

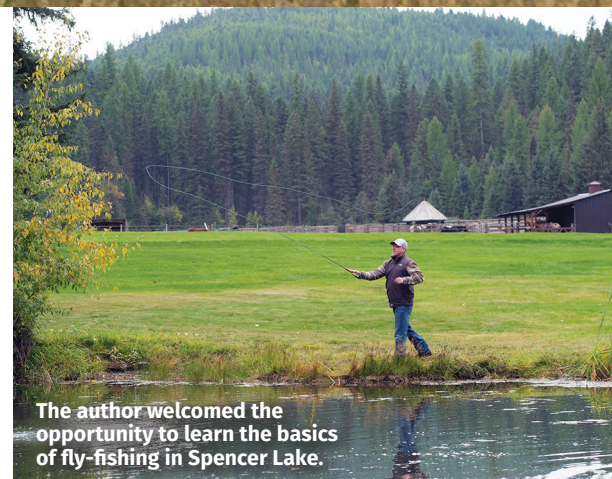
Escaping to...

The Bar W Guest Ranch

By Shawn Hamilton



The Bar W Guest Ranch on Spencer Lake in Whitefish, Montana, offers a vacation for all ages with true Western hospitality. The ranch is nestled at the base of Spencer Mountain, and features a 6,200-square-foot lodge, cabin suites, indoor and outdoor riding arenas, stables, a barn, play meadow, entertainment area, and a gazebo on the lake. They offer numerous other outdoor activities, but horseback riding in Montana's Big Sky country is their feature attraction. With 3,000 acres available to explore from the saddle, it feels far from civilization yet is just a few miles from the City of Whitefish.



The author welcomed the opportunity to learn the basics of fly-fishing in Spencer Lake.



Arriving at the ranch with my husband, Joe, in complete darkness, we were greeted at the gate by Dave Leishman, ranch owner and manager, and led to the cabin which would be our home for the coming week. After unloading the car I sat on the deck admiring the stars and taking in the sound of horses grazing in a nearby field. The log cabin was brand new, featuring wooden furniture and an extremely comfy bed. Drifting off to sleep, I wondered what the ranch would look like in daylight.

The next morning, I awoke to the sound of wild turkeys in the nearby field, just a few feet away from where a doe and her fawn were grazing peacefully. Approximately 40 good-looking Quarter Horse crosses were happily munching hay in their pens.

The ranch's gentle horses take good care of children and adults alike.



PHOTOS: CLIX PHOTOGRAPHY



Looking down the Canada-US border.

Breakfast was served at 8 am in the main lodge, a guesthouse and dining area of classic elegance and traditional Western informality. We introduced ourselves to the other guests, including a family with two daughters, a couple from Boston enjoying their third visit, and another couple from California hunting for their perfect retirement property. The breakfast of sausage, biscuits, and gravy was quickly devoured before gearing up and heading out to meet the horses for our orientation ride.

I was presented with Dolly, a Paint-cross mare, while Joe was introduced to Pilgrim, a bay Quarter Horse-cross gelding. In the outdoor ring we were taught how to walk, stop, and turn our horses before we headed out to the nearby forest for a short trail ride. Leading the pack was wrangler Samantha on Rooster; she has the perfect personality for a guest wrangler — funny and witty, and she doesn't take life too seriously.

The forest was thick with towering lodgepole pines and tamarack. Our ride took us to Moose pond where we spotted a large buck and a doe. They stopped to stare at us for a few moments before bounding off into the woods. Deer are obviously a common sight on the trail as the horses barely spared them a glance.

On returning to the ranch we headed into the lodge for buffalo burgers and spicy chili. I knew then that this was not the place to come to lose weight.

In the afternoon we had the choice of riding or learning to fly-fish in Spencer Lake, which is located on the property. I had never been taught how to fly-fish, so I jumped at the chance to learn how to do it properly from a professional. Our fly-fishing teacher, Marco, came here from Boston to work in the nearby Montana Glacier National Park and is now a fly-fishing guide as well as a sommelier in the local seafood restaurant.



PHOTOS: CLIX PHOTOGRAPHY

Our last day at the ranch featured roping, penning, and a miniature rodeo. It was evident that the group had bonded during their time together, and had left their everyday cares behind as they focussed on their horses and the tasks at hand.

wranglers would prefer if you didn't try to teach them or worry what lead they are on. "It is really not part of their job description," Samantha tells us.

Joe rode Pilgrim like the perfect cowboy.

I learned that fly-fishing is quite an art. Arm movement is important, as is keeping your wrist straight and moving the shoulder and elbow to keep the rod moving from ten o'clock to two o'clock. I learned about proper timing, waiting half a heartbeat in the back for the perfect moment, balancing the fly on the end of the rod then sending it as far as you can for the cast landing on the water in a straight line, and keeping tension on the line. Sounds easy enough, right? A few hours later I seemed to have the rhythm, but every time I made the conscious decision to cast the rod my brain would get anxious and I would force the cast too quickly resulting in a squiggly line hitting the water. Patience is the key. That half a heartbeat pause is extremely important. One of the guests caught a four-pound trout, which he named Wilbur. Marco unhooked him and made sure he was okay before releasing him, swishing him back and forth to get water in his gills to guarantee he would swim away. Unfortunately Joe and I did not have the same luck but we did feel that we were getting the hang of it.

After fly-fishing, Joe and I geared up again to do a lope test in the ring. The object of the lope test is to make sure you are safe to go on the lope rides. The task was to walk to the fence line, then pick up a lope along the long side of the ring, stop at the end of the ring for a count of five, then pick up a lope again and ride back to the group. Dolly was an angel and even picked up the right lead, which apparently is not common in these trail horses. It's not something they really need to know how to do and the

I was impressed since he had not been on a horse in quite some time.

That night we were picked up from our cabin by a wagon pulled by a pair of Clydesdales and driven by Lindsay, who has been at the ranch for seven years. They took us on a short trip around the property before stopping at a cabana overlooking the lake where flank steaks were cooking on the outdoor barbeque. We brought our own bottle of red wine as alcohol is not served on the property, and enjoyed potato salad, steak, and corn-on-the-cob. We opted out of the wagon ride back and walked to stretch our legs, then headed for the hot tub, which felt glorious in the chilly September evening air, reminding us that winter wasn't too far away.

The next morning, the breakfast bell rang just before 8 AM as we headed to the lodge for pancakes and ham. Today we would head out on an all-day ride to the US-Canada border at Eureka. An hour and a half in the truck pulling the stock trailer found us in the Kooacanusa National Forest where we unloaded the horses and mounted up. The forest floor was dry and sandy as we passed several crystal clear lakes. The open areas of the trail made me want to go for a glorious lope, but the ranch policy is loping on lope rides only, so I decided to curtail my enthusiasm

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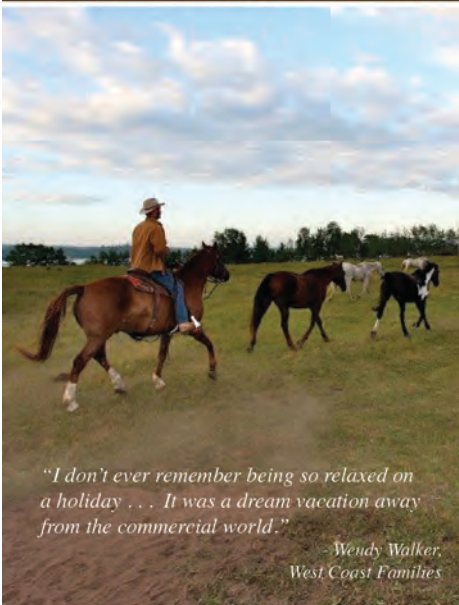
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A young ranch guest graduates from roping the plastic cow to the real thing.

and just enjoy the scenery.

We came to a fence with a 20-metre wide clear-cut on each side of it running east-west as far as the eye could see. It was like a reverse Mohawk carved out of the forest. Everyone got a chance to have their photo taken at the silver Canada-US border marker and a few people decided to jump the fence just to say they had been in Canada. Next we headed on to a 90-mile long reservoir called Lake Koochanusa which runs from Libby, Montana, in the south up to Fernie, BC in the north. The sun was shining and the water was turquoise in colour. We could have easily been on a Caribbean island. We stopped for lunch on the ridge of the reservoir and enjoyed the view. After we dropped down to the beach for a short ride on the sand we began our return trek, passing crystal clear lakes with the light glistening off the grass at their edges. A number of deer crossed our path.

The next day Joe and I opted for the lope ride; it was just the two of us led by Wesley on Ike. We took mostly wide logging roads and had five or six good long lopes. Dolly wanted to race Ike each time, but when I put her behind Joe's Pilgrim it was a lot easier to keep her in check. It was an enjoyable ride to a lookout over the ranch where we could see our cabin. That night we took part in the square dancing lessons after dinner — lots of fun!

The following afternoon, after another day of riding, the entire group of guests was invited to dine in Whitefish at a restaurant called Truby's. Bar W picked up the tab for the entire crew. Dave, the ranch's owner, told us how he and his wife came to Montana years ago with their daughters who were seven and nine, to escape the office and spend time with their family. He loved it so much that after four annual trips he decided to buy his own ranch and spend summers in Montana. After Truby's we headed off to



The Bar W horses are quiet and sensible.

PHOTOS: CLIX PHOTOGRAPHY

hang with the locals at the Great Northern Bar & Grill, fully equipped with shuffleboard tables, pool tables, and even a tennis table.

The breakfast bell felt a bit early for us next morning, but we got up and dressed to ride. Team roping and team penning were the themes for the day, starting with roping. Wrangler Mark has the perfect touch for teaching, and in just a few minutes I was successfully roping the plastic cow from the ground and had graduated to mounting the mechanical horse and roping the plastic cow from the saddle. Once that was perfected I was in the pen with the real thing. "I got myself a live one!" I shouted when I actually roped my first real cow.

Next came a miniature rodeo. Joe and I were on top of our game — he beat me in the barrel racing, but I came back with a vengeance in the pole bending. Everyone had a great time participating and cheering on the others.

Moving on to the indoor arena, we all tried out team penning. I was quite surprised to see how everyone's riding skills had improved over the week. By this point in our stay, I could see that work and daily troubles had been set aside and cell phones were only used to take photos. Everyone was enjoying the here and now, and concentrating on their horses. It was an



The outdoor barbeque at the cabana.

*"The first time, it's a vacation.
After that,
it's coming home."*

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incredible transformation to watch. They had come for a dude ranch experience but had completely changed over the week. The two young girls had become confident riders, their dad was now quite a cowboy, and all the guests seemed closer to one another.

This would be our last night together — and what a night it was! Dinner was served outside under the stars, and the guitars and songs around the large campfire seemed endless. It was the perfect ending to a wonderful week.

Bar W Guest Ranch caters to families and clients who would like to enjoy their horse passion with those who are not avid riders. They are extremely safety conscious and cater to building confidence. Their hospitality, cozy rooms, wonderful horses, and diverse activities make Bar W the perfect escape. There are numerous rides and activities going on at the ranch and for the more adventurous I would recommend one of their two annual cattle drives. 🍁

For more info visit > www.thebarw.com

Shawn Hamilton is a freelance equine photojournalist based in Ontario, Canada.



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