

HILUXURY

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Sarah Wayne Callies

This zombie-killing stunner struts this season's haute couture around O'ahu's North Shore, then talks about her island upbringing and much more.

Tahitian Turquoise

The Best of French Polynesia

Members Only

Fine Fare at Private Clubs

Along Came a Spider

Ferrari's Fierce 458

Take the Fall

Design Star Shares Décor Do's

Tee Tips

From Mauna Kea Golf Course



TRICKS OF THE TRADE

As told by Ranch at Rock Creek
General Manager Maja Kilgore

ROPING

Guests who want to learn to rope will begin with practice on a "cattle dummy." After this, you may be mounted on a horse and brought into the corral. Five young cattle are brought into the ring, where the basics of "riding" and "driving" cattle in front of horses are learned.

Phase two of roping includes cattle separation. Ranch hands will identify and separate one cattle from the group, and the fun begins.

BARREL RACING

The first lesson here is to be able to canter the horse in a collected manner, in small circles, around poles and barrels. When confidence builds in the rider, so does the speed. It's an exhausting skill to learn.

Roping

IN THE BIG SKY

Imbibing the Ranch at Rock Creek

BY ZACH EVERSON



Photo by Lynn Donaldson



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Gordon Gregory Photography



Photos courtesy The Ranch at Rock Creek

Clockwise: Guests at the Ranch at Rock Creek can watch seasoned ranch hands tackle the more intimidating cowboy games; but cattle drives, roping and other skills can be learned and enjoyed by anyone.

WAR EMBLEM. Curlin. Zenyatta. A thoroughbred racing enthusiast, I'm accustomed to horses with flashy names conveying speed, grace and power.

But saddling up for just my third time ever, the Ranch at Rock Creek's wranglers' experience leads them in a different direction when selecting my mount: Little Joe, whose previous rider was a young schoolgirl taking her maiden lesson. It seems a safe bet that Little Joe never sauntered up to the Kentucky Derby's starting gate.

Located in Western Montana, about a 90-minute drive from both Butte and Missoula's airports, the all-inclusive guest ranch's 6,600 acres include grassy ridges, alpine lakes and meadows to explore, as well as an arena for lessons. And with more than 50 horses, the Ranch at Rock Creek's stable can accommodate all skill levels, from tenderfoots like myself to veteran riders like my wife, who grew up competing on hunter jumpers. Nearby

luxury ranches The Resort at Paws Up in Greenough, Mont. and Triple Creek Ranch in Darby, Mont. offer similar experiences.

My wife's skill level means the ranch hands at Rock Creek are fine with her taking a horse off on her own, but she opts to join me on a guided ride instead. In a Western saddle aboard Lil John, a quarter horse, my two instructor guides, college-aged women who've been riding almost their entire lives, give me a needed refresher on basic horsemanship:

Hold both reins in one hand at waist level; to steer the horse, lift your hand in the direction you want to turn, laying the rein loosely across the horse's neck.

Put the balls of your feet in the stirrups with your heels down; that'll keep your foot from sliding through and help you position your legs on the horse's sides to stabilize the rest of your body.

Kick the horse with your boot heel to get him to pick up the pace, pull back on the reins to slow him down.



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The first two skills come easily; the last one proves tougher. Delivering a swift kick to a 1,000-pound animal I'm trusting with my wellbeing seems counterintuitive. An instructor points out that for my boot to even register with a beast that size, I've got to be forceful. By the end of my two-hour afternoon ride through rolling grassy meadows, I'm comfortable enough to speed up Lil John to a brief trot. (Afterwards, I resist asking how my performance compared to Lil John's morning rider.)

Horse-related activities at the Ranch at Rock Creek aren't confined to mere riding. Over a four-course dinner of fresh regional cuisine (the highlight of which was a hulking Montana Beef Ribeye "Two Ways" and hearty pours from the ranch's rather deep and spirited wine list), our 20-month-old daughter went on a stagecoach ride with the ranch's childcare provider. In the winter, the same horse-drawn sleighs cart guests wrapped in blankets, sipping hot chocolate across Big Sky Country's snow-covered landscape.

Visitors to the Ranch at Rock Creek typically pick both a morning and an afternoon activity, although there's nothing wrong with just sitting by the pond or a getting a signature "Saddle Sore Soak" at the Granite Spa. The next morning we arose in our tent (did I mention we were "camping?") If you can call a 630-square-foot, two-room Classic Canvas Cabin complete with gas fireplace, hardwood floor and 400-thread-count linens camping...—and proclaimed the "glamping" (glamorous + camping) trend as the best way to immerse in the elements with a side of refinement.



Ranch at Rock Creek makes sure guests have a “soft saddle” to land on after a day on the range, be it in the comforts of a luxury lodge or at the bar.



Photo courtesy The Ranch at Rock Creek

To further the good vibes, I surprised my wife by telling her that I’ve decided to forgo a chance to fly fish, hike or play paintball in order to get back in the saddle. (She then surprised me by choosing to fire pistols.) Rather than trying

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to pick up a new skill on this second ride though, I decided to get more comfortable on a horse. This trip was a bit more adventurous, navigating my steed up a narrow rocky path and riding along a ridge before descending a rolling green hillside dotted with grazing cattle.

Although this descent is as close to playing cowboy as I would get on this jaunt, more advanced riders can participate in group or private lessons in ranch roping, barrel racing and pole bending. At the not-to-be-missed weekly Tuesday rodeo, would-be cowboys can watch the ranch’s wrangling experts demonstrate various skills as well as ride bulls—all of which, even from the sidelines, builds quite the appetite. Thankfully, this event is preceded by a cookout with gourmet touches. Although you may spy the odd red-checked tablecloth, atop it can be found hand-crafted bison burgers, local ribeye steaks and a plethora of Montana microbrews.

With the horses parading out for their two-day rest, I would mingle over fine ranch fare with guests that arrived from as far the Netherlands, Austria and Saudi Arabia.

This came as less of a surprise after my chat with the Ranch’s owner, Jim Manley—over a rather tasty microbrew—

who also happens to own the boutique investment firm, Atlantic-Pacific Capital. He admits that he spent 25 years looking for the ideal locale, staff, builder and so forth before opening Rock Creek.

Before the sun set, I would find myself at the sporting clays course, knocking whizzing ceramic pigeons out of the big, blue sky.

Later that night I “saddle up” one last time at the Ranch at Rock Creek; on this occasion it’s in a far more familiar setting—a bar. At the Silver Dollar Saloon, guests sing karaoke, watch movies and bowl. Yet, with the recent memory of getting one-upped by someone one-fifth my age, I’m content to sit on one of the Western saddle-topped barstools, where it’s the tasty (if not a bit grizzled) Montana whiskey that is giving me the swift kicks. ♦

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