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THE INTEL

What Travelers Should Know About the West Coast Fires

From San Diego to Seattle, the latest on park closures and which businesses are open.

BY ARCHANA RAM
September 18, 2020

On September 9 in California, thousands of [Bay Area](#) residents woke to deep orange skies. Day looked like night; many said it felt like [the apocalypse](#). This was just one symptom of the Bear and Creek Fires that have collectively burned more than 500,000 acres across California, and have yet to reach 50 percent containment, at the time of writing.

But these blazes aren't isolated disasters. They're part of a series of fires that have been wreaking havoc in California since mid-August, stemming from lightning storms, suspected arson, and a series of accidents, all exacerbated by [climate change](#). As of September 15, a total of 28 major fires have burned more than 3.2 million acres of land in California, hitting areas like [Sonoma County](#), [Big Sur](#), [Los Angeles](#), and [San Diego](#).

Oregon and Washington are facing their own fires, which are ripping through tourist hubs like Ashland, Oregon, encroaching on [Portland's](#) suburbs, and forcing huge numbers of residents to evacuate. Even in places where the fires themselves aren't an immediate threat, air quality is: Portland's air is currently ranked the worst out of any major city in the world, according to [IQair.com](#), with [Seattle](#) at number two. Plumes of smoke have even migrated north to Canada's [Vancouver](#). (Other fires have since cropped up in neighboring states like Idaho.)



The fires have been devastating, not only to individuals and the environment, but also to specific natural areas, businesses, and infrastructure that are major sources of tourism in the states. Here, we break down how the fires on the west coast are affecting travel, the ways tourist-dependent businesses are coping, and what to do if you have an upcoming trip.

Parks and forests

Expectedly, the fires have taken a toll on state and national parks and forests, a point driven home by last month's haunting image of a fire **burning in the hollow of a redwood** in California's Big Basin Redwoods State Park. A dozen structures, including the ranger station and some campground facilities, were also destroyed, though the old-growth redwoods are resilient things; those in Big Basin were damaged but are still standing.

On September 6, rescuers airlifted more than 200 campers from Sierra National Forest as the Creek Fire roared through the area. Three days later, California temporarily closed all 18 of its national forests for the foreseeable future. Nearby **Yosemite National Park** is contending with hazardous air quality, and, as of press time, is closed along with Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. In Oregon, most state parks are open—Multnomah Falls and Crater Lake National Park are too—while areas by the Hood River region, like Angel's Rest Trailhead have been temporarily closed.

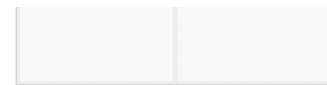


Smoke from the Creek Fire, visible at Yosemite National Park. Getty

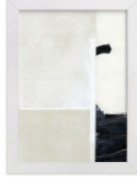

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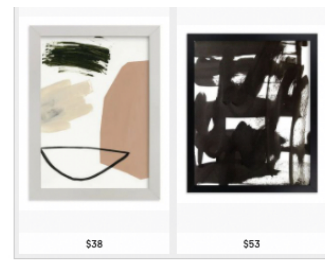
For four companies, the wildfires on the west coast are putting greater stress on a year already burdened by the coronavirus. Daniel Dietrich, who owns and operates the wildlife photography tour company **Point Reyes Safaris** had to stop tours in March when COVID-19 struck, resumed them briefly in mid-summer, then had to halt operations again last month when Point Reyes National Seashore, north of San Francisco, closed due to the Woodward Fire.

"Friends who guide and teach, everybody's pretty much at zero and starting over," he says. "I'm lucky that the fires didn't burn in the area I typically operate in, but it's been tough for sure—financially, emotionally. The fires are only a couple miles from my house. I was completely packed and under evacuation warning. The threat was always there."



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In Big Sur, the marine layer has pushed out smoke and ash from the Dolan Ridge Fire, which is currently at 40 percent containment. But popular sites like Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park and the Esalen Institute remain closed. If you're driving in from the south, note that a portion of Highway 1 is **currently closed** as a safety precaution against debris that may fall from the hills. Danger in the area could linger after the fires too. If the region gets heavy winter rains before vegetation can regrow, landslides are a potential threat.

Even in urban areas, the fires are creating smoke, and prompting road closures and temporary shutters. The L.A. Zoo closed due to poor air quality from the nearby Bobcat Fire, which is burning in Angeles National Forest and approaching the Mt. Wilson Observatory.

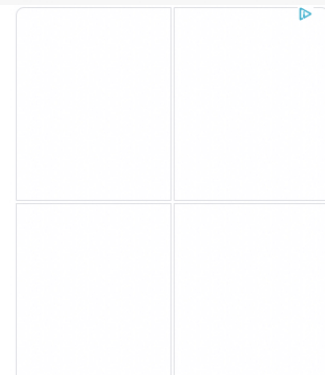
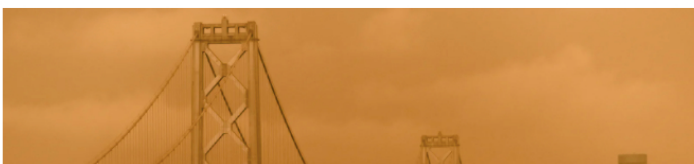
Restaurants, wineries, and other businesses

Some businesses that had previously switched to outdoor-only operations because of COVID-19 had opted to temporarily close due to air quality concerns when the fires began. In recent weeks, however, some food and drink spots in Seattle, San Francisco, and the L.A. area have cautiously re-opened. In Portland, a majority of businesses remain closed, including the farmers' markets, and city landmarks like **Powell's Books** and the **Japanese Garden**.

If you have a wine country trip in the works, conditions, hours, and closures vary. Washington's Walla Walla region has so far evaded fires, but air quality has been deemed **hazardous**. Many vineyards in Oregon's **Willamette Valley** are closed to the public. One winery further south, Simple Machine in Talent, Oregon, was completely razed.

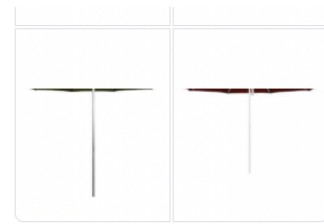
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California's Napa and Sonoma counties are now seeing some relief after the Wallbridge—now LNU Lightning Complex—Fire. "Wine country is very much open here," says Hollie Schulze, Director of Sales at **Donelan Family Winery** in Healdsburg. The vineyard chose to close for a couple weeks—"opening a \$150 bottle for a tasting in raining ash didn't seem like a great idea," she says—but they and other wineries in the area are back to booked-up appointment slots.





Smoke from California's wildfires in San Francisco. Getty



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What happens next?

It's too soon to tell how severe and long-lasting the impacts of these particular fires will be for some of the West Coast's most pristine natural lands. But what we do know is that, with fires like these a now-annual occurrence, **the acreage burned has been trending higher for years**. It's making many locals and business owners consider fires part of a new normal that they will have to live with.

"The fires are an unfortunate hiccup and didn't help those who were on the razor's edge, but businesses and travel regrow like nature," says Kirk Gafill, the owner of **Big Sur Bakery**. "People come back, and natural beauty generally isn't mitigated by fire except for a short window of time. We can see the end of this fire. I'm not wondering what November is going to look like in terms of the fires, but I don't know what it'll look like in terms of COVID. We're all just trying to do our best to adapt."

What if you have a trip planned?

Because the impact of the fires varies so wildly by state and area, travelers with an upcoming West Coast trip should track the impact on their destination in the time leading up to departure. Below is a list of up-to-date resources that will help evaluate whether or not you can visit as planned:

- [California Daily Wildfire Update](#)
- [California State Parks](#)
- [Oregon Department of Forestry](#)
- [Oregon State Parks](#)
- [Washington State Department of Natural Resources](#)
- [Washington State Parks](#)

In addition, consider reaching out to your accommodation or the specialist that helped book your trip.

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