

Travel

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A city slicker finds the perfect vacation at, yes, a dude ranch



View Photo Gallery — At Bitterroot Ranch, the West ain't some dog-and-pony show put on for tourists

By Dana Priest, [E-mail the writer](#)

After 10 slow miles on a bumpy dirt road with no other person or dwelling in sight, it crossed my mind that maybe the owners of [Bitterroot Ranch](#) didn't really want to be found. There were no signs anywhere, no encouragement that we were getting any closer, or had even made the correct turn off the one-lane road just past the blink-of-an-eye cowboy town of Dubois, in Wyoming's less-traveled Wind River Valley.

There was nothing. No GPS guidance. No cellphone service. No caravan of other rented four-wheel drives to fall in behind. Nothing. Nothing but 360 degrees of mountain ranges of every size and hue, backlit by a big sky turning purple and orange as the sun set. Gray and white strokes of rainstorms moved across the grassy meadows and sagebrush plains in the distance. I wanted to stop and stare forever. I wanted to keep driving, too, to figure out if we were lost before it became pitch dark.

An old pickup truck raced by in the other direction with the silhouettes of three cowboy hats in the cab. Then another. Then a minivan with even more passengers. Ranch hands? Tourists? Why were they headed in the wrong direction at this hour?



Then, at mile 16, we spotted a cluster of log cabins tucked in an oasis of trees. Rough cattle fences divided the land, and at last, a small painted sign on a wooden post pointed us down a final, narrow dirt path.

As we were gathering our suitcases from the car, Bayard Kane Fox unfolded his tall, lanky frame from a truck that had pulled in minutes after ours. "Welcome," boomed the 81-year-old, a fishing pole in one hand, the other busy with two happy dogs doing the jig at his feet. "Come on in. Meet Mel."

We'd just missed the other guests, he said. They were the carloads of people that had passed us coming in, headed into town for the weekly rodeo.

So began what I consider to have been the perfect vacation: a physical challenge in an unfamiliar place more beautiful than my imagination could dream up, with

wonderful people from whom we part as new friends. Not to mention the superb ranch-grown food, the handsome rodeo riders, the curious yearlings, the colt that let me lie on the grass beside him, and the well-trained, sure-footed Arabians with their smooth gallops. (Oh, and an unexpected CIA connection. More on that later.)

On the east side of the Continental Divide from Yellowstone National Park, the [Wind River Valley](#) is one of the lesser known of Wyoming's expansive landscapes. Bitterroot Ranch, next to the [Shoshone National Forest](#), is cut by the east fork of the Wind River and framed to the south by the jagged peaks of the 100-mile long Wind River Range. The range, which forms the Divide, is the highest mountain range in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, and is characterized by its unusual rock formations and exposed sediment lines. To the north is the volcanic Absaroka Range, which is nearly as high and dramatic.

In between are crystal blue rivers, streams and lakes fed by mountain snowmelt, vast plains of sagebrush, alpine meadows, stands of aspen trees, volcanic moonscapes perfect for fossil hunting and deep red rock canyons and cliffs. The 3,700-acre riding ranch is bordered by the 2 million-acre Wind River Indian Reservation, controlled by the Shoshone tribe but open to the public for horseback riding and fishing.

What makes Western landscapes so remarkable is that these individual geological attributes can all be seen in one sweeping view from so many locations, and especially on horseback, which makes it possible to go where it's impossible to go by any other means. The Pony Express and bank robber Butch Cassidy figured this out long ago; one of Cassidy's best hiding places is along one of Bitterroot's many trail rides. I'll never forget sitting atop a horse at a location that Bayard Fox named "360" because the view extends for hundreds of miles in every direction but is different in every quadrant. Or cantering away from an oncoming thunderstorm that didn't rattle the horses a bit and seemed to pelt the guests with hail only long enough to be fun.

You might expect that, after 40 years in the business, Bayard and his wife, Mel, would get

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tired of talking about their home. Not so. Their deep love of the land oozes out in every guided trail ride, which is also a history, geology and zoology course rolled into one.

Bayard is a natural-born storyteller, raised with horses in Pennsylvania, educated at Yale and then seduced by patriotism and wanderlust to join the CIA, where he jumped out of airplanes, learned five languages, operated in a half-dozen countries and once worked undercover in Paris as a model for a diamond company. The proof is a framed photo of him from an ad that ran in the *New Yorker* and elsewhere in August 1960. It sits atop the piano in the lodge. In it, Bayard appears, Gregory Peck-handsome (he still is), holding a large diamond brooch above the script, "A gift she'll treasure beyond all others."

Although he's had no contact with the spy agency for 45 years and doesn't advertise his past life, unlocking the memories wasn't difficult. They were detailed and vivid, from the no-holds-barred Cold War era.

Bayard runs the working ranch with Mel, who was raised on a farm in Tanzania and looks like Katherine Hepburn on safari, as well as with their son Richard and daughter-in-law Hadley, a Yale graduate who traded medical school for the ranch life. Their extended family includes the many college-age women who work here as wranglers, caring for and tacking up the horses, leading the trail rides and giving lessons.

Animals are so clearly a part of their extended family, too, including dogs, sheep, llamas, 200-plus head of Scottish Highland cattle and 150 Arabian and quarter horses of every color that run up and down from their high grazing plateau to the stable in the morning and again at dusk.

Only the wolves are not welcome. Bayard believes — and will regale guests with tales to support his view — that keeping gray wolves on the endangered species list has allowed them to overpopulate the land and eat up the traditional prey of bears, which have consequently been forced to forage at lower altitudes, in human territory. A bear killed one of his foals several years ago, and during our week-long stay, a bear killed a lamb and one of two llamas before being trapped by a game warden.

The first thing we noticed upon entering our cabin was the perfect outline of bear claw nails in the screen door. Bayard assured us that it was a decade old and that no bear had ever gotten close to a guest. They were after left-out food.

The second thing we noticed before unpacking our bags was the guest list left on the dresser. It was another sign — following Bayard's warm welcome and Mel's friendly tour of the lodge — that the chemistry between guests would be as important as the chemistry between rider and horse.

Among the guests was a family of four great riders from France (Bayard is a French-speaking Francophile whose ranch is well-known in that country); a couple from Ketchum, Idaho (he didn't ride but fished, she wanted to get over her fear of horses); excellent teenage riders from Illinois whose mother learned enough in a week to trot on a trail; the son-in-law of one of Bayard's former CIA colleagues, from McLean, who was game for anything, as was I; a Turkish-born triathlete couple from North Carolina; and Bob, another octogenarian horseman from Danville, Va., who joined the three teenage girls on the cross-country jumping course and not only stayed on but rightfully beamed with pride afterward. A class of international equine dentistry students also staying at the ranch livened up cocktail hour.

There are enough wranglers working on the ranch so that the daily rides can cater to the guests' riding levels, from novice to expert, even if it means that a guest with no experience takes lessons for a couple of days. Overnight pack rides are also available. Bayard or a wrangler leads the trails, and the horses, mostly sure-footed Arabians, stay in a line. This could get a little boring for more experienced riders, were it not for the river banks, streams and dense pine forests through which we traipsed, or the long, fast gallops up and down

mountain paths.

“Thank you! Thank you, Bayard!” Frenchman Gery Vaschalde yelled, nearly out of breath, after a particularly thrilling gallop through a meadow, around a bend and up a hill. “Bravo!”

Two- to three-hour rides, in Western saddles, are offered twice a day, each time on a different horse. English saddles are available for the cross-country riding course of about 70 jumps. Nothing is mandatory. Some husbands didn't ride; they went fly-fishing all day for cutthroat and rainbow trout instead and returned happy and with great stories. I sat out the second ride on the second day because I was so sore.

By then, my daughter had already popped the question: “When can we come back?”

When scouting for a vacation every couple of years that will cost some money, I look for something that puts us in an unfamiliar setting, one risky enough to be a thrill but not dangerous enough to cause injury. This is the way my brain is able to skip out of its normal pattern and onto a path of refreshment and rejuvenation. Sitting still around a pool or the beach just won't do it. Neither would golf, tennis or a cruise of more than a few hours.

Horseback-riding can be dangerous in untrained hands. That's why we opted for a trip with [Equitours](#), the company Bayard founded in 1971. It offers loads of references and came recommended by several people who'd taken its overseas trips, which include rides on six continents and some places that you can only reach on horseback, such as the steppes of Mongolia — and parts of the Wind River Valley.

Even at his age, Bayard remains enough of a daredevil to make the rides unpredictable. Take the cattle drive, for example. Having no idea what it entailed, I quickly signed on. It seemed that the presence of a bear had scared off some of the cattle, and they had to be located and driven back to the larger herd. Richard decided where to start looking: in a set of steep, brush-covered hills.

After half an hour, we found the separated cows, encircled them as Bayard instructed and used our horses to push them forward and to chase strays back into the herd. I had a willing partner, Talek, who helped me do things I'd never done before on a horse: leap up riverbanks, blaze a trail, chase another four-legged creature and make a sharp turn to head it in another direction.

I love my job at The Post, but this felt like a second calling, or a previous life, something eerily familiar. I was tempted to reserve a spot in the fall cattle drive from Sept. 24 to Oct. 1, when dozens of people pay to help the Foxes move their cattle for the winter. It can be a rough ride, given the cold, the wind and the snow, but we're seriously considering it. If we return to Bitterroot Ranch, we'll join dozens of other guests who for years have regularly made their vacation plans with the extended Fox family.

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