

Flying into Big Bear Lake: A High Altitude Adventure

STEVE ELLS gives a pirep on his recent trip to Big Bear City Airport (L35) and the adventures to be found in the surrounding area.

Why fly to Big Bear Lake? Well, how about clean fresh mountain air, a good deal on Avgas and interesting landing and takeoff challenges? I benefited from all this when I was invited to fly into Big Bear City Airport (L35) in late October.

Before my trip, I studied the takeoff and landing challenges, aided by the very informative website at bigbearcityairport.com, which gave me lots of ideas about operating into and out of L35.

I calculated my load, and important variables such as predicted outside air temperatures, runway length and percent power the 180-horsepower Lycoming O-360 in my aircraft would deliver to the prop at the Big Bear City Airport.

I also obtained winds aloft information from weather sites such as windy.com and aviationweather.gov before deciding I could safely fly from my home 200 miles west at Paso Robles Municipal Airport (KPRB), California, on Oct. 23, 2019.

I'm glad the weather was good, and the flight went off as planned, because my visit to Big Bear City was delightful.

Planning stages

When I'm flying a route I fly often, such as the 120 nm trip up to a ranch strip near my sister and brother-in-law's home, I depend on information on my FlyQ electronic flight bag (EFB) from Seattle Avionics to get frequencies, be sure I steer clear of military operating areas

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(MOAs) and stay up with temporary flight restrictions (TFRs).

But if I'm planning to take a trip to either a new airport or one I haven't visited lately, I do a lot of homework, often starting two or three days before I launch.

I had flown into the Big Bear City airport (L35) once before in 2007, but it was in a 310 hp Cirrus SR22 with a factory demo pilot. This time I was going in a 180 hp

aircraft, and with 130 fewer horsepower on tap, I knew I wouldn't be able to power my way out of any big mistakes.

I know that there are sophisticated flight simulator programs that are so capable that pilots can "pre-fly" into unfamiliar airports. (See "Indoor Flying: Garmin Emulators for PC-Based Home Flight Simulators" by Scott Kinney in the October 2019 issue of *Cessna Flyer*. —Ed.)

These programs help flyers "see" surrounding terrain and the airport environment as they "fly" into new destination airports. I don't use one of these programs, but I do use maps from topoquest.com and Google Earth. (Another great way to preview new airports is to view other pilots' approaches and departures on YouTube. Just search "landing Big Bear Lake" for several in-cockpit videos. —Ed.)

Check the message on the first page of the airport website: the airport is at 6,752 feet msl. L35 is the third-highest airport in California, beating out South Lake Tahoe airport by nearly 500 feet.

Scroll down the opening page to WhisperTrack, click on the name and

a drop-down menu will provide all the information pilots will ask about operating in and out of L35. One of the pages I used was “Images/Diagrams” which showed maps on how to avoid noise-sensitive areas and how to fly those routes from all sectors of the compass.

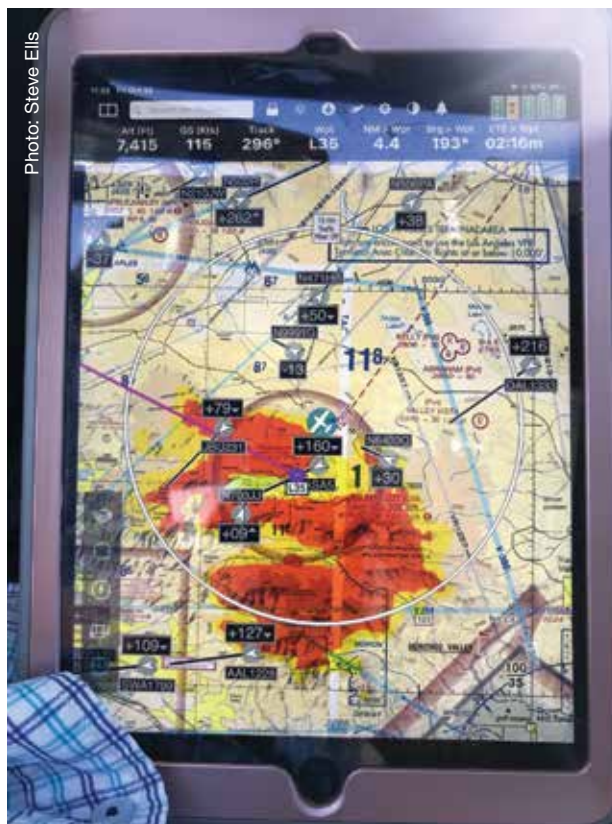
I also put the L35 Automatic Weather Observing System (AWOS) phone number (909-585-4033) on my phone and monitored it for wind direction and speed as well as temperature before and the day of my takeoff.

Approaching Big Bear

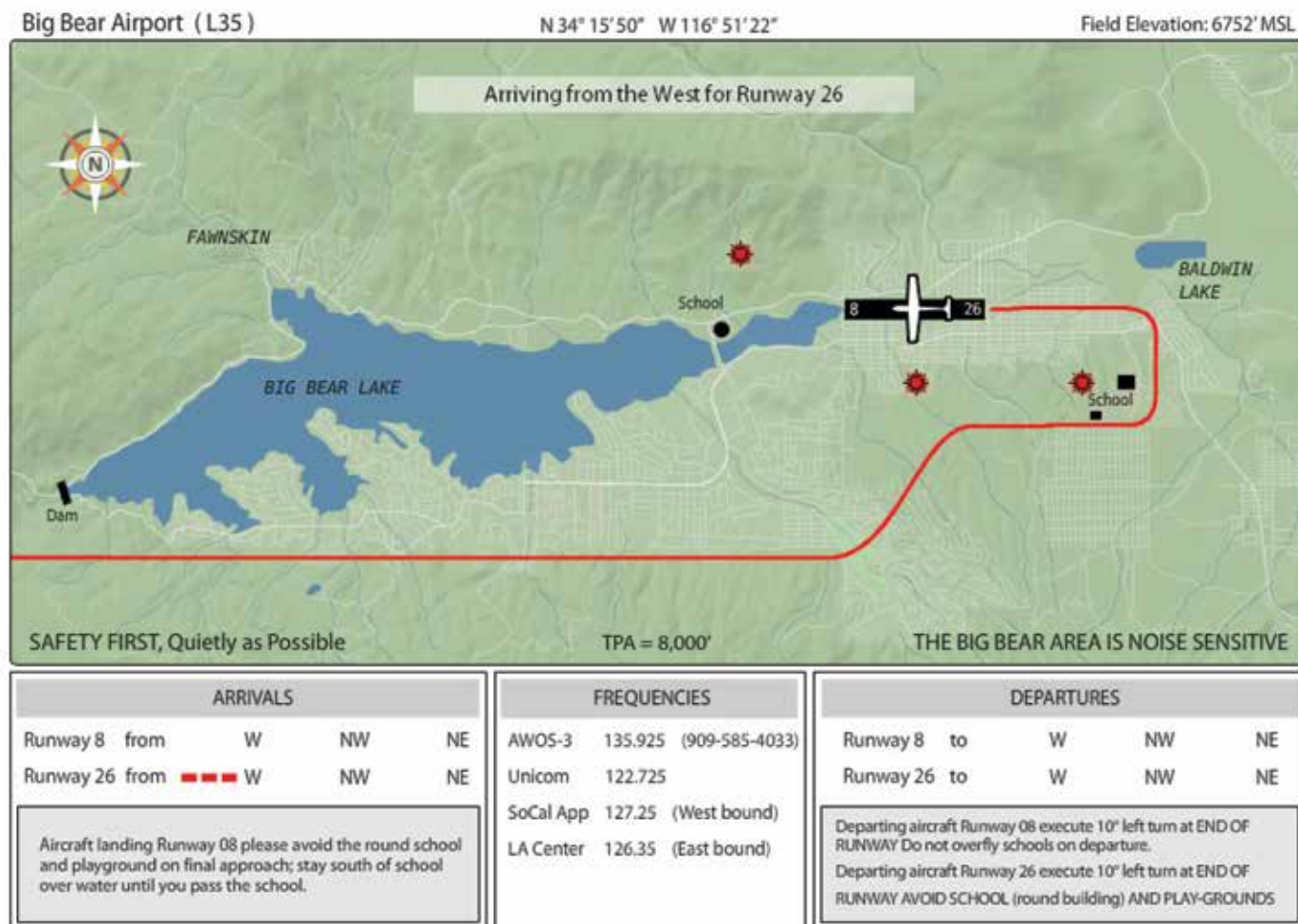
I chose to cross the mountains to the west of the lake at 9,800 feet msl. I was surprised when my GPS indicated I was less than 11 miles from the airport, but I did not yet have a visual of the airport.

Despite the blocking mountains, I was able to pick up the L35 AWOS frequency long before I had a visual on the airport. My view had been blocked by the high ridges west of Big Bear Lake. Once I cleared the ridge, the beauty of the Big Bear Lake Valley filled my windscreen.

I had direct-to L35 in my GPS, but I

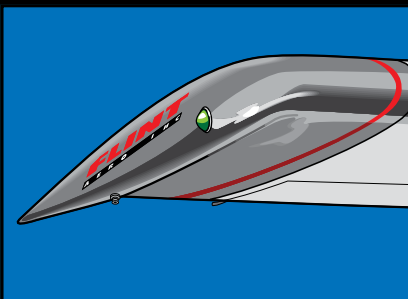


High terrain around Big Bear affects decisions on both arrival and departure.



The suggested arrival track for a landing on Runway 26.

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Photo Courtesy Big Bear



Flying into the valley in winter reveals a snowy, glittering landscape.

knew from the arrival diagrams that the arrival route was over the lake. Since the airport is at the east end of the lake, I was able to safely let down to pattern altitude after crossing between Butler Peak, at 8,535 feet msl and 9 miles from the airport and Crafts Peak at 8,354 feet msl.

Unlike most airports where the pattern is 1,000 feet above the airport, the pattern altitude at L35 is 1,248 feet above field elevation, at 8,000 feet msl.

The winds were almost calm that day, so I followed the "west arrival" route that routed me away from noise-sensitive schools before landing on Runway 26. There are landing and takeoff route pdfs that are easy to download from the WhisperTrack website.

Non-standard IFR procedures

There's a RNAV (GPS) LP or LNAV instrument approach to Runway 26. Minimum Descent Altitude (MDA) for the LP approach is 8,140 feet msl, or 1,388 feet above field elevation, with a minimum 1 1/4-mile visibility. The LNAV minima is 8,260 feet msl (1,508 feet agl) and 1 1/4. Circling minima are the same as LNAV minima. The approach is a 3.3-degree glideslope. For those who aren't yet instrument rated, this approach has a very high MDA (it's unusual when an

approach MDA is higher than pattern altitude) and a slightly steeper-than-normal glideslope. The procedure is only available for Category A and B aircraft.

There are very high mountains just south of the airport, so the missed approach procedure is a straight-ahead climb to 8,800 feet, then a climbing right turn to waypoint BRGET and hold at 11,000 feet.

As mentioned, Butler Peak is the highest terrain to the west. There are two peaks on the west and north of the airport that are higher than 8,350 feet msl.

Be sure your aircraft can meet minimum climb gradients for the missed approach. A climb to 11,000 feet in the summer can be a challenge for many piston singles.

There is also a GPS obstacle departure procedure, the OKAKO ONE departure, which uses Runway 8. It's only available to /E, /F and /G-equipped aircraft, and requires a minimum climb of 282 fpm to use standard departure minima.

Arrival at Big Bear

Due to tall trees east of the touchdown zone of Runway 26, the threshold is displaced to the west. The touchdown zone is at 6,752 feet msl. Don't drift left. There's a tower that is adjacent to and 40



Photo Courtesy Big Bear

Nottinghams Tavern in The Village.

feet higher than the touchdown zone.

Even with a displaced threshold, the useable runway is over a mile long—5,850 feet to be exact—and adequately wide at 75 feet.

Once I was down and off the runway, I taxied up to get the least expensive Avgas in the area. I filled up, unloaded the airplane and dragged my roller bag to the terminal building where I met Eddie Kirsch, the Director of Marketing for Visit Big Bear (BigBear.com), and my host for my visit.

I joined Kirsch at the Barnstorm Restaurant in the airport terminal building for coffee and a tasty lunch. The Barnstorm is a popular destination for local pilots; its good reputation is well-deserved.

After a discussion over lunch (freshly made egg salad for my order!) about hiking, boating and sightseeing adventures in and around the Big Bear Lake Area, it sounded like there was an activity to fulfill every visitor's yearnings.

Kirsch took me to The Lodge at Big Bear Lake, a 3.5-star resort with free parking, comfy rooms, an outdoor hot

tub, a swimming pool and Stillwell's Restaurant, where I enjoyed breakfast later in my visit.

At the Enterprise desk in the resort lobby, I rented a Jeep Wrangler to take on the unimproved roads to attractions in the area, then unpacked.

The first thing on my list was a good walk a few blocks to the new Visitor Center, then across the street to check around The Village, home to a variety of restaurants that offer fare ranging from

Nepalese and Indian at the Himalayan restaurant to freshly baked bagels at Amangela's sandwich and bagel shop, and most everything in between.

I was scheduled to go out on the lake in a self-driven pontoon boat the next day, but because of brisk winds, Jake, lead man at the Pine Knot Marina—"Where the Village meets the Lake"—and I decided to save that for another day.

That evening I enjoyed a very tasty and well-prepared dinner of chicken piccata, roasted Brussels sprouts and steamed baby carrots at Nottinghams Tavern in The Village.

*Once I cleared the ridge,
the beauty of the
Big Bear Lake Valley
filled my windscreen.*

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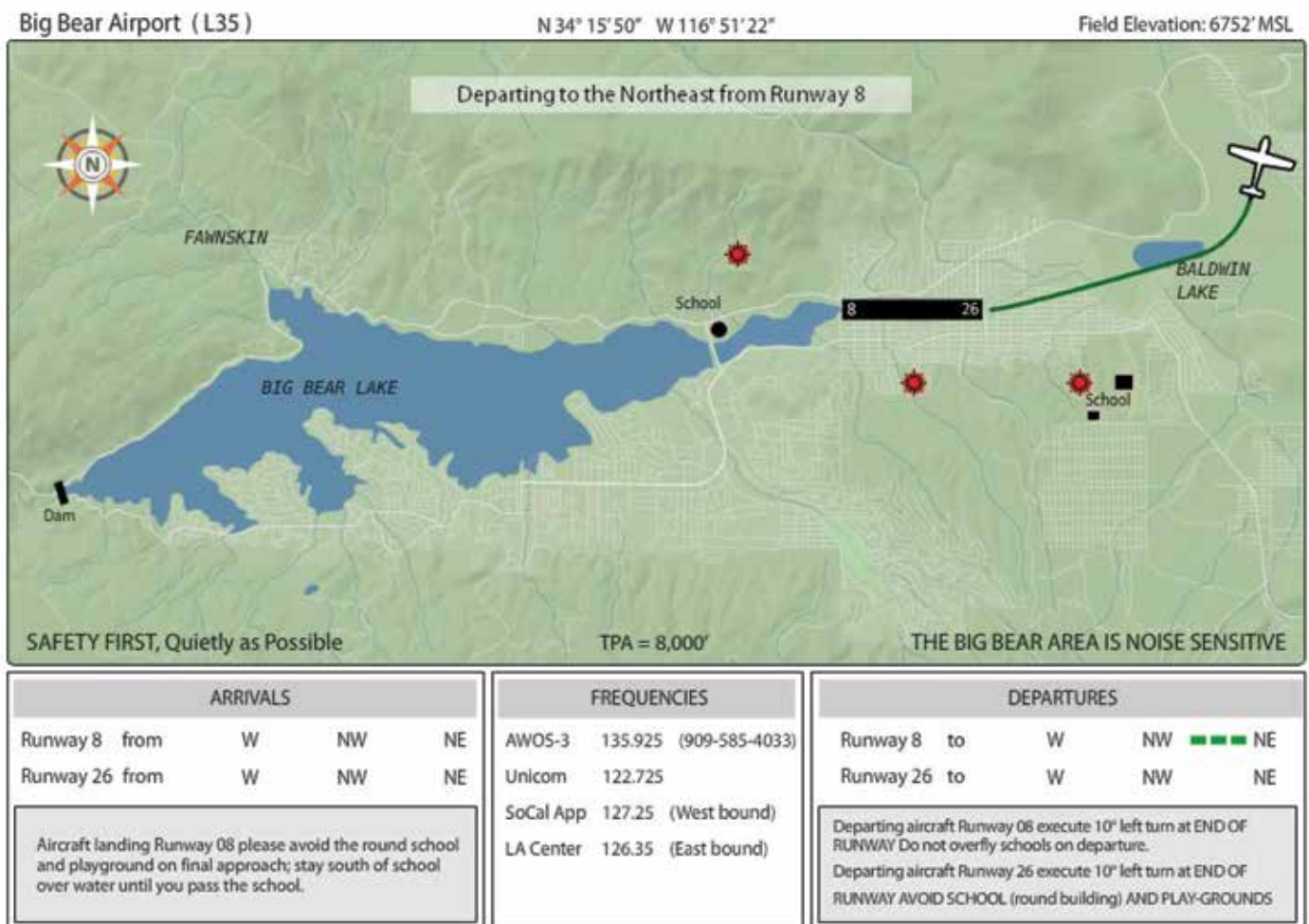


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Photo: Renee Strouse

The approach to Runway 26 at Big Bear City Airport.



Noise abatement procedure for departing Runway 8 to the northeast.

Departing for home

On Friday, after a much-too-short visit, it was time to depart and head west toward home. Winds were picking up—11 knots down the runway—favoring a take-off from Runway 8. After leaning the fuel mixture to compensate for the high density altitude, my airplane lifted off quickly as it accelerated down the runway.

The diagram for a departure to the west calls for a 10-degree left turn after liftoff to avoid overflying a school. Once clear of the school, make two right turns to a westerly heading before climbing over the southern edge of the lake and proceeding on course.

I chose instead to fly the Northeast departure, since I saw it as the gateway to lower ground. I wanted to avoid the turbulence I expected I would encounter after I crossed the ridge I flew over on the way inbound two days earlier.

After lifting off, I cranked in the 10-degree left turn and continued out over Baldwin Lake before gradually turning in a northeasterly direction over lower terrain. Within minutes I was out of the mountains and able to turn westerly and set up a direct routing for my return home.

This routing added a few minutes to my flight time home, but it made the trip much more enjoyable.

I had never before spent time in Big Bear City and was immediately taken with the place. The aspen trees were turning red and yellow, the pace seemed relaxed and there were more than enough activities and adventures for every kind of visitor.

The Falltacular, two weeks of Halloween-centered activities that take place during “sweater weather” was going on when I was there. Check the events calendars at BigBear.com or Big-BearEvents.com for the yearlong list of fun things to do.

My impression is that the chefs at the local restaurants surely know what they’re about, this mountain airport is well-run and clean, and the best part is that it’s less than two hours from almost any airport in Southern California. **CF**

Steve Ells has been an A&P/IA for 45 years. He is a commercial pilot with instrument and multi-engine ratings and loves utility and bush-style airplanes and operations. Ells was a tech rep and editor for Cessna Pilots Association and associate editor for AOPA Pilot. He owns Ells Aviation (EllsAviation.com) and lives in Templeton, California. Send questions and comments to editor@cessnaflyer.org.

Resources

INFORMATION FOR PILOTS

Big Bear City Airport
bigbearcityairport.com

Google Earth
earth.google.com

Topoquest
topoquest.com

WhisperTrack
whispertrack.com/airports/KL35

Vonesh Aircraft
vonesh.com

BIG BEAR AREA ATTRACTIONS

Amangela's
amangelas.com

Big Bear Events
bigbearevents.com

Big Bear Mountain Resort
(Snow Summit and Bear Mountain Ski Areas, Snow Summit Bike Park, Bear Mountain Golf Course)
bigbearmountainresort.com

Big Bear Valley Historical Society and Big Bear History Museum
bigbearhistory.org

Country Kitchen Restaurant
countrykitchenrestaurants.com

Himalayan Big Bear
himalayanbigbear.com

Nottinghams Tavern
nottinghamstavern.com

Pine Knot Marina
pineknotmarina.com

The Cave Big Bear
thecavebigbear.com

The Lodge at Big Bear Lake
thelodgeatbigbearlake.com

Visit Big Bear
bigbear.com

Wyatt's Saloon
bigbearevents.com/wyatts-2-2/

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Big Bear Bucket List: Things to See and Do

By Sara Schacht

The Big Bear Lake area, just a short flight from most of Southern California, offers year-round entertainment, vacation and outdoor sports opportunities.

Photo Courtesy Big Bear



BIG Bear Lake is a premier four-season resort destination located in Southern California. One hundred miles from the Los Angeles metropolis, the mile-high town is tucked away within the San Bernardino National Forest, offering a getaway from the noise and grind of city life below.

What began as the home of the Serrano Native Americans became a paradise known as the “Island in the Sky” for fur trappers and grizzly bear hunters in the mid-1800s. With William Holcomb’s discovery of gold nearby in 1860, the Big Bear area expanded quickly with eager prospectors and their families moving into the area over the next 15 years.

Big Bear Lake has also been a hit with many Hollywood location scouts and served as the setting for such films as “Gone With the Wind,” “Frankenstein,” “Beethoven’s 3rd,” “WarGames” and many others.

Today, Big Bear Lake is Southern California’s capital for outdoor adventure and weekend getaways. As you fly into the Valley, Big

Bear Lake sits as a shimmering centerpiece surrounded by dense forest... and in the winter, a glittering, snowy landscape.

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The airport in the sky

Since 1928, Big Bear City Airport (L35) has been serving the community as a General Aviation center. This facility sits at 6,752 feet msl. Big Bear City Airport is the third-highest airport in California.

Aviators can see some issues with density altitude; though they are typically manageable with appropriate preparation. Pilots should check their performance tables to be certain their airplane will have enough runway to lift off and climb without encountering nearby trees or mountainous terrain. It is also advised that takeoffs from the airport be earlier in the morning as cooler, denser air provides better performance.

The airport includes a single 5,850-foot asphalt runway, two main taxiways, transient tiedowns, and an Automated Weather Observing System III Precipitation/Thunderstorm (AWOS III PIT). Instrument-rated pilots can take advantage of the RNAV (GPS) approach to Runway 26. (See more info for pilots in Steve Ells’ companion piece on Page 50. —Ed.)

The terminal building at the airport offers aviators a flight planning room, pilot and passenger lounges, and the full-service Barnstorm Restaurant, open every day from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. The restaurant is also open Friday through Sunday evenings from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.

The airport operates on a 24-hour, seven-days-per-week basis and handles about 15,000 operations annually. Though terminal building operations are limited to 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Sunday, aviators always have access to the runway and self-service fueling station. Vonesh Aircraft also provides on-site maintenance to tackle any aviation issues you may encounter.

Big Bear City Airport can also be a nice stopover for transient flyers due to the low fuel prices. Self-serve 100LL Avgas is currently \$4.38 per gallon, one of the lowest prices in Southern California.

Get away in style

Big Bear Lake is one of the most accommodation-friendly destinations you’ll encounter. Lodging options throughout the Valley include luxury cabins, rustic

lodges, lakeside hotels and even fairytale-themed cabins. A host of vacation rental companies can help you find your perfect abode for the week-end—or longer. You

can scout traditional lodging and private homes online from the Visit Big Bear website at BigBear.com.

Things to see and do

The Village

One may argue that you haven’t experienced Big Bear if you haven’t paid a visit to The Village. As Big Bear Lake’s year-round hub for shopping, dining and entertainment, there isn’t anything you won’t find, and all of it with a subtle nod to the mountains.

From escape rooms to test your wit, to the latest releases at the cinema, to black-light bowling and afternoon wine tasting, there’s entertainment for everyone in The Village.

Just down the road from The Village, the Big Bear Lake Performing Arts Center regularly showcases productions ranging from musical theater to concert performances.

Within The Village you’ll find Indian, Italian, barbecue, Hawaiian and Mexican restaurants; not to mention plenty of



Photo: Renee Strouse

Big Bear City Airport (L35).

sweets. Around town, you'll find French food, Chinese food, seafood and more.

Live music

Big Bear Lake is quite the stage for live music, whether it be serenading diners at local restaurants, festival musicians or live performances at The Cave and Wyatt's Saloon.

The Cave's unique concert venue offers guests an up-close and intimate experience with their favorite bands. Such talents as Ted Nugent and Buckcherry have graced the stage, while some tribute bands would have you wonder if they're really the originals!

Wyatt's Saloon is the heart of Big Bear Lake's country scene and hosts live music performances every weekend, complete with country dancing and a ranch-style restaurant and bar.

Festivals and happenings

Annual festivals include the renowned Big Bear Lake Oktoberfest, and the newer spring Maifest, that bring much-loved German traditions right into the Valley. Twice-yearly Wine Walks in The Village welcome guests to peruse shops and businesses while sipping their favorite wine.

Craft beer festivals, a Renaissance Faire, a yoga festival, car shows and Visit Big Bear's very own Grill & Chill BBQ Festival and Chili Cook-Off keep Big Bear Lake a bucket-list destination all year, every year. The Big Bear Events website is a great place to look to see what's happening during your visit (*See link in Resources.* —Ed.).

*You're invited to enjoy
the San Bernardino National
Forest in as many ways
as you can think of.*

Outdoor adventures

Big Bear Lake offers an outdoor adventure fit for any visitor in any season. From carving down the wintery slopes at Snow Summit and Bear Mountain, to crème of the crop springtime fishing, to Snow Summit's thrilling downhill bike park, and autumn hikes among brilliant changing colors, there's something for every outdoor enthusiast. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

Winter sports

Known best for its wintertime skiing and snowboarding, Big Bear Lake is home to two ski areas. Bear Mountain (since 1943) and Snow Summit (since 1952) serve all skill levels of skiers and riders with the best natural and man-made snow conditions in Southern California.

Apart from skiing and riding, Big Bear Lake offers three seasonal tubing locations at Big Bear Snow Play, Magic Mountain at the Alpine Slide, and most recently, Snow Summit.

Live it up on the Lake

Big Bear Lake boasts some of the best freshwater fishing in Southern California. Rainbow trout are the most-targeted quarry, but fisherfolk also regularly reel in largemouth and smallmouth bass, crappie and catfish.

Several guides and charters operate throughout the summer to give new fisherman, as well as seasoned ones, the best experience and info on techniques for a bountiful catch. Technically, fishing is permitted year-round, but you won't be able to rent or launch your own boat

from December through March.

If you're not a fisherman, there's still fun to be had on the water. Kayaking, paddle boarding, jet skiing, water skiing, tubing and good ol' putt-putting around the lake on a tour boat or pontoon are all amazing ways to get out on the water and enjoy 360-degree views of the Valley.

Mountain biking

One of the Valley's most recent additions to the summer recreation list is the Snow Summit Bike Park. Opened in 2014, it's the only lift-served park in Southern California. This new mountain biking hub is making a name for itself as venue fit for beginners, intermediates and experts alike.

New this year, it will host the U.S. Mountain Biking Open competition, in the event's first ever appearance on the West Coast; and will do so for the next three summers.

The San Bernardino National Forest (more on that in a moment) is also home to over 100 miles of cross-country biking trails that are free to access and do not require lift service—unless you refuse to pedal!

Golf

Teeing off at Bear Mountain Golf Course is a must for visiting golf enthusiasts. Set at the base of Bear Mountain ski resort and surrounded by forested hills, this course offers one of the most scenic rounds of nine you'll ever experience.

Its creative design challenges players to clear streams and water features, while the blue and black tees of Hole 4 are positioned on a high ledge offering an incredible vantage point as you tee off.

Golfers can also take advantage of a 300-yard driving range, complete with a chipping and putting area. Newer players can rent equipment and reserve lessons with a PGA-certified instructor. At the end of your exploits, you can grab a bite to eat and a cold one at the Clubhouse and browse apparel and equipment in the Pro Shop.

San Bernardino National Forest

You're invited to enjoy the San Bernardino National Forest in as many ways as you can think of. Tour it on horseback, hike or snowshoe it, four-wheel it on a guided Jeep excursion and whizz through it on a high-speed zipline. The National Forest surrounds Big Bear and a trail is never too far away.

If you'd like to stay closer to home, you can take an easy stroll through The

Village and nearby beautiful neighborhoods, or roll around on an ultimate Segway experience.

As you can see, if you can think of it, it's probably here. The Big Bear area is lively all year; so there's no time like the present to start planning a fly-in vacation!

CF

Sara Schacht is the Social Media and Content Coordinator for Visit Big Bear. Apart from helping drive tourism to Southern California's four-season resort

of Big Bear Lake, she has also served as a freelance reporter for their local newspaper. When not on the job, she will most likely be found enjoying the ski slopes in winter, and biking trails in the summer. Send questions or comments to editor@cessnaflyer.org.

Resources

See a comprehensive list of Big Bear area resources at the end of Steve Ells' trip report on Page 55.

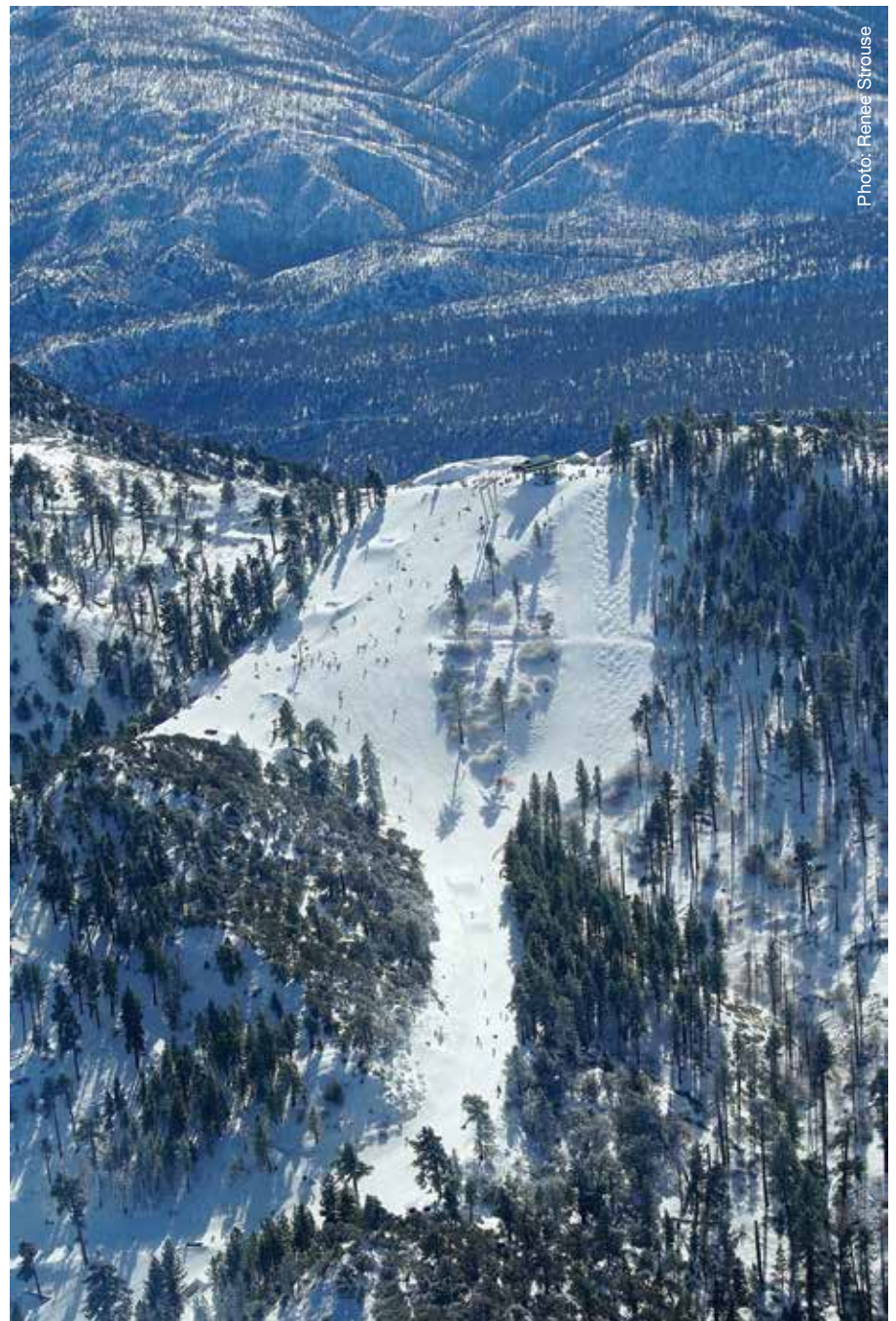


Photo: Renee Strouse

Big Bear offers some of the best skiing in Southern California.