

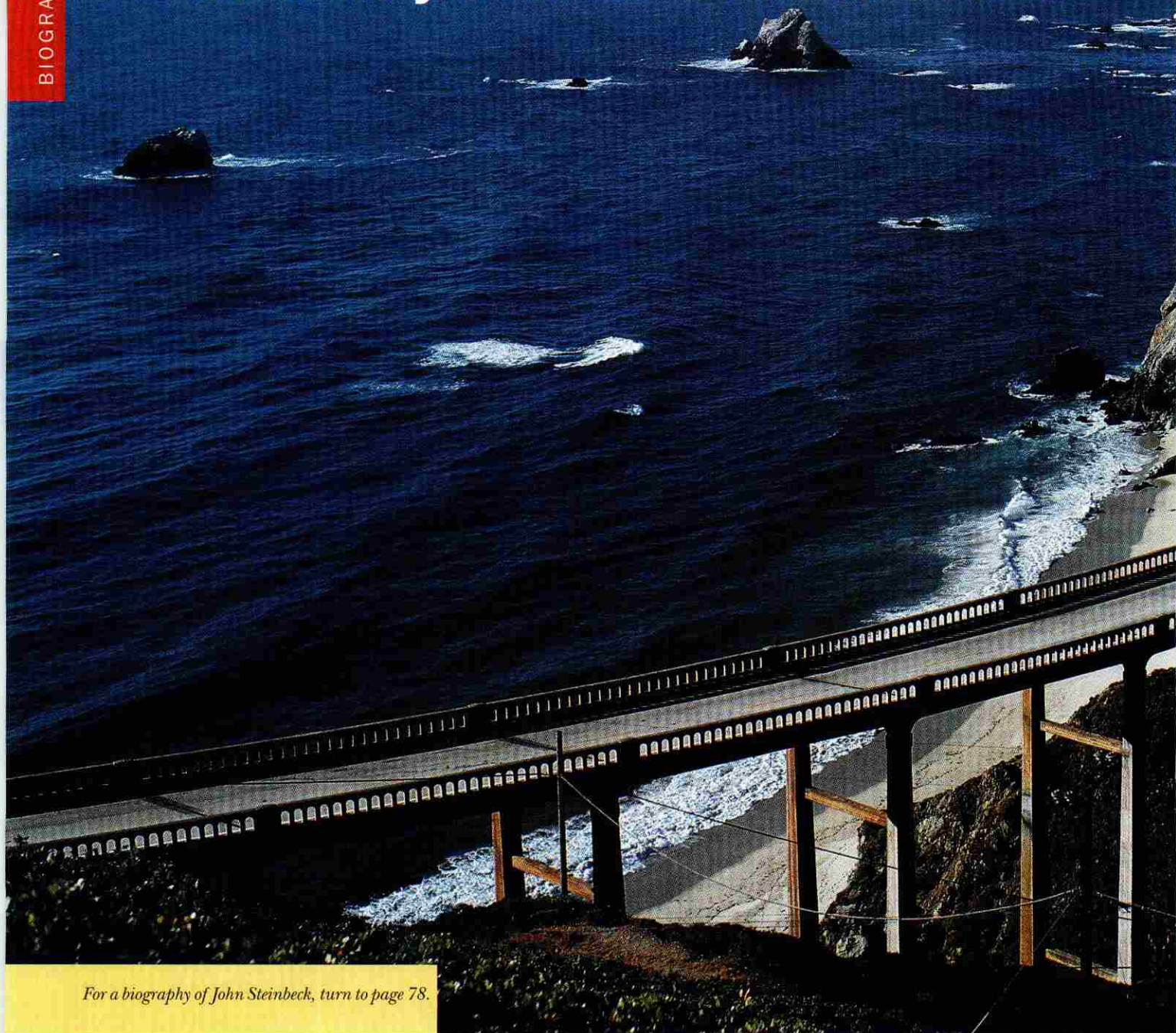


A narrow gray road twists gracefully along the sharp cliff edge high above the pounding Pacific. Far below, slender confectioner's-sugar-white beaches announce hidden coves, with the occasional green Monterey pine acting as an exclamation point. Further inland, fields of avocados and lettuce and tomatoes stretch beyond the farthest horizon. Chic artists' colonies flourish just a few miles from dusty farm towns, both

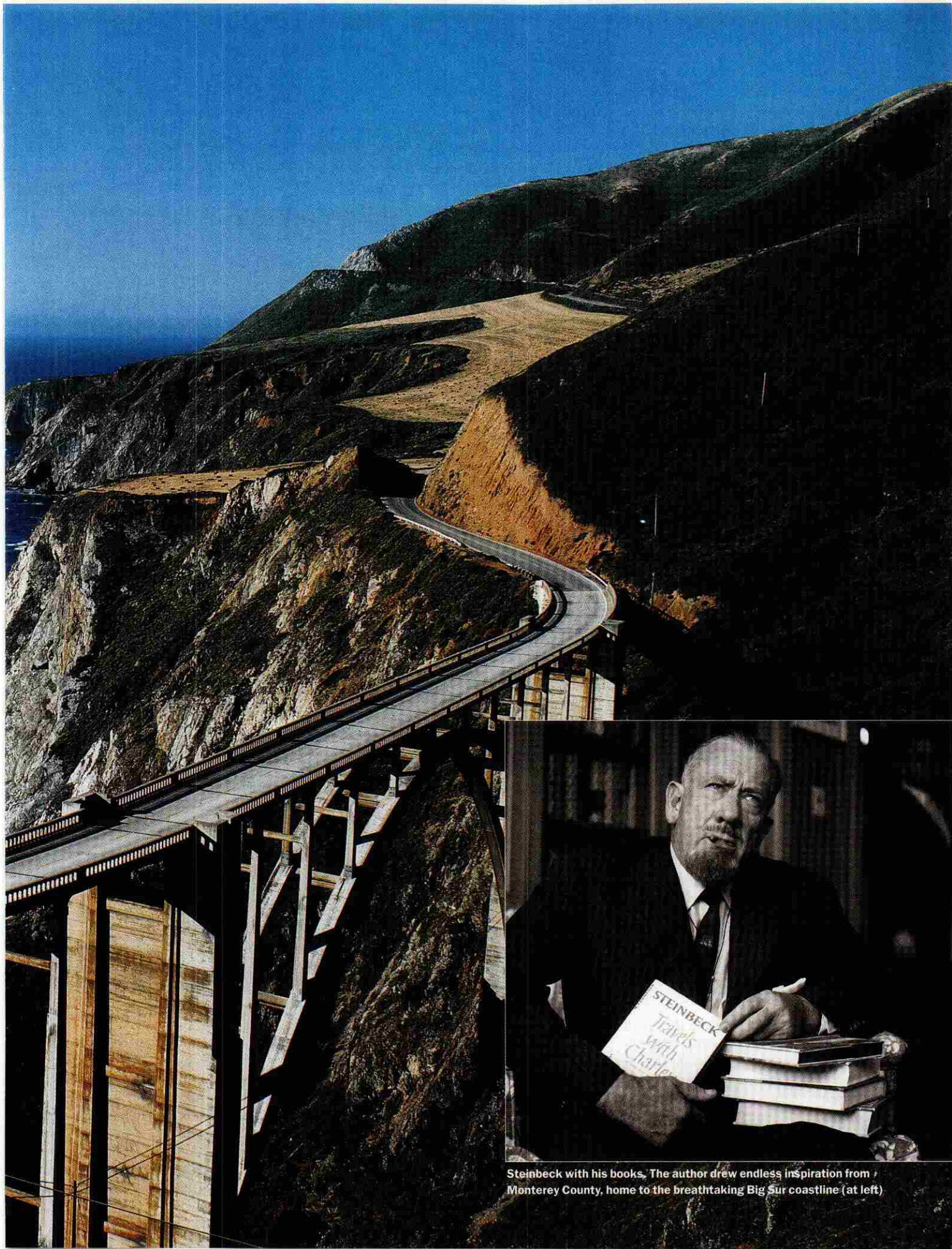
charming in their way. And there's more: emerald golf courses, one of the world's best aquariums, small vineyards producing increasingly subtle and delicious wines, and a museum honoring one of America's most popular writers. All that can be found in Monterey County, a sprawling section of north-central California just an hour and a half south of San Francisco. Book lovers, of course, know the region as Steinbeck Country.

BY MELISSA BURDICK HARMON

Monterey: Travels With Steinbeck



For a biography of John Steinbeck, turn to page 78.

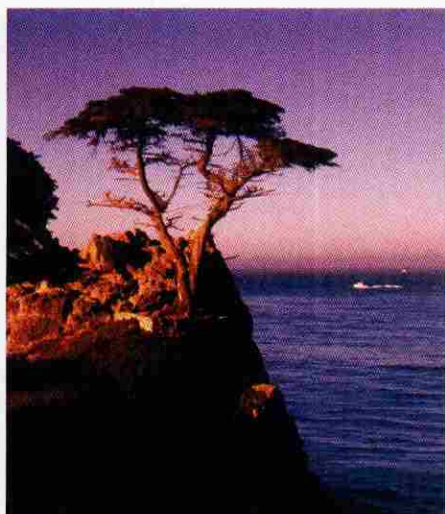


Steinbeck with his books. The author drew endless inspiration from Monterey County, home to the breathtaking Big Sur coastline (at left)

Steinbeck in Salinas

Salinas, California, the sun-baked small town that produced John Steinbeck, was then, and is now, the seat of Monterey County. It forms the heart of the Salinas Valley—the “salad bowl of the nation,” which still raises 80% of America’s lettuce and artichokes. Salinas is about farming, pure and simple. There is nothing chic about it. In fact, the day I was there, the Future Farmers of America were throwing a barbecue. As I walked around the neat grid of streets, past the California State Rodeo grounds, I half expected to run into James Dean, since the film *East of Eden* is set there.

I headed directly to Steinbeck’s childhood home at 132 Central Avenue, a 15-room Victorian dream of turrets and gingerbread trim. The local Valley Guild ladies serve lunch there, as they have for more



A gnarled cypress tree hugs a rocky cliff overlooking the Pacific at Pebble Beach

than 25 years, donating the proceeds to charity. Don’t miss it, but don’t expect spa cuisine. These women cook the old-fashioned way (I had thick chicken croquettes with creamy white sauce and three-layer cake so rich it could retire the national debt). After lunch, if you are able to walk, the ladies will show you the Steinbeck family photo albums and memorabilia, and the room where the writer was born.

Just down the street from this small-town charm lies the big-city-style glitz of the National Steinbeck Center, an \$11 million museum that uses multisensory, interactive scenes to tell the author’s life story. You’ll walk down a dirt road into the first of seven parts of Steinbeck’s life, hear horse carts rattle by, enter his childhood bedroom (kids can open bureau drawers to find his favorite

books), listen to taped reminiscences, watch clips from *East of Eden*, and crank a Model T Ford.

The presentation is equally evocative at every stage. You can smell sardines on the fake Cannery Row. You can peer into a giant oyster shell and discover—what else—The

tual GMC truck/camper that Steinbeck used while writing *Travels with Charley*—a nonfiction book that initially fired my dream to take trips and write about them.

I didn’t come away from the National Steinbeck Center convinced that writers really need museums like this. Their body



Carmel’s charming shops resemble quaint English cottages, and flowers brighten its sidewalks



Lily pads float in a fountain at Carmel Mission, founded in 1770 by Father Junipero Serra

Pearl. (That book’s manuscript is also displayed.) You can feel the chilly blast from a railcar loaded with “ice-cooled” lettuce and bring fiction to life by reaching into Lennie’s coat pocket to find the pet mouse he kept in *Of Mice and Men*. I liked the fake shantytown (shades of *The Grapes of Wrath*) and hearing Steinbeck’s “I Am a Revolutionary” speech. But my favorite was the ac-

of work does the job, I think. But this one is lots of fun, houses serious archives, and is the pride of the local population. (’Twasn’t always the case. When *The Grapes of Wrath* debuted in 1939, the good people of Salinas burned it on the library steps, enraged by its social realism and pro-labor views.) Never mind. Times change. Attitudes change. Salinas loves Steinbeck now. And Steinbeck

never *could* fall out of love with Salinas, hard as he tried. In fact, his ashes are buried here, in the Garden of Memories, just a few blocks from the museum.

Cannery Row

In California folks like to say that Steinbeck didn't write fiction at all, that he wrote real stories about real people. And a lot of those people lived in the city of Monterey, along a raffish waterfront area that Steinbeck called Cannery Row. He defined the neighborhood as "a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream," and his descriptions lent a gentle, dream-like quality to the whole chaotic world of immigrant labor and local hangers-on whose lives were timed by the catch coming into the sardine canneries. Steinbeck turned his real-life Monterey friends into fictional characters in three of his best-selling books: *Cannery Row*, *Sweet Thursday*, and *Tortilla Flat*.

Six decades later, Cannery Row is a different place. Sure, the corrugated tin canneries remain, but they now house restaurants and galleries—one with a 65-shop antique mall and another a 1905 carousel. If you're looking for nostalgia, stop by the American Tin Cannery (the phrase "Premium Outlets" has been added to the title) to check out the period photographs that line the walls, and pick up some bargains too.

You can also pass by marine biologist Ed Ricketts' rickety, bare-board lab at 800 Cannery Row, where Steinbeck spent long hours drinking, philosophizing, and studying Ricketts' soul to create the vivid character "Doc" in *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*. The lab, which the city has vowed to preserve, along with other buildings from the Steinbeck era, can be seen on Otter Mobile Tours and Charters' guided or self-guided tours. These trips give you a wonderful sense of the area's history. For me, however, that nostalgia, that ache for a lost era that Steinbeck talked about is most likely to come at night when the melancholy song of the foghorns breaks your sleep, or at dawn, when the sea lions on the rocks bark a shrill greeting to the world. These were sounds that Steinbeck knew—and they carry the power of the past with them.

The Scenic

Robert Louis Stevenson once called the 100-mile stretch of Pacific Coast known as Big Sur, "the greatest meeting of land and sea in the world." And so it remains today. It is a place of dense clouds of fog broken by

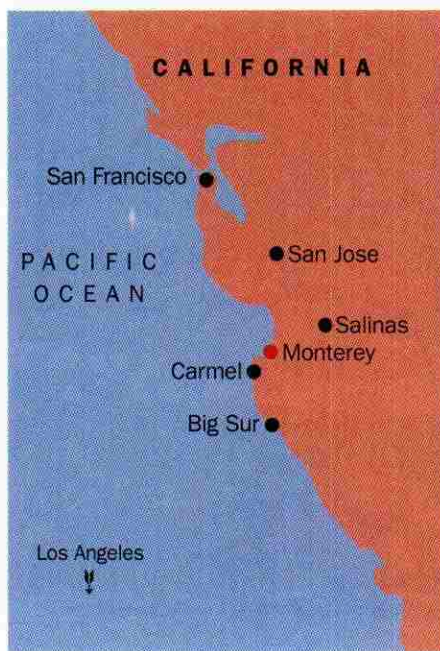
spectacular stretches of sunlight. A place of mountains (green in spring, seared dusty brown in summer) making dramatic swoops down to the sea. A place of soaring sea birds and, off in the distance, migrating

ple—pale by comparison and makes the occasional head-swimming dizziness totally worthwhile.

I stopped to take photographs at the graceful Bixby Creek Bridge, built by con-

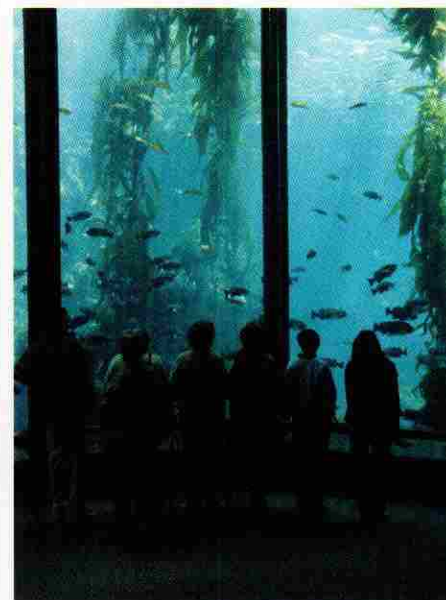


Putters' paradise: Visitors to Monterey play the fabled links at Pebble Beach



whales gently arching above the waves. It is also a place that has miraculously remained pristine. That's because Big Sur is almost all parkland, and the State of California deserves much credit for that.

The only way to experience Big Sur's power is to drive down the cliff-hugging California Highway 1. To me, it makes other big-vista roads—Italy's Amalfi Coast and South Africa's Garden Route, for exam-



Schoolchildren get a diver's eye view of sea life at the Monterey Bay Aquarium

victs circa 1932. It is one of the 10 highest single-span bridges in the world, and it offers a breathtaking view. Later, I pulled into the exquisite Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. A short hike took me to a 100-foot-high bluff where I watched a ribbon of frothy white water—the last fierce gasp of McWay Creek—making its breathtaking arc into the Pacific.

Of course, Big Sur is as famous for its



The once seedy waterfront factories of Cannery Row are now tidy and tourist-friendly

funky, Sixties style as it is for its scenery. Much of that spirit remains. For example, Esalen Institute, home of the hippie-era human potential movement, is still there (although I hear it now hosts corporate retreats). While you're in the area, stop by the roadside Henry Miller Library (it's really a bookshop, but worth a visit), devoted to the author of such shocking-in-their-day books as *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*. Miller spent nearly 20 years in the mountains of Big Sur, and the shrine to his work is as bizarre as you might expect. European visitors go there in droves, and I took a brief catnap on the lawn, cradled inside a giant sculpture of a hand.

The Chic

Not far away you'll find another Monterey County jewel—the perfect little town of Carmel-by-the-Sea. Lined with quaint, English-style cottages housing upscale shops and galleries, it combines European charm, artiness, and a gorgeous beachfront. Carmel is the only place I've ever visited where the mailboxes have little shingled roofs. Where the drugstore plays Rodgers and Hart music and sells imported Roger & Gallet toiletries. Where the prettiest hotel in town is owned by Doris Day and the niftiest is owned by former Mayor Clint Eastwood. Where the pet store sells designer-quality dog toys and the candy store sells peanut butter cups the size of cupcakes. What you won't find in Carmel? Neon signs. Billboards. Hot dog stands. I'm told that you even need a permit to wear high heels there, and wonder if Eastwood had a hand in that spiky piece of legislation. While in town, put on your flats and visit the Carmel Mission, founded in 1770 by Father Ju-

nipero Serra, and the loveliest of all the California mission churches.

Just a few miles from Carmel and equally chic is Pebble Beach, granddaddy of all luxury golf resorts and site of the Pebble Beach National Pro-Am. You too can swing your



Plump, juicy strawberries from Salinas fields

five-iron on the fabled links—provided you are willing to pay a \$350 green fee (cart rental extra). I thought that a little pricey for my blood and opted instead for the resort's much-touted 17-Mile Drive (toll: \$7.75). The road wraps around the southern tip of the Monterey Peninsula, past rugged rocks covered with shore birds and sea lions and seals—and past the Lone Cypress, the symbol of Pebble Beach. I understand that the resort holds a trademark on the tree.

Travel Tips

OTTER MOBILE TOURS AND CHARTERS offers a two-hour tour of Steinbeck sites in Monterey, including Cannery Row, and in Pacific Grove, where he spent childhood summers and began married life (self-guided tours on CD are also available). All-day van tours also include lunch at the Steinbeck House in Salinas and a visit to the Steinbeck Center. 877-829-2224. www.otter-mobile.com.

THE STEINBECK HOUSE 132 Central Avenue, Salinas, serves lunch from 11:30 A.M. to 2 P.M., Monday through Saturday. Set menu. Reservations recommended. 831-424-2735.

NATIONAL STEINBECK CENTER One Main Street, Salinas. Call about special exhibits. The new "Valley of the World" gallery, dedicated to the area's agricultural heritage, is scheduled to open in early 2003. 831-775-4720. www.steinbeck.org.

HENRY MILLER LIBRARY Highway 1, Big Sur. This historic building is also a center for poetry reading and concerts, and exhibits contemporary art. The bookstore sells Miller's books, plus those by his favorite writers. 831-667-2574. www.henrymiller.org.

CARMEL MISSION Rio Road at Lasuen Drive, Carmel. Open from 9:30 A.M. to 4:15 P.M., Monday through Saturday; 10:15 A.M. to 4:15 P.M. Sunday.

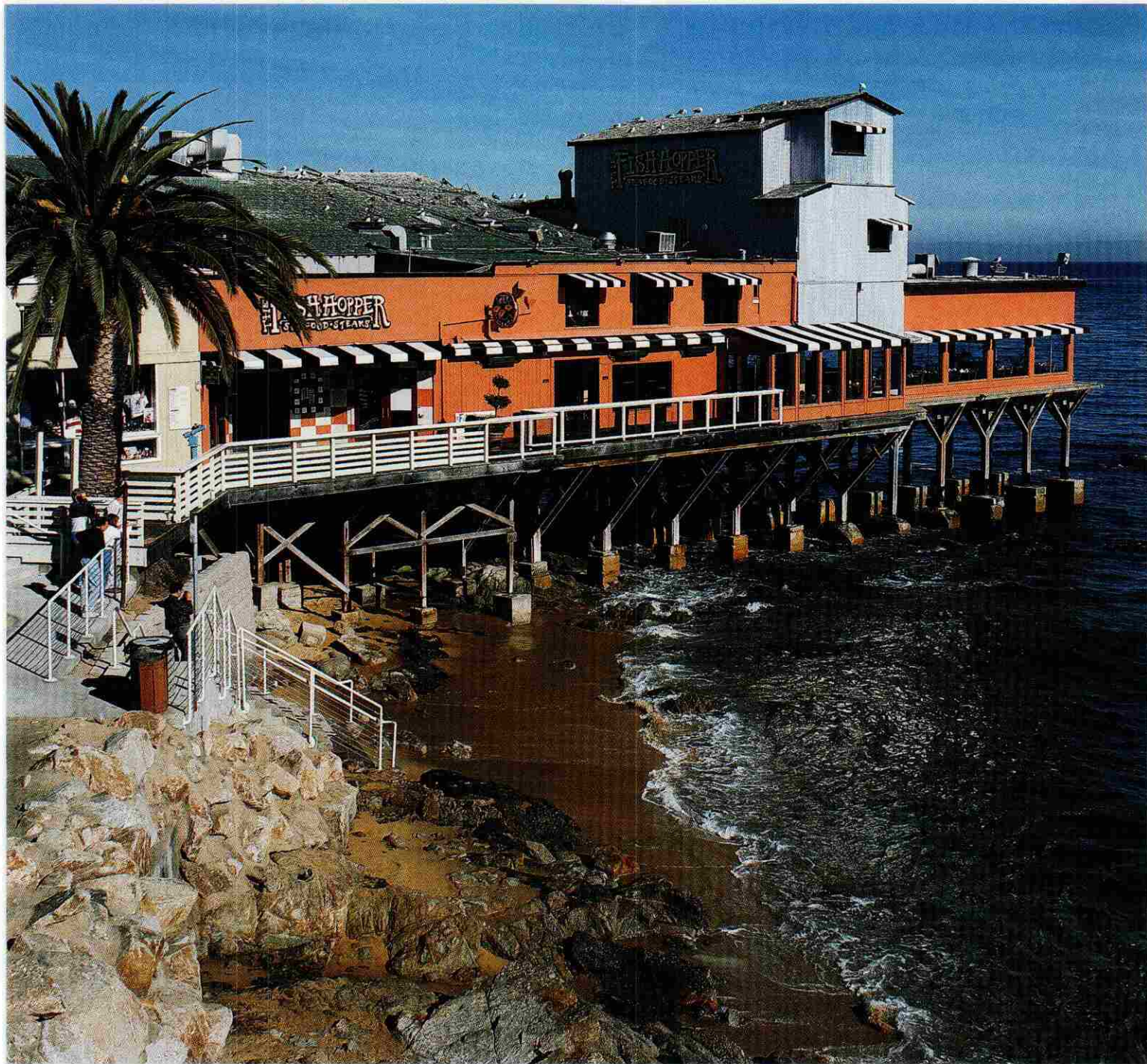
A TASTE OF MONTEREY This wine-tasting room has two locations, at 700 Cannery Row in Monterey, with beautiful sea views, and in Salinas at 127 Main Street. Daily 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. (11 A.M. to 5 P.M. in Salinas). 888-646-5446. www.tastemonterey.com.

MONTEREY BAY AQUARIUM 886 Cannery Row. Second only to Chicago's Shedd Aquarium in visitor numbers, this is one of the best aquariums I've ever seen and it appeals to kids too. 831-648-4888. www.montereybayaquarium.org.

Where To Stay

MONTEREY PLAZA HOTEL & SPA On Cannery Row, the Monterey Plaza has a great spa and an excellent restaurant. My room was actually over the Pacific and came with binoculars for sea lion viewing. 800-636-6084.

QUAIL LODGE 8205 Valley Greens Drive, Carmel. A pretty resort in the sunny Carmel Valley, Quail Lodge is known for its golf course, hiking trails, and for its Covey Restaurant, featuring wine country cuisine, including fresh local produce and Monterey Bay seafood. 888-828-8787.



Monterey's waterfront, where Steinbeck fans can retrace the fictional footsteps of the characters he immortalized in *Cannery Row*

The Serene

Just over the hill from the coastal towns, you'll find a blend of green valleys, rolling ranchland, and sheltering mountains in Carmel Valley. It's a place of laid-back golf and spa resorts and dramatic hiking and riding trails. It's also an increasingly popular spot to taste and buy wine. In fact, Carmel Valley, with tens of thousands of acres of quality vineyards, is now touted as "the new Napa." It is America's third largest fine wine-producing region, and tasting opportunities abound. A Taste of Monterey, which has a branch next to the Steinbeck Center, pours from 30 different vineyards.

With Steinbeck still on my mind, I returned to Monterey to visit the area's top attraction—and one that Steinbeck would have liked—the Monterey Bay Aquarium. It focuses entirely on creatures from the rich local waters, which encompass the 10,000-foot-deep undersea Monterey Canyon.

I saw things there I'd never seen before. A three-story kelp forest that grows six inches a day. A display devoted solely to jellyfish, drifting along like so many lace mantillas. A million-gallon tank filled with various bay fish gliding by with hypnotic grace, the anchovies on top just like on a pizza. Even scuba divers don't get a better view.

Leaving the aquarium, taking one last walk along the waterfront, I thought again of Steinbeck, who actually wrote *Cannery Row* in New York City. Ultimately he chose to leave California, this land of pounding seas and serene valleys, but he never could quite shake its hold on him. "I am very much emotionally tied up with the whole place," he wrote. "It has a soul which is lacking in the East."

Maybe he was right. ♦

MELISSA BURDICK HARMON HAS WRITTEN HUNDREDS OF ARTICLES ABOUT TRAVEL, BUT SHE HAS YET TO LIVE HER INITIAL STEINBECK-INSPIRED DREAM—A TRIP IN A CAMPER ACCOMPANIED ONLY BY A DOG.