



Destination

Where the buffalo roam

If you love the great
outdoors and fly fishing,
there is nothing quite like
casting a line in Big Sky Country



Text and Photos
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Page 78-79: Firehole Ranch fishing guide, Alice Owsley in the Little Firehole River, Yellowstone National Park.

Above: Firehole Ranch on the shores of Lake Hebgen, Montana.

I've seen a lot in four decades of fly fishing, but it wasn't until the middle of last year that I had to tip-toe past a bison to get a good angle on a rising trout.

He had settled into a favourite wallow along the Little Firehole River in Yellowstone National Park, while guide Alice Owsley and I were quietly making our way up the other side of the creek – which was so narrow that, had he taken exception to our presence, we'd have been up another creek altogether.

As we crept closer, I was more intent on getting the ultimate 'Beauty-and-the-Beast' close-up than I was on catching fish, but convincing Alice to wade into the stream and act nonchalant was

proving impossible. Happily, the Beast was more snore than snort, and while we never did hook that fish, we got as intimate as you'd ever want to be with a big American buffalo in the wild.

Had she needed to, fleeing a raging bull would have probably been all in a day's work for Alice, who lives the outdoor life large. In winter, she guides snow coach tours of the park, and in summer is the only professional female fly fishing guide in the Yellowstone area.

"It's a physically demanding job, but I really like that," she told me. "I get paid to be outside all day long, I don't have any need for a gym membership, and I can eat anything I want to – it's great!



"I'm pretty much in my waders seven days a week once the fishing season gets underway. We do get Saturday off... but I usually go fishing!"

Alice is one of six full-time guides at Firehole Ranch, a private fly fishing resort near the town of West Yellowstone, in the southwest corner of Montana. Taking its name from the same valley where Alice and I had our close encounter with the bison, where clouds of steam from geysers and thermal vents create a permanently smoky atmosphere, the ranch consists of a main lodge and six cabins spread along the edge of a broad meadow that slopes gently down to the shores of Hebgen Lake. Surrounded by majestic 3000-metre, snow-speckled peaks, it lies smack in the



middle of some of the finest fly fishing country in the world.

Directly to the east and just across the Wyoming border is Yellowstone, the world's first national park (1872). At nearly 900,000 hectares, with its gobsmacking scenery and cavalcade of roadside wildlife, it feels like an enormous open-air Disney-style experience. It is also a trout fishery of national significance, with the Yellowstone, Gibbon and Firehole Rivers among its gems, along with numerous smaller rivers and spring creeks. Flowing off its vast volcanic plateau into the corner country of Montana and Idaho are the legendary Gallatin, Henry's Fork and Madison Rivers – the latter described in one guidebook as "(possibly) Montana's most revered natural feature... the river and its banks are glorified in every major sporting publication in America."

BIBLICAL GRANDEUR

Superlatives indeed, but everything in this part of the American West seems to be biblically endowed. It's not for nothing that Montana is nicknamed Big Sky Country. This may fail to



Above: Spectacular views from the ranch dining room.



Left: Resort owner Lynda Caine and her daughter Tatiana.



Right: A trout lamp and other decorations in the main sitting room (below).



impress many Australians – after all, our own Outback could swallow several western US states and still feel hungry – but for the average flatland wage earner, there is a grandeur about the Rocky Mountains that is almost overwhelming.

The thing about fishing at Firehole is that somehow you feel like all of this amazing terrain is yours alone.

For starters, there are the guiding permits. Alice again: “Firehole Ranch is one of the luckiest fishing operations in the state because of all the guiding permits it holds. We are licensed to guide on all the major rivers in our part of Montana and Idaho, plus all of the water in Yellowstone, and also have two national forest permits that cover many more rivers and lakes in the area. We can pretty much fish everything within a hundred-mile radius and will be able to keep doing so as long as we don’t let the permits lapse – which is important, because as far as getting new permits, well, that’s almost impossible.”

Then there is the splendid isolation of the ranch itself, and its many creature comforts. Imagine a classic American hunting and fishing camp, but with a five-star rating. It’s been aptly described as “elegantly rustic”, and in 1996 was named the inaugural Orvis “Lodge of the Year” – sort of like winning Best in Show, since only the world’s most prestigious fishing lodges are considered for this award.

The main lodge is a mixture of traditional and contemporary western style, with a huge double-sided stone fireplace (the mantelpiece was hewn from a single lodgepole pine split lengthwise), wrought-iron chandeliers fashioned in an antler motif, and polished pine floors. Walls and tables are covered with all manner of western artefacts. A large moose head looms over the doorway into the dining room, which is more or less an enclosed porch looking over the lawn and meadow to the lake and mountains beyond.

CURIOUS CRITTERS

The guest cabins – log, of course, just like the main lodge – extend the rancho deluxe theme. Each is different, but most have fireplaces, and all have spacious, modern bathrooms and are furnished with great warmth and charm. Set into the trees along the forest’s edge, they are well separated from one another. The local wildlife is more likely to trouble you than are rowdy neighbours. One

“everything in this part of the American West seems to be biblically endowed”



Above: The view across the horse paddock to Mt. Coffin.

day we came home from fishing to find a cow moose nibbling the flowers in the window boxes at the front of our cabin, two sandhill cranes in the meadow, and a baby saw-whet owl in a tree by the back door.

With a full house pegged at 21, the staff of 24 always outnumber guests. Coincidentally, the staff's average age is also 24, but the air of youthful enthusiasm that pervades the camp is no accident. As owner, Lynda Caine explained to me: "One of the things we always try to do is create an atmosphere that is both casual and caring. For that



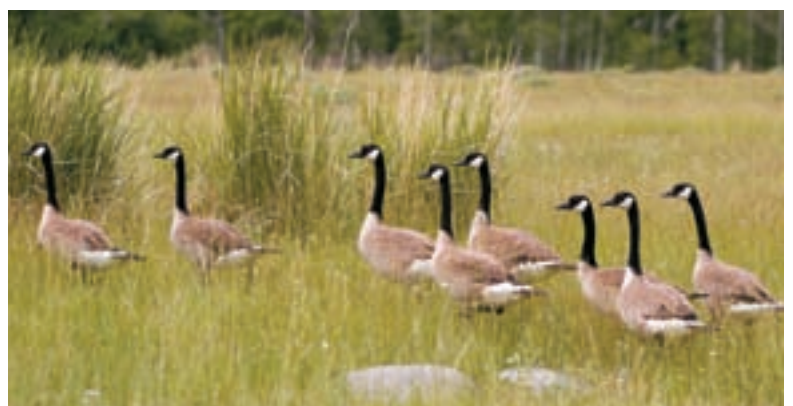
Above: A moose beside Lake Hebgen.

Left: Columbian ground squirrels.

Below: A flock of immature Canada geese.

reason, we usually hire energetic young people – often college students on holidays – because we’ve found they do their job really well, but are also fun.”

Gourmet meals served up by long-time chefs Bruno and Kris Georgetown are also a huge attraction – or distraction, depending on your point of view. How does Organic Spinach Salad with shrimp, scallops, onions and peppers, followed by Braised Buffalo Short Ribs with a wild mushroom cabernet ragout – or Baked Fresh Alaskan Halibut Cheeks with beluga lentils,



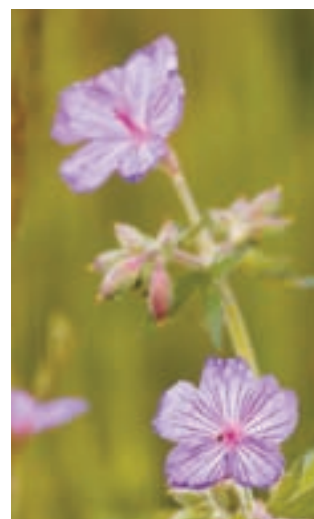


Above: Traverine (calcium carbonate) terraces, Mammoth Hot Springs, Yellowstone.

An American bald eagle beside the Madison River.

Sticky Geranium.

Opposite: Hot springs along the Firehole River.







*Right: Fishing by drift boat,
Madison River.*

*Below: A nice pair of brown
trout.*

Bottom: Firehole River.



and home-made profiteroles for dessert – plus matching wines – sound after a hard day's casting?

The real problem, of course, is fitting it all in after a cooked-to-order breakfast and a generous picnic lunch somewhere along the river. The secret is simply to surrender. As we heard another guest remark at breakfast one day, while we struggled to decide between huevos rancheros and French toast with all the trimmings: "There's something about being up here with all this fresh air and magnificent scenery that gives you permission to eat a lot more than you would at home." I'm with him – go for the Bloody Mary and the smoked salmon omelette – there's plenty of time for muesli when you get back home.

There is really nothing better than the unsolicited testimony of a repeat customer (in fact, 70 per cent of the ranch's business comes from previous guests) to paint a true picture of a place.

One couple we met had been coming to Firehole for eight years. After their sixth visit they asked each other if they should, perhaps, be looking for somewhere new to move on to, and at once agreed there was really no place they would rather be.

Perhaps this overheard dinner table discourse (possibly spoken in the afterglow of a good afternoon's fishing, but still...) sums it up best: "There are lots of places you can go to catch fish,



*Fly fishing in Firehole Canyon
on the Firehole River.*



but here it's the whole package that makes it special. Yes, the fishing is super, both the variety and the quality, but it's also the setting, the food, the staff and the way they take care of you, the guiding, everything. It's about as nice as it gets, to go out fishing all day and then come back to eat great food and look out over this beautiful view, and then get up and do it all over again.

"Sure, most days you catch fish, but even if you don't the rest of it is still great. No fish? Who cares? It's pretty hard to get upset about anything here."

But make no mistake, they take fishing seriously at Firehole Ranch. Not everyone who comes to Firehole fishes, but many are hard-core, and the guides – in fact, most of the staff – really know their stuff. Indeed, one of the first staff get-togethers of the season was a "Hatch Party", where everyone had to come dressed as their favourite insect!

It is completely up to guest and guide to decide where to go for the day and what sort of fishing to do. Some choose to walk and wade the medium-sized rivers in nearby national forests or in Yellowstone; a wonderful scenic experience in its own right.

SADDLE SORE

One day a couple of years ago, in early autumn when the cottonwoods were just starting to turn colour, a couple of us set off on horses with a guide and the ranch's head wrangler to ride to a beautiful little alpine lake in the Coffin Range, high up behind the ranch. It took us most of the morning to get there, and we then spent another couple of hours paddling around in float tubes and casting to hungry little cut-throat



Top and bottom: The Madison River.

Above: Drift boat fishing the Madison River.

Right: Brown trout.

trout, which was wonderful fun. Payback came on the ride home; not being much of a horseman, I could barely walk by the time we got back to the corral – but the experience was worth the sore thighs.

Probably the most popular fishing option is casting from drift boats along one of the larger rivers. Not only is it a novelty for the average Australian – it's just not something we do very much of here – but it's a great way to cover a lot of water and feast on some amazing scenery.

The guides all park their rigs at a marina on the opposite shore, so at 8:30 every morning everyone assembles with waders and rods at a jetty in front of the lodge for a scenic cruise across the lake. From there, the various groups disperse far and wide, often coming together again at one of the more popular put-in points along, say, the Madison River. For about an hour, the line-up of pickup trucks and boat trailers resembles a Grand Prix starting grid. Once afloat, though, there is so much water that you hardly see another boat for the rest of the day.


The guide's job is primarily to select flies, tend tackle, and find fish, but in reality he (or Alice) spends most of the time working the oars. Given the effort they put in, it's obvious why Alice has no need of a gym membership.



The whole idea is to drift quietly past likely trout habitat, and the client's job is simply to cast, but on some days that seems nearly as hard as rowing. On our first day on the Madison at the end of June last year, the river was at its highest seasonal level in a decade, and we covered about ten miles in seven hours. That's a lot of fishing. I must have made 2000 casts, and by the time we stopped I could feel every single fibre in the muscle group running from the base of my neck along and underneath my right shoulder blade. (Yes, they even offer massages at Firehole Ranch, if you book them the day before – so think ahead – especially if you do the horse ride.)

As with any fishing, the purple patches came and went, but by day's end three of us had caught and released more than 25 fish of up to about three pounds, using all sorts of different fly combinations. It was a fantastic day on the water... even including the thunderstorm and hail that hit us half an hour short of the takeout point.

Back at the ranch, tallies were compared and tales told, and the morning's air of excited expectation had become a sort of contented exhaustion. At least one guest was seen heading off for bed even before the flourless chocolate torte had hit the placemat. No doubt they were impatient to get up and do it all over again.

Firehole Ranch is open from mid-June to mid-September. All-inclusive accommodation rates start from \$US320 per person per day, and guiding is \$US395 per day for up to two people. For more information: www.fireholeranch.com. 



*The Firehole River,
Yellowstone National Park.*