

Recreational land, air, and water activities abound in Big Bear, California

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Alpine Playground

California's Big Bear offers high-altitude fun

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT

As you begin ascending scenic California Highway 38, you're officially on Big Bear time. It's hard to believe you're in Southern California, just 100 miles northeast of Los Angeles. The pace is slower in this mountain resort community, and the smog-free air smells sweet. Ringed by the San Bernardino National Forest, the elevation ranges from 6,750 to 9,000 feet. With four distinct seasons — and 300 days of sunshine a year — Big Bear is a popular multigenerational getaway. Recreational opportunities on land, on water, and in the air abound in this alpine playground.

All-Age, All-Season Adventures

Taking an off-road adventure on an all-terrain vehicle tour is the perfect way to explore Big Bear's rugged forest. Averaging about three hours, many 4x4 tours include driving by Holcomb Valley, a picturesque meadow where the opening shots of *Bonanza* were filmed. Guides are happy to share the region's prospecting, logging, and ranching history with visitors.

Mountain bikers can ride miles of trails, including those at Snow Summit, one of the town's two ski resorts. Once snow falls, typically December to February, there are extensive trails for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. In fact, Olympic gold medalist Shaun White learned to snowboard in Big Bear. Hikers can traverse the Pacific Crest Trail, and there's zip-lining for adrenaline junkies.

Big Bear Lake is the site for many summer aquatic activities. Visitors can rent WaveRunners and JetSkis for high-speed fun, or kayaks, canoes, and pontoon boats for a more leisurely exploration of the lake's coves and inlets. There's also stand-up paddleboarding, parasailing, and fishing. For younger children, Meadow Park Swim

Beach offers swimming in protected waters, and adjacent barbecue grills make it a great place to picnic.

For a stunning bird's-eye view of the area, take flight on an exhilarating, and surprisingly affordable, helicopter tour. Back on land, stroll Big Bear Lake Village's streets lined with shops and restaurants. In winter, the Village's sidewalks have heaters, and newly installed fire pits are lit on chilly evenings. For opportunities to interact with the town's friendly residents, take the Urban Adventure Quest, a three-hour smartphone sightseeing scavenger tour that blends elements of *The Amazing Race* with local history.

For those passionate about wildlife, the Big Bear Alpine Zoo serves as a temporary safe haven for animals unable to survive on their own. Ninety percent are rehabilitated and released back into their native environment. Currently, a pair of Himalayan snow leopards is the main attraction.

When it comes to food, mom-and-pop eateries dominate Big Bear. Made-to-order omelets are football-sized and the pancakes overhang the plate at Grizzly Manor Tavern, aka "The Griz." It's the kind of place where the cook greets everyone who enters, and diners help themselves to more coffee and pour a cup for fellow patrons.

SUZANNE WRIGHT is a Cave Creek-based writer who has written more than 450 articles for publications such as *American Way*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *USA Today*.

If You Go

Big Bear is less than five and a half hours by car from Phoenix; the nearest airport is Ontario, California. The family- and pet-friendly community rarely reaches 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Find out more at bigbear.com.