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Big Sky Country - Way Out West in Montana

Wayne Kenward reports on a working ranch holiday in America's fourth largest state

Montana, is the 4th largest state of the United States and it shares a 545 mile border with Canada, this really is "Way Out West". Stretching from the Great Plains in the East, to the Rocky Mountains in the West, and its altitude ranges from 1,880 ft to nearly 13,000 ft above sea level, Montana is not only vast but, very varied. Imagine a state larger than Germany but, with less than a million people. Montana really is as close to the Wild West as you can get.

I could write a book on Montana, let alone an article for the Journal, so I'll try and keep this brief and to the point.

Lets start with what first took me to Montana. Horses and Ranch Life, oh and the fact I wanted to be a cowboy! I wasn't disappointed when I got there either.

I spent two weeks living and working at a real life ranch, The Crazy Mountain Cattle Company in Big Timber to be exact. Karen Searle from 'Montana Bunkhouses Working Ranch vacations' arranged everything for me after several long emails and a phone call or two. Basically, Karen has an art of finding out what you want to do and then finding the best place for you to do it. Karen also works closely with over twenty Working Ranches all over Montana. They all offer something different, from Horse Riding to Cattle Branding. There are no 'Dude Ranches' here, oh and don't expect hotel like accommodation either. If it's a Bar you want then bring a bottle and swimming pools? Well, there is a nice cold brook on most ranches!



Mona Welborn, owner of the family's Z Bar T Ranch, at Dell.

What you get on a Working Ranch Vacation is just the good ol' fashioned western hospitality the type that Montana is famous for.

So what can you expect on a working ranch vacation in Montana? A lot will depend on what you want to do, when you visit and where you have decided to stay. Take the 'Z bar T Cow Camp', based outside Dell with a population of 35 and at 7,000ft, this really is wild. There is a 40 minute track ride just to reach it.

Now before all the macho statements about it being "Real Cowboy Country", this ranch is run by Mona, a real life 4th generation Welborn cowgirl! Oh yes, in Montana some of the toughest cowboys are in fact Cowgirls. The accommodation here comprises of a real log cabin with camp beds and a great iron log stove for heat and cooking. I can think of no better place to escape a hectic life of mobiles, emails and computers. While accommodation is remote and rustic, the setting and experience is a dream come true for anyone "cowboy or cowgirl enough" to value an authentic cow camp adventure. But this isn't for everyone,



Mona's finely detailed saddle.

some people prefer a level of comfort and somewhere to plug a hair dryer in (incidentally, I don't have a hair dryer before you ask).

The Crazy Mountain Cattle Company has a genuine old ranch hands bunk house which is ideally suited for a couple. This quaint bunkhouse, located across the yard from the main ranch house, is small but, cosy. There is everything you need in life, a bed, a couple of chairs, a great shower and a log stove. The J Bar L ranch in comparison has restored the ranches two homesteads. This makes this ranch ideal for a family or a larger group. However, don't be fooled, this is still a real family run working ranch.

It would be such a shame to travel to Montana and not spend some time tearing yourself away from ranch life to be a tourist for a day or two. Montana really does have so much to offer, from shopping to historical sites to one of nature's greatest wonders, Yellowstone Park.

Yellowstone National Park is a must for anyone who visits Montana. If you missed the BBC's three part documentary "Yellowstone", then go out and buy the DVD; watch it, then book your flights! It was established as a National Park in 1872 and it spans 3,468 square miles of Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. The wildlife you can see there is out of this world. There are Grizzly Bears, Wolves, Coyote, Bald Eagles, Elk and Buffalo to name but a few.

More spectacularly, Yellowstone is famous for it's volcanic activity, from the massive eruptions of Old Faithful, the most famous of all Geysers, to the smallest of hot springs or bubbling mud pools, this really is a land alive.



Hot springs in the Yellowstone National Park



The Old School House and Masonic Lodge, Bannack

If western history is your thing, then visit Bannack, located in Bannack State Park, a now preserved ghost town founded in 1862. It's birth had something to do with the discovery of an amount of gold in the Grasshopper Creek. Then in 1864, Bannack was named as the first Territorial Capital of Montana, albeit a brief one before the capital was moved to Virginia

City in 1865. At it's peak it was home to a population of 3,000 people. Now a walk down it's deserted street is a real step back in time. It's easy to lose yourself in a whirlwind of images conjured up by your own imagination.

Next on your list should be a visit to the National Monument site of The Battle of Little Big Horn. Famous for Custer's Last Stand, where Sitting Bull alongside the Lakota and Cheyenne Indians defeated the US Seventh Cavalry.

Less well known to the English (unless you watched 'A night at the Museum') is the Lewis and Clark Trail. There are many historical locations worth visiting along the Trail. Too many to list here. Lewis and Clark headed west from the Eastern side of the Mississippi with their interpreter and guide, the Native American Indian, Sacagawea, who carried her baby during the whole expedition.

It is the mention of the Lewis and Clark Trail that brings me neatly on to the final section, shopping.

Located on the Trail where the Madison, Gallatin and Jefferson rivers converge to form the three forks of the Missouri River, you will find the aptly named town of Three Forks. Drive into town past the

monument to Sacagawea outside the hotel which carries her name, further down the main street until you come to Three Forks Saddlery. The quality and craftsmanship of their handmade saddles is second to non, this is a true working cowboys tack store. In a true Montana way you are welcomed into the shop where you can look, touch and try the saddles or walk into the workshop and watch them being made.

In nearby Bozeman you can visit the warehouse sized store of Murdoch's, imaging shelves of boots of every size, colour and style with clothing from ranch wear to going out gear. Here there is everything from Montana Silversmith Jewellery and Myler Bits to parts for tractors! Murdoch's has it all. Just remember to take a spare suitcase.

At the other end of the spectrum and one of the best of the smaller stores, is 'Way Out West' in Livingston, some of the clothing here was not only Way Out West but, out of this world.

Montana is also the home of some of the best custom hatters and custom boot makers in the USA. Wilson Boots in Livingston will hand make boots from start to finish. If you want a one of a kind quality pair of boots Wilson's is the best place to start.

Head South to Billings, the largest built up area in Montana and look up Rands Hats. I only went in to look but, after trying on several designs and being shown around the workshops by Ritch Rand himself, I ended up being measured for my custom hat. Trust me, once you have had a hat made for you your will never buy off the peg again.

Before I take up two many pages or bring back too many great memories and book a flight I'll end with one last point. If I could live anywhere in the world, if money was no object, I'd have a nice small ranch in Montana as I can not think of a finer place to live and no finer way of life than that of a rancher from Montana.



The Big Hole River, Madison County



The sun sets over the Crazy Mountain Cattle Company Ranch, Big Timber, Montana

Here are some useful websites:

Bannack State Park:
www.bannack.org

Battle of Little Big Horn:
www.nps.gov/libi

Lewis And Clark: www.lewis-clark.org

Montana Bunkhouses:
www.montanaworkingranches.com

Rands Hats: www.randhats.com

Three Forks Saddlery:
www.3forkssaddlery.com

Way Out West:
www.wowmontana.com

Wilson's Boots:
www.wilsonsbouts.com

Yellowstone National Park:
www.yellowstonegetourism.org