

Cowgirl capers in Montana

By Vivien Creegor, The Mail On Sunday, 22th August 2006

Saddling up: Vivien hits the trail.



There are more fish than people in Montana, its citizens will tell you, and, as my husband David and I drove from the small airport in Bozeman to Papoose Creek Lodge near the town of Cameron, we could believe it.

Reaching the lodge - in the upper Madison River Valley - took just 90 minutes during which we saw only a dozen or so other cars as we snaked our way along, drinking in the majesty of the Rocky Mountains, still snow-topped in June.

At Papoose Creek, we were allocated one of the beautifully furnished cabins tucked into the woods just behind the main lodge, with a porch and a stone fireplace that had been thoughtfully lit for us.

Papoose Creek offers an enticing array of outdoor activities. At home, David and I had taken a couple of riding lessons so - full of confidence --we started the next day with a trek on horseback in the company of Mike and Roger, two legendary horse whisperers.

On flat ground we were fine but as the scenery moved into 'awesome' mode - open meadows, sagecovered foothills and virgin forests - it offered a few difficulties for the novice rider summed up by Mike singing 'Roll 'em, roll 'em, roll 'em, feel my butt is swollen.'

The pristine waters of the Madison River awaited our fly-fishing efforts in the afternoon. Brad Pitt did some of his scenes from *A River Runs Through It* here. I'd read the book by Norman Maclean to capture the spirit of the place beforehand. Maclean wrote: 'If I had had my way, anybody who did not know how to catch a fish would be allowed to disgrace a fish by catching it.'

I didn't disgrace a single fish (and even if I had, it would have been put back - those are the rules). Brett, our guide, was patience personified and, though the weather scuppered us, we were both in the end getting the rhythm right as we cast enthusiastically.

Wild West history flows through this part of Montana like a vein of gold so the next day we went to see the town which sprang up in 1863 when gold was indeed found.

Virginia City and its close neighbour Nevada City are superbly preserved. The dark and dingy saloon is so atmospheric of the period that a lone, sinister

figure in a long, black coat sitting at the bar caused a sharp intake of breath from us both (it transpired that he was an actor).

Our last day at Papoose Creek turned us into real cowboys. The neighbouring ranch needed to move its herd of Black Angus cattle to a new pasture and we were invited along. It was simply luck that it happened while we were there. We were told we could trail along for the ride or join in. We opted for the latter and produced some tentative 'yeehas' until our self-consciousness was overcome.

Moving the herd was pretty easy but if you stopped at all to rest, the cows would immediately turn round and advance on *you*. They looked pretty menacing but Casey, one of the cowhands, insisted: 'Aw, they're just big ol' puppy dawgs.'

This was a packed final day and I opted for a cookery lesson in the lodge with the head chef, Jeff Miller. Jeff tries at all times to use local seasonal food in his recipes and lunch that day (partially prepared by yours truly) was couscous with roasted vegetables, aubergine salad and lamb sausage.

Having gorged ourselves on that, we drove off with Jeremy, Papoose Creek's leading ecologist, who took us to the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Centre in the town of West Yellowstone, a drive of about 30 miles taking us past Earthquake Lake.

The strongest quake ever recorded in the Northern Rockies hit here in August 1959 and the land shifted so much that an area of forest became part of the lake - it's certainly eerie to see hundreds of dead trees sticking out of the water.

There are six grizzlies in the Discovery Centre, all of which have fallen foul of Man by encroaching on his territory. They end their days here instead of being shot and are magnificent to observe up close.

We returned to Papoose Creek to say our farewells and set off for the second lodge on our great outdoors Montana adventure. On the way we drove into Yellowstone National Park, which contains the most concentrated array of hot springs and geysers in the world.

It's the home of Old Faithful but we made for the Grand Prismatic Spring, the largest and one of the most spectacular. We then concentrated on finding some wildlife and were rewarded with a herd of buffalo, some of which (we were told by a park ranger) can weigh 2,000lb. This same ranger informed us grizzlies had been sighted that day and then offered this sage advice: 'Remember, you don't have to outrun a grizzly, just the people you're with!'

At the Big EZ Lodge in Big Sky resort we found the staff as warm and welcoming as those at Papoose Creek. Big EZ is 8,000ft up with truly spectacular views and luxury accommodation. In the winter, skiing is on offer,

as are dogsledding and snowmobiling. In the summer, it's golf, fly-fishing, horse-riding, hiking and biking.

We began with white-water rafting and, having freaked a bit signing papers acknowledging that we knew this activity can cause serious injury, paralysis or even death, we opted for the gentlest trip on offer. The sun shone, the waters sparkled and even the wildlife played ball, with a magnificent moose observing us from the river bank and a Cooper's Hawk (very rare) swooping overhead.

Back at the Lodge a soothing 'massage à deux' had been arranged for myself and David in a candlelit room with gentle music playing. This was a great curtain raiser for the barbecue-night dinner of home-made baked beans, ribs, steak, sensational scallops, corn and whisky barbecue sauce.

Although it was summer, a heavy snowfall took us by surprise the next day but it soon melted and, as the sun shone once again, we drove into the valley for a two-hour horse ride through the Big Sky backcountry, where we finally saw a bear in its natural habitat, albeit some distance away.

If the United States means Miami sea and sun or New York shopping to you, then do try amazing Montana for something different. As John Steinbeck wrote: 'For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection. But with Montana it is love.'

Travel Facts

American Round Up (01404 881777, www.americanroundup.com) offers tailor-made holidays to ranches in Montana. Return flights on NorthWest Airlines to Bozeman cost from £639. A three-night multi-venture package at Papoose Creek costs from £1,238pp including all meals and activities. Rates at Big EZ Lodge start at £209 per night full board.