

# Reality Vacations: *A hot ticket in tourism.*

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## *Move over Disneyland!*

Reality Vacations, like reality TV, are taking the public by storm. You won't find waitresses wearing togas, twirling stature of Chinese kids singing "It's a Small World" or near-scale replicas of Venice's landmarks, but ... Isn't that the point?

As we bounce along in Leo Cremer's Ford three-quarter ton pickup, grasshoppers fly at us from every direction like one of those rainbow glow balls at a small-town skating rink. A dozen white-rumped antelope play chicken with the massive four-wheeler until finally deciding to veer off to the north.

There are no roads on this high prairie pasture overlooking the Yellowstone River. There's hardly any grass left.

"I can't believe how dry it is," Leo, a third generation Montana rancher says, shaking his head. "I was just up here a couple weeks ago and it wasn't like this. This is terrible."

Leo's intention in driving across his 8,000 acres of grazing lands was to show us, his guests for the week, leftover stones from an ancient Crow tipi ring. His dad, also a rancher, had a thing for Native American history, could look down while fixing a well and pluck up an arrowhead. But as the land got drier, the drought's effects more apparent, Leo couldn't help but sigh at the devoured sagebrush, the disappearing "meal for his 300-head of Red Angus cattle.

Growing up in a family of ranchers, Leo has seen the ups and downs of ranching life. But with cattle prices hovering about the same as they were 30 years ago when he was a 10-year old, he's starting to wonder if he'll even have a ranch to pass on to Megan and Lane. Ranch families, he tells us, are dropping like flies.

That's why Leo Cremer and nine ranching families in Montana's Sweet Grass County have teamed up to open their ranches to vacationers wanting a real glimpse of ranching life. Calling themselves **Montana Bunkhouses**, the 10 families hope the income they can generate from renting out rooms—either in a restored bunkhouse or in an extra bedroom in the family house—will stave off imminent foreclosure. Accommodations range from the three-bedroom home of a now-deceased uncle to a fully equipped camper within casting distance of the Yellowstone River to a refurbished sheep wagon.

There's no wondering why these families would be desperate to keep their land. A couple hours north of Yellowstone Park, the countryside in Sweet Grass County is about as pretty as you're going to find anywhere. The Crazy Mountains rim one side of the county, the Absaroka-Beartooth range, the other.

Remember how your breathe sucked in when you first saw "A River Runs Through It" and "The Horse Whisperer?" In fact, remember that little red phone booth where Robert Redford returned the phone call to Kristin Scott Thomas? That's outside Big Sky Corner, a combination diner and country store and post office where Leo's family picks up the mail.

And there's no questioning why folks would want to visit. There's river rafting, fly fishing and national forest hiking. There even mountain biking if you don't mind following the paths the cows take from pasture to pasture.

This is not a dude ranch, not some manufactured tourism experience. **Montana Bunkhouses** is the real deal, a reality vacation served up with capital Truth. You live with real families, eat with their real kids and, if you want, you can chip in with real chores. You're guaranteed to come home with a valued new addition to your Christmas list.

The same day Leo drove me and my boyfriend, Jim, through his grasshopper-infested ranchland, I held the head of a flopping, snorting, 350-pound calf between my knees while Jim seared a diamond, a bar and a K, the brand of Kenny Laubach, Leo's best friend, into his hide. We also watched while Kenny turned a young bull into a steer.

At mealtime, we ate side-by-side with hot sweaty cowboys who, just that morning, had artificially inseminated nine cows. Suffice it so say, it's not for the faint of heart.

You also have to keep in mind that the families in **Montana Bunkhouses** see the tourism biz as a sideline, like the 2 acres of sweet corn they might sell at the Bozeman farmer's market. There're not here to serve you Starbucks coffee in the morning. They don't do room service or offer CNN. For that matter, lots of the restored bunkhouses don't even have a TV.

That's not to say they're not welcoming. The ranchers are proud of their land. They love showing off their wide open acreages, their seven-generation heritage. They relish the idea of educating consumers about ranching, reconnecting them to the food they so often take for granted.

And besides, it never hurts to have an extra hand around the ranch. While we were there, we helped Wyoma and Terry Terland drive 300 yearlings to a summer grazing spot on national forestland. We helped Karen Searle and Rick Jarrett move a herd of 100 sheep from a butte overlooking Duck Creek to a new pasture the other side of their Crazy Mountain Cattle Company ranch.

Sure it was hot and wearying work. Sure my bottom was sore from long hours in the saddle. But it was worth every moment. Quite frankly I've had it up to here with luxury hotels in Third World jungles where I'm served by locals wearing "native costumes" they wouldn't be caught dead in outside work.

**Evidently, I'm not alone!** Weary of computer-generated magazine covers, dishonest politicians and fake boobs, Americans are venturing in record numbers out as "reality tourists." This is a reality vacation where you can really "make a difference."

Preserve a dying way of life in Sweet Grass County, Montana. “Instead of being one of the crowd, come be part of the family,” is the slogan for **Montana Bunkhouses Working Ranch Vacations LLC**. Karen Searle, who came up with the idea after talking with farmers in Europe who have opened their homes to visitors for centuries, organized the Cremers and the other nine families who make up the cooperative. Anyone who wants to experience the reality of ranching life, should call Karen and she’ll match you up with one of the families. As she says, “It’s personalized because it’s just one family visiting one family.”

For more information contact Karen at P. O. Box 693, Livingston, Montana 59047, (406) 222-6101, [www.montanabunkhouses.com](http://www.montanabunkhouses.com) or [www.montanaworkingranches.com](http://www.montanaworkingranches.com).