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Tent camp in Montana hills exudes luxury

Sunday, May 15, 2011

By Anne Z. Cooke, The Dallas Morning News



Steve Haggerty

Spring snow covers the Middle Fork of Monture Creek, below Deadhorse Lake, as campers from the Encampment at Bull Creek navigate the terrain.

GREENOUGH, Mont. -- From where I sat, on a log in front of a crackling campfire near Bull Creek, deep in the heart of Montana's Lolo National Forest, all the world seemed wilderness.

Above us, the night sky was alight with stars. Beneath our feet, the piney scent of freshly scuffed earth summoned a long-forgotten memory, an echo from ancient days when primitive people gathered together after dark, not in front of a television but around a communal campfire.

Under any other circumstances, you'd have thought that the nine of us, a group of sometime-adventurers from California, New Jersey and Texas, were roughing it. But this was the Encampment at Bull Creek, the luxury tent camp run by the Resort at Paws Up, a guest ranch and resort 30 miles east of Missoula. Accessible only by horseback, the Encampment was a new concept, the kind I could get used to.

For most of my life, camping has meant getting down and dirty, usually on a budget. We've pitched tents in Colorado rainstorms, canoed across choppy Minnesota lakes and battled clouds of Canadian mosquitoes. We've subsisted on raisins and freeze-dried dinners and scoured pots by lamplight. But camping at Bull Creek is as organized as a Victorian tea party.

"You're going to love it," said Tira Beary, at Paws Up's main lodge, as she checked our family in to a three-bedroom cabin, our base camp for the duration. "Camping's twice as fun when

If you go Encampment at Bull Creek

When: The Resort at Paws Up is 30 miles east of Missoula, Mont. The ranch is open year-round on 37,000 acres, at 3,700 feet elevation, with 12 miles of Blackfoot River frontage. Contact:

1-800-473-0601 ; www.pawsup.com.

What to do: Warm-weather activities include riding lessons, trail rides, river rafting and tubing, spa treatments, hot-air ballooning, rappelling, fly-fishing, kids' camp, country-clay shooting and

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you don't have to do any of the work," she said.

The next day dawned bright and clear, a prescription for sunscreen. Hastily exchanging names with the four other guests on the ride, we piled into a shuttle van for the 27-mile drive to the horse corral and trailhead. Stuffing our water bottles, cameras and aspirin into the saddle bags, we mounted our horses while wranglers Tyler Beach and Mike Billingsley rushed from horse to horse, tightening cinches and adjusting stirrups.

backcountry camping. The Encampment at Bull Creek, one of the most popular outings, is \$800 per person per night for three days and two nights. It's available May to October.

At the ranch, cost: On-ranch lodging for 170 guests ranges from luxury log homes to meadow homes and in three luxury tent cities. Prices for two-bedroom homes start at \$1,176 per night and include three full meals daily, airport pickup, 24-hour bell staff, an on-property electric cart and other amenities. Add \$75 for each child 11 and younger.

The horses, accustomed to the 12-mile walk on a trail that crossed three mountain ridges and four rushing streams, patiently fell into line behind Mr. Beach. Wiggling until I located my saddle's sweet spot, I found myself near the rear in front of Mr. Billingsley.

With the corral receding behind us, we headed through the trees for a seven-hour ride that wound through the deep shade of old forests, crossed burned-out moonscapes (scenes of the previous year's forest fires), climbed alpine valleys and ascended rocky canyons. In midafternoon, we reached the Monture River, following it into camp.

"Well, look at this," said Danny Clark, riding next to me as we crossed the meadow, scattering the family of deer whose territory the camp invaded. "I wonder which one is ours," he said aloud after sighting the tents.

Hearing us, Curtis Davey, the camp boss, an energetic and good-natured man in a checked shirt who was splitting wood, put down the ax.

"Welcome to Bull Creek," said Mr. Davey, grabbing my horse's bridle. "We're expecting you. When you've straightened out the kinks in your legs, get a cold drink and tell me about your ride."

At first glance, the Encampment at Bull Creek, accessible only by foot or on horseback, reminded me of the photos taken of 19th-century mining camps. Wet socks and towels hung on poles, storage containers stood next to the cook tent, and a pile of firewood lay in the dirt.

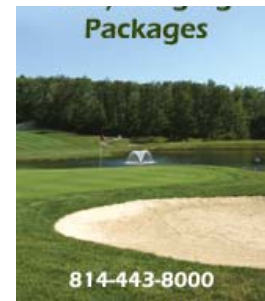
Ten tents were pitched along the creek, five of them reserved for guests. The cook tent, really two large attached tents, stood in the middle, heated by an old-timey wood stove. Long counters held crates of groceries and three propane stoves next to boxes, pots, frying pans and utensils stacked on two rows of shelves. At the rear, water from the creek supplied a purifier, the sink and a long drain board. A slab of wood served as lunch and dinner table, with benches long enough to seat seven on a side.

Two luxurious outdoor showers near the creek delivered enough hot water for a short but decent scrub, while the privy, with two canvas-shielded stalls, stood 100 feet away at the end of a narrow path. The stables, improvised for the summer, consisted of the corral, a long hitching rail and a shed for storing saddles, bridles and grain.

Our duffles, delivered earlier by mule, had been placed in the tents, each outfitted with two canvas-slung cots made up with fresh linens and down quilts. We hung our coats on a nail, put the flashlight and topo map on the nightstand, dug out the mosquito lotion, and the housekeeping was done. In the corner stood a compact stove and a stack of firewood, to be laid and lighted at bedtime by one of the wranglers.

Camp living is lovely when you don't have chores. We petted the horses, practiced fly-casting in the meadow, read a book in the shade, and hiked up the hillside. At mealtimes, we hung out in the cook tent, laughing as the wranglers ribbed the cook, Sonia Carrillo, and one another. Ms. Carrillo, 38, who's been cooking for hunting and camping parties for 15 years, made good use of quality meats and produce sent up from Paws Up's restaurant, producing broiled steaks, salads, sauces, vegetable dishes and cake, with wine or beer.

On our second day in the Encampment, Mr. Davey organized a horseback ride to Dead Horse Lake. We -- most of us, anyway -- kept our nerve as the trail navigated 50-degree slopes, teetered on cliff edges, jounced over rocks and roots, and crossed a melting snowbank suspended over the rushing Middle Fork of the Monture River.



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Our last campfire came and went too soon. Meanwhile, the rest of our family had relaxed at Paws Up, enjoying the patio barbecues, al fresco spa treatments, bike rides and kayaking on the Blackfoot River. I'm sure we had a better time than they did. But to each his own.

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