



Of course guided horseback ride is among the offerings at The Ranch at Rock Creek. But the resort offers myriad other activities, all under a mountain sky.

FAMILY TRAVEL

SADDLE UP FOR A WESTERN ADVENTURE IN MONTANA

MHAIRRI WOODHALL

After spending three blissful days playing cowgirl in western Montana's big sky country, I can say The Ranch at Rock Creek is pastoral perfection. From its tranquil setting in Philipsburg amid three mountain ranges, to its staff of cheerful wranglers and ranch hands — most of whom look as if they've been plucked from an Abercrombie and Fitch campaign — this place is flawless. By fully embracing the dude ranch's authentic western hospitality and adventurous spirit, my urbanite family enjoyed our most memorable vacation to date.

Play outside is the Rock Creek mantra. Ask any of the staff why they return year after year, and the big-grinned reply is "location, location, location." The 6,300-acre property boasts a 2:1 staff/guest ratio, and the majority of folks who work here are beyond passionate about the outdoors. Backcountry hiking, fly fishing, mountain biking, barrel racing and wildlife photography are a mere handful of the staff's pursuits. As ranch accommodation is fully inclusive, we embarked on two private adventures each day. It's astonishing how much our guides' unbridled enthusiasm enhanced the experience. Rock Creek offers more than 20 guided outdoor activities, including a comprehensive fly-fishing program on the trout stream that carves through the ranch. Recognizing my limited — OK, non-existent — patience for the art of angling, I opted for a wildlife tour, outdoor photography class, horseback ride and a Three Peak sightseeing excursion to capture some of the ranch's spectacular view.

Our wildlife tour, led by a geology student, was a total hit. In just under two hours we saw big-horn sheep on a craggy cliff, photographed numerous white tail and mule deer, watched a wily fox slipping through tall grass, and counted five moose nibbling greens in the river's marshland. Oh, and we learned a ton about the area's tectonic activity, where the best fly-fishing spots are and the ins and outs of Montana's rigid hunting and fishing laws.

My photography lesson was equally cool and just as informative. As I'm forever annoyed that my husband's pictures garner more Insta-likes than mine, I booked a workshop to help refine my skills. Good news: I received many helpful tips and tricks that I've continued to utilize post-ranch and managed to capture one exceptional shot. Bad news: my husband is still winning our photo war. Another bonus is that the ranch's myriad activities allow families to tailor their vacation to the individual interests of each member. While



The Ranch at Rock Creek Granite Lodge is about eight hours by car from Calgary.

I shot landscapes, my shutterbug hubby finessed his firing at the rifle range. Another solo activity for the man of our house was navigating the downhill mountain biking course. Although I was told that beginners are welcome, it was stressed that I must feel confident in my ability. I politely declined. The hubs had a blast, and I joined up with him in the afternoon for a leisurely horseback ride. Little Grizzlies Kids Club, and its contingent of bubbly camp leaders, is also responsible for my exceptional ranch experience. Our six-year old was completely mesmerized with every craft, scavenger hunt and nature lesson she received — all of which took place outside. Over three days, my energetic cowgirl groomed a pony, played soccer, geocached, examined the aquatic creatures in the ranch pond, discovered what flora and fauna grows in Montana and nurtured a new interest in bowling and darts. It is absolutely impossible for children to even think the words "I'm bored," at The Ranch at Rock Creek. If they're not worn out during their time at Little Grizzlies, the bicycles, outdoor pool and evening stargazing and marshmallow roasts will surely finish them off.

Food is another integral component of ranch life, and the chefs at Rock Creek surpassed my expectations. Think mountain cuisine — bison, elk, trout



The accommodation is rated five-star by Forbes Travel Guide.

and the best steak you'll ever sink your teeth into — with a western flare. After three gourmet squares a day, and unlimited snacks, I don't care how many horses you ride, or trails you hike, your denim will feel a little snuggler on the return trip home. The bartenders pursue their art just as seriously, and the craft cocktails, local draught beer, and impressive wine collection are free flowing throughout the day and night. Chatting with guests and bar staff in the Great Room was our favourite way to wind down après adventure. Every night after dinner we wandered over to the Silver Dollar Saloon for bowling and bar games. The western decor is on point and our

child loved trying for turkeys in 12-pin and attempting to beat us in shuffleboard.

My only vacation regret is that 72 hours simply wasn't enough time to experience all the ranch has to offer. We missed out on the ropes course, archery, yoga and spa. I'd also have welcomed the chance to take an arena lesson and perhaps even try my hand at roping.

For most families, ours included, The Ranch at Rock Creek is a bucket list, once-in-a-lifetime destination. It's an award-winning Relais & Chateaux property, the only Forbes Travel Guide Five-Star guest ranch, and the United States's only founding member of National Geographic

IF YOU GO

- We almost always book destinations during shoulder season. In addition to significant cost savings, we benefit from a quieter, laid-back atmosphere.
- No gear? No problem. You can suit up at The Ranch at Rock Creek's Rod and Gun Club. From cowboy boots and hats to slickers, gumboots and mountain biking protective wear.
- The ranch is located halfway between Glacier National Park and Yellowstone National Park — about eight hours south of Calgary. Go to www.theranchatrockcreek.com.

Society's Unique Lodges of the World. The impeccable service and pricing are reflective of the impressive accolades. Rates range from \$900 per person, per night in the Granite Lodge in winter to \$1,500 per person, per night in peak season, plus a 20 per cent ranch fee. Follow along Mhairri Woodhall's family adventures at www.arrivalstravel.com