

'Glamping' in the wild

It's still a tent, but Montana dude ranch offers a decidedly five-star spin

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SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

I woke up groggy, from the kind of deep sleep customary to camping outdoors. The rain was hammering the roof of our tent, and the wind howled fiercely as it tried to invade the canvass flaps. My face felt chilled from the dip in temperature typical on September nights in Montana, but the heavy down-filled quilt covering our king bed managed to keep the cool air at bay. This was definitely my style of camping. With heated slate floors in our ensuite (never mind the rain shower and towel warmer), even the universally dreaded middle-of-the-night campsite bathroom run was a non-issue. The mastermind behind 'glamping' had officially won a permanent place in my heart.

Visiting a dude ranch was a check off the bucket list for both my husband and I, and Paws Up, with its more refined wilderness experience, was perfect. As a working cattle ranch, spanning a massive 37,000 acres, Paws Up offers authentic ranching activities, like cattle drives and trail rides, in a rustic-yet-luxurious resort-like setting.

The scenery alone is a draw. Our campsite overlooked the Blackfoot River, where the Oscar award-winning movie "A River Runs Through It" (starring Brad Pitt) was filmed. Although there were three other couples sharing our site, we often had the camp to ourselves in the morning. Wrapped in blankets, cradling mugs of coffee, we'd sit fireside and watch the two resident eagles hunt for breakfast in the Blackfoot. Our own breakfast was cooked to order on the BBQ by camp chef Niffer in her open-air kitchen. I still miss her blueberry pancakes.

With the peaceful relief of having limited Internet access, and no cellular service at the campsite, we were reliant on camp butlers Ben and Clyde for organizing daily activities and shuttle service to the main lodge. The backdrop up at the lodge, which is only about a 15-minute drive from the riverside camps, is surprisingly different. At camp, we felt rather secluded among the tall pines that framed the riverbank, but the ranch land itself was the definition of big sky country — a landscape of vibrant green and sun-faded yellow grasses that evaporated into the blue.

Exploring the land on horseback felt like the right thing to do. Our horses, Spook and Bubba, were as placid as they come, which worked for us as my husband had never even sat on a horse before. I'd considered myself an experienced rider



A 'tent' at the Paws Up dude ranch in Montana. Heated slate floors are just one of the many luxuries on offer. — PHOTOS: CURT WOODHALL

If you go

Where it is: The Resort at Paws Up is located 35 minutes from the Missoula airport, two-and-a-half hours from Glacier National Park, and five-and-a-half hours from Yellowstone National Park. For more destination information visit arrivalstravel.com

er until 30 minutes in when my legs began to cramp. Apparently, it's not quite like riding a bike. Our wrangler expertly guided us through the varying terrain of tall grasses, steep hillsides and forested trails flanked with Ponderosa pines. Our pace catered to the least experienced horseman in the group, and after much cajoling on my part I convinced my husband to attempt a trot, and eventually some cantering. Ninety minutes later we were spent and more than ready for a massage.

Approaching the resort's Spa Town I saw a wash of white canvas punctuating the long green grasses of an



The view of the peaceful Blackfoot River from the Paws Up campsite.

open meadow. A wooden boardwalk brought us to the reception tent, and then onto our treatment room — an open-air tent with big sky views.

Lying on the heated massage table

I drifted in and out, listening to the wind play in the pines overhead. Between the horseback riding and skilful hands of my masseuse my body was mush, and from what I

could tell, my husband, who had passed out on the table beside me, felt the same way.

What surprised me most about the ranch was the camaraderie between guests and staff.

During the day our campmates were off on one of the thirty-plus activities offered throughout the resort, but after dinner we gathered around the campfire toasting marshmallows and sharing adventure stories. Our goal for the trip was to decompress from busy city life and simply enjoy the peaceful quiet. Reading by the stone hearth fireplace in the camp's open-air dining pavilion. Archery, billiards and horseshoe matches. Gentle mountain bike rides and wilderness hikes. But through the nightly fireside chats we were able to learn about some of the more adventurous activities — from cattle drives to hot-air-ballooning.