

Travel

Roughing it in comfort

Survival skills optional at Montana ranch.

Resort at Paws Up has a campsite catering to the discerning adventurer.

By Anne Z. Cooke
For the AJC

GREENOUGH, Mont. — From where I sit, on a stump beside a campfire in Montana's Lolo National Forest, it seems that for soul-satisfying, natural-born comfort only a log will do.

Overhead in the dome of the heavens, trillions of stars glitter over the Encampment at Bull Creek. Under our feet, the piney scent of fresh-scuffed earth summons a long-forgotten memory, an echo, I suspect, from the primal past when primitive people gathered after dark, not in front of a television, but around a campfire.

With the breeze at our backs and damp boots facing the coals, you'd think we were roughing it. But this three-day, two-night outing at Bull Creek has been a new experience, the kind I could get used to.

As longtime campers, we've pitched tents in the rain, canoed across choppy lakes and battled mosquitoes. We've dined on raisins and backpacking meals and scoured pots by lamp light. We've collected firewood by the ton — when available — and have eaten nearly as many pounds of marshmallows.

But those skills went unused in June at the Encampment at Bull Creek, the Resort at Paws Up's luxury tent camp, 22 miles by car and 12 miles by horseback from the resort, an exclusive guest ranch 30 miles east of Missoula.

"You're going to love it," said P.J. Wright, a Paws Up spokeswoman and a Montana native checking our family into one of the Timber Homes. "Camping's twice as fun when you don't have to do any of the work. No fire-building, no cooking! And all the menus and ingredients come from our restaurant here at the ranch."

Bull Creek camp is a seasonal destination with waterproof canvas tents installed in late May and dismantled in the fall. Five guest tents sleep two each; the larger tents shelter a work room, the camp kitchen and a dinner table with benches seating seven on a side.

Behind the tents, two showers deliver enough hot water for a decent scrub-down, while the privy, with two improvised stalls, is 30 yards up the hill, a bit of a walk after dark. The horse corral is also in that direction, next to the hitching rail and a tack shack. Listen for nickering and you'll know you're on the path.

Did I mention seven hours in the saddle? On our first day out, we six guests, strangers linked by chance, piled into a Paws Up van for the early morning drive to the national forest trailhead. Hasti-



Spring snow covers the Middle Fork of the Monture River, off a trail below the Encampment at Bull Creek in Montana.

Photos by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld



Six canvas tents (above) are pitched on raised platforms at The Resort at Paws Up. Inside (left) are simple comforts of canvas-sling beds and down quilts.

ly exchanging names and smiles, we stuffed our deli-style Paws Up lunches into the saddle bags and mounted our horses — Popper, Power, Hawkins, Blaze, Coalie and Matador.

The horses, who knew the drill, fell into line as we plunged into the trees following wranglers Tyler Beach, on Jasper, in the lead and Mike Billingsley, on Cherokee, riding rear guard. The seven-hour trip, with two short breaks to stretch your legs, climbs through a spruce forest, crosses a recent burn area, scales steep slopes and meets the Monture River, following it into camp. The scenery is spectacular (keep your camera in your pocket) but the trail is long. If you need help dismounting ask for it. Falling off could spook your mount.

"Well, look at this," said fellow rider Danny Clark to his father Don, a policeman from Forked River, New Jersey, as we crossed the meadow, scattering the yearling deer that hang on the fringes of the camp. "I wonder which tent is ours," he said, perking up as the tents came into view. The horses headed for the corral

where a dozen pack mules were snuffing and stamping, resting after toting our duffles and packs of fresh groceries and supplies.

Curtis Davey, the energetic and good-natured camp boss and our host, had been splitting firewood. Seeing us coming, he sank the ax into a stump and grinned. "Welcome to Bull Creek," he said. "We're expecting you. When you've straightened out the kinks in your legs, get a cold drink and c'mon over and tell me about the ride."

Exploring, we found our dufls in our tent and the two canvas-slung cots made up with fresh linen and down quilts. Our coats, flashlight and topo maps went on the night stand, table and chair, and the housekeeping was done. Gladdening our hearts was a compact wood stove, able to heat the tent in five minutes.

When we weren't petting the horses, practicing fly casting in the meadow, reading in the shade or hiking near the perimeter, we hung out in the cook tent, laughing as the wranglers ribbed each other and Sonia Carrillo, the cook. Carrillo, 38, made

magic with eggs and bacon, fruit salads, steaks, chops, sauces and fresh vegetables, producing cookies and cakes out of thin air.

Eerily thrilling was the next day's horseback ride, the first of the season, to Dead Horse Lake. We — most of us, anyway — kept our nerve as the foot-wide trail crossed 70-degree slopes, death-defying drop-offs, rocks and roots and a deceptively deep snow bank that hid the rushing Middle Fork of the Monture River, swelled by spring run-off.

But when the horses sank into the soft snow, plunging and sliding (one did a complete somersault), we decided to dismount and lead them. Rolling their eyes, they reminded us that novice riders should be wary of large animals and expert-only trails.

Our last campfire came and went too soon. But while we were peacefully out of cell phone range, our traveling companions back at the Paws Up resort enjoyed the patio barbecues, al fresco spa treatments, trail biking and kayaking on the Blackfoot River. I'm sure we had a better time than they did. But each to his own.

If you go

The Resort at Paws Up, 40060 Paws Up Road, Greenough, Mont. 406-244-5242, 1-800-473-0601, www.pawsup.com. Located at 3,700 feet elevation, Paws Up is a high-end guest ranch on 37,000 acres, with 10 miles of Blackfoot River frontage, 30 miles east of Missoula, Mont.

How to get there

Visitors fly into Missoula International Airport. A ranch shuttle provides transportation to the resort.

The Encampment at Bull Creek

Three-day, two-night trip is \$590 per person per night and includes meals and horses. Book early for select dates.

Recreation

Summer activities include fly fishing, hiking, river rafting, tubing, kayaking, spa visits, horseback riding lessons and country clay shooting. Some activities are free; others cost extra. Winter sports include cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, ice skating, sleigh rides and dog sledding.

Accommodations

Lodging for 170 guests is provided in luxury homes, attached meadow homes, duplexes and in Tent City (luxury tents overlooking the river). Prices start at \$640 per person per night sharing a double, and include three full meals daily, airport pickup. Children 11 and younger are \$65 extra per night each.