

If by now you've had enough of the season's heat, or you simply need an easy vacation, consider a trip to Big Bear. The air's about 20 degrees cooler and it's only about 2½ hours away. The tree-lined mountains are magnificent scenery and the lake is beautiful. You'll get to breathe deeply and truly relax. You can't help but feel rejuvenated up there and the variety of activities may surprise you.

With 22 miles of shoreline and a south side that expands into the mountains, there are plenty of accommodations to choose from. We opted for the charming Adirondack-inspired, full service hotel, the Northwoods Resort, conveniently located close to the lake and most of what we planned to do.

Big Bear was larger than we expected. We realized that because being great for both summer and winter sports, the homes and guest accommodations are not just around the lake but extend to the feet of the mountains.



Big Bear Lake

A PERFECT BREAK

BY DEBORAH SHADOVITZ WITH MUNA DERIANE

WAKEBOARDING WITH DESIGNATED WAKE SPORTS

Planning to water-ski, we contacted Desi Hauer, owner of Designated Wake Sports, and although he rents water skis, he suggested we discover wakeboarding — a cross between water skiing, surfing, and skateboarding.

Once on the competition-class boat, we asked Desi to ride first, so we could watch. Chris, his childhood friend, turned co-instructor, drove. Desi reclined in the water, board under his feet, and grabbed the tow handle. The boat started and pulled him up. I noticed it was much like water-skiing. Desi did flips and spins like a pro.

Then the guys showed us what to do, explaining exactly what to expect, demonstrating with the

towrope fastened atop the boat. Then, sizing us up and asking whether we'd lead with our right foot or left, Desi adjusted the spacing and angle of our boots, which were fastened to our boards. Stepping on the boat's deck, I slipped into the boots. Feet secured to the board, I felt like a plastic army man. It was uncomfortable and scary. But it was also time to get into the water.

Tow handle in hand, Chris on the throttle, I let the instructions fall out of my mind, retaining their gist. I reclined in the water, bent my knees, let the souls of my feet rise in front of me, clenched the tow handle, breathed deeply, said a prayer, then said "ready."

The boat started. The rope tightened and I felt it pulling me.

Forward... up... was I really doing this? Too much pull... ouch... let go! Down into the water. Muna held up the red flag to signal that a person was in the water as Chris circled back. I felt I hadn't gotten past a squat, but Desi declared it a great start. We discussed it. Time to try again. And this time... yes! I got up! For some brief shining moments I was wakeboarding. Until, I'm told, I tried to point my foot... Desi explained that I should have ridden for a while to get more used to the stance before turning. On my third try, which went pretty much the same, I realized how physical wakeboarding is. After my fourth, I was ready for a break, which according to the guys, is typical.

I'd like to dazzle you with stories of how we spent the next hour

riding with wind romantically blowing our hair, but the truth is that this must wait until next time. However, as we are both over 40 and not particularly athletic, that both of us stood up several times was an incredible feeling to take away from this weekend getaway. We learned firsthand that with a little instruction from Designated Wake Sports, even novices can walk away with a true wakeboarding experience.

WANT TO TRY WAKEBOARDING?

Designated Wake Sports operates out of Pleasure Point Marina. Best value is the half-day (four hours) with five riders. They also offer other tow-behind rides. Call to inquire or book, even day-of, as the office isn't staffed.

Designated Wake Sports, 603 Landlock Landing Rd., 909-556-3345 Designated-WakeSports.com



BIG BEAR OFF-ROAD ADVENTURES

Picked up at our hotel, we climbed into an old Swiss army truck for a ride up the dusty mountain, over some challenging roads and into the old mining areas. This 2½ hour Big Bear Off-Road Adventures tour let us really get to know the Big Bear Mountains. Our guide, Jim, regaled us with many stories of Big Bear's history. We learned about its gold rush of the 1860/70s (California's second largest), the once-existing mining town of Belleville, which nearly became county seat, and saw current-day gold stakes. Minus the tram, parts of this trip felt like we were on the Universal Studios Backlot Tour learning how this scenic and pristine land served as the backdrop to numerous well-known movies and television shows. I could almost hear the theme song to Bonanza as I imagined the Cartwrights heading down the mountainside to the Ponderosa when shown that shot's location. Eventually, we found ourselves looking down not at the lake, but at the desert. In the distance we saw where other mining — for calcium carbonate — still goes on.

TAKING A LAND TOUR

Big Bear Off-Road Adventures offers several tours, 909-585-1036
OffRoadAdventure.com



LAKE TOUR ON MISS LIBERTY PADDLEWHEEL TOUR BOAT

Having toured the mountains and given all of our muscles a workout, we headed to Pine Knot Marina for a gentle 1½ hour tour on the Miss Liberty Paddlewheel Tour Boat. Whether peering through the large windows inside the boat or sitting outside on the upper deck, you'll find this relaxing. We learned some stories about the lake, the people, and recent history of the area. It's an easy way to get out on the lake.

INTERESTED?

The tour runs at 2 p.m. daily. Call to learn of other tour times and of Twilight Cruises with music and appetizers. Ask for Captain Matt to arrange a special group package.
Miss Liberty Paddlewheel Tour Boat
 400 Pine Knot Avenue, 909-866-8129



KAYAKING, PADDLE BOATING, MOTORING AND MORE

The beautiful lake continued to call to us, so we rented some boats at Pleasure Point Marina. The marina is on Metcalf Bay in a 5 mph zone, making it a nice place to rent from, enabling people to get the feel of their boats, then venture out.

We played around in the battery-powered water cannon boats a bit and imagined families enjoying water fights in them. We also took a spin in canopied pedal boats, which are great for leisurely hanging out on the water. Then we tried single kayaks and fell in love with kayaking — enjoying the quiet, hearing only the sound of our oars pull the water as we paddled across the lake, exploring.

Finally, we couldn't resist the pontoon boat. After an operation lesson, we were off toward the lake's fast section. We'd been around the lake several times, from the water and the road, but it was a whole new joy to be zipping around on our own whims.

WANT TO GO BOATING?

Kayaks come in single or double and are easy to use. Pontoon boats vary by size accommodating 4-12 people and the longer you rent it for, the better the deal. Split amongst a group of people, they're pretty much the same per person cost as a man-powered boat. Heather and the crew are at the marina 7 a.m. - 7 p.m. to answer questions or rent you a boat.
Pleasure Point Marina, 603 Landlock Landing Rd, 909-866-2455, PleasurePointBBL.com

WATER SLIDE, ALPINE SLIDE, GOCARTS AND MORE

Big Bear's Magic Mountain is fun for all ages. This moderately sized amusement park will keep you and your entire family entertained.

We both find water slides alluring, but not the long lines at large water parks, so we appreciated getting our fix here on the Alpine Water Slide.

Also here, is the quarter-mile Alpine Slide, pretty much a bobsled, but you ride a wheeled dolly down the long, winding track. When was the last time you went speeding downhill, hugging banked curves, simply enjoying speed without worry of crashing?

Speaking of speed without crashing, we had a blast speeding around on the 5.5 horsepower Go-Cart rides. The Go-Carts are a fun driving experience for children of course, but I think Muna and I had just as much fun on them. As we sped around we noticed a family we'd met earlier was there too, enjoying the 18-hole miniature golf course and the small arcade.

WANNA RIDE?

The hours vary by season and there are several pricing plans, so visit their site info.
Magic Mountain, 800 Wildrose Lane,
 909-866-4626
AlpineSlideBigBear.com





EXCELLENT THEATER

Little did we know that in a town we considered a resort or ski town, we'd find a thriving full-time community and a serious theater group brimming with professional talent that produces off-Broadway, nearly Broadway, quality plays replete with fabulous costumes and continually changing sets. One member of the Community Arts Theater Society (CATS) actually came from Broadway, another from professional LA theater.

As impressed as we were with the Wizard of Oz production itself, the sense of commitment to this community — even from those who only live in Big Bear half-year or have recently moved there — was equally impressive and inspiring.

If you can get to Big Bear during a show's run, it's worth the trip or is a perfect way to top off your active day.

Community Arts Theater Society (CATS)
(909) 585-5505, BigBearTheater.org



SCENIC SKY CHAIR AND MOUNTAIN BIKING AT SNOW SUMMIT

Outside of ski season, the Snow Summit ski lift slows down to become a 15-minute scenic ride enabling you to get off at the top to enjoy a casual meal and stunning views. We were surprised to see mountain bikes, but learned that when there's no snow this is a mountain biker's paradise. There are more trails than you can ride in one day and many outstanding single-track trails. We saw entire families, some with young children, on bikes. Riders start out on one of the main US Forest Service trails that traverse the mountainside, then branch to other roads that lead in many directions. Asking if people brought their own bikes, we learned there are rentals and were told a great place to rent well maintained bikes is Bear Valley Bikes.

WANT TO RIDE?

Lift hours are 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Snow Summit, 880 Summit Blvd., 909-866-5766
BigBearMountainResorts.com



OTHER THINGS TO DO

There's much more to do in Big Bear. Moonridge Animal Park is a unique sanctuary that takes in orphaned or injured animals and is home to over 89 species. There's also the Big Bear Historical Museum, horseback riding, guided mountain biking, hiking, fishing, parasailing, a solar observatory, and even more.

You can easily visit as a day trip. But with so much to do, and with hotel rates so reasonable, you'll want to stay at least a couple of days. However long your visit to Big Bear, you'll feel better for it. Learn more at BigBear.com.

We stayed at Northwoods Resort, a 4-story hotel and beautiful conference center with onsite restaurant, heated pool and Jacuzzi, ample parking, and friendly staff. Our pool-facing room had double beds with benches at the foot of each, chairs, a small refrigerator and coffee maker, a separate bathroom area, a patio and plenty of space. (Some have fireplaces.) There are also video games and immediately accessible free wi-fi. Stillwells, the restaurant, has an upscale menu and is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.



It's a short walk (.1 mile) to the popular strip of shops and eateries where we had great burgers at Desi's In The Village. (Yes, Desi, our wakeboarding instructor.) Pine Knot Marina is a nice .4 mile walk (east), the slides are just .6 miles (west), and Pleasure Point Marina is 2 miles (west).

Northwoods Resort struck us as a great pace to book a large family gathering, wedding or business event.

NORTHWOODS RESORT

40650 Village Drive, Big Bear Lake, CA 92315, 909-866-3121, NorthwoodsResort.com

DESI'S IN THE VILLAGE

40766 Village Drive, Big Bear Lake, CA 92315, 909-866-3374