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Dashing Through the Snow

The secret season at America's top dude ranches is all about winter fun.

BY LARRY OLMSTED



Fresh corduroy groomed just for you—between every single run. On-demand access to a dozen winter sports and required gear. On-mountain dining with a personal chef in a private yurt. A chef-cooked barbecue tailgate lunch. If this does not sound like your typical ski vacation, that's because it's not. These are the one-of-a-kind winter amenities offered by America's best luxury guest ranches, and they are just the tip of the iceberg, along with world-class Nordic skiing, private snowmobile tours, extravagant food, and opulent lodging, plus unexpected activities from ice fishing and ax throwing to state-of-the-art shooting facilities.

The best guest ranches are among the best luxury resorts of any kind, and winter is the secret season at places like Montana's lauded **Triple Creek Ranch** (*triplecreekranch*

.com) and **The Ranch at Rock Creek** (*theranchatrockcreek.com*). The latter (above) has just 29 accommodations, from glamping cabins to five-bedroom homes, set on 6,600 acres. In sharp contrast, the nation's smallest five-star ski-in/ski-out hotel has more than three times as many units (most regular hotel rooms), all in one building.

"Unlike a traditional ski resort luxury hotel, we have maybe 30 to 60 people here in winter, on a huge property," says The Ranch at Rock Creek's General Manager Jon Martin. "When you book a luxury ski trip to Jackson, Aspen, Telluride, wherever, it is very snow dependent. Here we have this great hedge of flexibility, and even if you don't go skiing at all, you are always going to have a great time because there is so much to do. Maybe one day you were planning on not skiing and going horseback riding instead, but then

it snows a foot overnight, so you decide to ski. Or it doesn't snow much and you go snowmobiling. Our philosophy is you can come here and do whatever you want."

"Whatever you want" can mean staggering choices at these properties, which are much busier and better known as summer destinations, built around a vast slate of outdoor (and indoor) activities. This same variety is offered in winter, but on a far more intimate scale for fewer guests. The big change in recent years has been the addition of skiing and snowboarding to many of the best ranches, most of which already had cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, fat-tire biking, dog sledding, ice fishing, and skating, as well as winter horseback riding, sporting clays, a spa, and yoga classes. "I grew up skiing, and we added it here as part of our all-inclusive rates in →





2018,” says Martin. To do that, The Ranch at Rock Creek purchased a complete fleet of top-of-the-line skis, snowboards, boots, and even goggles, helmets, and apparel to get interested guests kitted out.

“You can show up here in February in flip-flops and shorts, and we provide literally everything you need to ski, ride, fish, shoot, or do any activity. It’s something our owner believes deeply—you come here and whatever you want is included.” The ranch teamed up with nearby Discovery Mountain, a hidden gem that enjoys Montana’s reputation for prodigious powder, but not crowds. “It’s not a massive mountain, but they get a lot of snow and have seven lifts, challenging expert skiing off the backside, powder, groomers, and no lift lines, even over the holidays.” Once a week (more often over holiday periods), the resort’s chef sets up a gourmet tailgate lunch party in the parking lot for ranch guests, who are shuttled over on demand, and typically ski once or twice in a five-day stay while also enjoying all the other activities.

Triple Creek takes a very similar tack with another hidden gem, Lost Trail Powder Mountain, which gets 300-plus inches of snow each winter covering more than 50 trails with an impressive 1,800-foot vertical. Guests are chauffeured to the mountain, armed with a boxed gourmet lunch, hot beverages, and cookies, and like The Ranch at Rock Creek, lift tickets and all gear are part of resort rates. In fact, this is one of the most truly all-inclusive of the all-inclusives, from wines and spirits to cooking classes, even on one of the specialty



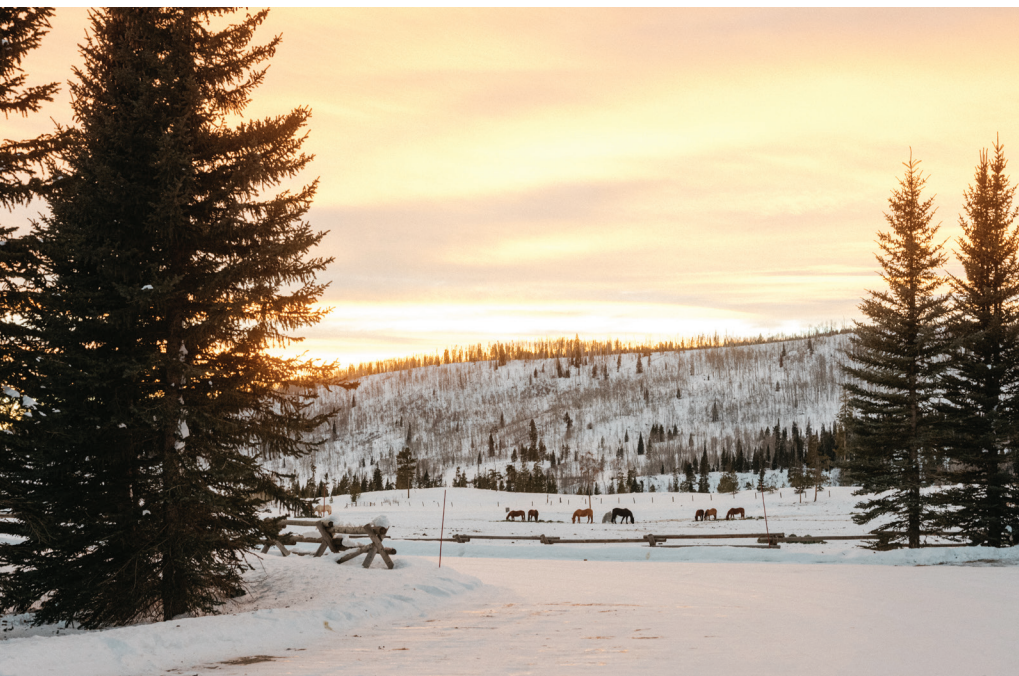


Courtesy Images From Top: The Ranch at Rock Creek/Athena Lonsdale
 Courtesy Images From Bottom: C Lazy U Ranch/Michael Chilcoat (2)



vintner or guest chef weekends. They offer a 15-mile Nordic trail system plus off-site skate and classic skiing at the nearby Chief Joseph Pass Trail system, angling, yoga, horseback riding, and meditation, as well as the newest offering, frontier skills, which includes hatchet throwing. Culinary excellence is a year-round highlight, with a Montana rugged menu that has been honored at New York's James Beard House and changes nightly, but always includes an option like locally raised wagyu, quail, elk, or bison. Uniquely, the luxury ranch accepts only guests 16 and over, and is very popular with honeymooners, anniversary celebrants, and groups of couples traveling together. Lodging is in 25 one-, two-, and three-bedroom cabins and luxury ranch homes with oversized steam showers, and decks with hot tubs.

Colorado's acclaimed **C Lazy U Ranch** (clazyu.com) teams up with two nearby mountains, Winter Park, a major destination ski resort, and the smaller Granby Ranch, just 15 minutes away, so avid skiers can go out repeatedly without feeling limited. C Lazy U has been operating as a guest ranch for over 100 years, but when they started they did not own the fleet of snowmobiles they have now, so they can offer twice-daily guided tours without using outside sub-contractors. The cross-country and snowshoe trail system that sprawls across the 8,500-acre property is so extensive it was ranked the second-best snowshoe destination on earth. The ranch closed for a few months in late 2020 and early 2021 due to the nearby East Troublesome wildfire, and used the downtime →



for a ranch-wide renovation, including upgrades to its 40 guest cabins. An especially family-friendly resort, C Lazy U has a robust program with supervised child and teen camps for those as young as 3 years old.

Also in Colorado, **Vista Verde Guest Ranch** (vistaverde.com) accesses Steamboat Ski Resort and offers optional (extra fee) off-site cat skiing with Steamboat Powdercats. Because the transfer is an hour long, Vista Verde is more popular with those who want a day or two of alpine skiing and is especially known for its excellent Nordic offerings, including groomed skate skiing, tracked classic, and on-site backcountry touring using the wider, metal-edged cross-country skis. In addition to the usual snowmobiling, yoga, and such, one specialty here is expert-led photography lessons. All lodging is in one- to four-bedroom cabins with hot tubs and either a gas fireplace or a wood-burning stove, and for most of January and early February it is adults-only.

Montana's **Lone Mountain Ranch** (lonemountainranch.com) has gone a similar route, except it partners with the biggest of them all, adjacent Big Sky Resort, which is among the largest ski areas in the country, with 38 lifts and over 300 runs. But the most impressive stat is the skier-to-acreage ratio: Even on the busiest days there are about two acres of terrain for every visitor. Lone Mountain is just 15 minutes from the lifts and 18 miles from the Yellowstone National Park boundary. The ranch itself has been named the top Nordic ski destination in the country, with over 50 miles of Nordic trails, a staggering amount—plus 19 additional miles of dedicated snowshoe trails. All this is for guests of one- and two-bedroom cabins with fireplaces and decks or patios. For larger groups, there is a four-bedroom home and the luxe six-bedroom Ridgetop Lodge, a contemporary residence with a hot tub, multiple decks and fireplaces, a billiard room, and a commercial kitchen, and every single lodging boasts a signature touch: record players and an assortment of vintage vinyl. All the Lone Mountain naturalist guides are also certified Yellowstone guides, so they routinely take guests on cross-country or snowshoe jaunts in the nearly empty national park, America's oldest. They also have immediate access to backcountry skiing in the thousands of acres of adjacent wilderness, from off-track cross-country to full-blown Alpine Touring, as well as an Orvis-endorsed winter fly-fishing program on famed blue-ribbon waters like the Gallatin River. For a truly unique winter experience, Lone Mountain offers guided full-moon snowshoe tours. →

