

A BREAKFAST AT BIG BEAR
Travelogue and Photos by Doug Crowder
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Big Bear Lake is a small city in the San Bernardino Mountains of Southern California. At an elevation of 6,752', it can get cold during the winter, and even during the spring and the fall. I last went there in April, 2017, and there was still snow on the ground in places. It's a two hour drive from Los Angeles by the most direct route, taking the 210 into San Bernardino, then highway 330 into the mountains, which seems to turn into highway 18 at Running Springs.

This time, I took a longer route, from Barstow, in the middle of the Mojave Desert, on Highway 18 through Lucerne Valley then into the mountains. I stopped a few places along the way to take pictures of Joshua trees, which seem to grow the best around the elevation of 4,000 feet.



I spent the night at the picturesque Happy Forest Cottages half a block north of Big Bear Boulevard, where I slept in my own private cottage. My only complaint would be that it was a little too cold for my liking, but after turning on the heat for a few minutes it got tolerable.

In the morning, I asked the desk clerk where she'd recommend for breakfast. She directed me to the Whispering Pines Café, on Pine Knot Avenue just south of the Boulevard. "Ask for Gertie, the owner," she added. "And tell her Amy from the Happy Forest sent you – she'll give you free coffee."

"Thanks," I said. "I will." I started the walk, less than half a mile, enjoying the crisp mountain air and the morning sun shining through the trees. As I approached the restaurant, I was amazed at the number of carved, wooden bears that decorated the downtown area. Some seemed to belong to shops or restaurants, and others were just on the sidewalk – my guess is that they were put there by the city. I spent a few minutes taking photos before going to the café. Many had very realistic artwork.



Some were less realistic, but still fun. One bear, for example, was portrayed as a cook. One as Robin Hood, holding a bow and arrow.



After a few minutes of taking photos, I went into the eatery and was greeted by a short but strong woman in her 50s, wearing a red plaid shirt, blue jeans and cowboy boots.

“Welcome to the Whispering Pines Café,” she said. “You came to the right place!”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“You want the best breakfast in town, don’t you?”

“Of course!” I agreed. “You must be Gertie.”

“How did you know?”

“You act like you own the place, and are proud of it. Amy from the Happy Forest Cottages sent me.”

“Well, then, you get a free cup of coffee.”

She led me to a table right by the front window and laid down the menu.

“That’s a nice looking bear you got out there,” I said.

Suddenly her demeanor changed, and she was no longer quite as cheerful. “That’s not my bear. It belongs to the city. I’d get rid of it if I could.”

"But it's a nice piece of artwork," I offered. "And doesn't it attract customers?"

"I think all those wooden bears should be outlawed," she insisted. "If it was up to me, I'd take them away and burn them!"

"What do you have against the wooden bears?" I asked.

"Let's just hope you don't find out," she said, walking away in a huff.

I looked over the menu, assuming that Gertie would soon get over her indignation about the bears and come back to take my order. I was right. At least for a little while. She came back, smiling again, notepad in hand. But before I could order, she looked outside, and got alarmed.

A mother and her young daughter were admiring the bear. The child was straddling its back, as if she were riding a horse, and her mom was starting to take her picture.

"Oh, my God, not again!" said Gertie, dropping her notepad and running outside.

"Get away from the bear," she shouted at the mother and daughter. They looked at her as if she was crazy, wondering what they were doing wrong.

They soon found out. The bear slowly started to move, emitting a low growl. The daughter was delighted, but the mother screamed.



“Come on,” shouted Gertie, “Get inside the restaurant.”

The mom grabbed her daughter and followed Gertie’s advice, running inside the restaurant.

The bear was no longer wood and paint, but was now flesh and blood with glistening fur and shiny white teeth and claws. It roared as it stood up, moving toward the restaurant door.

"Everybody get back," ordered Gertie. She tried to lock the door, but the bear yanked it open. Gertie grabbed a chair, pointing the legs at the bear as if she was taming a lion.

"Back!" she shouted.

"Roar!" responded the bear, unimpressed by her defensive maneuvers. He easily pulled the chair away from her, tossed it behind him, and continued his advance. Fortunately for Gertie, the bear was distracted by a sudden loud voice from outside the restaurant. '

"Stop!"

The bear did, for an instant, before turning around to see who was trying to give him orders. It was a tall skinny man wearing a long gray robe that almost matched his beard. He held a large wooden cross in front of the bear, and commanded loudly,

"I command you to stop frightening these people."

The bear growled at him and raised one of its front legs as if it were going to strike him. The man held his ground.

"From wood you came, and to wood you will return."

The bear quit growling, and started moving slower. The man pointed for the bear to return to its previous place in front of the restaurant.

"I would prefer that you would be wooden once more," he said

The bear growled again, but more slowly and not as loudly.

The bear made it back to more or less the same place it had been, but now it was in a different position, angrily standing on its hind legs rather than happily posing on all fours.

The people in the restaurant cheered, and the man with the wooden cross came Inside.

"I think I deserve a free breakfast for that," he said. Gertie just scowled at him, then turned around and walked back into the kitchen.

"I'll buy you a breakfast," I volunteered. He sat down at my table, and looked at the menu.

Gertie came back shortly with a cup of coffee for the tall man and a refill for me. She had her notepad ready, no doubt remembering that I was ready to order when we were interrupted by the bear, and figuring that the man with the wooden cross had already decided.

He had decided – on the most expensive item on the menu. The T-Bone steak, two eggs (over easy), hash browns and biscuits and gravy. I ordered a more modest, but still ample meal of two scrambled eggs with ham, whole wheat toast and an avocado.

“That was an impressive job with the bear,” I said. “You really took control of him.”

“Well, thanks,” he said, but it’s a her.”

“It’s a she?” I asked. “How do you know?”

“Yes. It’s a she-bear. I know it’s harder to tell with bears, since their sexes don’t wear different clothes, or have the obvious differences humans do. But I intended her to be a she when I carved her.”

“You’re the artist? Well, I have to complement you on your realistic work. Maybe a little too realistic. How did she come to life?”

“That I don’t know,” he confessed. “And no one’s been able to figure that out yet. But it’s been happening more lately. And when one of the bears comes to life, the artist seems to be the only one who can control it.”

“The artist? So there are other artists who have had their bears come to life?”

“Yes, at least 3 others that I know of.”

“How long do they stay alive?”

“The longest I know of must have been an hour at the minimum and might have been up to two weeks. That wasn’t my bear, but one carved by Jake Farmer. See that bear over there? The one across the street?”

“The one eating the salmon?”

“Yes, He – that one is a he-bear -- belongs to Roy Lopez, the owner of that gift shop, That bear came to life one day and was terrorizing the whole downtown area. Jake, wasn’t anywhere close when it happened, but I was. I went up to the bear and told him to turn back to wood. But the bear knew I wasn’t Jake, and came after me. I just barely escaped. When the cops showed up he ran off into the woods, off that way, and was never seen again. Not for a couple of weeks anyway, when a hiker came across a

wooden bear eating a wooden salmon. Roy took his truck and a couple of strong men and brought bring the bear back again.”

“So it sounds like eventually, the bears turn back into wood.”

“As far as I know, yes. But there’s one story I heard – it’s a little far-fetched, and I’m not sure I believe it, but this is what Jake told me. One day he was at the Golden Eagle Steak House – that’s on Pine Street a couple of blocks over that way – and he’s being complimented by the owner on what a realistic bear he carved, when suddenly the bear comes alive, and stands up and starts growling. There’s this lady who was just parking in the lot, and the bear goes up to the car – it’s a Lexus SUV -- and opens the door and motions for the lady to get out. She’s terrified and she gets out and starts running – then the bear jumps in the car and drives away. They find her Lexus later that day – it’s abandoned at the Yaamava Casino – that’s down in the flatlands -- about an hour from here – right before you get into the hills.”

“Yes, I remember passing it on the way up.”

“Well, they find the Lexus. It’s not damaged, but it sort of has a bad smell inside. But there’s no trace of the bear. The police look around of course, and go inside the casino and ask questions. There’s one blackjack dealer who remembered a large brown bear gambling at her table for about half an hour before security asked him to leave. Evidently, he was winning too much. They never found that bear. But there have been stories of a bear who comes back to the casino – and plays a mean hand of poker.

Gertie showed up to refill our coffee cups.

“If you’re going to keep telling that story,” she said, scowling at the artist, “you’d better get your facts straight. It wasn’t a Lexus, it was a Cadillac. And it took two weeks to get the smell out of the car. And the lady was me.”

Gertie left to tend to other customers, and the artist finished eating.

“Well, thanks for breakfast,” he said. “It’s been great talking to you. But I need to be moving on. Time to get to work.”

“Going back to your art studio?”

“Yep. Gotta stay busy.”

“Are you carving another bear today?”

“Well, no, I’m working on something else.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I hate to admit this. And I hope you don’t tell anyone. But I’m carving a good-looking young woman now.”

After he left, Gertie came to clear the table, still seeming in a bad mood.

“You don’t seem to like him too much,” I said.

“It’s all a scam,” he says.

“How so?” I ask.

“He just makes those bears come to life so that he can seem like a hero when he turns them back to wood. And he just does it so that poor suckers who don’t know any better will buy him a free meal.”

“You mean suckers like me?”

“Well, sorry, no offense meant. But mark my word – it’s all a fraud. That bear didn’t come to life all of its own accord. He made it happen.”

“I see. Well, tell me something. Just how does he make the bears come to life?”

She paused for a second, as if she had been thrown for loop. Then she looks at me like I had asked a stupid question.

“Well, that’s obvious, isn’t it?” she said. “He’s an artist, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but so?”

“Well, that’s what artists do. Make things come to life.”