Ventana stand on

what used to be a 1,500-acre ranch owned by the Post family, some of the first homesteaders to settle in Big Sur. (The Smokehouse occupies the original homestead building.) The Post Ranch plot, encompassing a lofty ridge facing the ocean, remained in the family the longest; one descendant, Bill Post, was a partner in building the inn here in the early '90s. The idea was for everything to blend into the surroundings—most lines are curved, many roofs are sod.

The rooms are all named after Big Sur pioneers and their descendants. I’m in the Ewoldsen, a kind of *wabi-sabi* amalgamation of rusted steel, wood, and glass that opens onto a private deck overlooking the Santa Lucias. As I walk along the ridge, the tree houses give way to cliff dwellings, their roofs covered in carpets of wild grass. Although the inn is at capacity, I don’t come across a single guest until I reach the northern edge of the property, where a woman is soaking alone in the meditation pool, a stainless-steel hot tub perched 1,200 feet above the surf.

## Big Sur Essentials

### STAY

**CARMEL VALLEY RANCH** Agrestic adventures amid summer-camp luxury. 🏠 Rooms from \$450; [carmelvalleyranch.com](http://carmelvalleyranch.com).

**VENTANA BIG SUR** A romantic cluster of cedar villas set amid redwoods overlooking the Pacific, where couples are encouraged to reconnect. 🏠 Rooms from \$700; [ventanabigsur.com](http://ventanabigsur.com).

**POST RANCH INN** A truly singular resort designed around contours of the natural landscape. 🏠 Rooms from \$1,095; [postranchinn.com](http://postranchinn.com).

**DEETJEN'S BIG SUR INN** An enchanting throwback to 1930s Big Sur. 🏠 Rooms from \$297; [deetjens.com](http://deetjens.com).

### EAT

**PARSONAGE WINERY TASTING ROOM** A family-run winery with a charming tasting room in Carmel. [parsonagewine.com](http://parsonagewine.com)

**MISSION RANCH** If you want to take a step into true, old-school Carmel, go for steak at Clint Eastwood’s restaurant in Carmel Valley. [missionranchcarmel.com](http://missionranchcarmel.com)

**LA BALENA** Local chefs recommend this Tuscan restaurant in Carmel-by-the-Sea. [labalenacarmel.com](http://labalenacarmel.com)

**AUBERGINE** Justin Cogley’s tasting menu has the only Michelin star awarded between L.A. and the Bay Area. [auberginecarmel.com](http://auberginecarmel.com)

**BIG SUR BAKERY** Wood-fired pizzas are the draw here (the breakfast version is famous). [bigsurbakery.com](http://bigsurbakery.com)

**NEPENTHE** Go at sunset for some of the most spectacular views in all of California. [nepenthe.com](http://nepenthe.com)

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**BIG SUR**

(CONTINUED FROM P. 135)

If Carmel Valley Ranch is heaven for families, and Ventana for young couples, you might say Post Ranch Inn is for anyone in need of spiritual uplift. The collision of natural elements, their sheer scale, inspires silence. When I note this to Gary Obligacion, the resort's general manager, he nods. "People come here to unplug," he says. "You feel tiny in the best way." One female CEO comes twice a year just to read books, I'm told.

There are plenty of splendid places to eat in these parts. The cozy, candlelit dining room at Deetjen's is an enchanting throwback to 1930s Big Sur, when Helmuth and Helen Deetjen first started building the Shangri-La in Castro Canyon. Big Sur Bakery does magical things with vegetables and pizza dough—the first time I stumbled in, in 2007, ravenous after cycling the 17-Mile Drive, I couldn't believe pizza so delicious could exist outside of Italy, much less on a remote stretch of Highway 1. For views, you can't do better than Nepenthe, built around a cabin once owned by Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth. In half a dozen visits, I've never not seen a whale.

But once you check in to Post Ranch, it's impossible to leave. And anyway, I've been to the other spots. Where I haven't been is Sierra Mar, the cliff-top restaurant at Post Ranch. The fog begins to roll in as a succession of dishes arrives—beer-battered borage with Meyer lemon, asparagus with nasturtium gremolata, tagliatelle with English peas and morels—each more luscious than the one before. By the time I take the first bite of my dessert, a heavy blanket of mist covers the sea below. It's a lot like sitting on a cloud. ☺

**MALIBU**

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and designed by Richard Neutra in 1948. Nobu Malibu, on Carbon Beach, is the area's most scene-ish dinner spot. For lunch and brunch, area residents are often found next door at Soho House's Little Beach House, membership to which is restricted to residents or those who have an affiliation with Malibu only. (Forget the Bugatti: The real power move is rolling up to the valet stand on your bicycle, as Patrick Dempsey often does.)

In many ways, Malibu leaves a visitor no choice but to embrace the cliché: Live like locals. It's a maxim the folks who live in Malibu have taken to heart. The continuum of surfing, hiking, walking on the beach—rinse and repeat.

"If I have friends who come stay with us for two or three days, they usually say, 'It's so beautiful, but I don't know how you could live here. It's just so slow. There's just not much to do,'" Gerber says. Though that changes if they stick around. "If they spend six or seven days with me, they get it. We go on a mountain-bike ride, and we surf and we hike."

In that way, the Malibu Country Mart, home to Pure Barre and RRL, is a perfect reflection of rural life for a rarefied set. It, along with the Lumber Yard, home to Maxfield and Café Habana, which hosts karaoke each Wednesday night, and Malibu Village, with Fred Segal, clustered at Cross Creek Road, comprise the shopping district.

As in most small towns, accommodations are limited in Malibu, but you only need one standout property. By far the most exceptional is the Nobu Ryokan, a place where authentic touches from Japan—custom-made tatami mats,

stones for the Zen rock garden, and art from Larry Ellison's collection (he's an owner)—somehow unite in a serene experience entirely suited to the beachside vibe. It helps that it's exclusive—it has only 16 teak-walled suites, which start at \$2,000 per night, with reservations upon approval—and perfectly private.

If there is something visitors seek, it's access to secret spots, according to Josh Parr, a longtime hiking guide for Ranch Malibu, the wellness retreat, who now leads private hikes. "People think they want a view of the ocean they can take a picture of," Parr told me on a recent trek, "but they tend to want surprises and keep searching for the sacred spots. It can be transformative, like with surfing. When they find it, they don't want to post their photos." He has been offered handsome sums by clients to keep the trails secret, and though Parr refuses those offers, he understands the impulse: He reserves some trails and vistas just for himself.

Parr pointed me toward a well-trafficked path from the trailhead at Circle X ranch to the Grotto, a hidden cavelike waterfall in a narrow sandstone ravine. Partway there, he diverted to a trail I couldn't see looping above. I couldn't tell you exactly where we turned if I wanted to, or how many turns we took, but some time later, on top of a sandstone ledge, the Pacific came into view all the way from Point Dume to Ventura County. I understood the impulse to keep the reverie to myself, though I know it wasn't. Through the breeze, I could hear distant chanting. I didn't mind that a meditation group had settled on a rock outcrop somewhere above us. ☺