

Vista and Refuge: Interview with a Big Sur Yurt-Hotel Owner & White Tanker Firefighter

By Adam Baer



Adam Baer: Are the winds always this rough here? We felt as if our yurt was moving last night. It couldn't have been moving, right?

John Handy: The Santa Ana winds are supposed to be following these, whatever they are, so it'll be even more windy soon. We have winds of all kinds. It can get stronger than this, for sure. I'm guessing they were 20 mph last night [ed note: when you were afraid to fall asleep for fear of blowing away like a fatty Jewish shrub]. We've had 60 mph's gusting up some nights, and we have some that gusted as high as 80 and knocked road-signs down. It's not all the time, just once in a while. One of the things that we did before we built all these yurts is: we built one, to test it out and see how it held up. They said it would hold up well to wind, all kinds of weather, and it did. It was up there for three or four years before we ever built the rest of these. It's a round structure, so you felt the wind. You were in Yurt Four? Yours is more sheltered than most [ed note: this is where the writer feels extra manly], but it flexed, probably. You could probably see it moving. It does that: it's rigged, tied down, all the pressure on it. They shed the wind really well, though. All the buildings are round, not so much for the wind, although that's a huge advantage, but because that's the natural look. If you look at the trees and almost every native Indian home, almost any structure that wasn't built

by our typical American construction is round; it's a strong way to build. Birds-nests, they're all round. Igloos, tee-pees.

AB: Why'd you build this place? I mean, how'd it come about? And why here?

JH: When we wanted to build this place, I was already traveling all over the world, so I was staying in hotels all the time. I wanted to do something that was unique, really different, that would really be specific to this piece of property. We had one idea in mind, which is "perching lightly." We have that on our Web site: "perch lightly on the edge." Because when we walked around here, on this piece of land, well, the only building that had ever been built was on the flat area down where the parking lot is, and it was a lumber mill [note, the rest of the property is elevated and hilly]. No one had ever built any house or anything up here [at the top of the hill overlooking Highway One and the Pacific], so whatever we wanted to build, we wanted to be able to stick it on the sides of the hill and put it in amongst the trees, and leave everything the way it was.



AB: Why yurts? What are yurts, really?

JH: Well, we were looking at tents, point-loaded structures, and all kinds of things that we could do, and my mom actually saw a yurt in Oregon at a state park. So I went and looked at it. I liked the way it was built. It was small, 14 feet in diameter. It had bunk beds and a plywood floor. But it was the inspiration for what we ended up doing. From the structure up, from the floor up, you just order it. They custom-make it for you, put the windows where you want them. They come in a kit, and you erect them. Putting a yurt up is easy. It takes a couple days. But the foundation and the infrastructure that's underneath it, that's up to the people who have it.



AB: You've been open since 2004. How'd you find land on the California Coast!?

JH: When we were looking for land, we weren't looking for hotel property, to tell you the truth. It was 1987, so it was like 21 years ago, and we roamed up and down the central coast for two years. We were looking for five to 10 acres on the ocean. Because we felt like we were Coastal Dwellers. I loved living in LA, and I worked at Mattel, and I loved my job, but someday, I knew I wanted to be living here. So even though we were in our twenties, we were looking for retirement property, because we knew it wouldn't be available at some point. We were very frustrated: we couldn't find any quality land still available on the ocean. There were pieces, but they were in deep canyons; there was something wrong with everything.

We were staying with a friend of mine who was an artist, who worked with me at Mattel, and being an artist, like a lot of artists, maybe, he was reticent to give his opinion. He could draw, like, crazy-fast, but if you were drawing something, he would never say 'Hey, you know, if you did this it would be a lot better. You should try this.' He just wouldn't do that. He never gave his opinion about

anything. So we're sitting in his house, and we said: 'Hey, Colin, we found a great piece of property in Paso Robles that we are going to buy.' It was an almond orchard, it was in bloom, it was in our budget, it was 10 acres, inland. And he goes: 'Don't do it.' And I go: "Do you have something against Paso Robles?" And he goes: 'No, it's not that. It's just that that's not your dream. If you're buying raw land, a vacant piece of land, you're buying your dream. You went to look for a coastal property. Don't stop until you find that.'

Wow, we were this close [pinching his fingers]. We were going to put the offer in, we were satisfied with the whole thing, but this guy never gave his opinion on anything else, so I said: 'Well, I can't find what I'm looking for.' And he said: 'Well, you gotta keep trying. Try out my real estate agent. Come down tomorrow.' So we go down and talk to her and she says: 'Well, there's a piece in Big Sur that just came up.' And I said: 'Wow, that seems like it's too far away.' She said: "Too far from what?" And so we drove up here, and we saw this piece of property. It was beautiful but hard to walk around on, completely overgrown. Nothing but a goat trail. But we loved it, and we went back to the real estate agent and said that it was, like, twice as much as we could imagine affording, but that we wanted to do it. She said: 'Don't do anything until you get the zoning. I'll write to Monterey County, and I will send you the exact description of what you can and can't build there.' And they wrote back to us and said that it was being rezoned. The coastal plan came out in 1987. This was '86, and the coastal plan figured out exactly what was going to be built on the Big Sur coast. It took a long time, but that timing was exactly right, and they had rezoned this land to function as commercial land. This, plus the Post Ranch Inn, and three other properties were basically decided to be "visitor-serving commercial," because they weren't sitting right on Highway One. Every other opportunity was right there, even a motel concept. As Americans, we feel that the coast needs to be pristine and open. They needed new "visitor-serving commercial" land, but they needed it to be off Highway One. This had road access, though it was pretty overgrown and fit that model. Perfect.

AB: So that's how this started? How'd you become a nature hotelier? Who designed this place, and how'd people start coming?

JH: Well, it's weird. We went ahead and bought the land, and about a year later, the zoning all passed, and our friend [apparently now not so quiet!] said: 'Sell that thing. You're not in the hotel business.' And we said, 'No, it's our new dream. We want to build something really different, unique.' We dreamed about it for a long time. Dreaming about it was the fun part. 15 years of thinking and dreaming. We had a famous architect, Charles Moore. He even helped us with it, showed us some concepts, about how to site these things, whatever we built: How do we build on the site, where it's sensitive to the curvature of the land, and how do we make it so it doesn't defeat the land? He just did that for us. And we had Cal Poly students who worked on it. A whole senior class helped us with our dream, just thinking about how to do it. And then again in about 1999, we decided we would start in earnest and get going on it. It took us almost five years to get the permits, and two years to build it. We started that process in earnest. We didn't just pick

away at it. We hired a company in Monterey, EMC Planning, and there were very difficult details with the county. We had to get an attorney. We got appealed by the coastal commission, at the very eleventh hour. But when we opened in 2004, it was supposed to be soft opening, just gradual: people will come, we thought, and we will sort of learn how to do this. But what happened is that it exploded. There was a pent-up demand for this. We had no idea. People were looking for it. We found clients so fast. Guests started coming through the internet immediately. Just looking up Big Sur and saying: there's something new, that's what I've been looking for. So we found our guest list immediately. We were busy, filling up right away. It was quite a shock to us.



AB: Who's this clientele that doesn't crave the Four Seasons treatment?

JH: Well, what's happening is that we have an influx of people who want to stay in something that's simpler than a hotel room. Something with low impact. On life, the earth, etc. The whole concept of "perching lightly on the edge," well, we want to push that point the furthest we can. For example, the Human Nest [see MJ piece for a description of a wooden sleep-nest sitting in a tree] is an art piece, but it's a place that people do stay in. It's an expression of a real nest, like what would it be like for a bird in a tree, where absolutely nothing in the tree is damaged or hurt. This is in fact made out of recycled trimmings of eucalyptus trees, so no trees were killed in the making of this nest! They actually came from Partington Ridge, where the big fire is right now. The idea is that you can be

comfortable in a nest, like a bird, and be in the tree, so when the wind is like this [i.e. rough], it's coming right through your nest, but you're making yourself warm, and people have fallen in love with that. It's not for everyone, but it's the expression of really living out on the edge, a really simple kind of structure, and being comfortable.

When people camp, that's what's interesting about it—they're in a beautiful setting, right next to the lake, right next to the ocean, right next to mountain or the stream, and they crawl into their tent and they get warm. It's a great feeling. Something like: 'I'm here in nature, but I'm alive and comfortable and everything is okay.' It's the same thing when they come to a place like this. You didn't bring a tent you with you, but you're definitely on the edge. The wind is blowing through, whatever's happening is right in front of you, but you go back into your cocoon and you're safe and warm. That concept actually came from a student from Cal Poly we were working with. He was doing his thesis on vista and refuge, and he mentioned that when people stay in places they're excited by, it's because there's great vista and great refuge. That's why penthouse suites in the city are way at the top. It's dangerous, looking: you look out and say, 'Wow, we're on top of the world,' but I can go back inside and be quiet and safe and warm. So that concept works, whether it's a nest or a tent or a yurt on the side of the stream; it's still the same thing, and I think we have that here. Some of those big wind storms in winter, where the rain is sideways, people stay dry and warm, and when they come into the lodge in the morning they're excited, like, 'Wow, we survived that. I can't believe it.' I'm kind of actually glad you got a little bit of wind; you get a sense of what that is. It's not the same as staying in a hotel room, where you don't even feel or sense it. You know there's something happening outside, beyond our control, it's happening.

AB: Someone told me you have "gone solar." Our power went out a little last night, but it was kind of fun. Is that because of the solar stuff? How do you turn a network of yurts like this into a solar powered mini-city?

JH: When we built this place, the technology wasn't there to put enough batteries in to run it solar. Part of the reason is modern regulations and rules. This whole place is sprinkled and has a fire pump, and you don't know when you're going to need that. So we had to generate our own power; we had to generate 60 kilowatts. So we got a really green generating system. It's not a piston engine, it's not a diesel generator; it's a propane powered micro-turbine. It's like a small jet engine. Propane comes in, burns super clean. And the heat exhausts at 600 to 650 degrees, so you funnel that into a heat exchanger, and it heats all the water, heats the floors in the lodge, the bathrooms, the pool, the Jacuzzi, the showers, and the kitchen. All that stuff is heated from the exhaust from the generators. The Monterey County Air Quality Management District waived all of our permit fees because we used that technology. We didn't even know that; that was just a gift at the end. They said: 'Well, we know the technology. It's expensive, but we're happy you're using it. It's good for the air quality, we're going to waive you fees as long as you have those machines.'

I went to the solar conference about three weeks ago in San Diego to see what we could use here, if not batteries. We found the technology that allowed us to just put solar panels right into the grid that we've created on site with our own generators. Those things scale down when you use less power. Even better than a diesel engine, they'll actually use half the power, half the propane. So we're going to be putting solar panels on here, bringing the propane use down. And we're going to be putting solar water heating panels. It's a bit like a science project. Everything we have here is like we've completely gone off the grid. So, septic, water, power, everything is on site. It's like a small city, you're right, so because of that, we're always figuring out new technologies and new things to do. One of the things we found out from the solar conference, and I already implemented it, was that we bought these variable frequency drive pumps, something like a spa pump and a pool pump; they run every time someone's awake. Anytime someone wants to use the pool, you have to be ready for filtration, chlorination. So what we did with that is I got one of these variable frequency drive pumps. They're really expensive, but they use up to a tenth of a power of a regular pool pump. A pool pump can use up to as much power as a house, on average, because it's all the time. It's like 2,000 watts all the time. These things scale down. They give you just enough to give you the flow you need and no more. We stuck one in, got it installed last week, and it's silent and they are low-energy use. Ditto the low-energy light bulbs, dimmers, to create the ambience we want, but they also use as little power as possible. We've actually cut our power consumption almost in half since we first opened. And we're still working. LED bulbs are the new thing; they're like a third of the power of a fluorescent bulb. They're 120 bucks a piece, we're putting them in places that really are on a lot and would pay off over time.

The other thing is that we were one of the first commercial places in Monterey County to use the saltwater generating water, and now it's part of the code. They really said no to us on that. Because they didn't have a precedent. Nobody was doing it. You put salt water into the pool, and it converts just enough chlorine to do its trick. Normally, in a commercial pool, you have to over-chlorinate. So you go to a hotel and you get in there, and you get out smelling like chlorine. This one, you don't have that. It makes it from the water, from the salt, it turns it into chlorine. But at first Monterey County said no, that's not part of our code, and we actually had to work with our pool guy and ourselves, to make a list of cities that do use it; the company that makes it had to submit some paperwork, too. And we said 'Let's make it part of your code.' You need to force yourself to get greener. You can't sit around and say we didn't do it.

I really brow-beat Monterey County and said I'm not going to accept that. It's an acceptable technology, you're not going to be lazy with me, and I got kind of bitter. I'm doing a lot of work, I'm trying to do it the right way, and you're going to work with me, or I'm going to make you work with me. Or you'll have to defend yourself in court; that's what it came down to. I didn't get threatening like that, but I was just saying that I'm going to do it and you're going to have to stop me. And in the end, what happened with our whole process with Monterey County was kind of neat. The director of planning had to come here for some kind of a

final deal, and he came during the middle of winter at night. He came in and we had gone through all these battles, and he wanted to talk business with me, it was supposed to be a light check, but I said before you do that, why don't you come into the lodge for a second and check out what's going on here. It was full of people, having dinner, having a good time, and he goes: 'Wow, they're really enjoying themselves.' He looked at some of the articles that have been written about us, and I go: 'What I want you to do is... you should go back to your people, back in your office, and tell them this was successful. The process was successful. Because in the end, don't you want you a place that the visiting public enjoys and gets good press and is good for Monterey County and everything else?' And he goes, 'Yeah, that's a good point, I never actually thought about that.' We need to celebrate the good ones. I'm sure there are plenty of ones that turn out bad and people are criticizing, but this one they're not criticizing, they're not saying this is a bad choice for the coastal commission or Monterey County, and that really has worked out well for us. We have a lot of good relationships now. Things like the salt-fluid generation: they adopted that, and that became a good plus for them. Believe it or not the yurt construction got us calls from people all over the country saying that they're having trouble with their planning commission, they don't have yurts on their books, they don't know to judge it. And I gave them advice about what happened with Monterey County. It's a feather in their cap that they at least went forward with it and let us do it. The way they did it was they basically said the yurt will have to live up to house standards.



AB: Is that why I didn't blow away last night in the wind aside from being of a considerable personal weight?

JH: Yes, the foundations are amazing. When you're building on a slope like this, you have to go down to solid rock; so some of those piers were 14 feet deep. As if it was a house, not a 1,100 pound yurt. So we got 18-inch, steel reinforced piers that go down 10 or 14 feet, in some cases, into the ground. This concept of point-loading: that's what these are. These yurts are point-loaded. It's not a slab wall. A lot of houses have a wall. Even on the side of the hill, they'll build a big concrete wall, and they'll have a house on that. If it's point-loaded, you have to have big beams that stay on points. The advantage of it on a hillside construction is that water and everything else flow over the surface, you don't try to damn it up, you don't put a slab on it. All the water, mud, anything else flows just right past it. There's huge advantages to building with piers and point-loads because you can build right on the slope without trying to flatten in, and you don't have to put the big walls in. Everything that's going to happen, let it happen underneath. The water runs right past it. This dry wind is a good thing right now, not for the fires, but it's good to dry the rain we have had. If the winter is good, we'll be alright.

AB: How'd you get into firefighting? This wasn't time-consuming and physical enough?

JH: When I moved to this community, I had been an executive at Mattel, and I was interested in what I could do for the community that would be most needed. They don't need a mayor, they don't need a political leader. But one of the things they needed was a volunteer fireman. I'm turning 50 in January, so I'm kind of old for that, but not for the brigade. I'm mid-range in the age of the brigade guys. And we've had along history of volunteer firefighters here in Big Sur. And the reason is that there's no professional firefighting here. The forest has a fire group that's north of us, but their main focus is protecting the forest. As far as structures and people's homes go, and people who drive their cars off the cliff and need to be rescued, accidents on the road and things like that, the brigade does all of that and trains just like a regular firefighting crew. So I joined a year ago. And in that year, I've been on two major fires. I was on a fire about two months after I started, and on this last fire, I spent probably eight 24 hour periods of time at peoples' homes, fighting fire, protecting their homes. I've been to multiple motorcycle accidents, car accidents, I went on a cliff rescue, where a guy fell off a cliff hiking, way off in the back country. Helicopter evacuations, all kinds of things, within that one year. It's been one of the most trying and rewarding things possible. We have these pagers, and I have them at my house or I carry them with me if I'm walking around. It could go off any time of the day. And every time it's different. The scariest one for me was getting this signal that said there's a man not-breathing. I'd been to first-responder class, and I knew you have four minutes before your brain starts dying. The guy's not breathing, and I'm sure the 911 person is giving advice to whomever's there, but when I got to the scene, even though I was still a rookie, I was the only firefighter there and the only person who knew what was going on, and that's a scary thing. But it's very rewarding to be able to help, and I love it.



AB: Were you one of those kids who always wanted to be a fireman?

JH: As a little kid, I never dreamed about being a fireman; that wasn't one of my things, but I'm doing it. I'm on the school board, and I work on government relations with different things that happen here in Big Sur, but it's been fun to be a part of the community, not just a business that draws from the community, but to give back, to devote time and money to good causes. They had a huge capital campaign recently, and they bought new fire equipment for everybody, brand new fire trucks, but they only have two water tankers, all in the north coast, and nothing down here [Treebones is kind of in the south part of Big Sur]. They had no money left in the fund for another. So I bought one, that white truck down there [points into the canyon parking lot]. That's the water tanker for the southwest. I bought it for the community and to use it for wildfires. That's part of what I want to do. Like in the Old West days, there's no formal government here. There's no infrastructure in Big Sur; it's a huge big piece of coast, but it's all just run by the people, different committees and organizations, like the volunteer fire brigade. And so you do what you have to do to be a part of that community. And people help you as well. I remember that I drove up to the community meeting in that fire truck, and they knew I was trying to help and do that, and just spontaneous applause came my way. People got out of their cars. And if we had a problem here I just know from the nature of people, not even because I bought the fire truck, that they would all show up here and do whatever they needed to do to help us. It's just the way it is.

AB: Who actually built this place? Who has the time and muscles and inclination to build things anymore if they don't work for a big company?

JH: When we decided to build this place, we vowed to the community that we would use only local talent to build it. It's a big economic piece for them. A lot of builders here, a lot of guys, have equipment. That's how they make their money, and they know how to build. So it's a shame. It would be easier to bring in a big construction company and have it just knocked out, but we hired a local contractor, a licensed contractor who's really good, and I asked him to hire all of his people from Big Sur, and he did. It took two years to do it, twice as long as it should have, but it was all local talent and they have a tremendous pride in the place. They built this place. So many that you would meet say, "Yeah, I worked there for three months, I did this or that on Treebones." So that's a good feeling. Their pictures are hanging on the wall over there in the lodge. It's fun to see that.

People that live here in Big Sur, well, their needs are very simple. So if they get paid 20 bucks an hour to build something for three months, they make more money in those three months than they would make in a year or two years. They really basically say: I got enough. I don't need to work for a while. They live off the land, and they live simply. So as a result, we had to continually hire new people, bring new people in. It was just part of it, we weren't mad at people, if they left. They just kept saying: 'Why would I keep working, stock piling more money, when I don't need it?' That's legitimate, I guess. We factored that into our whole process. We worked with the bank. The bank had to be flexible with us too, because I told them what we were doing. They wanted to push us to finish it in one year. When banks lend money, they don't want the construction to drag out; it's not worth anything to them until it's finished. You're paying interest only on the loan, and they can't sell the loan to a bigger bank until it's already built. So they were pushing me from the beginning. So it was supposed to be 18 months, it took 2 years, but they still hung with us.

AB: What's on tap for the next year in terms of weather? Mudslides? More fires?

JH: The worst case scenario, north of us where the Basin fire was, in the valley, is that there could be road closures and mudslides. Depends on the weather. Heavy rain? You're going to have some of that happening. Caltrans is super prepared. They've already hired extra equipment to stand by all winter, to keep that road open, we're going to try to keep that road open [Highway One]. That's the only artery through here. If it closes, everything in and out becomes hard. No matter what happens, we're always going to be accessible from the south. In the past, if we've had problems on Highway One, people still come to us by taking a little extra route. Coming from the south is not a problem. If the road did close, this is still a fun place to be. There's so much to hike around and do right around us, and we would have less people, so... The likelihood is that there will be mudslides and some problems in the valley. That's what everyone is preparing for.

Even my kids are training to be volunteers in that situation. Too young to be in the fire brigade, my two boys are, but they're taking certification training, and they have to study for it. Then you can go on the road and help people. They don't want untrained people running around trying to help. So they train them, then certify them; there's about 150 people in the community who've been trained on that. More than 10 percent of the community will be volunteer helpers. It's a special thing. When you're not living in a formal community where all that stuff is taken care of for you, everybody takes care of each other.



Henry Miller told a story of being in Big Sur, one winter, in his cabin. The road closed in both directions, and there was no going in and going out, and he hadn't prepared for it, and he watched his food supply diminish until there was nothing left. And he was sitting in his cabin one rainy night and he said, as bizarre as this can be, 'I can die here. Of starvation.' Then, a knock on the door, in the middle of torrential rain. He opens the door, and a bucket of potatoes is sitting there, right at his door as some stranger walks away. And he goes: 'Hold it, who are you?' And the guy goes: 'Oh, I just figured you're going to need these,' and he left. He wasn't there to socialize or anything else. He just left the potatoes. Henry Miller said that the thing you can say about the people of Big Sur is you might not see them for months or for even years, but when you need something, they sense it and they show up. That's what he learned about the people here, and that's exactly what they're like.