

# Cultural Daily

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## Chasing \$50K Dreams: A Weekend at Big Bear's Trout Tournament

R. Daniel Foster · Friday, June 13th, 2025

I grew up fishing in Minnesota, mostly on lakes—they number 10,000 according to the state's outdoorsy motto, "The Land of 10,000 Lakes." They actually number 11,842, at least those that measure over ten acres.

When I heard about Big Bear's Fishin' for \$50K Trout Tournament (June 7 and 8), a tradition since 1998, I knew I had to get out my fishing pole and tackle box. But then I remembered I had tossed them out a few years back. No matter. On the way into town, my fishing buddy and I stopped at [Big Bear Sporting Goods](#). Tiffany set us up with fishing licenses, poles, and hooks, along with instructions.

My days on Minnesota lakes and in ice houses came flooding back. Fishing has always been a meditative activity for me, especially in ice houses with a gas lantern hung over the augured hole, turning the small shack into a shrine. In the long silences, I attuned to sounds: the click of a beer can flip top, the scatter of lures in the tackle box, and the smell of my father's corn cob pipe that he let us smoke. The pipe always made him yodel, a real yodel that noodled out of him, sounding just like the ones I heard on the Ed Sullivan show.



Home base for the fishing tournament was the Hotel Marina Riviera / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

## Big Bear Reminded Me of Minnesota

Home base for the fishing tournament was [Hotel Marina Riviera](#), its 42 rooms facing Big Bear Lake. Built in 1968 by architect John Woods, the property was recently renovated—a warm and woodsy lodge-like feel with an expansive deck and bar area set with fire pits overlooking the lake. I appreciated the mid-century modern lodge aesthetic that felt at once roomy and cozy.

Framed by pine trees, the setting was idyllic. Was I back in Minnesota, or in Big Bear?



All the rooms at Hotel Marina Riviera face the lake / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The hotel is about a five-minute walk to [Big Bear Village](#), and in winter a shuttle takes guests to the ski slopes. The hotel is fronted by a private beach, and has a swimming pool, hot tub, and a sauna.



Big Bear hadn't been on my radar in years, actually a decade or more. I had always thought of it as a mountain ski resort, but the town and surrounding wilderness have changed. Skiing and winter activities are still high on the list, but the area has started to excel as a summer get-a-way: water sports, mountain biking, hiking trails that open to otherworldly vistas, and golf, among other activities. There's also a [concert series in the Village](#), a hub for shopping, dining and nightlife. The Village has a quaint mountain feel, the leafy streets dotted with flower baskets during the summer.

### Angling for a \$10,000 Trout

Our pontoon-like boat departed one of the lake's marinas at 8 a.m. on Saturday. The lake was mirror-flat, and yes, the fish were jumping. By the time we found a prime hangout, we spotting trout leaping around us. We hooked our rods, and I dug into a small jar of PowerBait, a green doughy substance that reeks of garlic. To trout, it's ambrosia.

I cast out my line. I waited. So did the other six people on our boat.



Big Bear reminded me of Minnesota. A couple on the deck of Hotel Marina Riviera / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

We talked, mostly about the tournament, which draws up to 15,000 anglers, although I think most of them were sleeping in that Saturday morning. I thought prizes were awarded on the weight of fish alone, but I learned that the trout are tagged—five of them in the lake had a \$10,000 marker in their gills.



Fishing has always been a meditative activity for me / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

I scanned the lake for the pricey fish. Surely one of those Gucci fish would nibble and then bite on my hook. Last year, two fishermen nabbed two \$10,000-tagged rainbow trout, one weighing just over 1.6 pounds, the other 2.5 pounds.

Ten thousand dollars. That would pay my apartment rent for nearly nine months (do the math and you'll discover I've lived in a rent-controlled pad for most of my life).

My pole jiggled. A nibble, I was sure of it. I jerked my rod to hook the hopefully moneyed fish. My pole bent. I let out the line. The fish swam wildly. I tightened my grip and reeled it in.

The boat exploded with activity, people grabbing nets, pliers, and jockeying for position to grab my prize once I hefted it aboard.



Kids love the fishing tournament / Photo courtesy of Visit Big Bear

While waiting for the fish to surface, I considered my other options. Maybe I wouldn't use the \$10,000 for my apartment rent. I dreamed of a new car to replace my 1999 Ford Ranger truck, or at least the down payment on a car. Or I would take a trip to Portugal to visit my good friend Theo who recently retired there.

### **I Nabbed the First Catch of the Day**

The fish broke the water. It was a little feller, but still, I knew the \$10,000 tag wasn't about size, it was about (apparently), some kind of mysterious style that these fish had, earning them a premium bounty.

There was no need for a net. I easily hoisted him aboard. But it lacked any kind of tag, and I looked at my feet, maybe it had fallen off? Surely, this could not be the outcome after I had already spent the ten grand in my mind.



I nabbed the first catch of the day / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Still, it was the first fish caught that day. I'm sure there was some sort of prize for that. Maybe a Starbucks gift card?

No matter, we were having fun. Another man aboard our boat soon caught a trout as well, about double the size of my fish—but also a dirt-poor specimen, no \$10K tag in sight.

Later at the weigh-in in town, families gathered, kids holding their catches. It again took me back to my Minnesota boyhood—camping, fishing and skiing. My dad taught me to skin sunfish, or sunnies as we called them, along with squirrels we hunted in the woods. It's the happy families that always seem to be out in nature, seeking adventure.



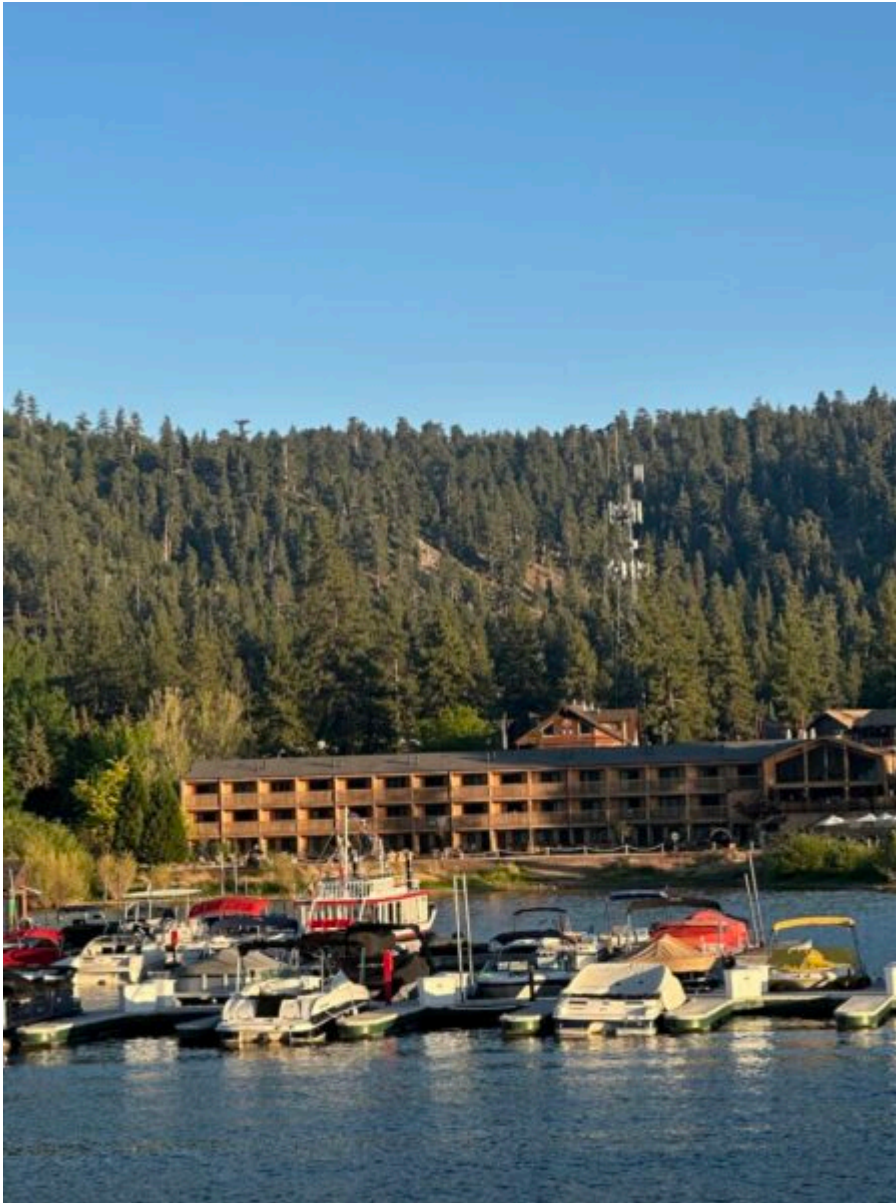
The Village in Big Bear / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

## A Sunset Cruise Around Big Bear Lake

We took a sunset cruise around the lake on Saturday, aboard the [Miss Liberty paddleboat](#) that sailed out of Pine Knot Marina. The 90-minute narrated journey was a good overview of Big Bear history. The captain pointed out famous homes: [Mel Blanc's 1940s vacation home](#) in Sawmill Cove (his son Noel was known to pop out and do a Bugs Bunny imitation via his megaphone as tour boats passed), and a home owned by the Max Factor corporation. Other Big Bear notables who escaped from Los Angeles for a breather: Bob Hope, Charles M. Schulz, Roy Rogers, Britney Spears, Zane Grey, and Wyatt Earp. Given that the architecture on the lake homes was spectacular, I could see why they sought out Big Bear.



A family at the award ceremony / Photo courtesy of Visit Big Bear



A marina with Hotel Marina Riviera in the background / R. Daniel Foster

Rounding a bend, we saw [Garstin Island](#), commonly known as China Island or Treasure Island, a rocky outcrop with Asian-inspired buildings built in 1911. It was built by Herbert H. Garstin, president and manager of the Bear Valley Mutual Water Company in the early 1900s. His wife Maude conceived the design, inspired by her trips to China.

The fishing tournament awards ceremony was held back at the Hotel Marina Riviera, on the beach with tents and seating spread out. It was great to see the families gathered, and some kids going up to receive their awards. As dusk set in, the sun faded over the lake, and the hotel's fire pits began to blaze—the perfect ending to the weekend, just like those I had in Minnesota.



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