

Tourists trapped in Big Sur between Highway 1 closures

Kathe Tanner, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 3-29-11

Highway 1 between Cambria and Carmel has been an open-and-shut case recently because of landslides on top of the road and one underneath it.

From Thursday to Sunday, closures trapped people along a 40-mile stretch of the road between Bixby Bridge on the north and Limekiln Creek on the south, leaving them unable to get to work, school, doctor's appointments, shopping or, in the case of two tourists from Belgium, to catch a plane home.

The northern closure went into effect March 16 and won't get a temporary fix until April 16, Caltrans is estimating. Then, when tons of mud and rocks fell on the highway north of Nacimiento-Fergusson Road early Thursday, there was no way out.

The Big Sur highway "is a nice coastal highway, one of the prettiest we have ever seen," Belgian tourist Frederik Van Herterijck commented on Thursday. "But this trip is becoming a nightmare with a scenic view."

He and his wife, Shirine Van Herterijck, already had missed their flight to Belgium. He signed his posting "Two Belgian tourists, caught in the middle."

Contacted Friday, Frederik Van Herterijck said the couple had been driving from Santa Barbara to Monterey on Wednesday when, just 20 miles before their destination, he said, "We were told by a local that the road sank into the sea and that the only alternative road is to drive 100 miles back!"

It was already late in the day and "we didn't really look forward to drive all the way back on this road in the dark ... my wife being pregnant and sick from the road drive," Van Herterijck said. They stopped for the night at the first lodging they found, Glen Oaks motel just north of Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park.

Thursday morning, after "a good rest for my wife, we headed (south) ... only to be stopped after 22 miles by a sheriff (deputy) telling us that we were stuck, trapped in the middle, as the night before, a mudslide paved the road."

They waited at Lucia Lodge, where "the lodge was full with all people stranded ... waiting in the line to pass across the road. Many tourists and locals are stuck: some from Denmark, some from Germany, others from Switzerland."

Hours later, they were told "the road would not open, as it kept on raining. All people were told to find a place to stay. So we headed back to our motel." Glen Oaks had expected the Van Herterijcks to return, so their room was ready.

About 1 p.m. Friday, they heard a rumor the road would open at 5 p.m. for one hour. "Nothing is moving," he wrote in an email just after 5 p.m. "People are all standing in the line ... a queue of 2.5 miles all waiting to get out of here ... We hope we make it ... and that we are able to get somehow back to Belgium" soon.

They were in luck. Van Herterijck emailed again Saturday morning. "We have made it out yesterday evening and then drove 250 miles to San Francisco. We have been able to catch a flight back to Brussels at 8:30 today ... so all things settled eventually. God bless us."

Also breaking out of the Big Sur blockage during that brief opening Friday evening was Maggie Wilson, part of a party of 10 that had their spring break trip to Big Sur unexpectedly extended. The group, mostly 2009 alumni of Mission Prep in San Luis Obispo, had been camping at Fernwood, also just north of of Pfeiffer Big Sur.

Wilson, a student at UC Berkeley, said Fernwood staff moved the group twice on Thursday, once from riverside campsites to tent cabins farther from the rising waters, then to complimentary motel rooms.

On Friday, they waited at Lucia Lodge from noon to 5 p.m. Wilson said her car was 20th in line and the party's other vehicle was about 100 cars back, with many more behind them.

When the road was opened temporarily, "rock was still falling," she said. "People were hurrying us past. There were people standing there with shovels, monitoring the slide." It was, she said, "intense."

SLIDE NEAR GORDA WILL TAKE DAYS TO CLEAR

Highway 1 will remain closed for "at least a couple of days" about two miles south of Gorda at Alder Creek, Caltrans announced Monday afternoon.

A hillside slid down Sunday evening, completely covering the highway about 32 miles north of Cambria.

The latest slide came just after Caltrans had reopened Highway 1 at Limekiln Creek at 6 p.m. Sunday. That closure began early Thursday. Caltrans opened a lane around the slide briefly Friday evening and Sunday morning to let traffic in and out.

The road is also closed due to a 60-foot collapse of the highway north of Big Sur and south of Carmel; that collapse occurred on March 16. Temporary repairs costing \$2.5 million are expected to allow reopening of a lane of the highway there by April 16.