

Reconnect with your inner cowboy in Montana!

By
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The sun, barely up, cast long shadows over the 3,000-plus acres of the Crazy Mountain Cattle Company, just west of Big Timber, Montana. Rancher Rick Jarrett and I had headed out early to irrigate a hay field in much the same way his grandfather did when he settled here in 1908.

As we plunged our shovels deep into the banks of an irrigation ditch, clear, cold water spilled into the field of alfalfa that brushed our rubber-booted legs. Jarrett paused to reflect on the realities of modern ranching: "This is what cattle ranching in this part of Montana is all about...I'm as much of a hay farmer as a cattle rancher. Hay is money in the bank. It keeps our cattle and us going through the winter."

That is, it helps. These days beef alone does not pay the bills. Which is why Jarrett, his wife, Karen Searle, and nine neighboring longtime ranchers started Montana Bunkhouses Working Ranch Vacations last year.

"Our co-op is not a dude ranch, and it's not for everyone," Searle says over a breakfast of eggs, elk sausage, and apple strudel French toast. "It's for families that want to experience first-hand what we feel is a romantic way of life that's rapidly vanishing from the West. Our hope is that guests will want to experience what real ranching is all about."

Visits aren't limited to just a single ranch. One morning my wife, Jill, went birding at a neighboring ranch while I fly-fished a private stretch of river. We met for a late-afternoon horseback ride, devoured a hearty dinner with Searle and Jarrett, then tumbled, deliciously tired, into bed.

After all, I needed to be up early. I would be saddling up at dawn with Jarrett to do the chores that keep a working ranch working.

This story was printed in the June 2004 Mountain States and Southwest editions of Sunset Magazine. The article goes on to talk a bit about "**Working the range near Yellowstone.**"

The 10 ranches of Montana Bunkhouses Working Ranch Vacations are all in Sweet Grass County, just off I-90 near Big Timber, Montana. A vacation here can easily be combined with a visit to Yellowstone National Park (about 90 miles south) and an exploration of Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. The nearest airports are in Bozeman (61 miles west) and Billings (81 miles east).

Activities: Visits are custom-tailored to match guest's interests with activities at any of the member ranches. For example, you can help with the lambing in the spring, try summer haying, or join a fall cattle roundup—or you can just go horseback riding every day.

Accommodations: Bunkhouse ranchers limit guests to one family or small group at a time on each ranch. Lodgings range from comfortable private cottages and upgraded

bunkhouses to ranch-house guest bedrooms, tepees, or even a sheepherder's wagon. There are also vacation-home rentals.

Cost: From \$200 per adult per night (ask about family rates), including lodging, meals and activities; three-night minimum stay (reservations required).

Contact: HYPERLINK "http://www.montanabunkhouses.com"
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