

FEATURES MONTANA

THE REAL CITY SLICKER

Jim Manley realised a childhood ambition when he traded in hedge funds for horses, launching his luxury adults' playground, The Ranch at Rock Creek, in Granite County. **NEIL DAVEY** saddles up



MONTANA. COWBOYS. The famous Big Sky. *Brokeback Mountain*. Karaoke. I'd ask you to spot the odd one out, but it's a trick question: all of the above are synonymous with Montana – although the final one does depend on whether you've stayed at The Ranch at Rock Creek or not.

You could be forgiven for the confusion – The Ranch at Rock Creek has that effect. The ranch takes things that you wouldn't expect from a luxury resort – ten-pin bowling, tents, karaoke, that dreaded term 'all inclusive' – and together makes them into one of the finest resorts in the US, if not the world.

The man responsible for this is Jim Manley. Jim ran a successful hedge fund, started his own investment bank and yet never lost sight of a Western-inspired childhood dream: owning his own ranch, with horses, guns and wide, open spaces. When he was finally able to make it a reality, things weren't as easy as Jim had expected, as he had very specific

requirements for himself, his family and the friends he'd long envisaged as his guests. The property had to have low elevation but a high alpine feel. Skiing had to be at least an easy drive away. There had to be a waterway on the property and a sense of being completely removed from busy roads and reality. His hunt took in the US and Canada, before the 2,670 hectares of The Ranch at Rock Creek – a former mining claim at the base of the John Long Mountains – ticked all of his boxes. Jim quickly realised that his vision of "a playground for adults" was saleable to a wider public, an act that would also ensure that his children could one day inherit the property.

It's this sense of playfulness that makes The Ranch at Rock Creek so remarkable. While there's much that is traditional – horses, homestead-style buildings (some are originals), fly fishing, shooting – Jim's amiable nature shines through and, if ever a resort could be described as tongue in cheek, this is it. ►



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catch something, but they're no challenge. The real fun is to be had on, and in, Rock Creek itself – particularly as a patient guide was on hand to remind me gently of the technique they'd taught me earlier and help untangle my line from various bushes and trees that, inevitably, I snagged more often than trout. There's a Zen-like quality to this sort of skilled fishing: real life fades away until it's just you, the rod, the line and the water... and, actually, snaring a fish proved oddly disruptive. I had several strikes. One was successful – although the wriggling little sod jumped out of my hands before I could secure photographic evidence. The rest could be seen as failures, yet I still returned as happy as I've ever been.

Activities – and clean air – build a hearty appetite, and the food, from chef Josh Drage, was excellent, with a healthy reliance on Montana's natural larder, particularly when it comes to game. There are also local wines – better than you'd expect – a wide range of good international bottles and some excellent, locally brewed beers. And then, after dinner, there's the logic-defying Silver Dollar Saloon. Bowling alleys, karaoke, darts, pool and assorted big screens – one showing classic Westerns, two showing live sport – seem at odds with the ranch's tranquillity, but somehow it works. Barriers are not so much broken down as blown out of the water: within just a couple of minutes of meeting Jim, we're "wohwohwoh"-ing our way through a rousing chorus of Tom Jones' What's New, Pussycat? Our karaoke bonding turns out to be so efficient that, if Nike were to sponsor this place, its tagline would have to be 'Just duet'.

When your final night sees you sitting around a campfire with people you didn't know 48 hours previously, smoking cigars, toasting marshmallows and swapping email addresses – which you then use to actually stay in touch – you know that something remarkable has happened. Sometimes, 'all-inclusive' isn't a service, it's a feeling. ■

Double rooms start from \$950 per night per person, inclusive of accommodation, telephone calls, internet, mini-bar, food, drink and two ranch activities per day. +1 87 7786 1545; [THERANCHATROCKCREEK.COM](http://theranchatrockcreek.com)



► On paper, my accommodation could be described as a tent, but it's like no tent you've ever seen. Yes, the walls are made of canvas, but the floor, porch and – seriously – en suite bathroom are hardwood. There's electricity. There are wood burners. There's a double bed and, further in, two single beds. There's wifi. Essentially, it's a canvas-walled suite. It may lack a TV and iPod dock, but if you had those, you wouldn't appreciate the calm quiet of the Montana night and the soothing sounds of the creek running mere metres from your door.

And then, by day, you have the run of the ranch: 30-something square miles of incredible greenery, water, hills and that famous sky for which 'big' is something of an understatement. The term 'all-inclusive' may carry dreadful connotations of buffets, cheap lager and red-faced Brits in Spain, but there's nothing like that here: one of its selling points is the sheer

range of activities available. Horse riding is, naturally, a big part of this. I resisted – I may be a slip of a thing by US standards, but I believe that the horses appreciated the gesture – but the decision was borne less from equine concern and more from having limited time and so many other things to do. Sporting clays, of a quite superb and challenging range, left me beaming. Archery – just myself, a bow and several lifeseize replicas of animals dotted around the forest – had a similar effect. The rifle and pistol range gave me the chance to fire a replica Winchester that looked uncannily like the toy rifle I owned as a kid, and left me *this* close to buying a Stetson. Under the expert guidance of all at the Rod & Gun, the central hub of the ranch's activities, I indulged in countless cowboy and outdoor fantasies. My personal highlight was fly fishing. There are well-stocked lakes, should you be desperate to