

The Province

TRAVEL

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Giddy Up

The Ranch at Rock Creek a childhood dream come true

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One of 70 horses that help deliver an authentic experience at The Ranch at Rock Creek in Montana. — SHANNON MELNYK/SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

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Amy the wrangler is capable of helping would-be horse riders of any age or skill level. — PHOTOS: SHANNON MELNYK/SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

Ranch time and the livin' is easy

Sprawling Montana property a childhood dream come true for founder and guests

SHANNON MELNYK
SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

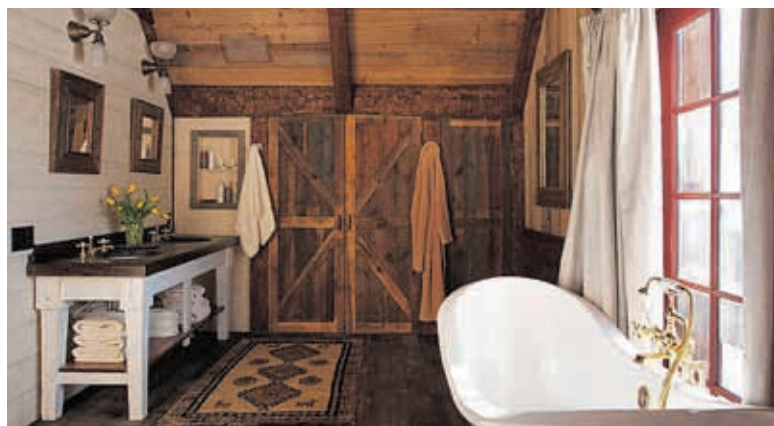
I come from farm stock. My dad rode a horse to school and over 85 years ago, my grandmother's childhood job was to take a horse and cart into town to sell jugs of her family cows' cream. Ridin', shootin' and fishin' are in my blood, but I was raised as a city girl. You can take the girl off the prairie, but that girl by the age of 10 was begging her daddy to go to horse camp. My mother would say I should marry a cowboy, but I just wanted to be one.

Unrequited childhood dreams have a way of manifesting themselves into adult reindeer games. When I discovered there was a pristine playground where I could play Calamity Jane, heroine of the Plains, and where there also happened to be five-course offerings of bison, Nea Bay sablefish and Mannix Ranch

beef — not to mention full-service spa treatments including “the saddle sore soak” — I made a beeline for The Ranch at Rock Creek. Surrounded by the sweeping Anaconda-Pintler mountain range of Montana, the wrangler refuge is 2,670 hectares of endless meadows, lakes and streams where big sky buckaroo fantasies come true.

Childhood dreams are what made this Buffalo Bill meets Relais & Chateaux guest ranch what it is today. Connecticut Financier Jim Manley grew up on television westerns. Little did I know it took a 20-year, 500-property search and his dedication to the right blend of historical authenticity and luxury to entice my inner-cattle herder to visit this family-feel estate.

The magic of what he's created here may have started with a dream and a dream property with miles of meadows, rivers and graz-



The loft of a 1900s historic barn is one of The Ranch's room choices.

ing moose, but it's the charm of the hired homesteaders that make The Ranch a kind of bridle and bit sanctuary that lingers long after the boots are unpacked and put away. It seems everyone here has a bit of

a Gypsy past and a story to tell with ease and familiarity.

Manley himself is caught literally skipping down a road with guests. He is unembarrassed and playful. Later, at a casual Blue Canteen din-

ner, I sidle up to the owner, a big kid who's bent on getting one of his guests to belt out a tune later on at the Silver Dollar Saloon. “How often do you get out to The Ranch?” I ask. “Every excuse I can make,” Manley grins suggestively.

Guests have their choice of a luxe barn loft, cottages, canvas tent cabins right on Rock Creek (despite the name, no roughing it required), or the cozy, convenient lodge life in rooms named for the historic Derringer or Winchester firearms or Appaloosa and Mustang horses of the American West. Even the tack room is straight out of an Architectural Digest spread. The relative all-inclusive experience has the distinct sense of timelessness; the endless amount of activities that include everything from rodeo riding and shooting — to paintball, fishing and hiking — are unscheduled and at your leisure.

At the Rod & Gun Club, I suit up and get some fly fishing 101 before hitting the river. Patrick is a gentle giant of a wade angler who can tell a good fish yarn or two, tends to favour a chubby Chernobyl for bait and admits to being superstitious about bringing bananas around the river. "Potassium scares off the trout," he says. He hooks me up with a royal sparkle caddis and a flashback hare's ear for lures and shows me how to finesse a rod. Within seconds of casting into Rock Creek, I manage to snag two colourful cutthroat trout. Patrick helps me catch and release them back into the waters of the only state in the US that guarantees a wild, un-stocked population of fish.

An Annie-get-your-gun session was high on my must-dos as a rare opportunity, considering a historical ranch is about the only place firearms could be deemed politically correct. Pistols, revolvers and rifles, oh my; it's not often you get to feel the weight of a single barrel semi-automatic 20 gauge Beretta or brag about the recoil bruises on your arm from learning how to shoot white flyer clays. Philip, my skilled and patient firearm aficionado, gave me the expert instruction I need to nail one.

But the biggest rush comes out of horsing around: I am summoned by happy, open trails as well as the arena, where a big old chocolate boy named Beau is my amiable companion under the blue Montana skies and kindly makes me look like a born barrel racer and pole bender. Wranglers Amy and Emily are cowgirls that can give any age or skill level rider an authentic experience in a western saddle.

Late afternoon has burley Belgians Coke and Crown giving us a leisurely wagon ride to the Granite Lodge, where both international and organic local creations dreamt up by executive chef, Josh Drage, arrive with carefully chosen wine accompaniments. By evening, guests mingle together outside under the stars to make s'mores at the fire pit, or head to the Saloon to drink, bowl, shoot pool or, as Manley seems to favour, hitting a happy note at Karaoke. The cowboy dreamer manages to pin down the guest from the night before for a duet of I Knew You When by Billy Joe Royal. This big-city banker come ranch king, he gets his way. And when it comes to his dream to create perfection in the middle of nowhere, Montana? For this, I am glad.

How to be a cow whisperer

A close encounter of the bovine kind is highly likely in the Wild West: there are 2.6 million cows in the state of Montana, outnumbering people two-and-a-half to one. But it wasn't until two other guests and I were swarmed by about 30-plus head of cattle that I realized their continuing approach met with a bit of urgency; their sheer size and rather serious expressions revealed there wasn't a lot of time to debate whether they were just curious or looking for a turf war.



A morning at the shooting range aiming at white flyer clay can lead to recoil bruises. — PHOTOS: SHANNON MELNYK/SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE



Every detail in the decor in the Granite Lodge, left, tells a story of the region. The Silver Dollar Saloon, right, is a favourite gathering place.



My reaction? I started talking, gesticulating, and yelling at them individually to vamoose. "You! Get, get, get!" "You — hit the road, Jack!" "Mooooove along!" — a spontaneous cattle run without the benefit of horses.

It seems their English was impeccable as we ran them off and congratulated our city slicker selves. But did

we do the right thing? According to The Ranch at Rock Creek Wrangler Rich Miller, the staring contest was commonplace. "I would have done the exact same thing", Miller says. "The mamas aren't going to hurt you or chase you. Even when we have the doctor come out to check on the babies, the mom just stands nearby. We've had hiking guides who feel like

the cows are following them or chasing them, but they're just curious and want to check you out."

If you go

Vancouver to Seattle with a connection to Missoula via Alaska Air

The Ranch is about a 35-minute drive from Missoula. Pick up available upon request. Three-night stay minimum. Rates are all-inclusive of accommodations, on-ranch activities, meals and bar beverages. Spa treatments and special requests rates apply. www.theranchatrockcreek.com