

On The Road Of Destruction To The Thomas Fire



MARCUS YAM VIA GETTY IMAGES

LOS ANGELES — There is smoke everywhere.

It's Monday morning at 10 a.m., and I'm driving north up California's famously stunning coastline toward the Thomas fire, the largest and most uncontrolled of five massive wildfires that have brought devastation to Southern California for the past week. I can see the enormous gloom ahead from 50 miles away — brown smoke hovering over the southern edge of a fire that had consumed a staggering 230,000 acres so far.

I'm on my way to Ventura County, where the fire first began on Dec. 4 and from where it would eventually grow into the fifth largest in state history over the week that followed. Ventura is an iconic place, a once rugged beach town known for its citrus fruit farming and local surf spots, so often overshadowed by its big neighbor, Los Angeles.



WALLY SKALIJ VIA GETTY IMAGES

A man walks along a road as the Thomas fire leaves smoke in Ventura.

By the time I got there, a grey haze had once again settled over the county, and smoke filled the air. To the east, a massive fire was rapidly spreading, producing a thick brown smoke cloud that reached all the way north, to Santa Barbara County. Firefighters and firetrucks peppered the landscape, racing toward the still active sections of the blaze while other rigs drove further up the coast. A pizza delivery driver wore a dust mask to keep some of the smoke out of his lungs as he carried on with his day.

I made it to Ojai Valley by afternoon. Melted wires from burned telephone poles drooped low or lay tangled on the ground. New smoke from spot fires still burned on the side of the road of State Route 150. In the valley, the smoke smelled of campfires and asphalt, where areas had been blackened in the days before. I could feel the heat through my clothes where hot spots still burned or smoldered.



MATT FERNER / HUFFPOST

A burned-out structure and car in Southern California's Ojai Valley.

A town of 7,500 in the Topatopa Mountains, Ojai is world famous for its wine, nearby hiking trails, art galleries and new age shops. The fire had come dangerously close in the first days, but, for now, the small town had been spared from the worst of the blaze.

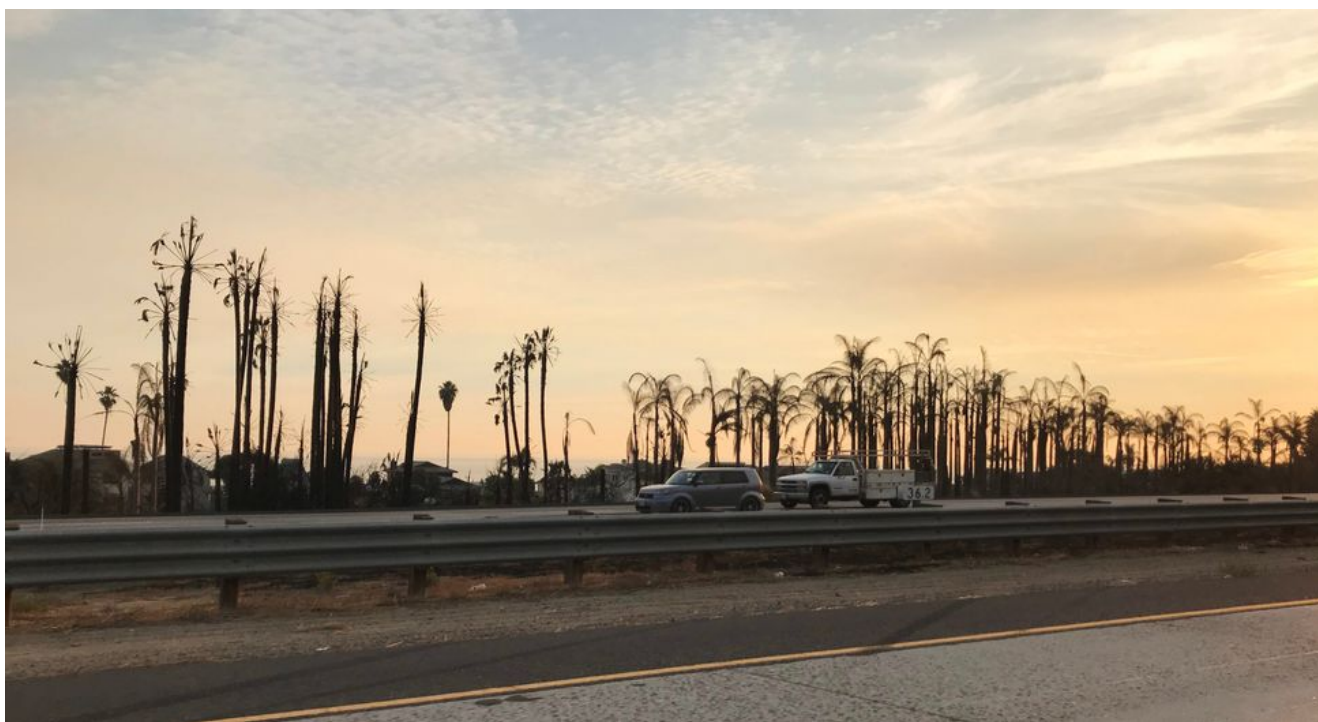
Now, three massive plumes of smoke surrounded the valley, growing larger by the minute. Dozens of smaller smoke trails caused by spot fires scattered across the landscape were an ominous sign. Who knew whether they would grow larger, too.

I stepped onto the embankment to take a photo of part of a ranch that had burned and collapsed, and I sunk into six inches of white ash. The path of destruction the fire had left in the area was dramatic and erratic. Some ranches were burned to the ground, leaving a stone chimney standing, a charred bathtub, and a burned out car with melted tires and windows. Others, often just directly adjacent, looked pristine — trees still green, horses and cows eating in their pens.

Further down the road, department of transportation officials chopped down a tree that looked like it was burning from the inside. Others mounted new telephone poles to replace the burned ones.

Firefighters were everywhere — on almost every street, at the restaurant, the gas station — loading up their trucks for the next fight. More than 8,000 are currently deployed fighting fires in Southern California. Here in Ojai, they had come from counties up and down the coast. Signs praising the firefighters' work were everywhere in the valley. "You kick ash," one read, "We love our firefighters," another said.

Driving further north, an even thicker layer of haze surrounded the car. The cloud stretched out from the growing fire in the Santa Ynez Mountains to U.S. 101, onto the valleys, onto the quaint towns that coastal California is known for. Through the haze, dozens of palm trees still stood at a tree farm on the shoreline at Faria Beach — long a landmark among commuters along the stretch — but their leaves were burned off, their trunks blackened and scorched.



MATT FERNER / HUFFPOST

Burned palm trees at a tree farm on the shoreline at Faria Beach.

This scene marked the entrance to an area where the fires were still very much active. Dead and dying cactus were left on the scorched hillsides next to U.S. 101, shriveled and brown. Each mile further north, the smoke-filled skies became darker. Whatever sunlight could penetrate through was a deep orange and red — as if the sun was setting, all day long.

The dense smoke enveloped the iconic beaches — Mussel Shoals, Rincon Point, Carpinteria State Beach — and drifted out over the ocean for what looked like

miles. Surfers — ever dedicated and undeterred — peppered the large swells that rolled in, filling their lungs with smoke.



MARK RALSTON VIA GETTY IMAGES

A family wears masks as they walk through the smoke-filled streets after the Thomas fire swept through Ventura County.

In the sleepy beach communities of Carpinteria, Summerland and Montecito, chunks of ash — former trees, homes, photographs, memories — rained down. The overhanging smoke was denser, blacker than in the south. For some locals here, dust masks weren't enough, with many wearing respirator masks instead. A thin layer of white ash lined the streets and sidewalks in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Parked on a ridge across the valley in Summerland in the late afternoon, I watched the flames leaping high off of the Santa Ynez Mountains, devouring dry trees and plants. Smoke poured off of the hillsides. After 30 minutes, my shoulders and head were coated with ash. My eyes stung as the ash drifted into them.



GENE BLEVINS / REUTERS

As night set in, locals gathered on hillsides, sat on top of their cars or rooftops, and watched as the fire continued to creep closer and devastate the land they call home. Planes and helicopters dropped red fire retardant to slow the blaze.

The sun finally set. The sky turned orange, then dark red, then black, and then orange again — but not from sunlight. It was fire light, which lit up the coast for miles.



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