

TRAVEL ISSUE

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THE MOGULS' ROCKIES

CHRISTOPHER
BUCKLEY
IN HANOI

WORLD'S TOP FLY-FISHING LODGES

THE PERFECT
SUMMER SUIT

P.J. O'ROURKE BEEPS OUT

YOUR
HOLLYWOOD
GLAMOUR
PORTRAIT



Hidden
Tuscany

True WEST

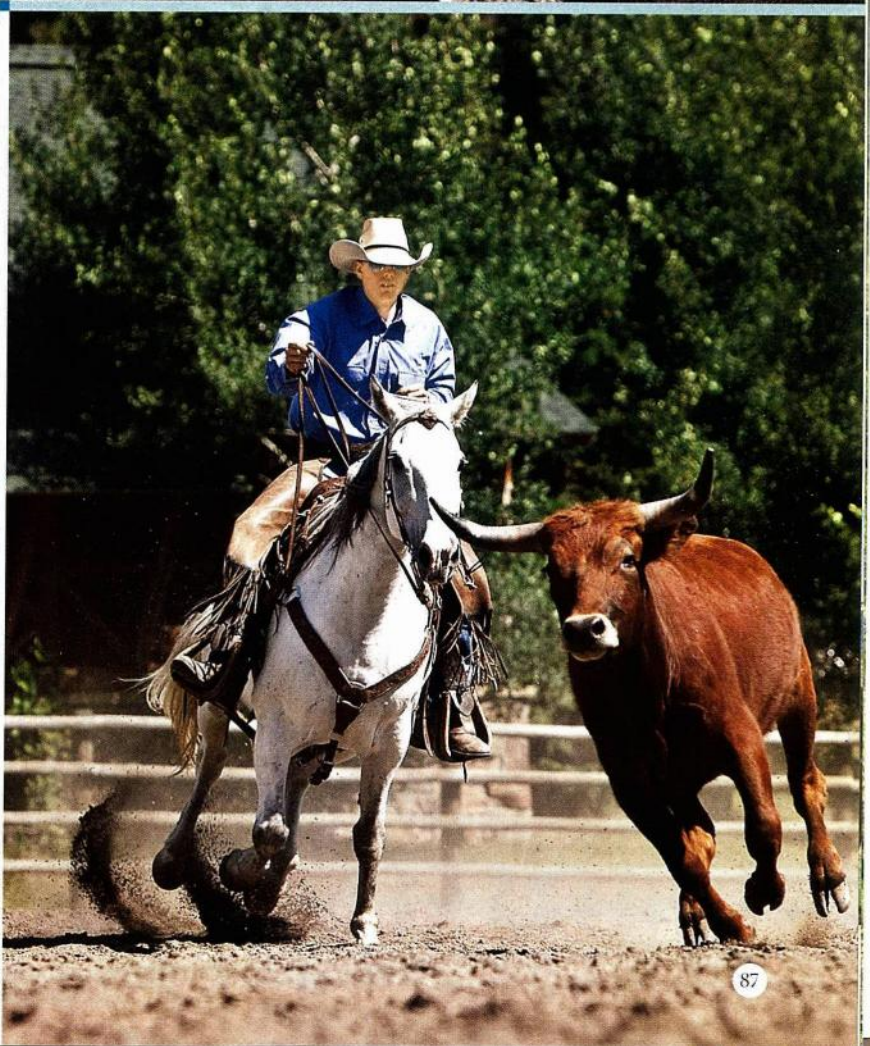
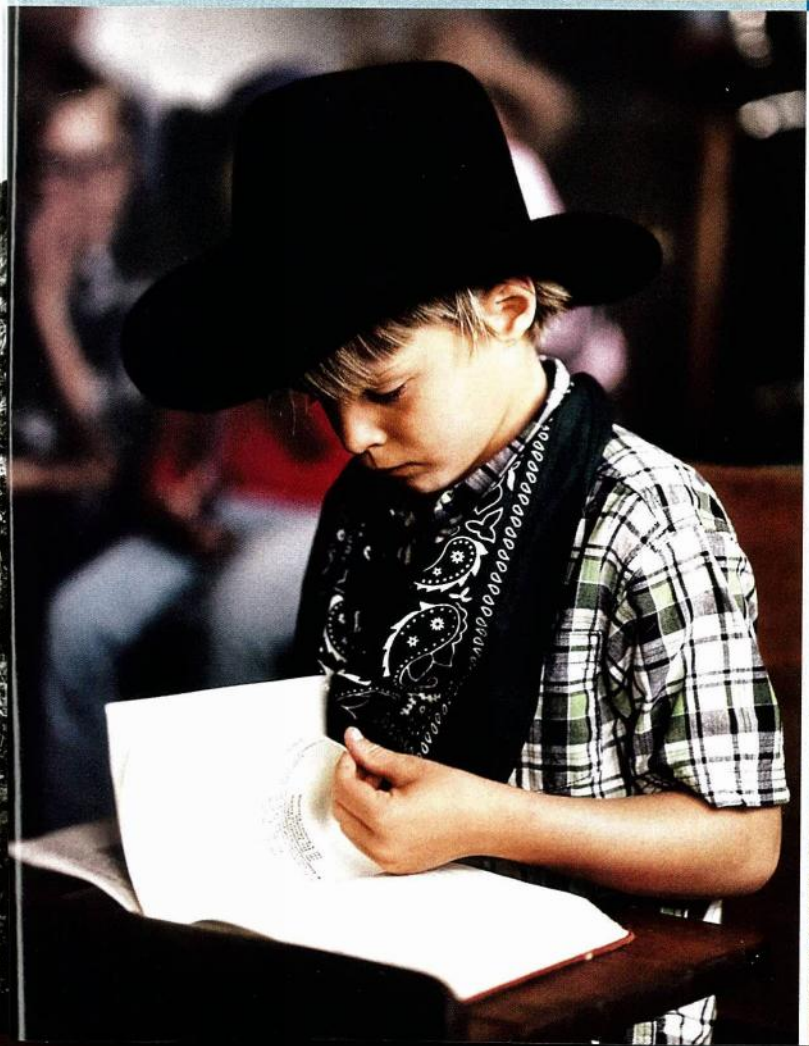
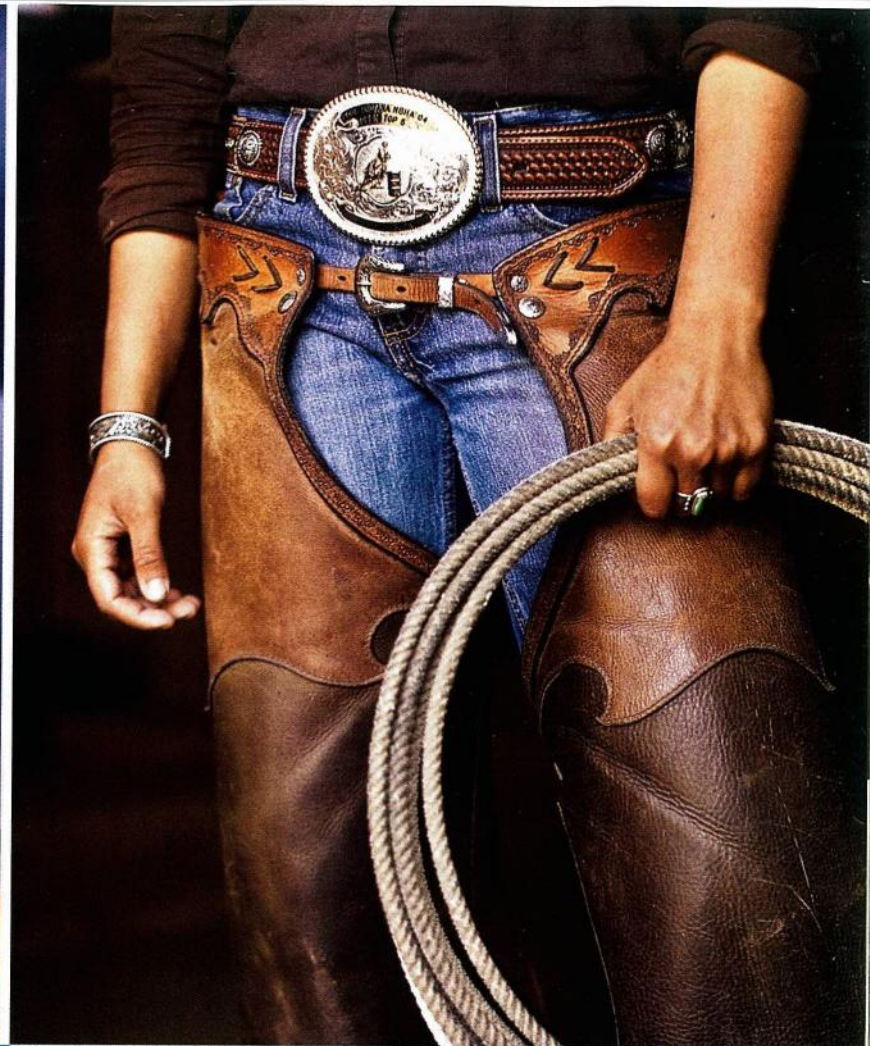
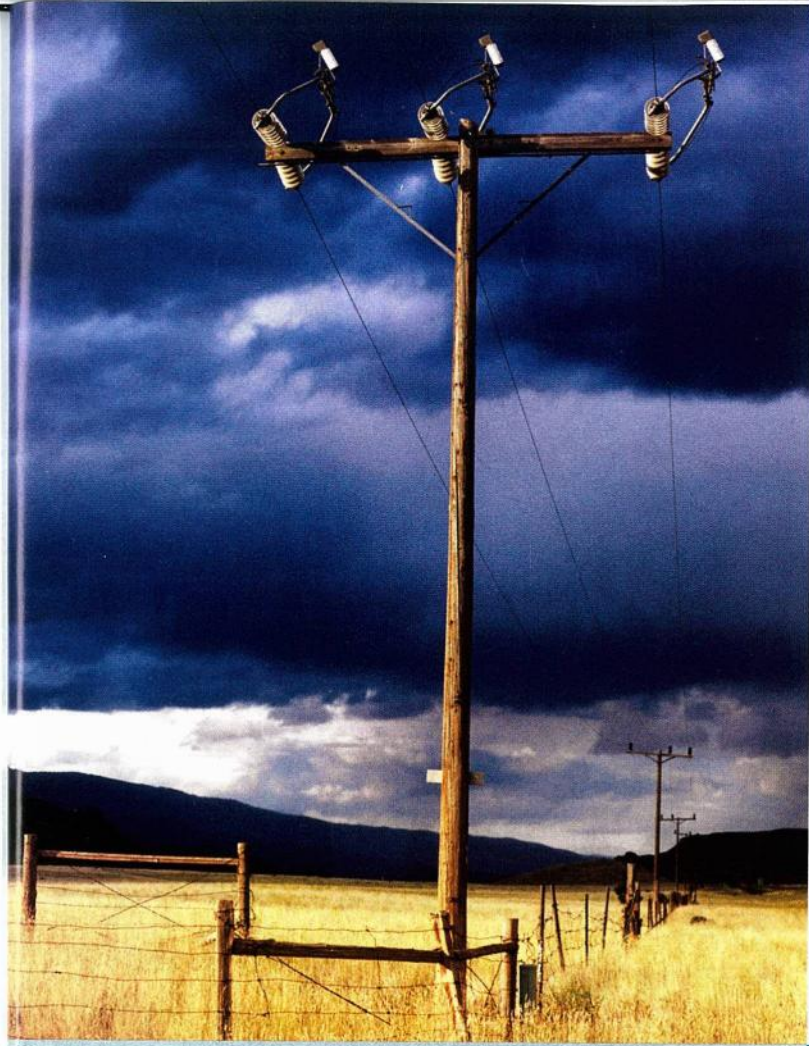
Three spare-no-expense Rockies dream ranches {By Ann Abel}

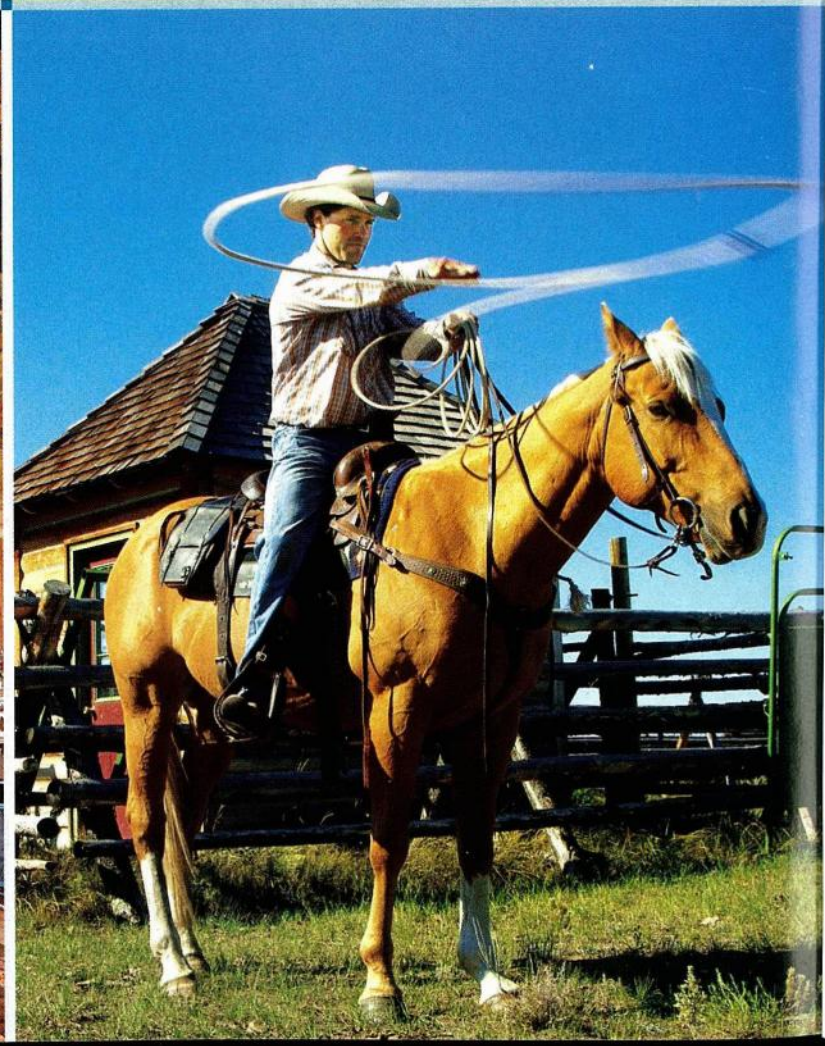
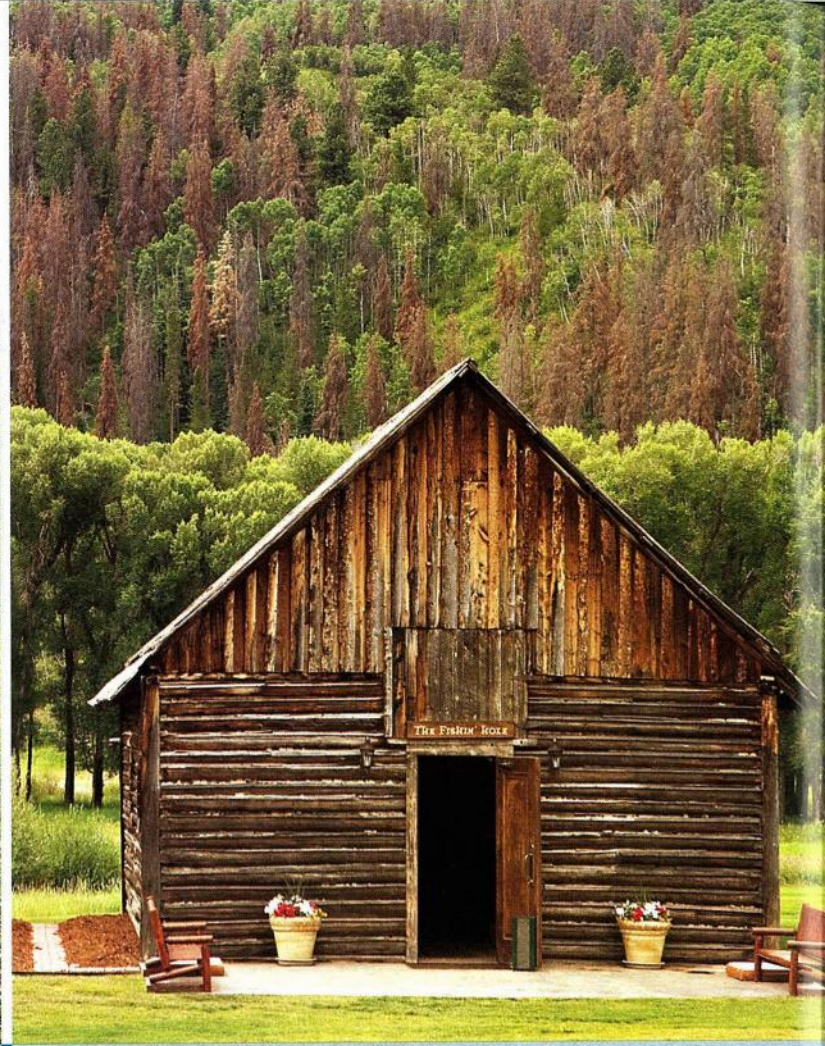
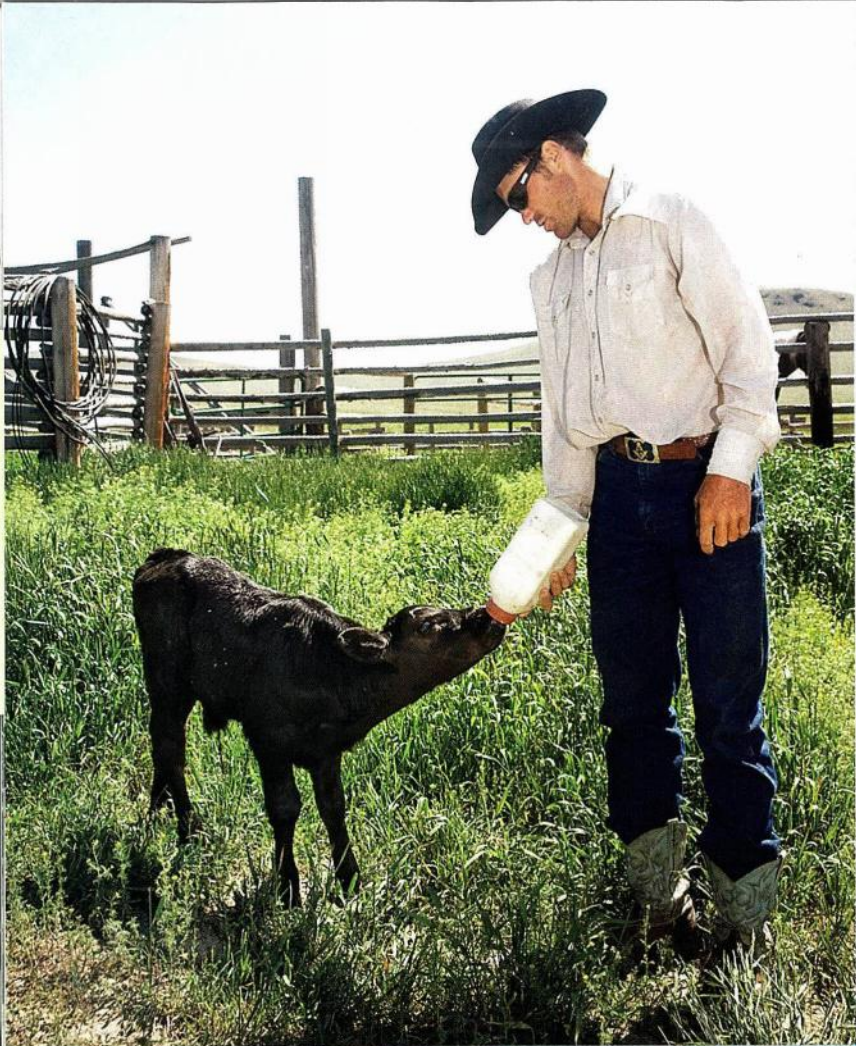
Call it the mild, mild West: the romance of the frontier intertwined with the comforts of wealth. Since at least the days of Teddy Roosevelt, affluent Easterners have gone back to the land in high style, buying ranches from New Mexico to North Dakota. Most keep their retreats for themselves, but others are willing to share. Their guest ranches range from rustic outposts where visitors herd cattle, to refined enclaves that could be displaced English manors. What the best have in common is a deep authenticity, a dedication to conservation and community, and the ability to transport guests not only to faraway locales but also back in time.



The view from Donahue Rock at Mountain Sky Guest Ranch. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The road to Mountain Sky; the staff uniform; Terance Eichhorn pens cattle; Mountain Sky campers at the ranch's historic Dailey School House.

PHOTOGRAPHS: NEALE HAYES





PHOTOGRAPHS, OPPOSITE: LYNN DONALDSON (CALF); KARYN MILLETT (CABIN);
MOTORGRAPHIC STUDIOS (HORSE); THIS PAGE, TOP: LYNN DONALDSON; CENTER: NEALE HAYES

When I arrived at J Bar L Ranch in southwestern Montana's Centennial Valley, manager Bryan Ulring doffed his hat in greeting.

Waiting for me in my cottage, a century-old homestead cabin beside a creek, was a plate of still-warm homemade cookies. Dinner that evening was simply prepared and shared with the ranch hands. I felt like I'd been invited into their home—this wasn't hotel-school hospitality but the genuine article.

Was it a remnant of the frontier days, when the harsh environment forced settlers to look out for one another? J Bar L is magnificently remote—22 miles from pavement, two hours from Idaho Falls, the nearest city. You can see 50 miles from one end of the valley to the other, and you're more likely to spot a wolf or an elk than another human being.

Since 2000 the ranch has belonged to Peggy Dulany, daughter of David Rockefeller, who spends three to six months here a year. (The rest of the time, she says, she's traveling for the Synergos Institute, the non-profit she founded to fight global poverty and social injustice.) She's put all 9,000 acres of J Bar L under conservation easement, and with the Nature Conservancy she cofounded the Centennial Valley Association, which helps ranchers and environmentalists find common ground.

J Bar L's cows eat only the native grass and are herded by people on horseback, rather than in trucks. The result is good for the earth and the cows, which score perfect zeros on stress tests at the butcher—one reason they produce uncommonly tender, flavorful meat.

About seven weeks each summer, the working ranch welcomes up to six guests at a time. Ulring and his wife, Libby, gave me the best horsemanship instruction I've ever had, then let me ride along to check on newborn calves and move cattle to fresh pastures. Sauntering across endless prairies, with snow-speckled mountains in the distance, was profoundly peaceful, and the old-fashioned physical work remarkably satisfying.

I'm not alone in that sentiment. Bryan Ulring says guests include "a lot of type A CEOs," many of them repeat visitors. Dulany hosts yearly retreats for the Global Philanthropists Circle, which includes some of the world's wealthiest donors. Throughout the summer, well-heeled guests saddle their own horses and eat steak with the cowboys, and discover that herding 400 cattle is good training for managing a business—and a heck of a lot more fun.



If playing cowboy at J Bar L was a singular experience, my stay at Mountain Sky Guest Ranch, in Montana's Paradise Valley, felt pleasingly familiar. It's the homey family camp of my childhood, but upscale—where Eloise would learn to ride a horse. The 31 spacious cabins are tricked out with wood-burning fireplaces and cushy beds, and owner Arthur Blank (co-founder of Home Depot and owner of the Atlanta Falcons) notes that while guests could afford to stay at a Four Seasons, sometimes they like creaky floors along with their creature comforts.

The atmosphere is unabashedly retro, and you get the feeling that little has changed since the ranch opened in 1929; the 1941 photo of the corral that hangs in the bar is proof. Everyone arrives on Sunday and departs the following Sunday, spending the days between on horseback and hiking trails. The week is punctuated with hayrides, sing-alongs, and a talent show. The energetic staff, which includes many long-timers who form lasting friendships with guests, refer to one another as "counselors." All visitors' photos are tacked to a bulletin board for reference, which hardly seems necessary since so many come the same week every year. (I met one guest on his 27th visit.) Every parent I talked to was having a ball because they knew their children were well looked-after and having fun.

It's this family-friendliness that led Blank to buy the ranch in 2002, several years after he first visited with his wife and their 2-year-old son. They fell in love with the place as he was preparing to retire from Home Depot.

Frontier fantasies: The dining hall at J Bar L (above); harnesses and hats at Mountain Sky (left); J Bar L owner Peggy Dulany at the ranch (bottom). Opposite, clockwise from top left: J Bar L cattle foreman Andrew Anderson feeds a calf; the Fishin' Hole at Three Forks Ranch, where anglers get suited up; Anderson shows off his roping skills; the great room at Three Forks Ranch.





Back in time:
The Old Saloon
(above) in Emigrant,
just a few miles
from Mountain Sky;
Mountain Sky ranch
hands Dennis
Dwyer, Jr., and
Dennis Dwyer (right)
and owner Arthur
Blank (below).
Opposite: Andrew
Anderson herds
a calf at J Bar L.

Based in Atlanta, he and his family now spend about seven weeks each summer at Mountain Sky, riding and eating with guests.

"A lot of personal growth takes place here," says Blank, who has also been involved with Outward Bound for 30 years, including three as chairman. "There are some of the same ideas at the ranch—teaching people they can push their limits and do more than they thought," like riding a horse or hiking an 8,200-foot peak.

He's serious about empowerment, and not just for guests who can afford the rates. Focused on youth development, the Mountain Sky Guest Ranch Fund has made \$2 million in commitments—a "pretty large percentage" of profits—to area charities. "Making a difference in people's lives is important to me," he explains, "whether it's for profit or not."

The experience at Three Forks Ranch, straddling the Colorado-Wyoming border, is decidedly more cossetting (and adults-only). That's especially true since the new lodge building opened in 2008, replacing the original, relatively rustic guest quarters, which are now rented just to hunters. The 15 guest rooms and public spaces are outfitted with baronial English paneling, Oriental rugs, and Chinese

porcelain, of all things, along with an impressive collection of vintage firearms and original Western art (including several Charles M. Russells). An 1866 Steinway grand piano sits under the 40-foot cathedral ceiling in the great room.

"My father wanted to create something people would never expect in this corner of the world," says Allison Pratt, Three Forks' marketing director. Her father, David, has spent more than \$100 million of the fortune he made from the 1999 sale of his agricultural-chemical company, United Industries, on the ranch. (He also became chairman of the outdoor-equipment company Gander Mountain, which may explain why Three Forks has such excellent gear.) "We wanted the lodge to be awe-inspiring, and not only from the exterior. When guests walk in the door, they're speechless."

That investment bought more than the building.

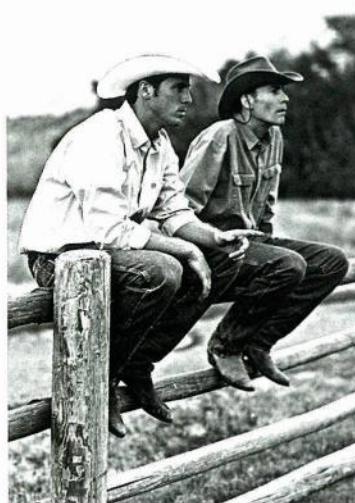
David Pratt, who lives in St. Louis and shuns media attention, purchased the 200,000-acre ranch in 1999 to raise cattle. Along the way, he discovered a river on the property that had been ruined by mismanaged agriculture. Working with the Army Corps of Engineers, he undertook an 18-month river-restoration project, the largest such privately funded endeavor in American history.

The ranch's 16 restored miles of the Little Snake River now boast some of the West's best trout fishing, and dedicated anglers have been returning for a decade. Hunters of elk, mule deer, and pronghorn antelope are even more devoted—there can be

a two-year waiting list during hunting season. The year-round repeat rate is 80 percent, but there's room for newcomers if they're flexible on dates.

Fancy new digs aside, the appeal here is intimacy. Managers dine with guests nightly (on local beef and impressively fresh fish and produce flown in daily). The three-to-one staff-to-guest ratio allows for spontaneity I've seldom encountered; last winter, I arranged snowshoe and cross-country ski outings with 20 minutes' notice. (Dogsledding was worth booking in advance.) "Our guests are captains of industry who live a structured lifestyle," explains Allison Pratt. "Vacations shouldn't be about schedules and time frames."

They also appreciate the seclusion—and the fact that everyone is treated as a VIP. As Pratt puts it: "Our goal is to help guests tell the best stories." ■



ROUNDUP

J Bar L Ranch
406-684-5927,
www.jbarl.com

Mountain Sky
Guest Ranch
800-548-3392,
www.mtnsky.com

The Lodge and Spa
at Three Forks
Ranch
970-583-7396, www.threeforksranch.com

FYI
A top resource
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vacations
is Off the Beaten Path.
800-445-2995,
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