

Where Guests Help Head 'em Up

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A LEISURELY dinner hour is drawing to a close at the J Bar L ranch in southwest [Montana](#), and a party of guests is still abuzz with the excitement of the day. Eyes bright despite fatigue, they swap tales of how they'd spent the day herding cattle. A high point for some was a veterinary procedure in which cows were held immobile in a chute while a vet made an incision in a flank and reached in arm-deep to pull out the ovaries.

At the J Bar L, taking on the cowboy lifestyle isn't an idle amusement. And for its guests, that is the key to its appeal: it's a fully authentic livestock operation, where work comes first. "We don't change our ranch operations to cater to guests," said the ranch manager, Bryan Ulring. "We've got over 1,000 head of cattle. When we move them, it's because we need to move them."

The property is one of a small but growing number of ranches where guests are willing to pay a premium to experience Western life in a far earthier way than at a standard dude ranch. At the J Bar L, there's no spa, no room service and few amenities, except a gorgeous backdrop of seemingly endless grasslands and mountains. And there's plenty of work to be done. The payoff: a feeling of authenticity that comes from experiencing the West as few but ranch hands ever do.

"I feel like I can connect emotionally with these wide-open spaces," said Matt Miller, 63, a J Bar L guest from Connecticut who normally

spends his days serving as a doctor and administrator at Danbury Hospital. “This kind of isolation is not common.”

The J Bar L is owned by Peggy Dulany, a scion of the Rockefeller family, who bought it in 2000 and began accepting a small number of guests four years later. The ranch has room for no more than 20 guests at a time, who bunk down in former homesteaders’ cabins that were carefully dismantled and then reassembled with modern comforts in mind; while the unfinished logs that make up the exterior have been authentically weathered by a century of Montana winters, the interiors are appointed with cozy, overstuffed leather armchairs and working cast-iron stoves (albeit ones fueled by propane).

The J Bar L runs its cattle across 20,000 acres near the [Idaho](#) border, in a vast and largely empty valley framed by the looming peaks of the Centennial Mountains. It was this pristine quality that attracted Ms. Dulany, a granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller Jr. Ten years ago, she’d never even been to the Centennial Valley. Then a friend took her on a scenic drive in late autumn. “We came in on a 56-mile ride on a dirt road that runs through national forest,” she recalled. “And as the valley opened before me, and the different mountain ranges came into view, and there was snow on the ground — it was just totally gorgeous. My heart said, ‘This is it.’ ”

But Ms. Dulany didn’t just want to own the land; she wanted to maintain it as a working landscape. “I’m interested in preserving ranch- and farmland as ranch- and farmland, rather than letting it be parceled into subdivisions.” she said. “But the economics of raising cattle is not the greatest. If you diversify, you can create a viable operation.”

When she was starting to explore the guest-ranch market, Ms. Dulany turned for advice to Bill Bryan, a co-founder of the custom travel outfitter Off the Beaten Path, who had long counted the Rockefeller family among his clients. In addition to creating bespoke itineraries for a well-heeled clientele, Mr. Bryan is director of the Rural Landscape Institute, a group that advocates for the preservation of the West's rural way of life. "There's nothing out here that's just nature," he said. "It's nature and people. It's that connection that's so important for people to understand."

To keep that connection intact, Mr. Bryan helps owners of large properties to tap an alternative revenue source in the form of small-volume, high-value tourism. He has also consulted with the Padlock Ranch, an operation that runs 11,000 head of cattle over nearly half a million acres near the Bighorn Mountains. For more than half a century the Scott family ran it as a strictly commercial operation; last year, though, they started bringing in small number of paying guests — no more than 14 at a time. "This isn't a dude ranch," said Wayne Fahsholtz, the ranch manager. "We involve guests in ranch activities, and if we had 50 people, they couldn't participate very well."

Padlock guests stay at the Wolf Mountain Lodge, a palatial log-cabin-style inn. As at the J Bar L, guests are welcome to take part in daily ranch activities like rounding up and moving cattle, or they go on hikes, fish, or take leisurely trail rides. For the more ambitious, the ranch offers an intensive "Cowboy School," in which ranch hands provide one-on-one instruction in the various points of cattle husbandry.

Not all the landowners that Mr. Bryan works with are billionaires. In southern Montana, he has consulted with a group of neighboring ranch-owning families that banded together last year to form a collective called Madison Valley Expeditions. The organization takes paying guests to a variety of ranches.

“It was an idea that was born in the community,” said the manager of Madison Valley, Todd Graham. “The issue was that there was so much wildlife in the valley — elk, antelope, wolves, bears, raptors — and they were consuming such a large amount of resources that it was a burden on the ranchers.” Allowing paying guests access to that abundance of wildlife is a way for the ranchers to turn a burden into a new revenue source. Visitors are also invited to work cattle alongside ranch hands, or simply to enjoy the landscape of the various ranches at their leisure.

Some of the West’s most storied ranches are also opening their gates to guests. Among them is Ted Turner’s Vermejo Park ranch in northern [New Mexico](#), which, at 600,000 acres, is about three-quarters the size of Rhode Island. For years, the property has run a small program for hunters and fisherman; two years ago, Mr. Bryan brought in the first small group of visitors for a program focused on forestry and game management. The ranch is home to some 10,000 wild elk, as well as two herds of bison (one wild and one bred for market). Guests who come through Off the Beaten Path can learn about the ranch’s livestock management program, as well as its sustainable forestry and endangered species programs.

Also considering expanding access is Trinchera, the 170,000-acre [Colorado](#) spread that Louis Bacon, a prominent hedge fund manager,

bought from the Forbes family in 2007 for \$175 million. Like Vermejo Park, Trinchera has long allowed hunters and fishermen onto its land, and is now considering letting Mr. Bryan bring in adventure travelers. “We are actively looking at expanding recreational opportunities on the ranch,” said Cody Wertz, a Trinchera spokesman. “It would be great for educating the public about wildlife and habitat management, not just on this ranch, but in Colorado and across the West.”

For Mr. Bryan, it’s all win-win. As a consultant to landowners, he can help maintain traditional stewardship of the land. And as a purveyor of high-end adventure, he can usher Off the Beaten Path clients onto some of the West’s most magnificent landscapes, uncluttered by development.

A day after the spaying session at the J Bar L, he drove down a winding dirt road to the banks of the Ruby River. Mr. Bryan gestured at the dirt track before him. “You get on a road like this, with grass growing in the middle, and you think to yourself, Holy smoke, this is the real West,” he said. “It’s still around.”