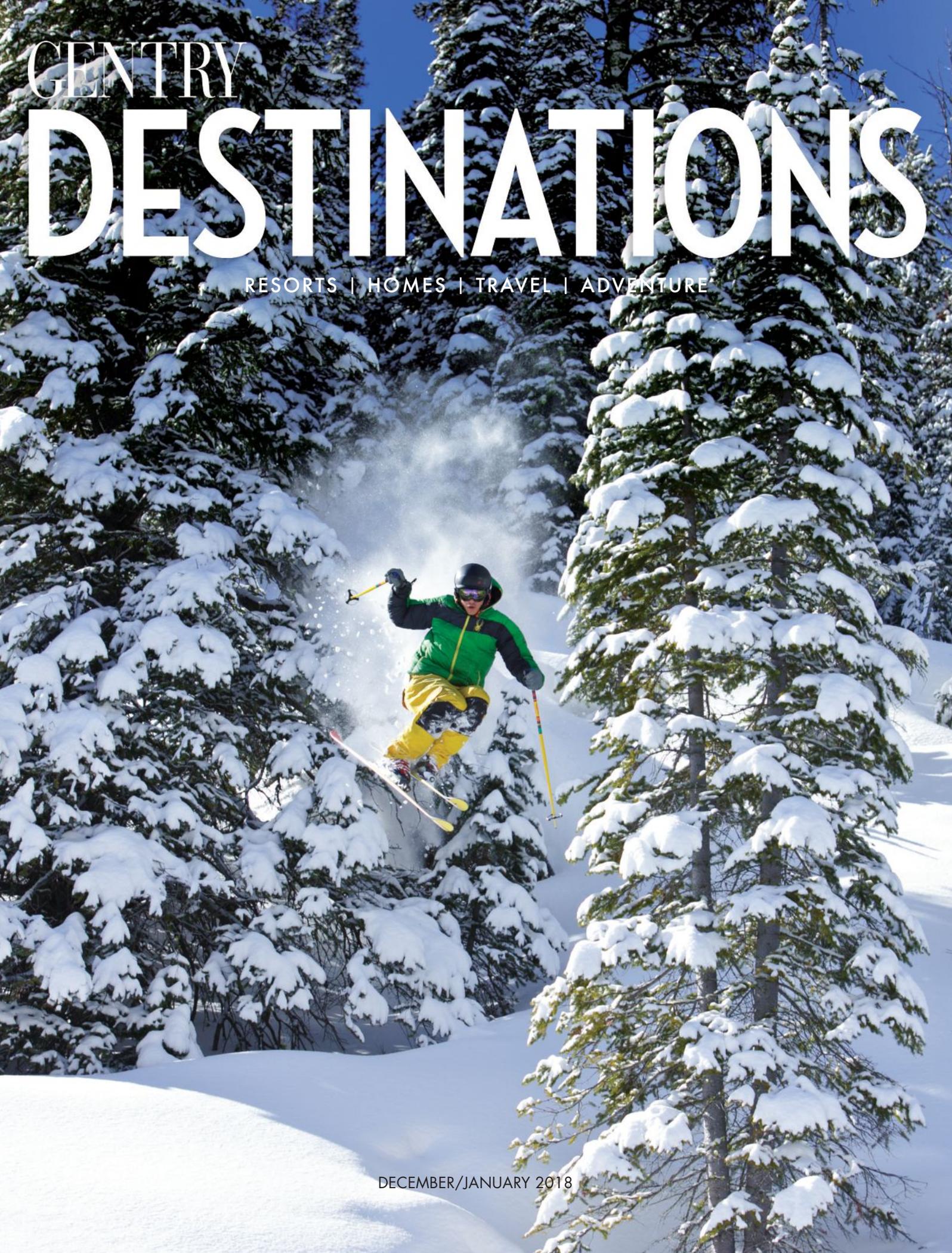


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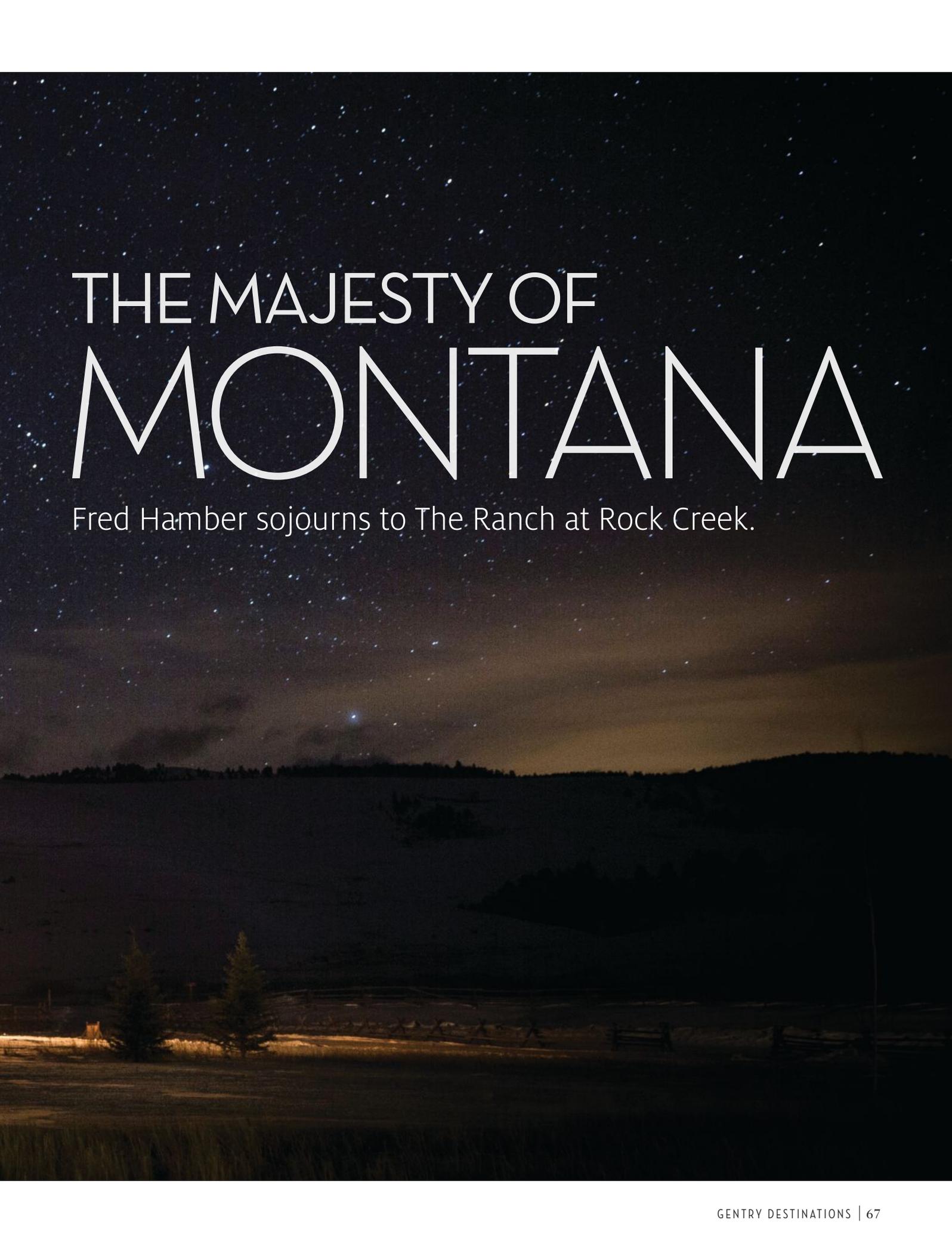
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THE MAJESTY OF MONTANA

Fred Hamber sojourns to The Ranch at Rock Creek.



To spend several days at The Ranch at Rock Creek is to begin to view Montana as a stage on which various actors have been arriving over millennia to play their parts: the sagebrush and ponderosa pines; rainbow and cutthroat trout; elk and brown bears; Sioux and Blackfeet; homesteaders, miners, and cowboys; skiers, fishermen, and recreation lovers.

It was late autumn when I was invited to visit the ranch, a luxury Relais & Chateaux property in Granite County, southeast of Missoula, and a bit of frost and snow were starting to appear. Outdoor activities are at the heart of the experience on the 10 square miles of diverse terrain. At check-in, guests are encouraged to schedule their week: horseback riding, fishing, nature hikes, target sports, yoga, and mountain biking, all with expert guides. The ranch operates on an all-inclusive basis wherein meals, drinks, and activities are covered in the daily rate.

Among the guides are two Master Naturalists, experts in the region's flora and fauna. One morning while hiking to the "Top of the World," a high meadow vista spot looking toward the Pintler range in one direction and the Sapphire Mountains in another, our guide explained the native uses of the mullein plant's leaves, the root system of aspen trees, and how to tell direction by pointing the hour hand of a wristwatch toward the sun. "Guess which part of the body this is from," he quizzed, brandishing an elk

scapula found lying along the trail. Further on, we encountered the remains of an impromptu campsite that had been created weeks before by a team participating in a survival skills course the ranch offers.

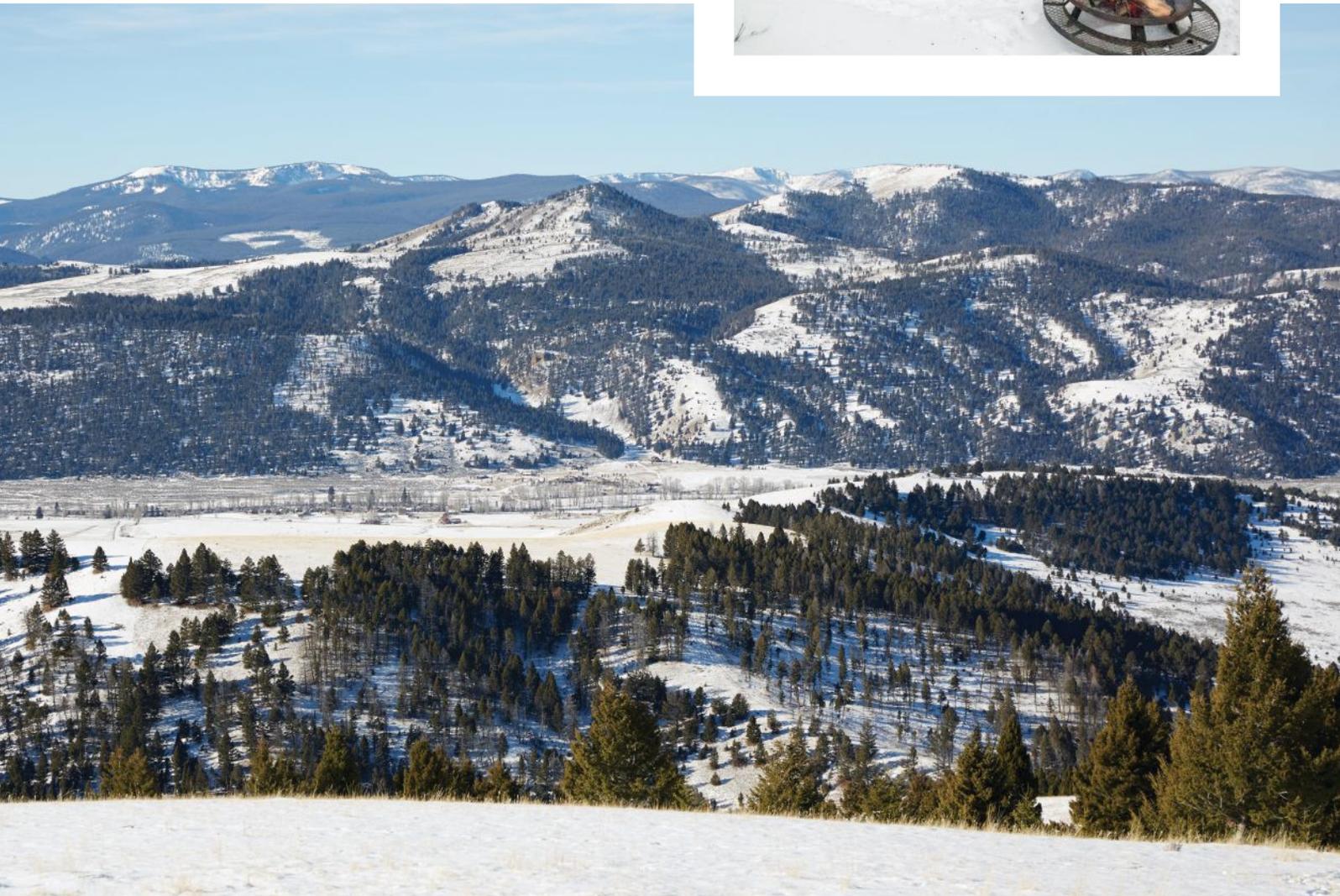
Rock Creek is home to seven species of fish and has been officially designated a Blue Ribbon fishery. During snow season, hiking trails become more than 20 miles of groomed cross-country ski trails. Management and staff put a lot of thought into offering a contemporary Western experience, honoring the history and culture of Montana while keeping things current with geocaching, paintball, snowmobiling, a ropes course, and something called Snowga whereby yoga enthusiasts ski a mile to a flat spot before removing their skis and doing their contortions standing on the snow.

One afternoon I hiked the archery course with my guide, shooting at life-size 3D replicas of a wolf, badger, and mountain lion. It's hard not to feel like an action hero when standing atop a rock boulder, flexing a compound bow while taking aim at an antelope through a scrim of juniper.

Another morning I was given a lesson in outdoor photography, developing an eye for interesting foreground subjects to juxtapose against the stunning backgrounds. The Ranch at Rock Creek is one of *National Geographic's* "Unique Lodges of the World", and a veteran *National Geographic* photographer recently spent a



Horses return to winter pasture each afternoon following the day's activities (*opposite page*). Rock Creek boasts one of the highest fish counts in Montana. In colder months, fly fishing gives way to ice fishing (*left*). Target sports, including pistols and riflery with professional guides, are offered year round (*below*). The ranch covers 6,600 acres of terrain with views toward the Sapphire Mountain range (*bottom*).



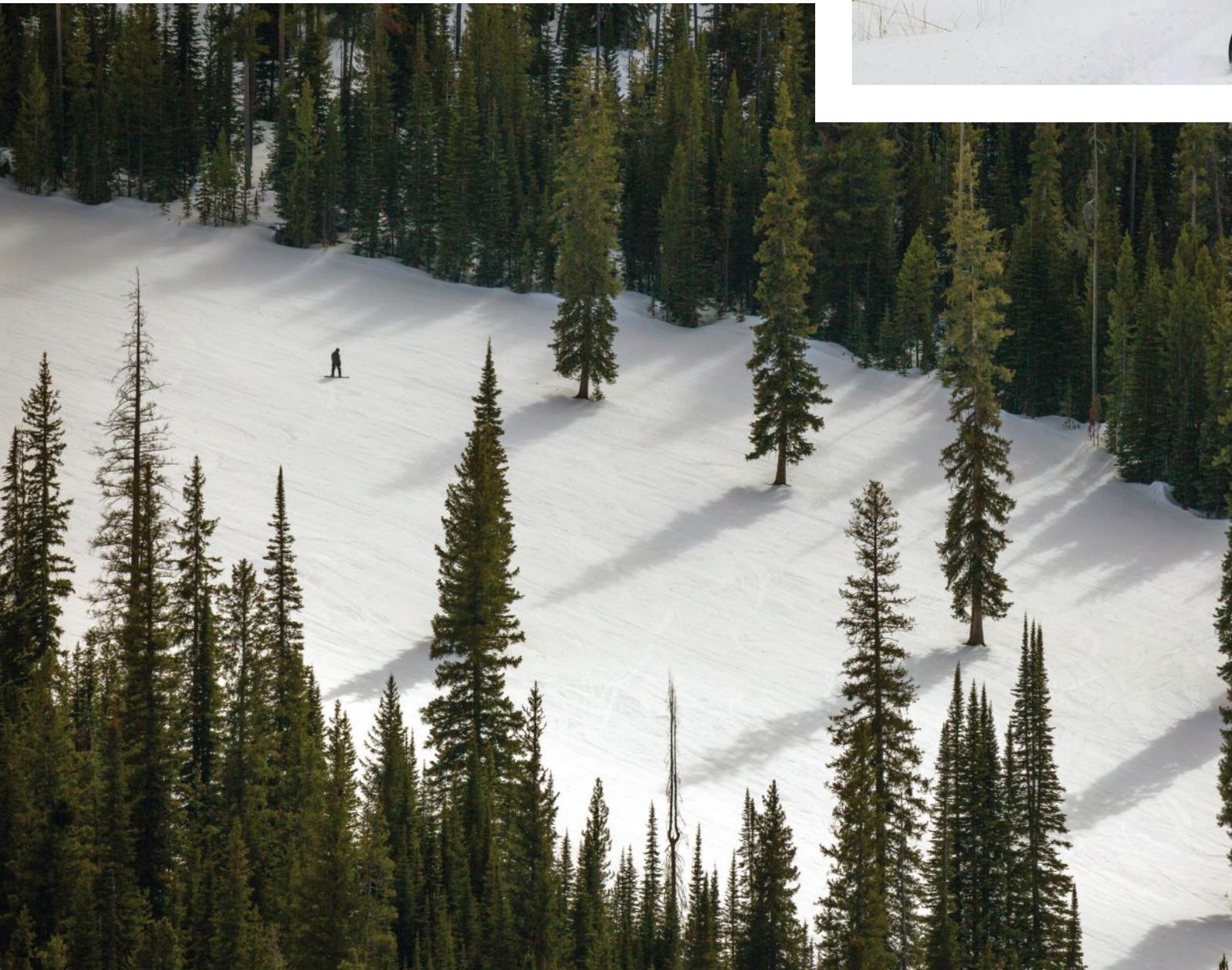


PHOTO COURTESY OF LAUCALA



(clockwise, from top left) The Little Grizzlies Kids Club engages younger guests with sports, horseback riding, nature lessons, and arts and crafts. Winter activities include snowmobile and UTV property tours. Guests savor twilight cocktails with mountain views outside Trapper Cabin. Montana's western heritage is honored with daily trail rides. Cross country skiing on the ranch's mountains and meadows.



(clockwise from above) Ponderosa pine floors and a claw-foot bathtub in one of the spacious bedrooms. The richly furnished Great Room of the Granite Lodge functions as lounge and reception area. All meals, drinks and snacks are included in the ranch's daily rates. Granite Lodge as seen from outside looking toward the ground-floor spa, which offers hot stone massages and sagebrush scrubs.





week on the property teaching the guides techniques that they now share with guests. Activities Director Patrick Little, who shared this with me, pronounced it “Nat Geo,” making the venerable publication sound like an amiable guy. (I hope to have a beer someday with Nat Geo, but he probably plays a mean game of poker.)

Accommodations range from luxury canvas glamping cabins (complete with stoves and heated floors) to three- and five-bedroom homes with screened patios. You can soak in a claw-foot bathtub in your bedroom while gazing out the window at Montana meadows. The ranch has been honored with a Forbes Travel Five-Star designation, which means there are phone numbers to summon a staff member to light a fire in your fireplace or to drive you to the main lodge for dinner if you’re not in the mood for the short walk.

The Bay Area provides a top feeder market for Rock Creek’s business, General Manager Steve Shotsberger told me over dinner, along with New York, Europe, and some very well-heeled clients from the Middle East. “We have guests who won’t bathe in anything but Evian water,” he chuckled when pressed for an example of a five-star customer request his staff has accommodated.

Meals are overseen by Chef Josh Drage, an Alaska native who mixes western comfort food with a rotating weekly schedule of beer pairing dinners, homestead-style suppers, and outdoor buffets in various locations on the ranch. The produce is provisioned through the Western Montana Growers Cooperative, a group of several dozen local growers who offer their bounty even during off-seasons by cultivating microgreens and root cellars. At a chef’s tasting menu dinner (held weekly in the Granite Lodge dining room), a course of vodka- and beer-battered Alaskan rock fish with remoulade and pickled carrots was paired with a white wine from the island of Corsica.

At cocktail hour the lodge takes on a club-like feel with guests chatting while holding copper mugs filled with “Montana Mules” made with one’s choice of local craft spirit. In winter there are Aquavit tastings and ice skating on the pond with hot drinks nearby. After dinner,

the fun moves into the Silver Dollar Saloon, equipped with a bowling alley, billiards table, board games, and a movie theater. One night I opted to avail myself of the sauna located in the Granite Spa, a warm cocoon of a space on a cold night, then walked back to my cabin while gazing up at the Big Dipper in the clear big sky.

It turns out I had missed a formidable round of karaoke in the Silver Dollar Saloon. The next day a fellow guest, a genial Texan, was still humming bits of the cheesy 1985 Dan Seals/Marie Osmond country hit, “Meet Me in Montana.”

As I said, Montana is a stage where the past lives on. ♦