


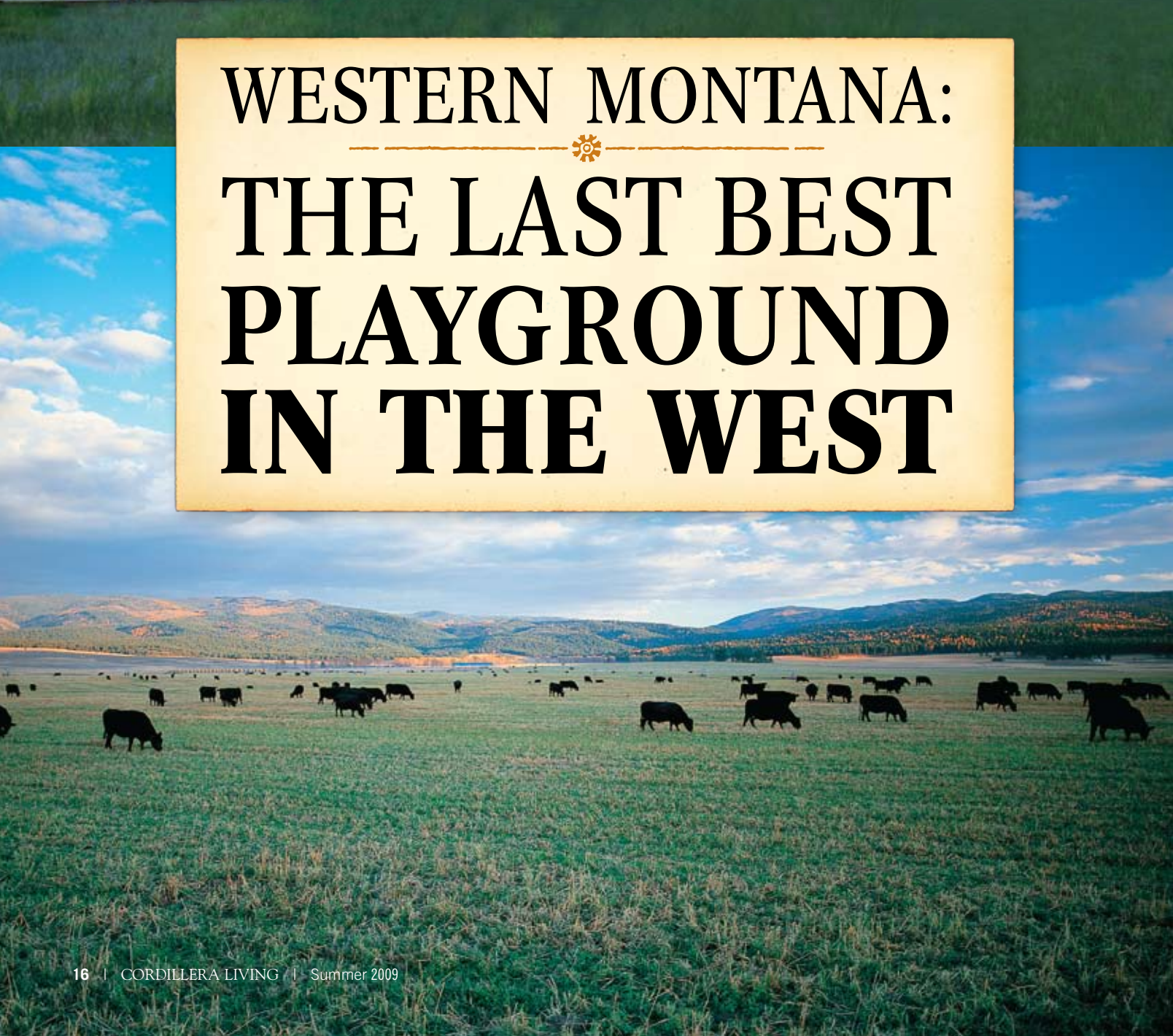
CORDILLERA

SUMMER 2009





WESTERN MONTANA:
— — — — —
THE LAST BEST
PLAYGROUND
IN THE WEST



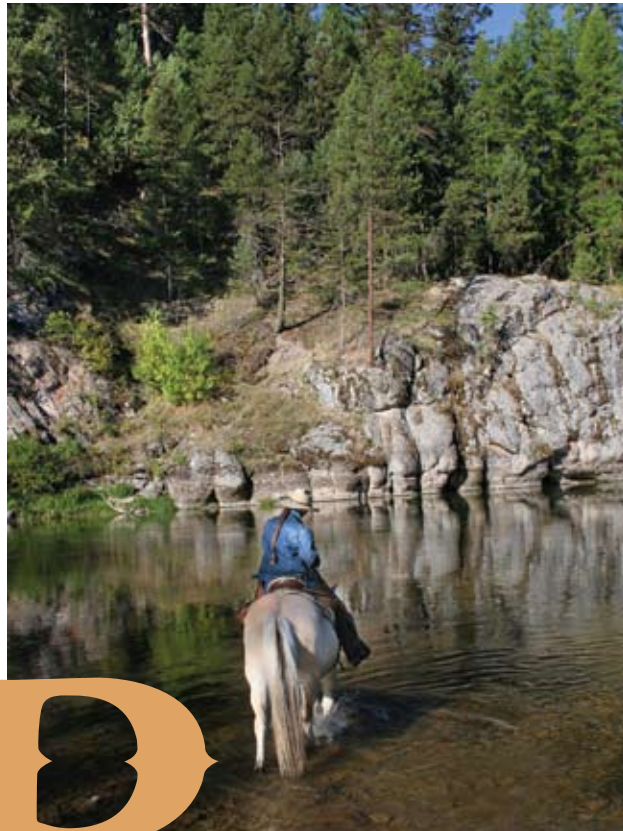


Photo by Alan Rosenberg

R

Remember summer camp? Carefree sleep-a-way camp? Escorted by upbeat staff, you were whisked from softball to soccer, swimming to volleyball, archery to boating, horseback riding to water skiing, with meals in between and an evening program with s'mores and sing-a-longs around the fire. Rough life.

Now imagine a summer “camp” for sophisticated adults with discriminating tastes, featuring every luxurious amenity, a pampering staff, a mouth watering menu of desirable activities, chefs and sommeliers practiced in pleasing your palate, all provided within the vast and pristine playground that is Western Montana.

That’s the sense when you send yourself to two of the preeminent getaways, The Resort at Paws Up, located along a seven-mile winding stretch of the Blackfoot River, and the Triple Creek Ranch, nestled high in the Bitterroot Mountains in the southwestern part of the state. Both are a short distance from the airport in Missoula. While their personalities are distinctively different—Triple Creek, for one thing, is adults-only, while Paws Up has a family-friendly feel—the resorts share an otherworldly attention to detail, and a religious zeal to satisfy every whim.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

(TOP) “Spa Town” tent encampment at Paws Up.

(BOTTOM) The resort is an elegantly-appointed working cattle ranch.

BY ALAN ROSENBERG

With its 27,000 acres, Paws Up is the very definition of “a spread,” and an instant cure for the most extreme case of claustrophobia. For folks weaned on Bonanza, this is the Ponderosa, an elegantly-appointed working cattle ranch that brings hundreds of head of black Angus cows to market. And, at the same time, it’s an inspired theme park where you can imagine Ben Cartwright bringing Hoss and Little Joe for some high falutin’ R&R following calving season.

After a few days residing here, it is easy to appreciate what a mind-altering experience Paws Up can be. A story told by general manager Terre Short, relates the experience of a CEO during his stay.

“On his first day here, he was complaining, ‘My Blackberry doesn’t work.’ But on Day 3, he took me aside to complain that something horrible had happened to him. He said, ‘I took a nap on the way to an activity.’ Short smiles. The story rings true in a resort where the staff is as eager to please as they were to hire on. Consider, says Short, that 2,100 people applied for the 150 positions.

The summer camp sense begins sifting into consciousness during the days and weeks before your arrival, as you customize your adventure, selecting activities from the online menu and in conference with the concierge. The list includes equestrian excursions, fly-fishing, river floats, ATV tours, shooting clays, water activities at an “annex” on nearby Seeley Lake, mountain biking, rappelling, geocaching and golf off-campus on a course “hidden” at the edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. That doesn’t include off-the-menu specials that can be cooked up with a bit of notice.

Of all the activities, shooting clays is as unusual as it is perfectly suited to the terrain. Assigned a guide or “caddy,” you are chauffeured to the Sporting Club outpost, then led along an exquisite 12 station “course” carved into a mature stand of Ponderosa Pines a hundred feet above the valley floor, where views of the Garnet Range are



“It’s set up to be shooter friendly, with the clays very hittable, so even a first-timer can have a good time.”

partridge as it zips out from an outcropping beneath you. The other, a beat or two later, streaks high across your field of vision like a dove or passing duck.

Even beginners have success, says Denruyter, “though it helps if you’ve grown up with a gun in your hands or played a lot of video games.”

Like championship golf, the experience depends on the creativity of the course designer. Andy Duffy, who designed the course for Paws Up, is the Jack Nicklaus of shooting sports, a 12-time national champion. Duffy describes his layout the way Nicklaus might describe a course:

“It’s set up to be shooter friendly, with the clays very hittable, so even a first-timer can have a good time,” he says. “But it’s also set up so the guy who has shot before will find it challenging.” His first time through the “course,” Duffy hit 95 percent of his targets. A first-timer would be thrilled to hit one in five.

While Paws Up features its well-publicized “glamping”—that’s glamorous camping—along the river, with thoroughly amenitized tents,

gourmet dining in a cook “shack,” a butler and a key to your private bathroom, a more “conventional” option remains a Cordillera-class log “cabin” in the woods. You access it, as well as most of your activities and the restaurants, with the golf cart assigned at check-in.

If you hadn't previewed Spa Town on the web site, you might do a double take when, on a misty morning stroll, you encounter this “encampment” of eleven impeccably appointed canvas tents on the fringe of the forest. While most spas create a serene mood by enveloping you with the piped in sounds of nature, at Spa Town this would be redundant.

Crickets, birdsong, bugling elk in the distance, a wild turkey call, the shushing of the wind, the muted timpani of rain on your canvas roof, the roll of thunder and crackling of lightning provide the accompaniment for your treatment.

Considering the resort's name, it shouldn't be surprising that spa treatments are available for your pets as well.

Time it right and a day's adventure climaxes with dinner on the deck of The Pomp restaurant at sunset, with a full moon rising over the resident herd of elk that dot the endless pasture. With a saddle blanket draped over your shoulders against the gathering chill, a glass of peppery pinot in hand, you might be willing to allow that the ambiance alone would have been sufficient salve for the senses.

But then, there is more—it seems there is always more here—as the server delivers your grilled bison rib eye, then caps the meal with an exquisite El Rey chocolate Moelleux torte with port wine whipped cream, and a hot chocolate shot of hazelnut cream angelica.



The interiors of the Spa Town tents are elegantly appointed.

Photo by Alan Rosenberg



HANGING ART GALLERY: FACE OF A CHANGING RESERVATION

If you'd wanted to hide an elegant latte-serving art gallery/coffee house, you couldn't have chosen better than this nondescript red brick building on the Flathead Indian Reservation. You'll find it a half-hour out of Missoula along U.S. Hwy 93 in the town of Arlee, pop. 600.

The success of the gallery, which showcases regional native and non-native art, not only provides evidence of the dramatic changes in the cultural landscape, but of the life of its owner, Denny Nault. The building once housed the notorious Log Cabin Bar with which Nault had his own personal history.

“It wasn't uncommon for a patron to be shot off his saloon stool,” particularly during the rough and ready Pow Wow days, says Nault, 70, a French-Indian (Metis) artist himself. He created the gallery as a cultural and alcohol-free oasis.

The old bar, he says, deserved its reputation.

“It had a concrete floor to bounce your head off when you got knocked off the bar stool,” Nault recalled. “The musicians protected themselves by playing within a wire cage. I remember having to fight my way in the door and fight my way back out the door.

“The priests and nuns in town were always praying that God would intervene.”

Those prayers were answered in 1987 during the July 4th Pow Wow days, when, during the fireman's pancake breakfast, the bar burned down to its cinder block shell. No one was injured.

“I like to think that God blessed this place with the fire,” Nault said. “It was a cleansing fire. All the ghosts went up in smoke.”

Today's customers, says Nault, reflect the diversity of the town. “We get the grumpy old men, the Jocko Valley hippies, pregnant women with kids, tribal members, ranchers and, lately, members of a Tibetan Buddhist spiritual community. We don't get the he-man young cowboys.”

The name Hanging Art alludes to the bad actors who patronized the bar, says Nault. “I was finishing up the interior walls when someone said, ‘Remember, you're going to be hanging art in here.’

“Without missing a beat, another fellow said, ‘That Art, he was always a no good son of a gun.’”

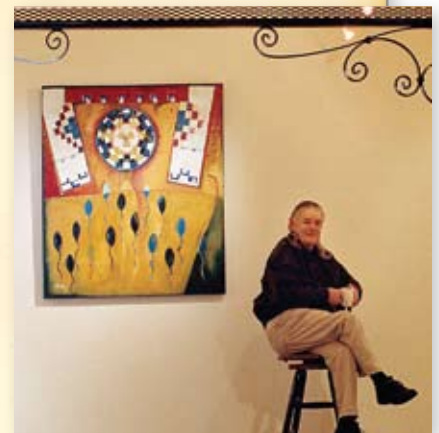


Photo by Alan Rosenberg

Comparing the Triple Creek Ranch to Paws Up is like comparing Grade A goose foie gras and Almas Beluga caviar. While the quality of resorts is comparable—as are the prices—the feel of the guest experiences is vastly different.

In contrast with the vastness of Paws Up, Triple Creek, selected by Travel & Leisure readers as the best hotel in the United States and Canada in 2008, provides a delicious sense of intimacy, with its 600 acres swaddled within the pristine forests of the Bitterroot Mountains. There's a concerted effort here—though the effort rarely shows—to make you feel utterly and unselfconsciously at home.

Finding the cupboards of your lavishly-simple cabin stocked with top shelf liquor that you are free to pour contributes to a sense of ownership, as does a visit to the guest lodge lounge before cocktail hour. The fact that the bartender isn't on duty doesn't mean the bar is closed. It simply means that you and your fellow guests are invited to mix your own, and each others', cocktails.

While the days at Triple Creek can be as plushly packed and programmed as at Paws Up, there's an unwritten invitation in the air to simply be, to lounge by the swimming pool or nap in a hammock, to drink in the sunset from a perch along a mountain trail.

That said, with the "freestone" Bitterroot River close by, an opportunity to fly fish with guide Rick Thomas, owner of Fly Fishing Always, is not to be passed up. Floating in a raft with Thomas and his trusty "boat dog," Bodee Lee, a 4-year-old schipperke, you experience a tame stretch of river that's a softer and more genteel counterpoint to the raw muscularity of this wild country.

Unusual for conditions that remain conducive to fishing even toward the end of a hot summer, the Bitterroot, says Rick, is a better bet year-round to catch a trout than most other Montana rivers.

While advising a client to "drop" the fly into the foam line—a "conveyor belt" of food for fish feeding beneath it—Rick talks of the time he guided Bill Gates and his wife Mellissa down this same stretch of water.

"Rick," he'd say, 'I keep doing this but nothing is happening.' And I kept telling him, 'Bill, if you keep doing that, something will happen.' Pretty soon the fish came up and ate his fly, and he was right on it. First fish, he landed it. He was just very intense."

“Don't bother me when I'm ridin' herd. I ain't no souvenir collectin' tourist. I'm a cowboy.”





Photo by Alan Rosenberg

The success of Gates' trip was evidenced by the fate of the three computer magazines he had brought along "in case he got bored." After landing three trout, Gates noticed the magazines soaking at the bottom of the boat, happily unread. "I guess I'm going to have to replace those," Gates said to me, and then he went on fishing.

Of all the activities offered at Triple Creek, nothing captures the romance of the range better than playing cowboy on a cattle drive on the nearby 28,000-acre Sula Peak Ranch.

Only it's not playing, make-work or make-believe. Ranch manager John Thomas needs to rotate his pastures to prevent overgrazing. And if he couldn't convince resort guests that this was a neat way to spend a vacation, he'd have to hire extra hands.

As a coyote lopes through the ankle-high grass and a red-tailed hawk cuts circles through a high unblemished sky, a half dozen tenderfeet, along with a couple of Triple Creek wranglers, saddle up to do a day's work.

"We're gonna take these cows and push'em north, a couple of drainages over," ranch manager Thomas instructs this day's crew. "A calf wanders off, you have to chase after, cut it and get it



HATS OFF TO JIMMY

If being a cowboy isn't enough and you insist on looking like one too, Jimmy the Hat Man has you covered. If you miss him making rounds at Triple Creek measuring heads and taking orders, you can mosey into town to his Double H Hat Company shop. (www.doublehats.com)

Talk about the real deal. A bull-riding rodeo cowboy in his younger days, the 55-year-old Jimmy Harrison left an insurance job to make the kind of hats he once routinely shaped for himself and his wild and woolly rodeo friends. (He quit bulls for good when, at age 40, he was showing his sons his moves, got thrown and put a split in his pelvis.)

These days the closest Jimmy comes to adventure is when he mists the beaver felt hats with alcohol and sets off a quick-burning inferno to singe off the loose hairs.

The four dozen or so hats in the shop are display models. If you ask, he'll show you a picture of another one, a bright yellow hat that, except for the outrageous color, is a duplicate of the one John Wayne wore in the movie, "The Shootist." A customer from the East Coast ordered it to complete an all-yellow ensemble for TV commercials he was doing for his company.

Jimmy smiles and shakes his head. "I'm sure the Duke turned over in his grave."



ABOVE: City-slickers experience a real cattle drive at Triple Creek Ranch.

BOTTOM LEFT: Guide Rick Thomas and his dog Bodee Lee help Ranch guests land trout on the Bitterroot River.

Photo by Alan Rosenberg



MONTANA LAKE LODGE: THE ULTIMATE IN EXCLUSIVITY

It's hard to imagine a resort more exclusive or private than the Montana Lake Lodge, an 18,000 sq. ft. log and stone mansion on a small island in Salmon Lake, a pristine pool beneath the soaring slopes of the Swan Range.

Since management books the lodge to only a single party at a time—whether that's a group or a couple—you always have the place entirely to yourself. The level of service and the degree of privacy is up to you.

In fact, while you can request a butler and chef to be on the premises and at your beck and call 24/7, you can also “vote” the help off the island and choose to have your solitude, says Jane Fisher, the general manager and chef.

With or without staff on hand, you do have the run of the resort, with access to a fleet of watercraft in which you are invited to paddle out in the shimmering moonlight. And a refrigerator and cupboards you're welcome to raid in your pajamas. (You can have it stocked with whatever you'd like.)

Working with Jane, your experience is entirely customized, including on-island massage and spa treatments, lake cruises or off-island guided back-country fishing and hiking in summer and dog-sledding and snowmobiling in winter.

While the University of Montana, into whose possession the lodge fell years ago, resists marketing the resort's back story, scrapbooks reveal a tale worthy of a Shakespearean tragedy.

When Bruce Vorhauer, a star-crossed research scientist, built the island retreat 28 years

ago, he named it Anuka, the Blackfeet Indian word for the source of his sudden wealth. Anuka means today. And Today was the now-infamous brand name of the contraceptive sponge he put on the market in 1983. When the stock in his company rose from 40 cents a share to a high of \$26, he became an instant multimillionaire. Spending his money with abandon, he bought the island and built his retreat.

Soon, however, reports linking the contraceptive to toxic shock syndrome took a heavy toll on his bottom line, and Vorhauer, who had also poured money into a failed candidacy for the U.S. Senate, found himself running head long off a financial cliff.

His personal life wasn't going any better. Driving on icy roads in the area, he lost control of his Jeep Wagoneer. His fiancé, for whom he claimed to have built Anuka, was killed.

A few years later, unable to make payments on a yacht—it had once belonged to actress Julie Andrews—Vorhauer torched it to collect the \$1.3 million insurance. Bankrupt and facing arson charges, Vorhauer ended his life in 1992.

One of Vorhauer's creditors, who obtained it at auction, donated the property to the University.

“Our guests,” says Fischer, “are writing the latest volume in the Vorhauer saga.”

While most guests arrive by car, shuttled from the shore by boat, or hovercraft once the lake freezes, you're welcome to drop in the way Vorhauer preferred, landing his helicopter on the 40-foot illuminated pad just out the back door.

moving. You see a bulge in the herd, ride over and push it back.

“The horse,” he explains, “is the intimidator. You want to go nice and easy, keep the pressure on the calves and these first-time mamas out there.”

Though the yearlings can “run like elk,” a drive isn't about speed. Moving fast on a hot summer day, a cow can lose 50 pounds.

While some of the guests are experienced riders, a few have logged but a few hours in the saddle. After a while, however, the distinction isn't noticeable. And Thomas is right when he says, “Your horse knows what to do and he'll teach you.”

“Besides,” chips in John, a Triple Creek wrangler, “when you get busy and all you're thinkin' about is pushin' cattle around, the ridin' becomes second nature.”

About the time you no longer feel self-conscious hollering for the doggies to “Git along,” wrangler John slips a digital camera out of his saddlebag to take the requisite memory-capturing photos. “Aw heck,” you feel like saying as you wrestle your horse around to pose, “Don't bother me when I'm ridin' herd. I ain't no souvenir collectin' tourist. I'm a cowboy.” 