

# WINTER WONDERLANDS

Experience scenic snowscapes right here in California as you hit the slopes at nearby ski resorts.

BY ASHLEY RYAN

When picturing Southern California, it's a pretty universal picture: Palm trees swaying over sandy beaches with not a cloud in the sunny sky. But while our region's mountains may not be as well known as those in Colorado, Utah, Montana or even Lake Tahoe to the north, they have plenty of beauty and thrills to offer outdoor enthusiasts visiting from near or far.

Make the quick jaunt northeast to Big Bear or venture farther up the state to Mammoth—no matter which you choose, you'll likely be surprised just how much winter cheer these California ski areas pack in.

## Big Bear

**POSSIBLY THE MOST SUBSTANTIAL NEWS** out of Big Bear—a small lakeside town that is less than three hours away from Orange County by car—is the expansion of Big Bear Mountain Resort. Alterra Mountain Co., which has owned and operated Bear Mountain and Snow Summit since 2017, acquired Snow Valley Mountain Resort in nearby Running Springs in early 2023, ensuring that this ski area now offers three times the fun.

As Snow Valley kicks off its first full season under the Alterra umbrella, guests can explore this new property for some of the best beginner terrain in the Big Bear region; visitors will also be able to enjoy lift-served sledding and snow tubing, including a high-speed lift with a whopping six seats called the Snow Valley Express. The resort originally opened in 1924 and is now the longest continuously operating alpine resort in Southern California. Aside from ski/snowboard lessons and rentals, Snow Valley is home to two mountain zones, a tubing park, snow play area and multiple terrain parks; it also offers night sessions and mid-mountain dining.

Snow Summit, over in Big Bear Lake, has 240 acres of skiable terrain along more than 30 trails, with sprawling views of the water below. This



Big Bear Mountain Resort offers options for everyone, from beginners to experts on the slopes, as well as places to gather and dine afterward.



Mammoth Mountain Ski Area features more than 3,500 acres to explore.

property is designed more for intermediate snow bunnies, but also offers tubing and terrain parks and mountaintop dining options that make it an ideal spot for families with children. Nearby Bear Mountain, on the other hand, caters to beginners as well as those who are experts on the slopes, with nearly 750 acres available to ski or snowboard and three peaks over 8,400 feet. Though there are slightly fewer trails here, you'll also find terrain parks with Southern California's only halfpipes.

In total, Alterra has invested \$12 million during the off-season to make improvements to this three-mountain destination. At Snow Valley, new snowmaking equipment and two additional magic carpets were installed while locker rooms and rental shops received renovations and the parking lot was resurfaced. The beginner area was also expanded for accessibility and more outdoor seating was incorporated at on-site dining venues.

Bear Mountain is also presenting considerable upgrades since last season, with the outdoor Laybacks Bar being transformed into a full-service restaurant with the option to dine indoors or on a patio. The property's sun deck, which has been under construction since 2019, has also been completed, with an additional 12,000 square feet of space as well as fire pits. Snow Summit also underwent light renovations and has received new snowcats and snowmobiles.

As far as places to stay, the Sessions Retreat &

Hotel, which reopened over the summer as a sanctuary for rejuvenation, is situated in the heart of town. The property now has a focus on nature, wellness and art, allowing guests to fully immerse themselves in the mountain environment. Those looking for more space can opt to stay at the boutique Noble & Proper, a lodge that opened last winter with eight cabins.

A number of restaurants in the small town are perfect for breakfast, lunch, dinner or apres ski, like the home-style Teddy Bear Restaurant or the quaint Grizzly Manor Cafe, the quick-service Dank Donuts, the authentic Old German Deli, the all-American Peppercorn Grille, burger-and-beer joint Fire Rock Burgers & Brews, Mexican eatery Nuevo Vallarta Grill, Italian restaurant Sweet Basil Bistro and the Big Bear Lake Brewing Co.

## Mammoth

**HEAD FARTHER NORTH TO IMMERSE** yourself in the natural beauty of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. With a relatively long ski season and an average of 300 sunny days per year, this is a popular destination for winter travelers in California.

Located about 350 miles from Newport, you can make the drive in about six hours or opt to fly,





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Mammoth Mountain recently invested \$5.5 million into its snowmaking system to provide ideal conditions.

with direct Advanced Air charter flights into the Mammoth Yosemite Airport from Hawthorne Municipal Airport in LA County or McClellan-Palomar in northern San Diego County; flights with a layover in San Francisco are also available from John Wayne Airport in OC to Eastern Sierra Regional Airport in Bishop.

Ski or snowboard at Mammoth Mountain Ski Area, which is another Alterra Mountain Co. resort. With 175 trails ranging from easiest to extremely difficult and more than 3,500 acres to explore—plus 10 unique terrain parks—more than one visit may be required to experience it all. Guests can also venture out on cross-country skis or snowshoes, traverse the uphill routes, adventure via snowmobile or take a ride on the gondola to experience the beauty of the region.

The resort's Canyon Express chairlift was replaced during the off-season, in order to accommodate 25% more people uphill at once and reduce the wait times at nearby Canyon Lodge. Enclosed terminals were also added to both the top and bottom of the lift, and an automated loading conveyor makes getting on and off safer than ever. In addition, Mammoth Mountain recently invested \$5.5 million into its snowmaking system, allowing the property to provide ideal snow conditions for skiers and snowboarders, particularly during the early part of the winter season. A state-of-art Wintersteiger ski tuning machine has also been installed at the repair shop at the Main Lodge while more than a dozen ticket pickup kiosks were also incorporated around the property.

Off the mountain, in the town of Mammoth Lakes, the new Community Recreation Center

was slated to open this fall. The 40,000-square-foot arena will feature an Olympic-sized ice rink crafted in collaboration with the LA Kings hockey team; each summer, the rink will transition into a recreation area for the town's camps and other programs.

Another spot that was completed this fall is Outbound Mammoth, formerly the Sierra Nevada Resort. A \$34 million renovation features reimagined rooms, suites and chalets as well as an upgraded lobby, wine bar and contemporary restaurant; standalone cabins, a heated pool, two hot tubs and a culinary garden have also been added.

Harmony Brazilian Grill & Bar is also set to open this winter season, bringing a Brazilian churrascaria, or steakhouse, to the area for the first time. This elevated barbecue experience will include a craft cocktail program, unique salad bar and high-end slices of meat.

Elsewhere in Mammoth Lakes, enjoy drinks at Shelter Distilling in The Village, luxurious fare at The Brasserie (surprisingly, within a local bowling alley, Mammoth Rock 'N' Bowl), an intimate meal at Lakefront Restaurant on Twin Lakes, healthy snacks at Elixir Superfood & Juice, flights and bites at Mammoth Brewing Co., warm bowls at Gojira Ramen & Sushi, seasonal menus at Skadi or



Above: Petra's Bistro & Wine Bar in Mammoth Lakes; right: opening day at Mammoth Mountain

contemporary cuisine at Petra's Bistro & Wine Bar.

Or opt to stay on the mountain for dining: Fuel your mornings at the Sierra Grind coffeehouse at Main Lodge, sip cocktails with views of snow-capped peaks at the indoor/outdoor Steeps Bar at McCoy Station, grab cheesesteaks for lunch in Airstream food truck The Lunchbox or warm up with a Bavarian-style dinner in the fireplace lounge at Yodler Restaurant & Bar.

No matter how you choose to stay, play and apres ski, you're sure to experience the thrill of the mountains at these California resorts this winter. NBM



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OPPOSITE PAGE: LEFT: ASHLEY RYAN; ALL OTHERS ON SPREAD: COURTESY OF MAMMOTH MOUNTAIN SKI AREA



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