

Big Bear: The One with All the Snow

How many places do you know of where you can surf and snow ski in the same day? In Southern California, that's kind of our go-to bragging point. Because we sit in a basin between the ocean and the mountains, we are surrounded by the best of both worlds. So, if one were so inclined, you could, indeed, surf in the Pacific Ocean in the morning and then drive up to [Big Bear](#) mountain and snow ski that same afternoon (hopefully not in the same outfit).

Big Bear is a hugely popular getaway for SoCal residents all year round. In the summer you can go boating, fishing, or bar-hopping and in the winter, you can go skiing, snowshoeing or... bar-hopping.

But there are also some amazing things to experience in Big Bear that are not quite as obvious as rolling your spouse down a hill into a snowball. Here's a few that I would recommend:

1.) Gold Rush Self-Guided Auto Tour

I've been to Big Bear countless times and had no idea that it was once a bustling gold mining town! If you stop by the [Big Bear Discovery Center](#), you can get a brochure for a Self-Guided Auto Tour that takes you on a trek to several remnants of these bygone days. We drove on a bumpy, gravel road for a good 6 or 7 miles to get to Holcomb Valley. Not a fun drive after a 36-ounce Big Gulp but beautiful and quiet just the same.

It's hard to believe that the 1860s Gold Rush town of Bellville was home to nearly 1,500 prospectors. The pastoral silence is so tranquil that it makes you want to whisper. And yet, if you're really quiet, you can still hear the sweet echoes of ruthless bar fights, runaway stagecoaches, naughty saloon dancers, and the town sheriff being shot in a street duel.

One of the few remaining structures is the Van Dusen cabin, a quaint little lodge smaller than my kitchen but with a view that will knock your socks off. If you can get past the generations of douchebags who've carved their names into the logs, it really is a peaceful scene—as opposed to the death trap right next to it. The stump of the Hanging Tree is where at least 50 ne'er do wells and no-goodniks were strung up by their Buster Browns. A perfect location for a Halloween séance if I do say so myself. Add to that some original ore grinders, a few graves, and mine shafts, and you'll feel like you've landed in [Tombstone](#) (1991).

2.) Picnic at Juniper Point

On the north side of the lake sits [Juniper Point](#). We came upon it by accident, really. I saw a stunning house on the opposite side of the lake flanked by bright red and orange trees and wanted to take a photo. And it turns out, you have a clear view of the entire lake from this vantage point. That may have been because of the time of year where the lake retreats faster than Tom Cruise's receding hairline. But seeing nothing but nature in all directions is extremely liberating. At 7,000 feet up, I don't have to think about work, or doing laundry or washing dishes. It's as if there's a particular altitude threshold that my problems and stress are not allowed to pass through. That's when my mind, my creativity, and my confidence are at an all-time high.

3.) Dam Keeper's Stone House

Before you ask, no, the dam keeper is not the one who punished people for swearing. Rather, he was in charge of the Big Bear Dam, and his former home remains standing on the small hill overlooking the dam—a bit worse for wear, but still enough where you can see that he had the best view in the area. Actually, all he needed was a Moses-like walking stick and he probably could've parted Big Bear Lake.

My favorite part of abandoned buildings is always the fireplace. There's something about a partially remaining fireplace that can tell so many stories about the history of a home. I imagine the dam keeper reading a book next to a nice, warm fireplace on a cold, snowy night. Or perhaps he was writing in his diary about how motherf*cking cold it is and that he deeply regrets his decision to take this job. Either way, behind every partially built fireplace is a real human being with real feelings.

Officially, the Dam Keeper's house is about a hundred yards up on a private road but it appears to be government property and not residential. Just be quiet, be respectful, don't touch anything, and if anybody says anything, give them a sob story of how the dam keeper was your great-great-great-grandfather and you're researching your family's ancestry. I would recommend seeing it at sunset or sunrise. When the golden light kisses the building and forms sunlit window-shaped shadows on the wall, it's quite a sight.

4.) Oktoberfest

Being a wine drinker myself, [Oktoberfest](#) is a new experience for me. If I remember correctly, I had exactly one sip of JP's German beer (whatever it was), and while once was enough, that didn't stop me from enjoying the ambiance. After all, where there's beer, there's noise!

The majority of the shenanigans were taking place inside the octagonal convention center room where a group of older men and women were dancing the Schuhplattler. (I have no shame in admitting that I had to Google that one!) It's the traditional folk dance popular in the Germany/Austria region. Of course, they were all wearing the traditional Bavarian costumes to go with it—kind of a requirement with that dance otherwise they'd be just a group of old people with restless leg syndrome. To be honest, I was seriously impressed with their stamina! Or maybe it was the booze. Either way, there's something about watching drunk people with no talent dancing to their heart's content that just makes you smile.

5.) Stargazing

Being so close to one of the biggest cities in the country, you might think there are more stars in LA than there are in Big Bear. And while it's not exactly the Death Valley, you can actually see the [Milky Way](#) on a clear night... as well as Southwest Flight 2049 from Phoenix... And Delta 5232 from Dallas... But the truth is, sometimes it's kind of nice to see the infinite universe in the same scope as our terrestrial world. I get perspective—both physically and metaphorically—and from this unique perspective, I gather how truly precious we all are. We are but a speck in the history of time,

but that's what makes it all the more important for us to cherish each and every day. To make the most of each day. To tell those we love how much they mean to us each day. Suddenly, problems like somebody cutting me off in traffic or losing my keys for a few minutes are not that important.

Big Bear is literally (and figuratively) a breath of fresh air. We're lucky that even in a busy city like Los Angeles, we still have a beautiful place in nature where we can escape, regroup, and reconnect with our true selves.