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THE RANCH AT ROCK CREEK

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FOUR DAYS IN HEAVEN

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I've spent the last four years in my living room on Sunday nights ogling the beautiful cinematography of the Paramount+ streaming hit Yellowstone, yearning to be in the midst of those stunning landscapes. So when the chance came to sample some of Montana's beauty in person this past spring at a five-star resort called the Ranch at Rock Creek, I did not hesitate.

It was late May when my husband and I flew from Southern California to Missoula, Montana—not an easy feat in these times of understaffed airlines and overbooked flights. Even though we ended up arriving in Missoula a day later than we had planned when we left our house at 3:00 a.m. to catch a 5:45 a.m. flight, the staff at the Ranch at Rock Creek had us covered. One of the friendly staff employees picked us up at our hotel the following morning, and we headed out on the 90-minute trek to the Ranch near Philipsburg.

The contrast between the dry, brown hills of Southern California with the lush green mountains covered with pines and flowing creeks along Interstate 90 was our first clue we were now in a very special place.

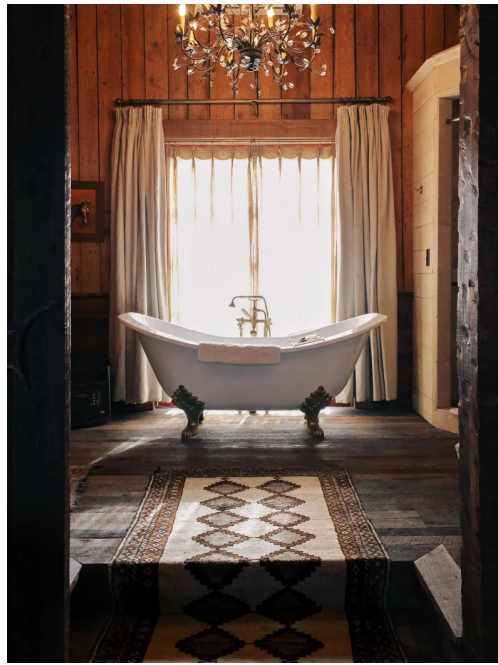
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When we arrived on the ranch, the soothing energy of this ranch resort was immediately apparent. Located in a green valley surrounded by pine-covered hills, the scene was idyllic. The smell of crisp air was intoxicating as we left the car and walked up the path to the Granite Lodge, the main building on the ranch located at the top of a rise overlooking the rest of the ranch. Built and decorated in the style of the great National Park lodges, the Granite Lodge is surrounded by an aspen-lined courtyard and flagstone path that leads to the Silver Dollar Saloon (featuring actual saddles for bar stools), a spa and a mercantile. When we stepped inside the lodge to check in, we found ourselves surrounded by custom-made furniture, woven textiles and frontier antiques, all providing a warm, western feel.



We stayed in the Wrangler suite, located in the Historic Barn, the original homestead building on the ranch, built in the late 19th century and renovated to accommodate three guest rooms. We were thrilled when we saw the rustic furniture, log bed posts and old western photographs carefully placed on the walls in the Wrangler. This original Historic Barn structure once housed a stable, tack room and hay loft, and our room was originally where saddles and harnesses were stored. The porch just outside our front door offered views across the lush meadow. We could hear the sounds of Rock Creek murmuring in the distance.

Once we settled in, it was time for lunch at the Buckle Barn. A short walk from our room, the 5,500 sq. ft. dining venue and event barn boasts a modern kitchen and a wood fire grill. The custom-built grill facade is made of repurposed John Deere tractor parts, and the interior dining hall had the same warm, western feel we saw at the Granite Lodge and in our room.

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City Chop sandwich, Montana wagyu beef burger, fresh salad and more. Sourced from local farms, the ingredients were fresh and perfectly prepared.



Cows Galore

After lunch, it was time for our first activity. I had told our Ranch at Rock Creek hosts that I was an equestrian and wanted to have the full working ranch experience. While my husband went off to get a rifle shooting lesson, I was taken to the horse barn and arena just across from the Buckle Barn, and paired up with a grey Quarter Horse gelding named Fine China. Wranglers Rob and Hailey, who are father and daughter, and Bri, a wonderful horsewoman, informed me I'd be working some cattle with them in the arena.

I spent the next hour and a half in the arena with about 12 older calves and my instructors, learning how to single out a particular calf and move her away from the herd. Since calves like to stick together, separating one from the group and keeping her away for even a minute is no small task. My teachers were excellent, and because I've been riding since childhood and had done a little bit of cattle work in the past, I was quickly moving calves around.

Because Rob, Hailey and Bri thought I was doing well, they added some more cattle-moving exercises. As a group, we pushed the calves around the arena as a group, and then graduated to moving them around three barrels in a cloverleaf pattern.

By the time we were done, I felt like I'd had the most fun of my life. My teachers were upbeat and patient, and more than generous with compliments when I accomplished my goals. Of course, they had put me on a great horse, so I was destined to succeed.

Next, as part of the Ride Along With A Rancher activity offered by the Ranch, Rob, Hailey and I



Ranch's cattle.

The Ranch at Rock Creek has a working cattle operation, managed by Rob and Hailey, on 6,300 acres. We headed away from the resort buildings and toward the fenced pastures where the ranch cattle live. Our first stop was the cow and calf pasture. A number of the cows had young calves by their sides, and after Rob poured a bag of cow treats on the ground, mommas and babies all came running. Some of the cows were friendly and let me scratch them behind the ears as they nibbled on the treats.

As we admired the all-black cows and their calves, Rob explained that the Ranch's cattle are a cross between a Swiss breed called the Simmental and the popular beef breed, the Angus. They are bred for their meat quality as well as for their color because cows with black hides bring higher prices at market. The calves we were looking at had been bred using a variety of methods, including artificial insemination, embryo transfer and "live cover" (standard bull-on-cow action).

We next visited the heifers—young female cows yet to be mothers—and found them to be quite playful, running alongside the ATV as we sped through their pasture. Our cattle experience culminated with a trip to see the Ranch's three bulls. Although intimidating in appearance, they were actually friendly and docile.

After getting back to our room and washing up, we headed to the Granite Lodge for dinner in the beautiful, western-themed dining room. Our meal featured pecan-smoked ribs, chicken and seafood, made from regionally and locally sourced organic ingredients.

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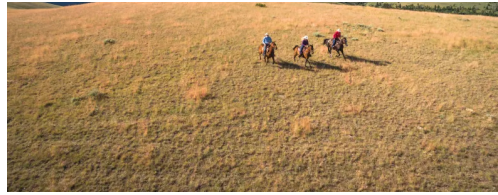
Our next day began with breakfast at the Buckle Barn, and included a number of tempting choices including ricotta blueberry pancakes, locally smoked bacon, a farm fresh egg scramble and as much coffee as you can drink.

After breakfast, we walked over to the barn for a trail ride. Bri met us there with a mustang named Noble ready for my husband, and I got up on Fine China once again. We headed out on a trail that ran alongside Rock Creek for a while, and then climbed up into the pine covered hills. We were treated with views of the valley below and snowcapped Rocky Mountains in the distance as we walked the trail for nearly two hours.

After our ride, we had lunch at the Buckle Barn and then strolled over to the Rod & Gun, a log building that houses the firearms, crossbows and fishing gear for Ranch guests. We were scheduled for a shotgun lesson, and met our instructor, Rich, who drove us up the hill to the Clays Range and a covered shooting stand.

I'd only held a shotgun once and was a bit intimidated by the gun, but by the time Rich had finished teaching me gun safety and the way to handle the weapon, I was shooting like a pro, taking down three of the five clay targets fired from launchers. My husband wasn't quite as adept as I was, and we had a few laughs at his expense.

After our shotgun lesson, we were scheduled for a cigar and spirits tasting on a nearby hillside, but the quickly changing Montana weather had other ideas. As the wind picked up and it began to rain, Rich drove us back to the Rod & Gun, where we found our tasting set up under the porch near a large stone fireplace. Here we sampled a Devil's Brigade Whisky, a Rock Creek bourbon aged in a barrel up on a nearby hill, and a Jefferson's Ocean Bourbon aged at sea. My husband paired the



After resting for a while in our room while the rain continued to fall, we hitched a ride from one of the ranch staffers up to the Granite Lodge for dinner. The menu was inspired by the cuisine Old West travelers would have experienced in a historic luxury train car, and featured chicken, beef and even elk.



Frontier Skills & Fly Fishing

After waking up in the beautiful Wrangler and then enjoying another wonderful breakfast at the Buckle Barn, we were excited for our morning activity: Frontier Skills. As we headed to the Rod & Gun to meet our instructor Jon, snow began to fall. Undaunted, Jon, my husband and I walked to the edge of the creek, where Jon showed us how to build a shelter using branches, explained that the most crucial elements of survival are shelter and water, and gave us pointers on how to keep from losing body heat when lost in cold weather. The wet snow made starting a fire impossible, but we learned the principles.

After resting in our room for a while, we headed back to the Buckle Barn for lunch and then back to the Rod & Gun for our flyfishing activities. I had only done rod-and-reel fishing as a kid, and my husband had never fished at all, so our instructors Harry and Mitchell had their work cut out for them.

My husband and I were given waders to put on—a first for both of us—obtained our mandatory fishing licenses, and then got into a vehicle with Harry and Mitchell to find a good spot along the creek for fishing. The sun was out now, and the snow had completely melted, turning the busy creek into more of a raging river. For safety's sake, we stayed close to the edge of the water and learned to cast our fly fishing rods—a very different method from rod-and-reel fishing. After a couple of hours, both my husband and I had caught some trout and whitefish, which we released back into the

moose, who was browsing on the other side of the creek.

Instead of returning to the Wrangler afterwards, we headed up to the lodge. Our late arrival meant we had to switch to a different room for our last night. I was happy to do so because it gave me a chance to see yet more of the Ranch's beautiful lodging. Our new room was on the second floor of the Granite Lodge. Called The Palomino, it featured a custom king canopy bed, antique horse-themed décor, and views of the nearby Sapphire Mountains.

Mining for Sapphires

We woke up in The Palomino, knowing it was our last day at the Ranch. As we headed to the Buckle Barn for breakfast, I took a good look around at the stunning beauty of the valley, sad I'd soon have to leave.

Snow began falling again as we walked to the Rod & Gun for our final activity: sapphire mining. The hills around the Ranch are filled with sapphire, and guests have the opportunity to find and keep sapphires they can pick out from soil taken from the mountains.

Because it was snowing, our activity took place under the Rod & Gun porch next to the stone fireplace. Our hosts provided washed piles of dirt on a table before us, and gave us instructions on how to sort the sapphires from the rest of the rocks. I found about five small sapphires and was able to keep them as a souvenir of our trip.

After lunch, it was time to head back to the Missoula airport. As we waited for our ride near the lodge fireplace, watching rain fall lightly outside, I knew I would never forget these four days at this incredibly special place.

Sidebar



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The Ranch at Rock Creek is open year-round and provides activities for all kinds of weather, including golfing, skiing, sledding, snowmobiling hayrides, biking, archery, hiking and more. The resort is located just outside the historic mining town of Philipsburg, Montana, the ranch is most easily accessed from the Missoula Montana Airport, and offers traditional lodging as well as glamping. -A.P.

theranchatrockcreek.com

Audrey Pavia is the author of 23 non-fiction books. She is an award-winning writer and editor living in Southern California, and a frequent contributor to Cigar & Spirits Magazine.

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