

Travel and Adventure: So close and yet so far - Lake Arrowhead will lure you

by Priscilla Lister

It has pretended to be Switzerland, Sweden and the Adirondacks and very few are the wiser. Its crystal-clear skies, snow-capped peaks and azure blue lake could place it in any of those locations, but in truth it lies in the Far West.

MANSION ROW - Lake Arrowhead, once called Little Bear Valley, is an upscale resort a two hours drive away from Los Angeles. CNS Photo by Priscilla Lister. LAKE ARROWHEAD VILLAGE - Just a short stroll away from Lake Arrowhead Resort is a small village lined with shops and restaurants. CNS Photo by Priscilla Lister. DOWNHILL FROM HERE - One of the favorite activities at the resort is a hike in the San Bernardino National Forest. Through a partnership with the National Forest Association, the hikes are guided by NFA rangers. CNS Photo by Priscilla Lister. SELDOM SEEN - All the properties surrounding the lake is privately owned and boarding the Arrowhead Queen is one of a very few ways for outsiders to get on the lake. CNS Photo by Priscilla Lister. Lake Arrowhead, just a two-hour drive from Los Angeles, is an alpine resort that has beckoned West Coast residents for more than 100 years. Hollywood began filming it in 1911, setting "Heidi" there in 1937 with Shirley Temple; "I'll Take Sweden" with Bob Hope, Tuesday Weld and Frankie Avalon in 1960; and the 1998 remake of "The Parent Trap" with Lindsay Lohan.

When I met a friend there in late April, we found ourselves transported from the traffic-mad lowlands to a tranquil place at the "Rim of the World" that has recently become even more inviting.

The winding road from the flats of Riverside, Calif., seems to go straight up to the 5,100-foot elevation of this destination, making the road trip almost as nail-biting as an encounter with the now-extinct California Grizzly Bear that used to roam these parts.

Once known as Little Bear Valley, Lake Arrowhead is just a ridge or so away from Big Bear Valley, where peaks rise above 10,000 feet, offering the closest ski resorts to Southern Californians.

Lake Arrowhead, like Big Bear Lake, was created by a dam in the early 1900s. It has been an upscale resort almost from its beginnings.

The lake's owners today are the residents of Lake Arrowhead. All the property surrounding the lake is privately owned. Use of the lake itself is confined to residents who have lake-use permits.

So visitors cannot bring their own boat to use on Lake Arrowhead, and jet skis are not permitted. Such exclusivity makes Lake Arrowhead a rarefied place that has attracted the rich and famous since its beginnings.

And now there's a resort worthy of the posh character of Lake Arrowhead that allows you and me a glimpse of that glistening life in the pines. It's the Lake Arrowhead Resort and Spa, which just completed a \$17 million renovation in spring 2006.

It's still the lake's only luxury hotel since its first incarnation as the Arlington Lodge in 1923. The lodge was torn down in 1976 and a Hilton occupied the property since the early '80s.

But within the last two years, new owners and managers have created a far more gorgeous mountain escape than the one I remember from the late '80s. The new restaurant and bar, BIN189, was itself worth the trip. Looking out on the lake, it features alpine elements that made us feel we were in a fantastic treehouse. Birch tree limbs line one entry to the bar, where a fireplace and overstuffed chairs sit in front of a lighted display of bottles that just seem to glow.

Stewart Redhead, the new executive chef, shows off his American California cuisine combining influences from New Orleans, the South and France. We had one delectable course after another at dinner and breakfast, including irresistible homemade potato chips with a Creole crab dip, exquisitely prepared salmon and the best-ever soft-scrambled eggs with herbs.

The best way (and one of the only ways) for outsiders to get on the lake is to board the Arrowhead Queen from the village for a 50-minute tour with Capt. Bill. This view of the unbelievably enormous mansions, as well as the historic properties owned by various well-known names from Los Angeles, including movie stars of yesteryear and today, was fascinating.

And the small village, just a short stroll from the resort, had some wonderful little shops to explore as well as outlet stores from name brands. Several worthy restaurants are in the village, including Papagayo's Mexican, Papaya Bay Thai, and Woody's Boathouse on the water, but we could never resist Stewart's fare.

The resort's spa also drew our attention. Spa of the Pines has several treatments designed around alpine ingredients, while being as up to date as imaginable in the ills it addresses. I swooned over its Signature Massage, which offered a combination of styles depending on your preferences - I had a mixture of Swedish, Shiatsu and therapeutic massage as I pointed to my aching shoulders and lower back.

I want to go back for the facials, from anti-aging to eye-contour to decongesting treatments for Rosacea or allergy-prone skins to native clay organic or aromatic facials.

But my favorite activity was a hike in the San Bernardino National Forest with a ranger from the National Forest Association. As we walked along a trail amid huge boulders, towering pines and bubbling brooks, we learned there are seven different ecosystems in the San Bernardino National Forest and more rare and endangered species there than in any other national forest.

The hiking opportunities are the brainchild of the resort's general manager, Peter Henry, a charming man who essentially eschewed retirement when he found this alpine paradise. He has created a partnership with the National Forest Association to offer guided hikes to guests, based on a voluntary \$3 per-night, per-room donation from guests that supports the NFA's efforts to enhance our forests. This partnership, which should be a model elsewhere, includes Saturday-night fireside chats with rangers on the resort's private beach, morning guided hikes twice a week, and stargazing on Friday nights with a local astronomer.

Peter has also dreamed up Love Letters, special experiences that can be added to your resort stay, such as a romantic fireside picnic in front of your suite's fireplace complete with cognac and chocolate and Beach Blanket Butler for Lakeside Lovers, which offers a cabana tent on the private beach, iced buckets of little Coronas and Pellegrinos, and a butler who brings iced seafood and crudites when you ring.

It's only two hours away from the biggest city on the West Coast, yet Lake Arrowhead will take you to Cloud Nine.

IF YOU GO

Contact Lake Arrowhead Resort and Spa, P.O. Box 1699, 27984 Highway 189, Lake Arrowhead, CA 92352; 800-800-6792; www.laresort.com. Room rates range from \$129-\$369 (with specials sometimes at \$99), with suites ranging from \$209-\$1,195.

Priscilla Lister is a freelance travel writer.

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