

Escapes

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The New York Times

Big Changes At Big Sur

THE GRASS CEILING Like anyone who builds in Big Sur, Zachary and Langka Treadwell had to satisfy a lot of California and local environmental regulations. Their hillside home, a cube of glass and rock, has a sod roof.

Noah Berger for The New York Times

By FINN-OLAF JONES

DRIVERS passing through Big Sur on Highway 1 between Los Angeles and San Francisco are inevitably awed by the duel of sea and sky played out against the rugged Santa Lucia Mountains. Indeed, the pristine slopes facing Highway 1, a designated American National Scenic Byway, are some of the most rigidly protected in the country, guarded by a phalanx of agencies that range from the Monterey County Resource Management Agency to the California Coastal Commission.

But turn down one of the dozens of private roads along the coast, and you'll discover teams of builders laying stone walls and installing hot tubs

at multimillion-dollar properties, trucks full of building supplies groaning up the steep switchbacks and poles set up on the hillsides with orange plastic netting fluttering between them like Tibetan prayer flags.

There's a mini-construction boom happening in Big Sur, local real estate agents say. And, these days, more than half the homes in the region are owned by part-time residents who live mainly in Los Angeles or around San Francisco Bay.

"For the past six years we've been seeing a lot of fund managers and dot-commers coming in who want to buy a slice of heaven," said Robert Carver, an architect whose firm, Carver & Schicketanz, specializes in Big Sur. "Contractors here have been so busy that folks are importing outside con-

tractors, and builders from as far away as New York."

Big Sur's epic landscapes, studded with redwood forests, hot springs and misty coves, have attracted metaphysical types for at least three generations. "It was here in Big Sur I first learned to say Amen!" the novelist Henry Miller wrote in "Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch" after settling here in 1944.

Even so, more than a quarter of the properties along the coastline have changed hands the last decade, said Martha Diehl, a member of Monterey County's planning commission, altering the region's demographics. In 2005, building permit applications submitted to Monterey County were up about 50 percent from five years before.

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises for anyone who has watched how the Hamptons or Palm Beach have developed is the complete lack of large housing or even fencing around the pricey acreage being bought up by wealthy city dwellers seeking second homes. "You don't move to Big Sur if you want to host a lot of people," said Mr. Carver, citing his clients' disinterest in Aspen-size mansions. "This has always been a place to go to for solitude."

Peter Mullin agrees. "I read, I hike, I sit in the hot tub and watch nature in all its glory," said Mr. Mullin, a Los Angeles-based entrepreneur who has spent the last decade converting a 30-year-old cabin into a magnificent, yet understated, weekend

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INSIDE

WEEKEND WITH THE KIDS

Portland, Ore.

Imagination is at work in attractions that captivate children (and parents).



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ADVENTURER

A Wonderland Unlocked?

Long off limits to the public, a slice of Sutter Buttes in California is almost a state park.

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French Lick Returns to Its Sin City Roots

By JERRY GARRETT

WE glided on ancient steel rails alongside a clear, slow-moving river, past golden fields and red barns, a canopy of green overhead. The view from the Pullman car's windows looked very much like it did 90 years ago, when Parke Flick used to ride the train with his father, who was on his way to work at the West Baden Springs Resort near French Lick, Ind.

"People called this the Monte Carlo of America back then," said Mr. Flick, now 94, watching as a little diesel engine pulled five vintage passenger cars into the town's depot. It stopped just short of the resort, with its mammoth red dome flanked by three white towers. "It was magnificent."

The train was how visitors usually arrived in the Roaring Twenties — a dozen or more trainloads a day — when French Lick was one of America's most famous, and infamous, party towns. Back then French Lick and the surrounding Springs Valley had 30 hotels and 15 clubs. The town, which got its name from the French traders who founded it and the salty mineral

deposits that attracted wildlife, was a lawless hangout for a generation of politicians, entertainers, sports idols and gangsters.

"When I went into the Army and told people I was from French Lick, they all knew it, mostly for two things: Pluto Water and gambling," Mr. Flick said. The mineral water from Pluto Springs may no longer be bottled, but the gambling, after more than a half-century's absence, is making a comeback.

A \$382 million makeover of the area's two famed Beaux-Arts hotels has just been completed. The hotels, the French Lick Springs Resort and the West Baden Springs Resort, both of which originally opened a few months apart in 1901 and '02, are national historic landmarks. West Baden's six-story atrium had the world's largest free-span dome until the Astrodome opened in 1965.

The restoration of West Baden Springs is the last major piece of a plan to return tiny French Lick, also known as the hometown of the basketball star Larry Bird, to its long-lost status as one of

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MORE THAN GAMBLING

Locomotives outside the Railway Museum.

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BREAKING GROUND

AtlanticA

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WHERE The Dominican Republic.

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STATUS Should begin opening late this year.

DEVELOPER Puerto Luperon Company.

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DETAILS On the island's northern coast near the town of Luperon, this project covers more than 1,400 acres and will have an airport for private jets and docks capable of accommodating megayachts. Spread over peninsulas and islands in a bay and along the Atlantic coast, the initial phase of devel-



opment will consist of 230 houses near a golf course designed by Arnold Palmer; a beachfront hotel with 112 condo-hotel units and 80 other rooms; 70 townhouses near a marina; and 33 houses overlooking the ocean from a bluff. Some of the condo-hotel units, which owners may enter in a rental program, will have private pools. The houses, many with private docks, can be customized with options like pools, wine cellars and screening rooms. Adjoining the marina will be a village with shops and restaurants, and plans call for a polo facility, a beach club and additional hotels and residences to be added later. **NICK KAYE**

— *Breaking Ground* is a weekly look at projects, planned or under construction, that include weekend or vacation homes.

LETTERS

SECOND HOMES ON DISPUTED LAND

To the Editor: "Choosing Israel, Not the Hamptons" (March 9) reports that Americans and other foreigners are buying properties in Israel as second or vacation homes. The article mentions a number of Jerusalem neighborhoods as "areas where roughly half of last year's home sales were to foreigners."

What your report does not say is that he

Big Changes at Big Sur



Photographs by Noah Berger for The New York Times

DISCRETE DESIGN The Treadwells have views 600 feet above the Pacific from their bedroom and terrace, but the house is relatively invisible to the outside world.

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home.

Clinging to a rock shelf suspended between the waves and Highway 1, Mr. Mullin's retreat is an interconnected series of wood pavilions that have Asian touches — right down to a koi pond that surrounds the front entrance. Despite the spectacular construction, the place has just enough beds for Mr. Mullin and his family.

"The freewheeling hippie feeling of Big Sur has modified," he said. "But the big swells of the sea are raining on you. And you still have to know where your candles are for the power outages. Most newcomers cherish the scenery there, and they try to blend in."

EVEN so, the change is noticeable. "My neighbors are a lot different now than when I moved here," said Monique Bourin, who has lived in Big Sur for 20 years. "The flower children and countercul-



The New York Times



Creating a haven where

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EVEN so, the change is noticeable. "My neighbors are a lot different now than when I moved here," said Monique Bourin, who has lived in Big Sur for 20 years. "The flower children and counterculture types who came here in the '60s and '70s without any money were suddenly sitting on top of multimillion-dollar properties, and a lot of them moved. The buy-in for a coastal plot is now around \$3 million."

Ms. Bourin, who was helped by her late husband, has spent the last two decades building a house in an isolated highland valley facing the sea. "We were hippies who were going to homestead and build our house with our own two hands," she said, indicating a pile of lumber outside her front door, awaiting a new project. "It's been a lot of work, but I'm almost done."

Her cedar and redwood home rises out of a ravine near Pfeiffer Beach like a vision from the Whole Earth Catalog, complete with stained-glass windows and a well-tended vegetable garden. It has solar power and a water cistern so that it's entirely self-contained, right down to an 1893 wood-burning stove salvaged from the Los Alamos, N.M., train station.

On the hills surrounding her home, sculptural modernistic dwellings that range in value from \$2.5 million to \$6 million are replacing the simple wooden cabins and modest bungalows that once made up most of the housing here. Orange flagging across the ravine indicates another structure about to be built on a neighboring property.

A gleaming BMW convertible parked on the dirt road in front of Ms. Bourin's homestead gives a hint to the mixed feeling she might have about all the changes going on in Big Sur; she has become a successful local real estate broker. (By the way, if her house were for sale, she said, she'd price it at \$3.7 million.)

Given all the newcomers, some fear that Big Sur is becoming another Aspen or Sedona, where the wealthy have bought into the local counterculture lifestyle while indelibly altering it.

"People think of gentrification as some-

A refuge with a rustic reputation tries to sidestep the pitfalls of its own popularity.

thing that happens in downtown neighborhoods," said Chris Calott, an Albuquerque-based urban planner who has been camping in Big Sur for more than 30 years. "But now we're seeing it happen on an unprecedented scale in rural areas all over the country. The questions facing Big Sur are the same ones facing the Hamptons, Taos, Marfa and other bucolic destinations that become popular with urban elites. Can a place be considered 'preserved' if the local store now has a fantastic imported cheese section, but you have to drive an hour to buy twine?"

Ms. Diehl, the planning commissioner, who has lived in the area for 20 years, said, "We don't want a Disney or Colonial Williamsburg Big Sur — we want to keep it real. The only people who can go through the pro-



The New York Times

Creating a haven where new neighbors from the city will build houses, not fences.

cess are people who can afford it, and that brings social costs."

Michelle Rizzolo understands the problem well. "We can't find any place for our employees to live," said Ms. Rizzolo, who left the kitchen of the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills to open the funky Big Sur Bakery & Restaurant on a lot she shares with a gas station tucked off a wooded knoll on Highway 1. "In fact, when we started this place, we all had to sleep on the floor of the bakery."

Although two of the area's biggest employers, the Post Ranch Inn and the Ventana Inn & Spa, have housing for their employees, on weekday mornings workers from Salinas, an inland city an hour's drive away, are crammed in cars and trucks going south on Highway 1 to their jobs in Big Sur.

While Big Sur is changing, it isn't so easy to tear down an old cabin and build a modern house. The region has some of the country's strictest building laws, officials and contractors say, and new construction tends to be limited to existing building footprints. There are rigid standards regarding water and natural preservation.

"I usually tell clients to count on one, or even two, years between buying the property and putting the first shovel in," said Jay Auburn, who procures building permits for Carver & Schicketanz. "You have to factor in an additional 5 to 10 percent of construction costs just for getting over the regulations."

Two Carver & Schicketanz clients, Zachary Treadwell, a Los Angeles-based screenwriter, and his wife, Langka, recently built a 1,500-square-foot sod-roofed retreat half-buried in a windy hillside 600 feet above the Pacific and only accessible by a steep and winding private road in the narrow canyon that leads to Pfeiffer Beach. The road was only blacktopped last December. Ms. Bourin, the real estate agent, estimated that the Treadwell property would go on the market at \$6 million.

As is typical with most new construction in Big Sur, not even a fence delineates where the Treadwells' land ends and public space begins. The home, a glass-and-rock cube with a stone-lined in-ground hot tub, appears Zen-like in its simplicity. Yet the effort involved in the logistics and regulatory hurdles the Treadwells had to overcome seems akin to the building of the Pyramids. Even choosing the grass for the roof was complicated.

"Some of the oak grass is considered endangered," said Fred Ballarini, one of the naturalists hired to help shepherd the Treadwells through some 18 different presentations to the Monterey County Resource Management Agency. "We were required to replant three times the amount of the grass that was affected by the construction nearby."

The biggest hurdle for getting a building



NATURAL HABITAT Peter Mullin spent a decade building a home that clings to the rock.



CHANGES Monique Bourin, a real estate broker, has been in Big Sur for 20 years.



FLIP SIDE Michelle Rizzolo says the boom is pushing her employees out of Big Sur.

permit is keeping new construction invisible from Highway 1 and other areas of public access. "General rule of thumb is if you can see it, you can't build it," said Dale Ellis, director of the management agency. Hence the rise of flagging scaffolds that outline proposed construction throughout Big Sur's back roads — erected so regulators can determine the visual impact of new construction.

FOR the Treadwells, the effort has paid off. During a recent visit, coyotes and a wildcat scurried along the patio while midway to the vast horizon a line of migrating gray whales spouted like sea locomotives.

When the sun set, the glass house seemed

suspended by invisible threads between the starry sky and the pounding surf below. Highway 1 and any other sign of civilization were hidden behind the hills that had merged into the night. Despite the sweeping view of the California coast, one could be the last person on earth. "All that matters is that the miraculous becomes the norm," Henry Miller wrote — and every weekend, that possibility exists for the Treadwells and other denizens of Big Sur.

"It was a major thing, getting all the permits," Ms. Treadwell said as her three small children played outside in the steaming hot tub. "But we knew that when we got into this, and we're fine with it. Even with all the building going on, we think the magic of this place is going to be preserved."