



RAINBOW RANCH LODGE

BY KENDALL JONES



LIVING LARGE BENEATH THE BIG SKY

In a half-day's drive, we traversed three mountain passes and crossed more rivers than I can remember. Each bend in the highway presented a new, awe-inspiring vista. The shadows of mountains on the eastern horizon became vanishing reflections in the rearview mirror. The rivers changed direction as we summited the Rocky Mountains and crossed the Continental Divide.

Near Bozeman, we headed south towards the Spanish Peaks and the Madison Range, following the river up an ancient canyon into the mountains. We stopped at one of the waysides just to look at the river and stretch our legs. Like Montana itself, the Gallatin River possesses a feral beauty that is both intimidating and alluring. No wonder they filmed the movie *A River Runs Through It* on the Gallatin — the breathtaking scene of Brad Pitt fly-casting from atop that magical boulder could not have been filmed anywhere else. Even the most skeptical city slicker cannot help feel something primal and spiritual in such a place as this.

A few miles farther up the road, we arrived at Rainbow Ranch Lodge, a historic hotel and gourmet restaurant on the banks of the Gallatin River in Big Sky, Mont. This would be our home for the next two days, providing a sophisticated, comfortable counterpoint to our rugged surroundings. It was exactly what we wanted — pampered luxury, fine dining and excellent drinks amidst the wilds of Montana.

From the road, the main building looks very much like a lodge, with peaked rooflines, large wooden beams and structural logs. Rainbow Ranch Lodge is an intimate inn, with just 21 rooms offering different levels of expense and amenity. Inside, the entryway spills into the lounge and the restaurant, which in turn moves onto a large deck that overlooks the lodge's beautiful grounds along the Gallatin River. In the lounge, soft seating surrounds an enormous fireplace fashioned from boulders presumably harvested from the nearby river. Outside, the recently sunny sky was filling with snow. That fireplace would become our friend.

We grabbed our keys and eagerly headed to our room. We stepped inside to find a three-room suite waiting with heated hardwood floors, two separate wardrobes, and an enormous bathroom with walk-in shower and jetted soaking tub. When we made our reservations, the staff was inquisitive, asking about the nature of our vacation. They offered and we accepted





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BREWING OUTSIDE THE BOX

It is not yet widely recognized as such, but Bozeman, Mont. is a great beer town. For a large selection of beers, check out Montana Ale Works — a popular local restaurant offering more than 30 Montana-brewed beers on tap. Also, be sure to check out the area's five breweries.

MONTANA ALE WORKS

|| 611 E. Main St., Bozeman || (406) 587-7700 || montanaaleworks.com

BOZEMAN BREWING COMPANY

|| 504 N. Broadway Ave., Bozeman || (406) 585-9142 || bozemanbrewing.com

406 BREWING COMPANY

|| 101 E. Oak, Ste D, Bozeman || 406brewingcompany.com

MADISON RIVER BREWING

|| Building B 20900 Interstate 90 Frontage Rd., Belgrade || (406) 388-0322 || madisonriverbrewing.com

LONE PEAK BREWERY

|| 48 Market Pl., Big Sky || (406) 995-3939 || lonepeakbrewery.com

NEPTUNE'S BREWER

|| 119 N. L St., Livingston || (406) 222-7837 || montanabrewery.com/neptunesbrewery



to have a mixed six-pack of Montana-brewed beers waiting for us on ice. Outside our door, a private patio with a fireplace and a view of the Spanish Peaks, which seemed to appear and disappear at their own mysterious whim regardless of weather conditions.

NOT ALONE, BUT CERTAINLY IN THE WILDERNESS

Rainbow Ranch Lodge is located about 45 miles south of Bozeman. This is the halfway point between the city and the western entrance to Yellowstone Park. The first hotel on the site opened in 1919 as a solitary outpost in the wilderness. Today, the nearby resort-town of Big Sky offers a host of year-round amenities including golf, shopping, restaurants, a brewpub and, of course, skiing.

You may be deep in the mountains of Montana but Rainbow Ranch Lodge offers every modern comfort and convenience, accompanied by whatever level of wilderness adventure your heart desires. The lodge's staff will happily plan your fly-fishing excursion, river-rafting trip, snowshoeing jaunt, cross-country skiing outing and more. When you're done with that kind of recreation, world-class cocktails, an exquisite selection of wines and delicious gourmet meals await you at the lodge.

Maybe dog sledding, hiking, snowmobiling and whitewater kayaking are not your thing. Spend your days at the lodge sitting on the banks of the river. Cast a line into the pond, glass of wine in hand; the lodge provides the libations and the fishing tackle. Sit above it all on the deck and watch the river go by.

Spa services are available and encouraged. I particularly enjoyed my riverside massage, with a beer just an arm's length away and the laughing waters of the river serenading me into a tranquil stupor.

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

Each morning the lodge offers a deluxe continental breakfast, which features freshly made pastries by Elisabeth Michealis, the lodge's pastry chef. Michealis trained at The French Pastry School of King

Kennedy College in Chicago so this is serious stuff; not flapjacks and cornbread like you might expect in the wilds of Montana. The fresh-from-the-oven scones approached breakfast perfection. At dinner, we also experienced some of her desserts; the apple galette, made with rum sautéed apples and rum-infused caramel sauce, was a personal favorite.

Executive Chef Ian Troxler creates exquisite meals that exceed expectations. Troxler has strong ties to the Pacific Northwest, having worked with two of Portland's James Beard Award-winning chefs: Greg Higgins (Higgins Restaurant and Bar) and Phillipe Boulot (Heathman Hotel). Troxler likes to focus on the bounty of Big Sky and cannot help mentioning Greg Higgins when he talks about his own focus on local, sustainable food.

For the wine cellar, which boasts a 5,000-bottle capacity, Troxler focuses on wines from the western United States as much as possible. If it were up to him, he would probably serve nothing but Northwest wines, but the desires of his guests require him to offer a more worldly selection. The result is a carefully curated wine list befitting any big city, fine-dining establishment.

Our first dinner featured locally raised bison served two ways: bison kielbasa and bison hanger steak. The second night, our meal focused on fresh, locally raised trout. Of course, Montana's environment presents some challenges in terms of obtaining fresh produce, but Troxler does the best he can and makes up for it with fresh, local meats and fish.

A PLACE AT THE HEARTH

We spent two lovely days exploring the surrounding wilderness at our own speed, knowing that the Rainbow Ranch Lodge was waiting for us at the end of the day. For two snowy nights, the fireplace in the Rainbow Dining Room came in handy.



Whatever the time of year, you simply must try the lodge's signature Manhattan, the Montana Sky. To create this distinctive libation they blend Buffalo Trace whiskey, Taylor Fladgate Tawny Port and bitters in five-gallon batches. Each batch is aged for six weeks in whiskey barrels from a local distillery. It is a remarkable drink, strangely befitting of its surroundings. Like the Rainbow Ranch Lodge, and like Montana itself, this unique cocktail is both elegant and rugged.

As any good bartender will, ours told us a story. Whenever newbies float down the river, it seems they are strangely compelled to touch one particular rock along the way — a very large boulder on the banks of the Gallatin River. "It's Brad Pitt's boulder," the bartender explains. "Even people who have never seen the movie want to touch that rock for some reason."

Of course they do. ●