

{WEEKEND GETAWAY}

# SADDLE UP

*It's the Wild West with a luxe twist  
at MONTANA'S poshest ranch. BY ALLY DEAN*

I'm filled with a mix of excitement and dread as I head out on my first cowboy-worthy riding adventure. The large metal gate of Montana's Ranch at Rock Creek swings open, and I gently urge my horse, Kemosabe, an imposing black-and-white gelding, forward. As a fairly accomplished equestrian—I spent several years as a competitive stadium jumper growing up in Ontario—I'm embarrassed to say that I've never felt more uncomfortable on a horse. The handmade western saddle feels like a stiff couch beneath me, and the uneven terrain ahead has me wishing I were prancing around a ring in my Zara Phillips-esque show gear.

Thankfully, I'm not alone. Thomas and Maja Kilgore, both experienced riders and also the property's resident managers, are leading a small group of guests out to explore some of the ranch's 2,670 hectares of private meadows, forest and mountains.

"Why don't we canter up to the far ridge," says Thomas, who, along with Maja, is immaculately dressed in leather pants, a crisp white button-up shirt and a printed neck scarf.

"Sounds great," I say, surprised by my own bravado and acutely aware of my trembling hands as ▷

The Ranch at Rock Creek has 2,670 hectares of wilderness to explore; Ally Dean takes Spud out for a ride (right).



## HOME ON THE RANGE



The Trapper Tent  
canvas-and-wood cabin

**HEAD TO THE HOMESTEAD** You'll feel like you're on cowboy safari à la Ralph Lauren at this Relais & Châteaux property. Each of the western-chic guest rooms, log cabins, canvas cabins and barn suites is uniquely decorated, with touches like vintage furs and antler chandeliers. Sink into one of

the leather-backed chairs by the main lodge's fireplace, where your toughest decision will be choosing between the beer-braised pork with figs and melted leeks or the Montana elk rib-eye with cherry, watermelon and fennel salad.

**GO BEYOND THE BARN** Whether your outdoor prowess is minimal or more Katniss Everdeen, the range of activities—fly-fishing, hiking, skeet shooting, archery and cross-country skiing—might make you not want to get back on the horse.

**GET SOME R&R** The Granite Spa's unique treatments, such as the Fisherman's Facial, the Saddle Sore Soak and the signature Rock Creek Ritual (120 minutes of circulation-stimulating, muscle-relaxing, skin-soothing bliss), are the perfect break from a strenuous day on the ranch.



**WHAT TO PACK** Channel famed cowgirl Annie Oakley and fill your suitcase with a laid-back assortment of jeans, plaid shirts and chunky knits. If you forget anything, the Mercantile at the Ranch at Rock Creek has everything from embellished suede vests to cowboy boots and hats.

Flannel shirt, R13 (\$395, at [NET-A-PORTER.com](http://NET-A-PORTER.com)); jeans, Levi's (\$94, [levi.ca](http://levi.ca)); "Taos" shoulder bag, SilverTip (\$475, at the Mercantile at the Ranch at Rock Creek, [theranchatrockcreek.com](http://theranchatrockcreek.com))

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ELLE  
TRAVEL



**Get a taste of the Wild  
West in Philipsburg.**

I fumble with the reins. Kemosabe instantly rockets into an aggressive gallop and I jostle wildly as I try to stay in the saddle.

"Isn't this amazing?" Maja yells through the wind as we near the ridge. Sensing my discomfort, she slows to a walk. "Western riding is an adjustment," she says. "You hang back with Clara until you've got the hang of it (and without humiliation), I wait until the other guests gallop off to the next ridge, then I head into the forest."

“Jumpers always get out of sorts when they leave the ring,” Claire reassures me. “We’ll get you sorted—first we need to lower your stirrups.” Twenty minutes later, I’m sitting deep in the saddle with my legs swung out in front and holding a loose rein casually in one hand. I still feel like a ballet dancer trying to breakdance, but I’m now comfortable enough to appreciate my picturesque surroundings.

As we emerge from a wooded area, I catch a glimpse of Granite Lodge—the main guesthouse—but I don't see a single person. There are never more than 75 guests at the ranch, and we are 130 kilometres east of Butte, the closest city. The sense of isolation is blissful.

A little later on, we stop for a break near Trapper Tent, the property's most secluded wood-and-canvas cabin. (Carey Mulligan and Marcus Mumford stayed here earlier this year.) Just as I'm imagining myself curled up on one of the porch chairs, the sky begins to darken and I hear thunder. "Storm's coming! Are you up for making a run for it?" Claire calls out. With my new-found confidence, Kemosabe and I canter smoothly across the field. I feel exhilarated. "You finally look like a cowgirl!" exclaims Claire as we safely careen into the barn. I have to admit, I actually feel like one. I can't help but shout out a triumphant "Giddy-up!" □

## TAKE A SIDE TRIP

The historic mining town of Philipsburg is just a 25-minute drive from the ranch. You can sift for sapphire gems or just peruse the jewellery counters at the rustic Gem Mountain Store. Other notable stops include the Philipsburg Brewing Company and the Sweet Palace, a candy shop with over 1,000 different types of goodies.