



THE OVERSIZED CHARM
of
Big Bear

CALIFORNIA

Writer Suzanne Wright

I first heard about Big Bear Lake, California, from a fellow Cave Creek resident who takes his kids and grandkids there during the summer to escape the Arizona heat. But Big Bear is also a fine destination in winter. When enrobed in white, the main village takes on enchanted alpine warmth as downtown fire pits are lit at dusk, glowing orange.

Big Bear may be known as Southern California's playground, but it looks and feels nothing like Los Angeles or San Diego. As part of the San Bernardino National Forest, Big Bear is situated at nearly 7,000 feet in elevation, with a population of just over 6,000, giving it the familiar, laid-back vibe of mountain towns that stud the West. In fact, locals say once you head "up the hill," you're officially on "Big Bear time." Celebrities who are rumored to have digs here include Mike Judge of "Beavis & Butt-head" fame, Kevin Costner and Courtney Cox.

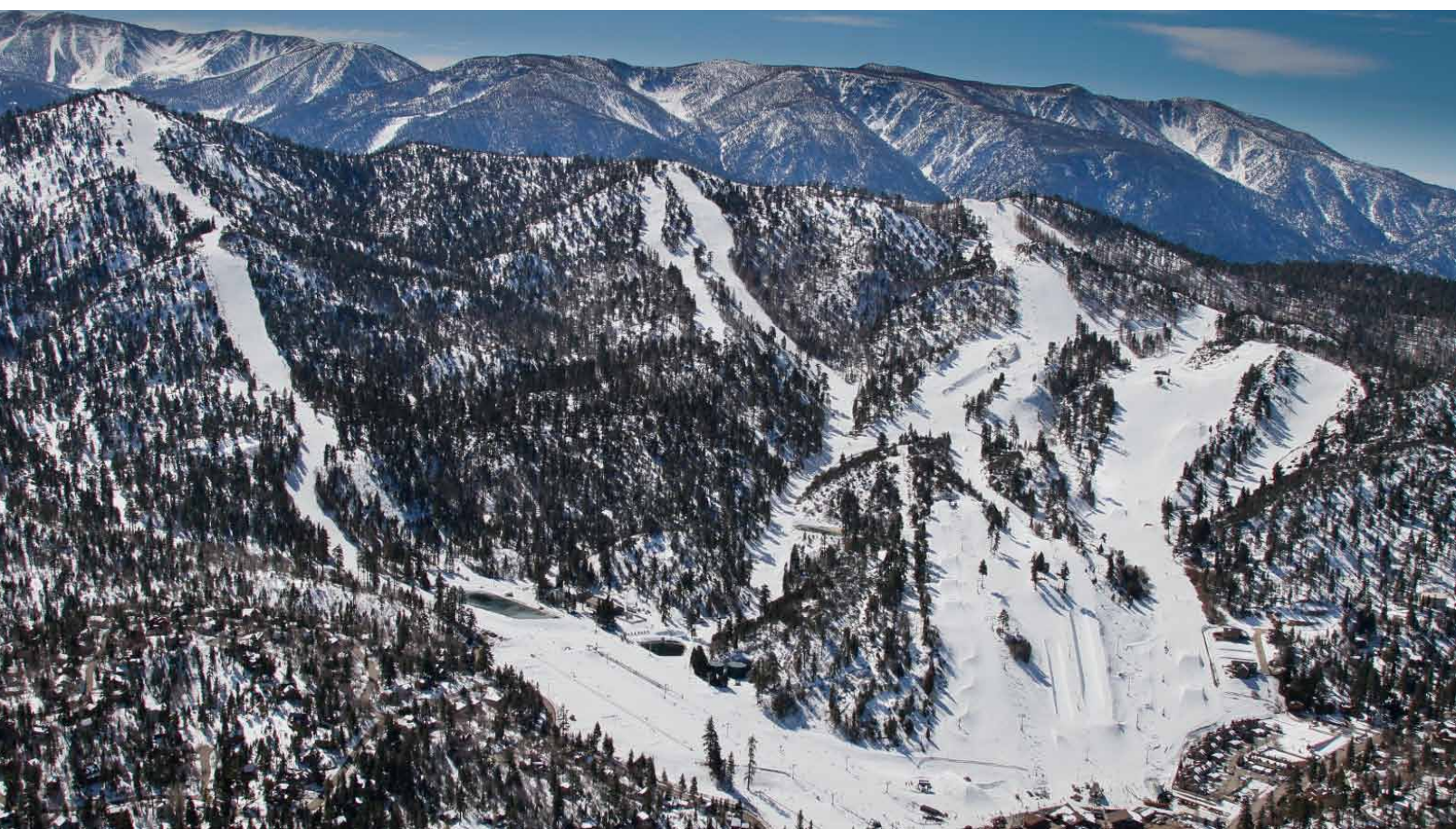
Going back down the hill into the population crush of Redlands or Ontario is a trip the locals put off for as long as possible, and it's easy to see why. In any season, Big Bear is a family-friendly outdoor destination without the crowds. There's no shortage of activities, including ziplining, jet skiing, horseback riding, Segway touring, golfing, fishing, hiking, picnicking and pontooning. Come winter, in addition to downhill skiing, there's cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, a scenic chairlift at Snow Summit, snowboarding at Bear Mountain and an alpine slide.

I started my visit by taking to the skies to get a lay of the land. The bright yellow Helicopter Big Bear takes sightseers on an airborne adventure with stunning views. Captain Roy Harding pilots surprisingly affordable rides of 11 minutes (not long enough!) to 45 minutes (it flies by!) from the city's small airport.

Back on terra firma, participating in the Urban Adventure Quest is another great way to explore. All you need is a smartphone; you play at your own pace, answering questions as you cover the downtown area on foot.

The friendly locals make it a lot of fun, like the 19-year-old who had headphones on but popped them off to ask, "Can I help you find something?" I'd been studying the architecture on the block, trying to locate a particular landmark. He peered at the clue on my cell. Then he signaled to his mom and sister, who were down the street. We strolled a couple of blocks until we solved the puzzle.

On the first day I was in Big Bear Village, I met Richard Millener, owner of Old Tyme Photos. He's hard to miss with a long gray mustache and beard, dressed in what appears to be the garb of a prospector from the late 1800s. "Richard spotting" became a highlight of my day, and I'd often see him multiple times in different locations, each of us waving hello. Small towns — even when they cater to tourists — always seem to have a few of these amiable characters.



Another longtime fixture in the community is Doug Walton, who owns Big Bear Off-Road Adventures. After buckling into his 4WD Pinzgauer, a Swiss army truck, we headed off on a three-hour tour to explore the canyons, streams, meadows and historic sites of the San Bernardino Mountains.

Doug is a real storyteller and a passionate steward of the land, stopping several times to hop out and pick up litter carelessly left behind. It was a wooly ride as we climbed the rugged terrain on forest service roads; at some points the vehicle was nearly vertical. He often stopped, cut off the engine and pointed out the local vegetation, including Jeffrey pine (the bark smells like butterscotch!), white fir, California black oak and poplar, along with historic gold mining camps.

At one point, we intersected with the Pacific Crest Trail, widely popularized in the bestselling book and blockbuster movie, "Wild," by Cheryl Strayed. We stopped to overlook a seemingly endless desert terrain with views to Barstow and Las Vegas in the far distance. By late afternoon, we entered a beautiful meadow, the sun glinting gold off the short grass. This was Holcomb Valley, also known as "Hollywood's backlot," where the TV show "Bonanza" was filmed.

For a small town, there's no shortage of great restaurants, including two brewpubs; the new 572 Social Kitchen and Lounge with its trendy, big city cocktail list; and Royal Thai Cafe, where sunny owner Teknath "Bodha" Niraula greets every

guest personally and makes menu suggestions. You'll definitely want to grab a sandwich on freshly baked bread at Amagela's Sandwich and Bagel House or take the chill off with a caramel spiced latte from The Copper Q. Topping the list is the Grizzly Manor Cafe for breakfast. Cooks greet the regulars and anyone who gets up to pour their own coffee circles the room filling other diners' cups. The football-sized omelets and pancakes lap the plate, so you can skip lunch.

On my final day, I swung by Walgreen's and witnessed a middle-aged male clerk and a 20-something, tattooed guy having an easy, if unlikely, conversation about fishing. The customers in line were not impatient. Instead, they added their own thoughts on best locales and what was biting. Within a few minutes, several were making plans to hit the lake later that week.

On my way out of town, I managed one more Richard sighting. It's always hard to leave vacation and return to real life, but it seemed my visit to Big Bear was complete as I headed down the hill and back to Arizona.


Big Bear is less than five and a half hours by car from Phoenix; the nearest airport is Ontario, California. Big Bear Cool Cabins rents condominiums and homes of all sizes. Mine was near the Stanfield Marsh boardwalk, lovely for a sunset stroll, and had a hot tub for stargazing under clear skies.

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