



The Continuous Dream: Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch

By Kim Frank and Gretchen Wagner
Photography by Josh Wells

Roughly nine miles south of Stanley, turn under the classic western wooden arch with the sign: "Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch." Up a winding dirt road, tucked out of view, the Ranch reveals itself as you make your way up the final hill. Climb the stately flight of entrance stairs and behold the covered porch that just begs you to settle in. The creaking of willow rocking chairs makes perfect background music to the epic panorama of the Sawtooth Mountains with the sun setting into their sharp teeth. Now add a glass of Pinot Gris and a small plate of vegetable crudités with an array of handmade dips that fit perfectly on the original cigarette tables just the right height to your hand. Kick back. With a setting virtually unchanged since the 1929 construction when it was the "Idaho Rocky Mountain Club," you have successfully, and comfortably, gone back in time.

In his book, *The Art of Fiction*, writer/teacher John Gardner asserts that great fiction is the creation of "a vivid and continuous dream." When no odd sentence or misplaced event interrupts the experience, the writer can suspend disbelief and successfully transport the reader to another world, in another place and time. While not a short story, the history of the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch, and the painstaking efforts to honor its heritage in renovation, has certainly achieved the Holy Grail. If you are lucky enough to stay overnight, you can't help but feel as if you are a guest at a luxury dude ranch during the golden age of adventure travel in the 1930s and '40s.

Above: Welcoming guests for 85 years, the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch's front steps beckon.



First...a little history:

The Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch is surrounded by 878 acres of the Sawtooth National Recreational Area, just south of Stanley. Established as a guest ranch from 1930-1951, then again from 1977 up to the present day, the Ranch was one of the earliest true resorts in Idaho. In its eighty-plus years of operation, the property has hosted politicians and European royalty, supported the Rokmor herd as a private working cattle ranch, and returned back to its original vision as an all-inclusive vacation destination.

The Ranch was founded with the vision of offering a breadth of outdoor activities to well-heeled adventure seekers wishing to explore the Wild West without sacrificing fine dining and comfortable lodging, as this 1931 newspaper excerpt from the *Lewiston Morning Tribune* attests:

“One of Idaho’s unusual hostelries is the Idaho Rocky Mountain Club, a dude ranch set in the heart of Stanley Basin between the Sawtooth and White Cloud mountain ranges. Everything one would not expect in that isolated mountain region is found at the club, from its private golf course, swimming pools and airport

to a cuisine which would shame any metropolitan hotel.”

Originally part of Stanley Basin pioneer Dave Williams’ homestead, the ranch property was acquired in 1929 by New York Frigidaire executive Winston Paul, who built the Idaho Rocky Mountain Club. Austrian clothing manufacturer, Josef Lanz, purchased the IRMC from Mr. Paul, but the outbreak of World War II brought the operation to a close. In 1951, Pocatello, Idaho automobile dealer, Edmund A. Bogert, purchased the Ranch, turned it into a working cattle ranch, and renamed it the Idaho Rocky Mountain

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Ranch. In 1977 Rozalys Smith, Ruth and Ed Bogert's daughter, began her proprietorship of the IRMR and returned the Ranch to its hospitality roots. The Smith family continued operating the Ranch for 54 years, until February 2005. The tradition of family ownership continues with current owners Steve and Courtney Kapp, David Singer, and Diana Kapp, who among them have six children. From its inception, expectations have been upheld that the Ranch would be a luxurious western adventure for travelers coming as far away as the Eastern Seaboard. The original visitors to the IRMC enjoyed activities like golf and polo on the lawn. Modern-day guests may flyfish, go whitewater rafting, trail ride, mountain bike, or climb peaks with a number of local guides and outfitters. At the end of an action-packed day, they can relax in a natural hot springs pool on the lower Ranch before ambling up to the expansive covered porch to reflect on their memorable day.

Dinner at the Ranch may include a wagon ride to a Dutch-oven cookout with live music along the river, a family-style barbecue prepared in front of the lodge on a custom grill and wood-fired oven, or choosing from finely curated menu selections in the lodge dining room. Dining at the Ranch has never been a wiener-roast-and-a-warmed-up-can-of-baked-beans-affair. Current chef Jordon Boutry uses organic and local ingredients to create meals that rival those found in any major city. The food quality and quantity is outstanding. Breakfast is everything you could hope for, from macadamia nut French toast to bowls of fresh seasonal berries and endless cups of strong locally roasted coffee.



Top: Original cabins have been painstakingly restored and remodeled.
Middle: Wagon heads to a remote streamside BBQ spot.
Right: Foodie heaven: an uncommon Dutch oven spread

And then the restoration....

"God is in the details" is a phrase so key to an artist's work that no one is quite sure who said it first. The Dutch master, Rembrandt, architects Mies Von derRohe and Le Corbusier, and writer, Gustave Flaubert have all gotten credit for coining the phrase. Regardless of who said it, one thing is certain: the details make the art. And while the tiniest nuances are often unseen, the result is almost always appreciated.

When the Kapp and Singer families purchased the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch, they were well aware that they'd inherited a legacy in need of a lot of work. Renovations at the Ranch have been ongoing since they took ownership. The family knew that creating a historically accurate experience was certainly not the easiest way to approach a remodel, nor was it the cheapest. But they recognized artisanal craft, both fine and rough, as the necessary means to marry the new parts to the old. As a result, there is a delightful sense of discovery in recognizing the singular elements that make up Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch.

"Over the years, the magic of this place is respected and enhanced. Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch gets better, but never gets different."

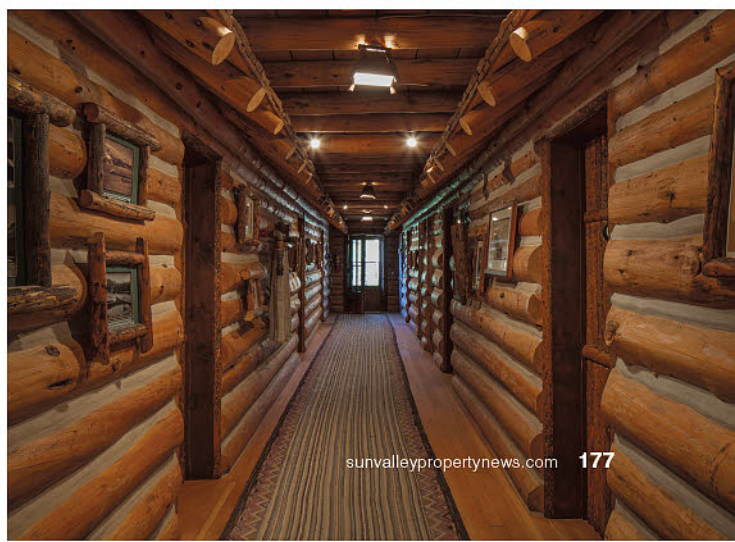
- Sandra Beckwith, Lodge Manager

When Courtney Kapp, herself a UVA-trained architect from Pennsylvania, hired Gretchen Wagner of scape design studio in Ketchum to help painstakingly restore and enhance the property, it became both a terrific challenge and a labor of love. Gretchen shares the story about the project, their shared vision, and the forces behind it:

"The owners had recently acquired the Ranch and had taken inventory of what they had. I stayed a few nights at the ranch to walk the property, interview the staff, and poke around everywhere I could to get a sense of the soul of the place. As with any renovation, the documentation of the existing conditions needed to be very precise to know where to begin. The lodge was the most sensitive. We measured every log and stone to be sure what we were doing would be seamless. It was imperative to use a light hand to bring this place up-to-date without muddying or destroying its past.

"Courtney and I talked about assets and liabilities, what needed to be fixed and what needed to be preserved. We discussed luxury accommodations in the context of the Ranch's rich history and

Top to bottom: Go back in time. Every detail works together to make the Ranch a unique experience.



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its future. We identified priorities, set limits, established rules, agreed upon a path forward, and planned for both the short- and the long-term. Then we went deep into method architecture, searching for clues and imagining details that we could hang our thesis on. The minutiae created the big picture. It was the constant architectural conversation between us that allowed us to accomplish what we did.

"Although Courtney and I are both modernists, the new parts needed to be very understated and not interfere with people's expectation of what a ranch should be. In the lodge, the original log structure is composed of round pine logs and pine floors. The new furniture and bar and window valances are square-cornered clear fir, another material native to the area but visually distinguishable from pine. These pieces were designed and constructed in a very simple and durable way so that they accumulate their own patina over many decades.

"In the first year, we did the staff dormitory, commercial laundry building, new kitchen, new service pantry, new bar, and check-in desk in the lobby. We designed these in a little more than two months and they were constructed in less than six by Keith Reese and John Dean of Sawtooth Valley Builders. Summer guests and a lack of utilities or access in the winter months made for an extremely short building season. While Stanley is frequently the coldest place in the lower 48, I can confirm that the lodge lobby on a cloudy early spring day is colder.

"Off-site during the winter we designed and fabricated coffee tables, a map table, a chess table, a coffee stand, nightstands, and picnic tables, all in square-edged fir to contrast with the pine logs and indicate that these were not original. Bill Amaya of Cimarron Lofting made all of these except the nightstands which were cut from fir on site with a chain saw. With Allison Connolly of Allison Paige Interior Design, we sourced chairs, sofas, headboards, lighting, rugs, tablecloths, lemonade



Right: Original guest switchboard from the 1930s.

Bottom: Historic meets functional: working refrigerator courtesy of early owner, Frigidaire executive, Winston Paul.





casks, pepper mills, and soap (the soap selection process was particularly complex!). We took down, catalogued, reframed, and rehung every piece of art on the property. One of our choice photograph placements occurs in the men's bathroom in the lodge. We unearthed, culled, rearranged, and redistributed furniture, hardware, and artifacts where they would have the most impact. The original Frigidaire, refurbished and restored to a place of honor in the new lobby bar, and the original signal indicator installed at the check-in desk are not mere props, but are also significant pieces from the Ranch's past.

"The kitchen was taken down to the studs and I worked with both the chef and a commercial equipment supplier to make distinct zones in the kitchen for optimal cooking and staff movement. The location of every knife and spoon and machine was considered for optimum function. It's a rarity to get to create a commercial kitchen from scratch, but the quality of the food and the chef's creativity are important to the owners, so we were given the freedom to make it really ideal—probably quite different from the way it was in 1929.

"The new laundry and staff buildings are tucked away on a hill, well out of view of the guests. They are purely functional in nature, and their utility exceeds their beauty, to be sure, but they



Top: Guest cabins promise the most comfortable sleep imaginable. Right: Original touches abound. Sandra found this milk jug in an antique shop. The label reads: "Idaho Rocky Mountain Club."

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do speak to the rest of the buildings on the property. We were careful to relate the proportions, roof pitches, and volumes to the lodge and cabins while slotting them into an existing hierarchy of scale. The materials have almost nothing in common with the original structures other than their simplicity and suitability for the time in which they were constructed.

"During the second building season, we rebuilt a cabin that had been badly restored after a fire in the 1980s—a very delicate exercise in improving upon an original without doing a reproduction. We also prototyped a new bathroom scheme, and designed Ranch quilts.

"In later years, cabin bathrooms were opened up, porches were re-built and repaired, the lodge was re-roofed, and asbestos was abated, all under the watchful eye of the Idaho Historic Preservation Commission, the Forest Service, the owners, staff, and returning guests. I have come to be as protective of this place as they all are and there are things I see even now that could be edited and tuned.

"We resisted the urge to use all the cutting-edge tricks and talents available, and tried to imagine what the original construction team might have had at their disposal. In the early 1900s everything would have been sourced and built on-site: i.e. no cabinet shops, spray booths, or imported materials. With this in mind, we site-built a lot of things and limited our palette of materials. The result is that the character comes through from the artisans who constructed it. My favorite examples of this are the original door handles and strap hinges. You can imagine the blacksmith onsite forging hundreds of these and changing each one a little as he went just to make it less repetitive. They are works of art. Our modern-day mason who did the Oakley stone showers placed a little turned stone in each shower as his signature—a completely appropriate detail that adds to the interesting history of the place.



"There is no faux.
There is no kitsch.
There is no piped-in Hank Williams, Sr. on a
scratchy record player to create a Hollywood
version of the West."
—Gretchen Wagner, scape design studio

"There is no reproduction except in cases of repair (like the Frigidaire handle) or replacement (original Old Hickory chairs are still made today and some have been replaced when they couldn't be fixed). The success of the architectural interventions is that the guests can't see them without looking carefully. Lots of deferred maintenance was performed that guests will never notice.

"There are invisible luxuries throughout. The mattress specifications were copied from the Four Seasons in New York—the best the owners had ever slept on. There are endless activities to keep little ones busy if adults choose to enjoy uninterrupted conversation. The food is incredible and abundant. There is Internet and even occasional cell service in the lodge. There is plentiful hot water in the stone showers. And the service and staff are unmatched.

"The future of the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch is well planned. The owners continue to look for ways to expand and enhance the experience of guests during their stay. There will be thoughtful additions, repairs, and improvements on both the upper and lower Ranches. They will become evident over the years so I won't ruin the surprise, but I know that many of these will be happily invisible too."

The Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch is a remarkably special place. You feel intimately part of the history and scenery from the moment you arrive until the day you depart. It's an experience that sticks with you, that changes you in some significant way. The carefully crafted 80-year-old continuous dream of care and attention nestles itself into a permanent place in your heart.

Left to right: Hand-forged original and recently restored hardware grace every door. Authentic old-time firehouse hangs with vintage images of life at the Ranch along the guest room hallway.

Every historically authentic guest lodge has a viscerally felt soul. Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch gets its special energy from the stunning unchanged scenery, the painstaking attention to quality detail, and from the Ranch manager, Sandra Beckwith. Arriving at the Ranch with her late husband, Fred Benson, in 1993, Sandra has greeted guests, helped arrange their activities, and coordinated all aspects of onsite care and feeding for 21 years and counting. Whether she's wearing an understated vintage western blouse with bright red cowboy boots peering out of her jeans or a fuchsia fleece sweatshirt with the Ranch's logo on it, her adventurous spirit, quick wit, and keen sense of humor is infectious. Sandra's spirit is well-paired with her surroundings. If you do get the opportunity for intelligent conversation with her over a glass of wine as the sun sets into the Sawtooths, you will definitely end your stay feeling as if you've scored the secret bonus activity unique to the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch.



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Left: Original, restored guest cabin.
Above Left: Willow rockers with arguably the best view in Idaho.
Above: Ranch Manager, Sandra Beckwith: 21 years of shine.