

# LIVING THE DREAM

Bayard Fox, founder of Equitours, has ridden horses all his life and now runs a variety of unique riding adventure holidays, everywhere from Kenya to Mongolia via Wyoming



This page and opposite Exploring the breathtaking landscape of Bitterroot Ranch in Wyoming on horseback

JEFF VANUGA, GABRIELLE BOISELLE



From my ranch in Wyoming, I can see a range of mountains, towering more than 13,000ft into the sky. No other human dwelling is in sight. I live in a remote valley next to the vast Yellowstone Ecosystem and surrounded by public land, with no near neighbours. A bubbling stream full of trout winds through the ranch, which has been my home for the past 44 years. I share it with my family, around 185 horses and 250 cows, plus a few dogs, cats, sheep and llamas.

This place and the lifestyle it gives me are the fulfilment of a dream, far from the frenzied stresses of urban life; I love horses, wild nature, fly-fishing and tranquillity. But it took 40 years of sometimes tortuous twists and turns in other parts of the world, not to mention a vast amount of good fortune, to bring me here.

I grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania, which in the Thirties and early Forties was still wide open horse country. I would ride my Welsh Pony for 20 miles or so, crossing only the occasional paved road. My grandfather loved fox-hunting and used to keep a pack of hounds, but soon after World War II, highways and development closed off the best riding possibilities around our old farm, though we kept a few saddle horses.

My dream of a ranch in the West really began when I was 14, during a two-week-long horse-packing trip through the Yellowstone area. It was reinforced in 1947, when I spent the summer fighting forest fires from a ranger station in the Gila National Forest of New Mexico. They kept horses at the stations in those days, and sometimes I would ride to remote, roadless areas to isolate a small fire started by a lightning strike.

When I was at Yale in the Forties, you still had to have your own string of horses in order to play polo; at that point, my father had enough trouble affording to keep me there, without that additional

66

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99

cost. By the time I graduated, the Cold War was just heating up and I spent the next 15 years or so living in Europe, Iran, Africa and the Solomon Islands. I enjoyed riding in Iran, in particular, and we often used horses to go on hunts with the nomadic tribesmen to remote places, looking for bighorn sheep and ibex.

I'd planned to return to Iran to join a migration of the Bakhtiari tribe and thought it would be interesting to try to lance some wild boar while I was there. The idea of 'pig-sticking' came from that wonderful book *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, but unfortunately it didn't turn out well for me. One frosty morning, I was practising lancing bareback with a makeshift spear when my horse hit a small muddy patch and cartwheeled on top of me, smashing my left hip. It did not heal well and left me on crutches for the best part of two years.

Not wanting to spend my time swimming in the YMCA pool for therapy, I set up a crayfish-diving business in the Solomon Islands; several hundred local fisherman on a number of islands helped me catch them. We collected the crayfish tails on two freezer ships and sent them by air to Hawaii. I became very interested in the exotic cultures of these remote islands, which were sometimes visited by ships only two or three times a year. Their striking art, which had similarities to that of neighbouring New Guinea, intrigued me. In some places, I even saw stone tools, such as adzes,

which were no longer in use but were treasured by their owners as the possessions of their forefathers.

Swimming and working a great deal in those island waters helped me regain the use of my leg. However, I couldn't quite get over my visceral fear of sharks, and several close encounters did nothing to soothe my nerves. I still longed for the Rockies, so when I could walk again, I began searching for another kind of life.

I was attracted to many places in the world. It's hard to beat the excitement of the Highlands of Kenya; Iran has some magnificent mountain country; and the Himalayas are spectacular. But these places were no longer politically stable. Unfortunately, my wife, Mel, was to discover this first-hand, when her family's farm on the slopes of Kilimanjaro was expropriated soon after Tanzania was given its independence. Wyoming looked like the safest place for us to find a long-term future and start a viable business with the least amount of government interference. So that's where I chose to explore my dream.

I bought my ranch in 1971 and it is certainly a splendid piece of land, with superb surroundings. How we would make a living out of it was another story. Agriculture alone at 7,500ft is not really viable, so a dude (guest) ranch seemed like the only solution. A cousin of mine had a fine place at the base of the Tetons where our family would sometime stay. It had a marvellous atmosphere and people loved it, often feeling it to be a cherished second home.

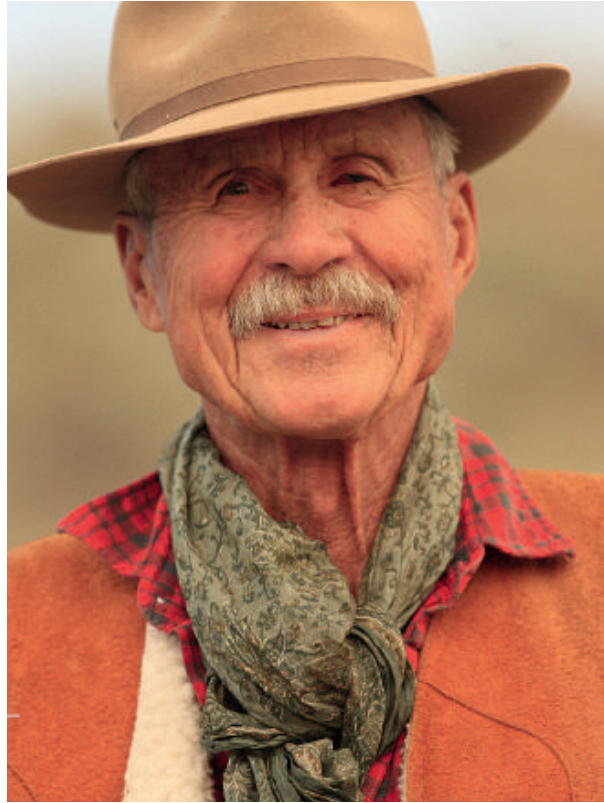
There was no livestock at our ranch and we didn't have enough cabins to house many guests, so we had to start from scratch. A big plus was the fine old house with its huge stone fireplace, which we could use as a main lodge. We bought a few horses, fixed up some of the old buildings, constructed new ones and were in business on



a small scale by 1972. Eventually, we could take 30 guests at a time, but in those early years, it was a struggle to make ends meet.

To make more money, we ran an elk-hunting camp 10 miles into the adjacent wilderness, which could only be reached on horseback. It took about three hours to ride from the ranch to the camp, which was in a magnificent location at 8,500ft and beside the river, with a large clearing where the horses could graze. I used to guide hunters, and Mel did the cooking and wrangling. But even with the extension of the hunting season, we could only operate for around five months of the year, leaving at least six months with little for us to do. So Mel suggested we start taking guests on winter horse safaris in Kenya's Maasai Mara – an area she knew well and where her fluent Swahili was an advantage. We borrowed the horses, equipment and staff we needed and ran those safaris for several years during the winter months.

The next step was to start making ourselves known to organisations from other parts of the world whose riding adventures we could market in the United States. That business took off under the name of Equitours and we were soon handling several thousand trips a year for 55 different companies in 30 countries. It works well with our own ranch, where we have a chance to ride with many of our clients, and gives us an opportunity to travel widely during the winter months. We also



This page from top Bayard Fox; a safari ride in Kenya. **Opposite** Riding on the Bitterroot Ranch



acquired another good piece of agricultural land, 2,000ft lower than our upper place. It now produces the hay and oats to feed our horses and cows, and affords some good grazing for our animals during the winter.

Several of our partners in far-flung places are polo players. Tristan Voorspuy, who has run our rides in Kenya since 1983, has a wonderful string of ponies and they are ideal for galloping along with the zebra and other game on his fabulously exciting ride in the Maasai Mara. Kevin Begg at Los Potreros in Argentina has an excellent polo field and guests have a chance to play there at any level. In India, where polo has been played for many centuries, Bonnie Singh has an excellent string of ponies, which are also ideal as endurance horses for his palace-to-palace riding safaris. He puts on a spectacular performance of tent-pegging: first the lance, then the sword and then the dagger, spiking three tent pegs all in one run at a full gallop. He is one of the founding members of the world-famous club in Jaipur and started elephant and camel polo.

So, for more than half my life now, I have been able to live my dream. I share it with Mel, our son, Richard, and his wife, Hadley, who is also a keen horsewoman. It is certainly not for everyone, but it is pretty close to paradise for someone like me, who likes horses, travel and wide-open, wild country. [equitours.com](http://equitours.com); [bitterrootranch.com](http://bitterrootranch.com)



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