

“Log Cabin with 1000 Acre Backyard”
A Review of the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch
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by Linda Greenhouse

To get the confusing part out of the way: the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch is not really a ranch, and while it is in the northern Rockies, the mountains visible from the front porch of the ranch’s main building – snowcapped peaks towering 3,000 feet or more above a basin that is already 6,700 above sea level – are called the Sawtooth Mountains, birthplace of the Salmon River and a lure to wilderness lovers and backpackers who gladly climb heart-stopping trails for a glimpse of a hidden Alpine lake.

The Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch is an oasis of understated comfort and civilization in the wilderness of south-central Idaho. If a 1,000-acre spread can be said to be tucked in anywhere, this one can. Its main building, an 8,000-square-foot lodge of hand-cut pine logs, sits far back behind a little ridge that makes it nearly invisible from the state road that bisects the property. We had driven right past the ranch on a previous visit to the area without even noticing it.

Built by a New York businessman in 1930 as a private hunting club – it was bought in 1951 by the Idaho family that still owns it. Twenty years ago, the ranch began taking paying customers; with a cabin and four rooms in the main lodge, it is almost always full. Four years ago, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Guest rooms have private baths and electricity, but no telephones, television, radios or even clocks. My travel alarm clock never made it out of my suitcase. We left the window shades up and let the sun do the job.

Our family visit to the ranch, for four days last August, was largely accidental. On a previous Idaho vacation, we had driven 60 miles up State Highway 75 from Sun Valley to Redfish Lake, a popular boating and fishing spot that takes its name from the red sockeye salmon that spawned there in great numbers in happier days for that threatened species. Last year we hoped to stay there, at Redfish Lake Lodge, a rustic hotel overlooking the lake’s swimming beach. IT turned out to be fully booked for our long August weekend, and the manager referred me to a place with a “somewhat different atmosphere” only five miles away: the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch.

“Somewhat different” was an understatement. While I still think a visit to the Redfish Lake Lodge would be great fun, it is basically a bustling waterfront summer camp – RV’s jostling for space, hikers stocking up at the general store – compared with the ranch’s relative isolation and blissful serenity. Not that guests at the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch are expected to take a vow of silence: small children and extended families are much in evidence, and most guests choose to eat meals with other guests at big tables in the cozy dining room, dominated by an impressive stone fireplace. Our Thursday arrival coincided with the weekly barbeque night, and a five-member Western band provided foot-stompin’ backup as guests sat on the porch watching the sun set over the mountains and savoring their salmon and barbecued ribs.

The Idaho mountains might not seem like a culinary capital, but the kitchen is in fact the pride of the place. The ranch bakes its own bread and pastries, including peach and apple strudel for breakfast and the walnut-basil wheat bread served one night at dinner. A typical dinner menu offered a choice of three entrees: grilled Chilean sea bass in an orange rum sauce; rainbow rotini with roasted yellow pepper and garlic; and New York-style steak in a pepper mustard sauce. Dress for these elegant meals is most informal; blue jeans or even shorts.

Breakfast and dinner are included in the rate. Depending on the capacity of the dining room, a limited number of nonguests are accommodated for dinner at \$38 per person.

Our log-cabin room, with a fireplace and a walk-in dressing area, was a rather tight fit when the roll-away bed for our 13-year-old daughter, Hannah, was open. Families with more than one child would almost certainly need a second room. But the cabins are strictly for sleeping. Ranch life centers on the lodge's porch, where rocking chairs are inviting, and lemonade, beer, and other drinks are always available.

The ranch's property, mostly undeveloped, includes hiking trails through sage-covered hills, a stocked trout pond and a swimming pool filled with the warm and slightly sulfuric waters of a nearby hot spring. Although daytime temperatures were in the 80's, the night chill arrived quickly once the sun began to set, and the hot spring pool beckoned. One night, a dramatic summer storm began to play out over the mountains as we soaked peacefully and paddled on inner tubes. A full moon rose behind us in a clear sky while lightning flashed over the high peaks in the distance ahead. With reluctance, we bowed to safety concerns and left the pool, glad to have caught the show. The pool is open 24 hours a day, and the management gently reminds guests not to forget their bathing suits.

There is no riding program as such, but half-day, full-day and overnight horseback rides are available at a nearby stable. Allergies and fear make us a nonriding family, but we spoke to experienced riders from Southern California who were ecstatic over their full day of challenging trail riding in the nearby White Cloud range.

At the dinner table and pool, we met people from every part of the country. Many were repeat visitors; for some, the ranch was respite at the end of days of backpacking and camping in the surrounding Sawtooth National Forest or the nearby Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. This 2.4-million acre preserve, bigger than Yellowstone National Park, is the largest wilderness area in the lower 48 states. No motorized vehicles are permitted, and the area is best known for the whitewater rafting trips on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River.

The gateway to several wilderness areas in this part of Idaho is Stanley, the region's metropolis with a permanent population of 69. It is nine miles up the road from the ranch, and while no settlement with an espresso and ice cream bar named Peaks and Perks can be considered completely outside the American mainstream, Stanley is isolated – its few square blocks are lined with outfitters and suppliers for rafters, hikers and campers. State Highway 21, the northern route that we took from Boise, 130 miles away, is sometimes closed during winter. The Stanley Basin traps cold air, and the town often runs second only to International Falls, Minn., as the coldest spot in the lower 48, with temperatures of minus-40 degrees not uncommon.

We used the ranch as our base for exploring Stanley and the surrounding area. While it is California that is busy celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Gold Rush, the quest for gold shaped Idaho's early history as well. Stanley is named for Capt. John Stanley, a prospector who passed through in 1863 with a party of 75 other hopefuls. He kept going and never came back, but others in his group established a permanent settlement. The cozy Stanley Museum, in a former ranger station on Highway 75, tells the story of Stanley's days as a service center for nearby gold mining towns, some of which remain ghost towns.

But traces of the town's gold mining past extend far beyond the museum, at a series of sites along the Yankee Fork of the Salmon River. The Land of the Yankee Fork Historic Area, managed by the

Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation and two Federal agencies, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, covers an area from just east of Stanley to Challis, 50 miles to the northeast.

Some of the historic area's unpaved roads require a vehicle with high ground clearance, but there's enough of interest to see without one. We turned off Highway 75 onto a paved road at Sunbeam and followed the Yankee Fork – in late summer, more of a shallow stream than a river – to the ghost town of Bonanza. A few tumbledown structures are all that remain, and we were startled later to see a photograph of elegantly dressed 19th-century ladies playing croquet on a manicured Bonanza lawn. In the cemetery, the graves date from the 1870's to the 1950's; several of the early ones are those of Chinese immigrants. The mining towns were multiethnic societies, and the Chinese, who worked as cooks and operated laundries in the mining camps, were one of the biggest immigrant groups.

The museum in Custer, a better preserved ghost town a few miles up the road, displayed the Census of 1880 – 129 men, 8 women and 10 children, from two dozen states and 16 foreign countries. At its peak, Custer had a population of 600. But by 1911, the mining era had ended and the place was abandoned until the 1960's, when some counter-culture types set up housekeeping in the old structures until the Forest Service kicked them out.

Even after the mining towns died out, gold fever lingered. In the late 1930's, a group of investors came up with the idea of dredging the bed of the Yankee Fork a half mile south of Custer for the placer gold, nuggets and flakes that had washed down over eons of erosion from veins high in the mountains. To accomplish this, they commissioned the Yankee Fork Gold Dredge. If a battleship had been designed by Rube Goldberg and then beached in a remote gully, it might look something like this contraption. More than 100 feet long (200 feet with various attachments at bow and stern) and 64 feet high, its purpose was to dig up the riverbed gravel and work it through a series of sorting devices to find gold that the owners believed would have a value of \$12 million. It took over six million cubic yards of gravel to yield enough gold for a two-foot brick.

It is unclear how much gold the 988-ton dredge actually found during the five years it was used. The volunteer guides at the site said the owners did quite well. The same cannot be said of the surrounding landscape – the dredge churned through almost one mile of riverbed a year, leaving huge piles of gravel along the bank, scarring an otherwise nearly pristine area with a five-mile trail of ugliness that leads to the dredge's final resting place, where the riverbed, and dreams, ran out.

Our other excursions from the ranch included a boat ride across Redfish Lake and a six-mile hike back, up steep switchbacks and along a high ridge with great views of the lake and surrounding mountains. Guided nature walks are also offered through the lake's visitor center.

We also stopped at the Sawtooth Fish Hatchery, a state facility that has the daunting mission of trying to bring back the local salmon populations that have been dangerously depleted by the eight dams standing between their Idaho spawning grounds and the Pacific Ocean 900 miles away. The hatchery, just north of the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch on Highway 75, welcomes visitors with tours, informative exhibits, and even food for the distinctly unendangered rainbow trout raised there for stocking nearby streams.

Every morning in summer at 9, hatchery workers check a trap to see if any adult Chinook salmon have made it back from the ocean, up through the Columbia, Snake and Salmon Rivers, to spawn and die here in their Idaho mountain birthplace. Hatchery workers accelerate those last natural events, killing the fish and taking their eggs and sperm to insure a higher breeding success. More

than 90 percent of the fertilized eggs will survive to hatch here, compared with fewer than 10 percent in the wild. The Chinook's fertility is impressive; in two long tanks, we saw 137,000 hatchlings from 27 adult females. But fewer than one in a thousand of the young Chinook will make it back as adults. On the two mornings we visited the hatchery, the trap was empty of returning salmon.

Another worthwhile excursion was a scenic drive over an unmarked dirt road the locals aptly refer to as Nip and Tuck (be sure to ask for directions). The road climbs to offer a magnificent view of the entire Stanley Basin.

To prolong our stay in the backcountry, we signed up with one of the Stanley outfitters for a half-day whitewater trip on the main Salmon River. The 10-mile river trip began under bright sun but ended with a vivid display of the mountains' volatile weather: rain, thunder, lightning, a 30-degree temperature drop and hail. As we sat, paddling and shivering, bare arms and legs pelted by ice, I had only one thought: to get back to the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch and soak in the hot-spring pool. Then came the sad realization that we had already checked out. True, a hot shower awaited us in our rented Sun Valley condo. But somehow it just wouldn't be the same.