

Wyoming, June 2015

The Bitterroot Ranch

First stop - Jackson Hole

Plane landing amongst snow-capped mountains, a small, very easily handle-able airport, mid 20Cs but fresh mountain air... and after a frenetic time at home, a weight definitely lifts.

A night in an ordinary but OK and ideally central motel and a lovely lazy Sunday morning wandering along the boardwalk, in and out of a few shops, admiring moose-statues and drinking coffee at a sunny Café. This suits me to a T!



Quite an itinerary I suppose, three ranches and Yellowstone National Park in a little over a week, but hire car finally collected (an unnecessary trip back to the airport - I'd forgotten the shuttle takes you to the opposite side of town!), car into Drive and I'm off towards The Grand Teton National Park. Just gorgeous and every bit as good as I remember. Photograph after photograph but of course they're nothing like the real thing.

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The drive is easy, even for me! A long straight road, its hard to go wrong. A quick break for a leg stretch in Dubois, then left onto the gravel East Fork Road, past the rather incongruous 'Trial Lawyers College' and on, on, on, more gravel towards The Bitterroot. This part seems further than before but I know to just keep going

The road is quite bumpy in places, gravel flies as a big Chevy truck passes (thank goodness my car hire includes windscreen cover) but at last I spot horses, horses and yet more horses. I must be nearly there.

Finally I see the ranch and soon, the bridge over the river that takes me right into the yard.



Mel shows me to my cabin, a short walk from the bridge and a lovely cozy one, dark wood, wood-burning stove and easy to sit-in planters' chairs on the 'porch'. I'm facing away from the mountains this time but love its back country-hideaway-in-the-woods feel. I go for a leg stretching walk along the river to look around, breathe the mountain air and wave hellos to other new arrivals.

We meet again a little later over a glass of wine on the veranda of the main lodge. They've come from all over the US – Florida, Maine, Colorado, Ohio, Kentucky, some on their first visit, several who've been at least once before. 'It sure is peaceful' says Bob from Florida and we sigh our agreement, not wanting break the spell.

Dinner is a surprise BBQ by the river, red check table cloths and home reared beef made into proper American burgers. Delicious, very relaxed and a great chance to catch up properly with Mel & Bayard.

Always fully involved, with son Richard and daughter-in-law Hadley – unlike many ranches The Bitterroot is truly owner run - they've another busy week ahead. Mel's been making last minute re-arrangements for guests attending long-time friend Linda Tellington-Jones's clinic last week. Several want to stay longer to see her back another young horse. Changes made, they've gone into town tonight but talk is of how amazing Linda is. I hope there's a chance to watch her at work.

Bayard has some fishermen to entertain and he'll be riding every day as well. Where does he get his energy? It must be living here that does it!

Monday morning, a leisurely breakfast at about 8am, then we meet by the corrals at 9.15 for an introduction to the horses and Western tack. All a bit different to what I'm used to. Mel gives a few hints on technique. Most of the horses go in Western bits, are used to a loose contact and neck rein. I remember from a previous visit that to properly neck rein you must move your hands right up the horses' neck; if you don't, turning seems a real chore; do it right and the horses turn on the spot. Mel asks us too to get weight out of the saddle at faster paces and up hills - and the fact the horses are not back-sore says it all. Luckily this 'English hunting seat' is also best on uneven Dartmoor ground, so its easier for me than some of the Americans, used to sitting back in the traditional western way.

Everyone's a little apprehensive but soon we're safely mounted and our group of 5 heads off, with Bayard up front and a wrangler at the back. First into the school, a few circles and trotting poles under Mel's expert eye, just to be sure we've got the hang of it all, then we're off to explore.

A wide western saddle, long stirrups, my nippy little horse is keen and spritely and I'm wobbly after my travels and too much desk-time! We weave through the sage brush, hopping over wayward twigs, Bayard leads the way as we canter along a game path this way and that through the pines. Its all good fun; the route is beautiful, I survive ...but only just!



Back to base for lunch, a welcome leg stretch and a different horse in the afternoon - for me the very comfortable, laid back Honey. Heading out with Mel this time, we follow a new route, cantering up and around the gravel 'roller coaster', passing some of the ranch's 30 or so tempting cross country jumps and winding our way along the banks of the gushing Wind River. It's only Day 2 but as we meet again in the evening, dipping huge shrimps in horseradish mayonnaise with a glass of wine, I'm beginning to feel completely refreshed.

Next morning some choose a lesson to brush up on riding technique, some decide to fish in the pond behind the ranch and 4 of us head off with Bayard again, in search of Butch Cassidy's hideout in the hills. A few day's ride across State from the notorious 'Hole-in-the-Wall', rumour has it Butch bought a ranch near Dubois in the 1890's and was supplied with horses and beef by friendly local ranchers. Crossing the river, climbing steep, rock strewn paths through ancient pine forest and onto grassy meadow dotted with daisies, phlox and pink Bitterroot flowers, it's easy to imagine taking refuge here. Talk turns to the Pony Express and we look to the far mountains, still covered in snow. How far you could ride, even today, without coming across another soul.....

After lunch, energetic as always, Bayard takes me to see some of the fishing and picnic spots a little higher in the National Forest, bordering the Shoshone Indian Reservation. It's simply gorgeous. I'd love to spend a few days up here with pack horses, cooking over a camp fire, fishing in the hills..... a return family visit, our 3 boys and some friends, would be perfect! Cattle are being moved into the National Forest too at the end of June and then ranch guests will regularly ride up here to round up strays and check on mothers and calves.



Tuesday is square dancing night in Dubois, serious stuff for the locals and you mustn't be late! Delicious home reared beef sets the dancers up and several cars head off at 7.15 to join the fun.

Wednesday is another blue-skied morning and another ride heads off – so much to explore and so easy to slip into the daily routine.

But all too soon its time for me to leave and driving to my next stop, I ponder over the pull of The Bitterroot. For me, it has to be the simply glorious countryside. All that unending space; a panorama of sage-and-herb covered plains, Big Sky, snow-capped mountains on every horizon, the noise of the rushing river. Its peaceful, calming, good for your head – and with limited Wifi and hardly a mobile signal to be found, the most wonderful way to switch off.

Then of course, the horses. 180 or so with 130 used for riding, without doubt the best way to get around. I enjoyed all 4 of mine and in the evening what a lovely wind-down to watch the foals, the happy bays, greys, paints & chestnuts wander past your cabin snatching at the grass, roaming free.



The Bitterroot is definitely for horse lovers, but there's something more to it than that. Staying here is time out. Turn off screens, escape the never ending flow of must-do-this-now information, let someone else make the decisions, enjoy good food, a comfortable bed, a simpler life and nature on your doorstep. Chipmunks run into holes under your cabin, birds hop through the trees close to your veranda, unruly grass blows over the decking. Its natural, unfussed. Days to ride in a wilderness that goes on and on, thinking of nothing more than where your horse steps next, what's on the horizon, what's in the space around you. Evenings to read, play pool, listen to the river, watch the stars in an unblemished sky. For a breather from life's hectic routine, its a wonderful tonic.

