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True West

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Ann Abel, 05.03.10, 06:00 PM EDT
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Ever dream of the fantasy Western ranch you'd put together-the land, livestock, and ranch house-if your jeans developed seriously deep pockets? Here are three fellow dreamers who made it happen on a grand scale. The best part: You're invited.



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.

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

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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 nonprofit 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. Ullring 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 Ullring 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

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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.

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