

# how to spend it

## Exploring the secrets of the American West

On an epic trip across the wide open spaces of Wyoming, Montana and Utah - complete with wranglers, helicopters and a private mobile camp - Lucia van der Post gets a taste of the indomitable frontier spirit of the American West



The resort also offers first rate fly-fishing in Blackfoot River

## WHERE TO FIND

Lucia van der Post travelled as a guest of **Steppes Travel** (0843-778 9926; [www.steppestravel.co.uk](http://www.steppestravel.co.uk)), which offers a nine-night itinerary from £8,495 per person for four people, with three nights at Brush Creek Ranch, three at The Resort at Paws Up, one at Zion Mountain Ranch and two nights' private luxury mobile camp at Lake Powell, including flights and transfers. **Brush Creek Ranch**, +1307-327 5284; [www.brushcreekranch.com](http://www.brushcreekranch.com), from \$750; **British Airways** (0344-493 0787; [www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)) flies from London Heathrow to Denver once a day, from £636; then 3-4 hour drive. **The Resort at Paws Up**, +1406-244 5200; [www.pawsup.com](http://www.pawsup.com), from \$425; **Virgin Atlantic** (0344-874 7747; [www.virgin-atlantic.com](http://www.virgin-atlantic.com)) flies from London Heathrow to Missoula twice a day, from £422; ranch provides free transfer from airport. **Zion Mountain Ranch**, +1435-648 2555; [www.zmr.com](http://www.zmr.com), from \$133; Virgin Atlantic flies from Heathrow to Las Vegas seven times a day, from £455; then 3-3.5 hour drive.

JANUARY 20 2017 / LUCIA VAN DER POST

They call Wyoming the Lonesome Land, and it doesn't take long to see why. There are more than two cows for every person and just over half a million people in a place larger than the UK. It's authentic cowboy country, a state where a picture of a bucking bronco is on the licence plate, where mustangs still roam, the skies are impossibly wide and in summer the sun burns long and hard. It's a place where the small towns are 40 and 50 miles apart, and all they have are a few small stores and a couple of saloons with swing doors and hitching posts outside, just waiting for John Wayne to come riding by. And there are strong silent men, who lope about in Stetsons and cowboy boots and move from one rodeo day to the next, riding the broncos, hoping for the prize money that keeps them on the road.



The view from Brush Creek Ranch, Wyoming | Image: Allen Kennedy Photography

And if you want to get a taste of what it's all about, then Brush Creek Ranch is the place for you. It's set in some 30,000 acres of awesome Wyoming country, right in the heart of the Platte River valley, between the Sierra Madre mountain range and Medicine Bow national forest. It's a breathtaking drive from Laramie, where connecting flights from Denver land; the long, empty road heads up through Medicine Bow, which is home to elk and moose, mountain lions and bears, and then quite suddenly you come upon Brush Creek, lying in its beautiful green valley, lush with sage brush, cottonwood and pine.

Not much more than 100 years ago this was all frontier territory where, as cowboy poet Chuck Larsen, writing about the early pioneers, put it, "For their home they chose a place where they could smell the sage and touch the land. They constructed a house, a barn and fences while their bond



The author and her husband, Neil Crichton-Miller, dining on a rocky hillside overlooking Lake Powell, Utah | Image: Kevin Jackson

Brush Creek Ranch is based around these self-same solid houses and barns. It calls itself a dude ranch, but they've polished up the notion, adding the sort of comforts and fine touches the sophisticated traveller expects – with no more than 94 guests at any given time. The rough log cabins, so essential a part of the idealised vision of the hardy outdoor life of the early settlers, have been replaced by beautifully furnished lodges and wood houses; there is fine, though appropriately local, food, including the best New York strip steaks we'd ever had, and quite extraordinary wines (which are included in the rates); but best and most charming of all is the band of young guides and experts who would have you believe that they want nothing more from life than to lead you through the magical landscapes, unravelling their secrets as they go.



The ranch's expansive dining room and bar | Image: Dan Ham Photography

“The land is as close to untouched as you can get,” says ranch manager Ron Hawkins. “We aim to push guests just a little out of their comfort zones to give them a flavour of what it was like to live in the West.”



Some of the 37,000 acres of mountains and forest around Montana's The Resort at

[Paws Up](#)

And so it came about that my husband and I, who had decided we wouldn't really be doing much (he was recovering from pneumonia) – that we'd just read our books and enjoy the extraordinary vistas of forests and crystal-clear streams – found ourselves on our very first morning on two of Brush Creek's 135 or so riding horses, winding through grassy meadows and beside little creeks. The sun was high in the sky, the ravens flapped above, a solitary bald eagle flew by and the smell of pines filtered through the air. We, who hadn't ridden for many years, had two expert female wranglers to guide us – and we couldn't have loved it more.



The sitting room at one of the resort's lodges, each of which has a hot tub

They have a motto at Brush Creek: "Learn to do, learn to do better." And so we did. We hiked around Mirror Lake at the base of Medicine Bow Peak; back at the ranch we ~~learned to cast line~~ in one of the fishery ponds (easier for first-timers than the river itself), and we both felt that first exciting tug on the line. Expert fly-fishers should know that all visitors to Brush Creek can fish about 20 miles of private waters, while some seven miles of the glorious North Platte River itself runs through one of its adjoining ranches. We went to the gun range, and though we were no Annie Oakleys, under the expert tutelage of Jon Kruger – an eight-time US Open champion dubbed the "Tiger Woods of the shotgun" – we found shooting pistols at metal targets curiously addictive.



Glamping at The Resort at [Paws Up](#)

Every morning the young guides would encourage us to try something new, never making us feel like the novices or oldies we were. At night we dined in a converted barn with views over the rolling meadows and cottonwood-lined creeks to Bennett Peak, which, as a series of strategically placed cameras has revealed, is home to one of the largest populations of mountain lions in this part of the US. We slept in Coop Cabin – which, we learnt, used to be a chicken coop, though you'd never know it today.



Horse riding is another option

Bruce and Beth White, who bought Brush Creek in 2008 as a working ranch, clearly have the sort of emotional attachment to it that has bound so many Wyoming owners to their historic homes. “We decided in 2009 to open up Brush Creek to others who we hoped would be as enchanted as we are by this special place, surrounded by history and adventures,” says Bruce. “Here we balance the needs of wildlife, livestock, land and watersheds through our land, stream, pond and forestry restoration and management plan. Our goal is to continue that tradition for generations to come.”



The naturally formed Rainbow Bridge in Utah | Image: Kevin Jackson

Another of the new breed of dude ranches that offers a taste of the Wild West, but wraps it up in new-age comfort, is The Resort at [Paws Up](#) in Montana – Big Sky Country. Here in some 37,000 acres surrounded by mountains and forest, there are more than 300 resident elk, bison, a huge herd of black Angus cattle and – best of all – 10 miles of the legendary Blackfoot River, which featured in the Robert Redford film *A River Runs Through It* and offers some of *North America's best fly-fishing*. This is the country through which Lewis and Clark trekked on their expedition to the Pacific in the early 1800s. But you don't need to be an expert to enjoy it; here, my husband, a grandfather several times over, caught his very first trout. Sailing down the river with Joseph Eller, our young guide, who has been fishing these waters since he was a child, we spent a sublime afternoon.



Camping near Lake Powell | Image: Kevin Jackson

Just as at Brush Creek, the young guides at **Paws Up** egg their charges on to sample everything on offer. Even novices can join in rounding up the cattle, try their hand at archery or clay-pigeon shooting, hike or ride through the forests, learn to fish or go whitewater rafting. It's larger and more sprawling than Brush Creek, so every house comes with its own little car for getting around, and at the camping sites bicycles are provided. You can choose to stay in one of the 28 lodges – wooden houses, each complete with large bedroom, ensuite bathroom, kitchen, hot tub, grill, sitting room and veranda. Or – apparently wildly popular – you can go glamping beside the river in one of 30 very poshed-up tents, furnished with all mod cons. Those staying in the houses eat mostly in the main dining room, which goes in for vast buffets featuring everything from divine homemade crisps to a variety of US specialities (hamburgers, shrimp gumbos, Caesar salads). One evening, though, we had a memorable dinner at one of the camping sites – the sun setting slowly behind the mountains, the river rustling below us, the young cooks bringing us one interesting, quintessentially American dish after another – lobster tails followed by nachos and heavenly homemade ice cream.





A helicopter trip to Tower Butte offers outstanding vistas | Image: Kevin Jackson

It's easy to fall in love with the wide-open spaces and huge horizons, but for those who want a more personal, once-in-a-lifetime adventure, Kevin Jackson is your man. Jackson co-founded Epic Private Journeys to give his guests a private, privileged experience utterly different from the usual tourist trails. "Crowd elimination," he tells me, is his goal. He has built up firm relationships with a host of US national parks, and as a result he uniquely holds special permits to camp deep within their reaches, where others are unlikely to go. He works with Steppes Travel to make sure every single trip is one-of-a-kind and curated to meet the tastes and wishes of each guest. What he loves to do above all is take them on a [private mobile camp](#) to the special places he has discovered; it might be close to where wolves are known to roam around Lamar Valley in Yellowstone National Park, or, for the physically adventurous, it could be [mountain biking](#) along the Northern Rim trail or abseiling down slot canyons to remote picnic locations. Budding paleontologists can travel with experts on [Navajo and Pueblo history](#) to visit a number of excavation sites.

For us, he provided a taste of the wonders that Utah has to offer. Utah is Canyon Country, filled with red rock and sculpted sandstone, huge cliffs and great valleys. We explored a little of Zion and Bryce Canyon national parks on our way through to Lake Powell – a somewhat contentious reservoir created by a dam finished in 1963 that flooded Glen Canyon (deemed by some to be even more stunning than the Grand Canyon), and then took nearly 20 years to fill. Today the canyon is a wonderful watery playground, surrounded on all sides by red rock strata of Navajo sandstone formed over the past quarter of a billion years, a treasure trove for geologists.

We camped beside the lake and had a supremely simple dinner of shrimps and scallops on a high promontory overlooking the water; we made our way up using ancient Navajo-carved moki steps along the way, and as the sun went down it seemed to set these extraordinary sculpted shapes on fire. We had a helicopter ride to see something of the almost 2,000 miles of the lake's shoreline and landed on yet another extraordinary promontory, called Tower Butte, where we had a picnic lunch, looking out over vast acres of water and multitudinous coves. We kayaked, went for boat rides, hiked to see one of the most famous natural bridges in the world, Rainbow Bridge, formed from sandstone and sacred to the Navajo. Camping here in such a strange and awesome place was an experience like no other; but the West, we discovered, is rich in natural wonders.

Now that we are home, what lingers in the memory is the wild beauty, the huge skies, the meadows and the shadowy forests of Montana and Wyoming. From Utah it is the strange landscapes, the extraordinary rock formations and the ghostly remnants of its first peoples that stay with us. But above all what we remember are our young guides – mostly college graduates whose love of the land had bred in them a sturdiness, a refusal to buy into mainstream suburban values. For them a life of self-reliance and little material gain was a trade-off for being able to spend much of their time in the glorious landscapes that are their heritage. They brought it beautifully, unforgettably to life for us, and for that we are infinitely grateful.