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HOME *on the* RANGE

Unleash your inner cowboy at America’s most decadent dude ranch.

WORDS MARK SISSONS • **IMAGES** THE RANCH AT ROCK CREEK



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Tales of life in America's Old West have long captivated the imaginations of city slickers. Cowboys, Indians, wagon trains and cattle drives all form part of the mythology that emerged from the taming of that great expanse of wilderness. Among classic frontier settings, Montana

(Spanish for 'mountain') holds special pride of place. In Big Sky Country, it's all about going big or going home.

Montana may not be the geographical centre of the US, but it has always been at the sentimental heart of cowboy culture. That might explain why part way through my three-day stay at America's most decadent dude ranch, I start to feel at home on the range. Somewhere between learning to ride a trusty steed named Whisky, piloting a snowmobile along a snow-packed riverside trail, and unloading my AR-15 semi-automatic rifle's 30-round clip into a snowy hillside, I also begin to feel like a real Montana frontiersman, albeit an indulged one.



A DREAM RUNS THROUGH IT

In 2006, New York-based investment banker James Manley also succumbed to the call of Montana's wild. After an extensive search of more than 500 properties, this lifelong Old West aficionado finally found his dream spread – 6,600 breathtaking acres of mountains, meadows, forests, ponds and a blue-ribbon freestone trout stream blanketing the verdant valley between Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks. With the help of Santa Fe-based interior designer Jet Zarkadas, James set about transforming his acquisition into the epitome of frontier chic – think Ralph Lauren meets *Gunsmoke* – and named it after the sparkling waters of the river that runs through it.

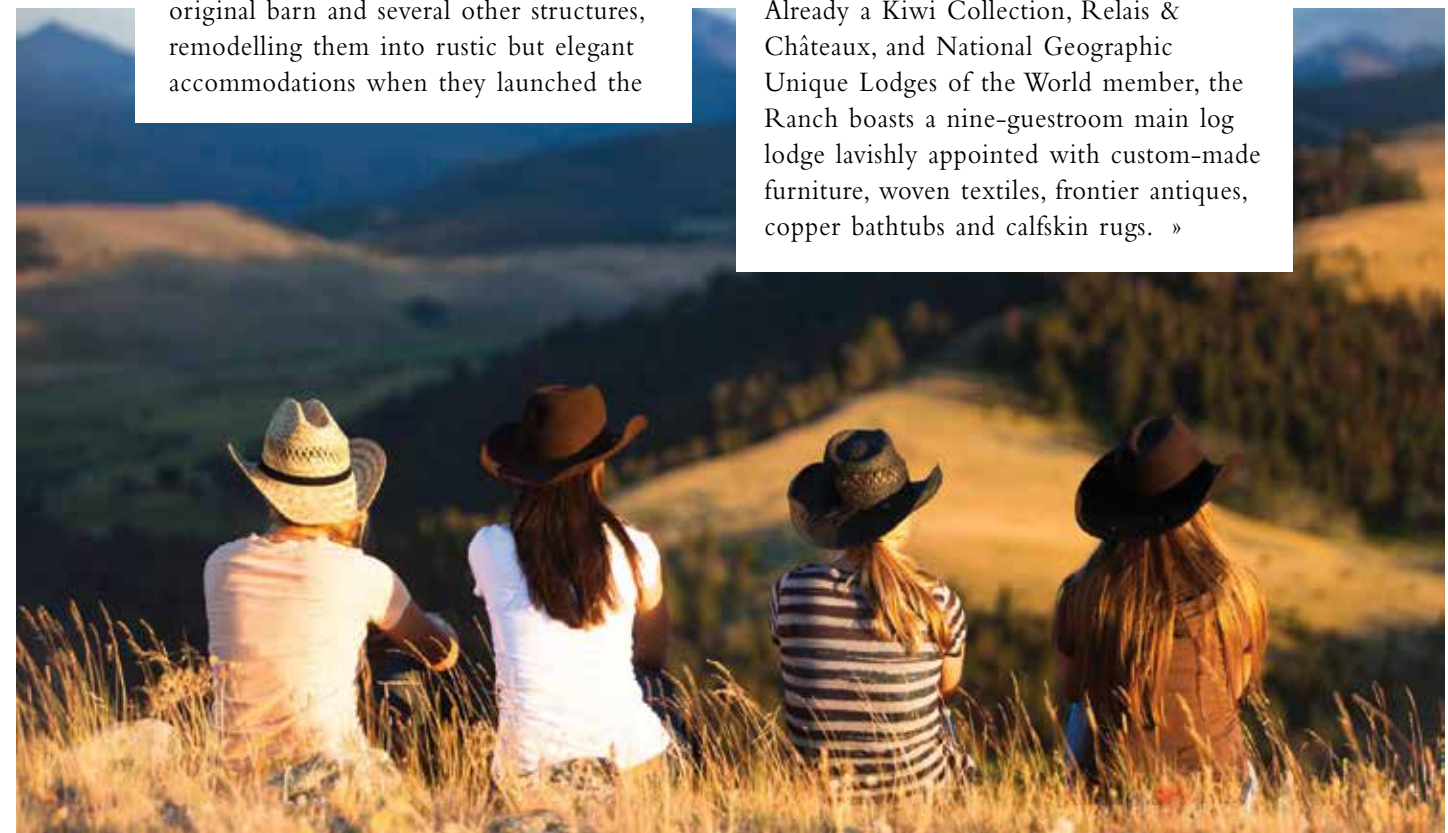
The Ranch at Rock Creek was originally a mining claim during Montana's silver boom of the late 1800s; nearby Granite Mill was the state's largest silver producer. By the turn of the century, the land had been homesteaded, and has operated as a working cattle ranch ever since. Manley and Zarkadas preserved the original barn and several other structures, remodelling them into rustic but elegant accommodations when they launched the



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property in 2010 as an all-inclusive slice of pioneer paradise, complete with all the luxurious spurs and whistles a modern-day cowboy or cowgirl could want.

Their efforts have paid off handsomely. Already a Kiwi Collection, Relais & Châteaux, and National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World member, the Ranch boasts a nine-guestroom main log lodge lavishly appointed with custom-made furniture, woven textiles, frontier antiques, copper bathtubs and calfskin rugs. »





Six self-contained log cabins, three suites in the remodelled nineteenth-century barn, and nine riverside canvas ‘glamping’ tents heated by stoves that can toast the chilliest Montana winter round out the luxe accommodation. Each suite is unique in design and character, and all offer inclusive amenities ranging from in-room dining to personalised activity plans.

INDULGENT FRONTIERSMAN

This brings me to the real reason I came to the Ranch at Rock Creek – the outdoor activities. I’m not an avid outdoorsman, nor am I entirely comfortable on horseback, let alone in a gunfight. But that’s the fun of staying at the Ranch – you get to play Wyatt Earp one moment and *True Grit’s* Rooster

Cogburn the next. Even in the dead of winter when I arrive, there’s plenty to do to keep me from succumbing to cabin fever. Choices include the aforementioned snowmobiling, horseback riding and target shooting, plus cross-country skiing, pond skating, ice-fishing to catch kokanee salmon, snowshoeing, and even downhill skiing at Discovery Ski Area, a half-hour drive away. The Ranch stocks all of the cold-weather riding, skiing and sledding gear and equipment you need during your stay for use at no extra charge.

In the end, it’s the guns that get me. Staffed by a pair of Iraq war vets, the Ranch’s skeet and rifle ranges stock enough ammo to arm a survivalist militia. Despite my quintessentially Canadian abhorrence of America’s gun culture, I soon find myself gleefully blasting away. Marksmanship, along with other winter wilderness survival skills like fire starting and shelter building, are part of the Ranch’s signature Indulgent Frontiersman getaway. Designed to ‘embrace the fortifying beauty of a Montana winter with all the vigour of a nineteenth-century frontiersman’, this all-inclusive package, inspired by the real-life Montana exploits of *The Revenant*



protagonist Hugh Glass, lets you choose your own four-day adventure with the reassuring knowledge that you’re never far from five-star comfort.

HIGH-END HOEDOWN

After the survival training is complete and the cattle and horses are fed and watered, the Ranch takes a decidedly decadent turn: first with craft seasonal cocktails and hors d’oeuvres around the Granite Lodge’s bar, then with multi-course dinners in the adjoining dining room where chef Josh Drage creates world-class farm-to-table fare that deliciously reflects Montana’s seasonal bounty. Employing a wood-fire grill and a Dutch oven in his state-of-the-art kitchen, Alaskan-born Josh serves up hearty fare like Montana elk rib-eye with cherry, watermelon and fennel salad, beer-braised pork with figs and melted leeks, and locally sourced beef burgers and quinoa-cauliflower salad. The wine list is as world class as the chequered-curtain and tablecloth decor is *Bonanza*. As I sip my merlot, I half expect patriarch Ben Cartwright to strut into the room looking for Little Joe.

Post dinner, Ranch guests can mosey over to the nearby Silver Dollar Saloon for a nightcap, bellying up to the bar seated on stools made from leather saddles to sip whisky-and-ginger-beer Montana Mules in copper mugs. The Silver Dollar also has a four-lane bowling alley, 14-foot



HD video screen playing classic westerns, and even a karaoke machine.

But this being Saturday night, I head to the weekly country-and-western dance in the Buckle Barn. The hard stompin’ hoedown kicks off with ranch-style gourmet food like organic beef meatloaf and white barbecue chicken, washed down with local brews like Moose Drool and Otter Water. Then Shodown, the house band, gets the party started, belting out classic country tunes that get guests and staff line dancing. Stepping outside between sets to catch my breath, I find myself beneath the most brilliant canopy of stars. Tonight, I’m right at home on the range in Montana’s Big Sky Country, where even an urban cowboy’s dreams can still come true. ■

That’s the fun of staying at the Ranch – you get to play Wyatt Earp one moment and True Grit’s Rooster Cogburn the next.

Rooms from US\$1,800 per room per night in Granite Lodge (plus taxes), based on a winter four-night Indulgent Frontiersman Package. theranchatrockcreek.com

