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Inside the wild American state with an unconventional art scene

By James Stewart

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Cowboys, concerts and cutting-edge sculpture — welcome to Montana, the big-sky US state with a serious creative streak



Archway II by Alexander Liberman in Tippet Rise Art Center, Montana
JAMES FLORIO/TIPPET RISE ART CENTER

In the high country of Montana, where the Rocky Mountains meet the Great Plains, there are only two things you can rely on: horses and yourself.

The horses I trust. Lenny, the chestnut gelding who's taking me on my morning ride at Barron Ranch, Absarokee, is sure-footed on trails. He barely blinks when ranch dogs bound ahead in search of grizzly bears down from the Rocky Mountains.

Myself I'm less sure of. I attempt cowboy impressions; loose-limbed, reins in one hand. Lenny isn't fooled. Occasionally he pauses to chew grass as I tug on his reins. A prairie native, he'll take no instruction from a greenhorn like me.

Still, it's a lovely ride. We sway through open forest to track alongside the Stillwater River. Mountains jut beyond the treetops. Deer trot away as we approach. My leather saddle creaks softly.

In the 1860s homesteaders started heading west like this to tame the prairie. Most failed. "Montana is wild no matter what you do. And we like it wild," says my trail guide, Sharon.

What thrives in Montana is the pioneer spirit of the American west. Cowboy culture is "screamingly alive", says Sharon, no shrinking violet herself in straw stetson and silver-glitter eyeshadow. When not leading tourists, she works as a cowgirl ("Don't get paid but in meat. I ain't bought beef in years") and performs in the Cody Nite Rodeo, one of the world's longest running professional rodeos.

Professional rodeo riders are the rock stars of Montana. Careers are short — 15 years max if your body survives the punishing rides — but those who make it can expect enough prize money to buy that little for-ever ranch. Actually, cowboys are rodeo support acts. In Montana the big money goes to those broncos so wild no one can ride them. One was recently valued at \$1 million.

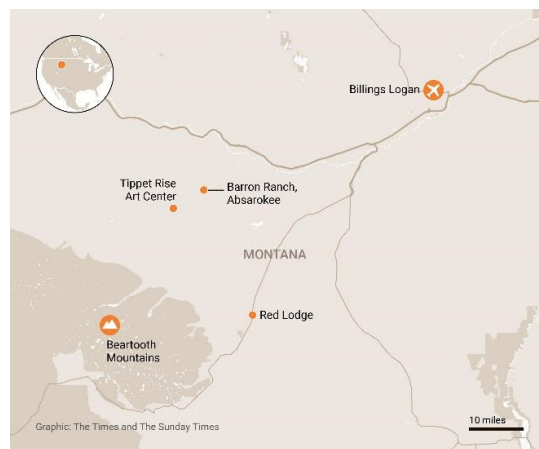


Red Lodge, Montana
ALAMY

In small towns people wear ten gallon hats without irony and talk about Washington as if it were a conspiracy. Visit a former frontier town such as Red Lodge, where the main street looks like a film set, and flitting just out of sight are former visitors including the Sundance Kid, Calamity Jane and “Buffalo Bill” Cody.

Sharon continues: “We live free and we die free out here. We go out with a gun in our boots.” I assumed that was a figure of speech until she pulled up her trouser leg to reveal a pistol stuffed in her cowboy boot.

In a way, pioneer spirit is what brought the musician Peter Halstead and his wife, Cathy, an artist, to Montana. In 2014 they bought 12,500 acres of prairie near Fishtail to create the Tippet Rise Art Center. Let’s just say eyebrows were raised among local ranchers. Alongside cattle, sculptures now roam free across endless expanses of prairie. During a classical music festival from late August to September 150 lucky concertgoers at a time get to hear internationally fêted artists in an intimate larch-walled barn. Each ticket costs just ten bucks (£8).



On my visit Sir Stephen Hough, a pianist more accustomed to Carnegie Hall, sits 10ft from his audience (initially it's unnerving, then almost communal, he tells me later). I can see every emotion flicker behind his closed eyes. It crosses my mind that this is the only concert hall I've ever visited with a window. More should have one. The music broods as a storm approaches in an extraordinary, cinematic synergy.



The intimate music barn
ERIK PETERSEN/TIPPET RISE ART CENTER

The idea behind it all is to escape the pursed-lip formality of the high arts. To loosen things up a bit. Democratise. That strikes me as rather American west.

The Storm King Art Center, a pioneering outdoor sculpture museum in New York's Hudson Valley, provided a role model for Tippet Rise. The Halsteads' inspiration, though, was Montana's scenery. The ranch lies within the 22-million-acre Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem beneath the Beartooth Mountains. "When it's foggy the mountains here look gothic, like something out of [a painting by] Caspar David Friedrich," Peter says. "There are beautiful valleys and gulches where we can hide sculptures. And because there are no trees there are no boundaries between the hills and sky. The two reflect each other. It's a very complex landscape."

Mountain-bikers aside, most visitors experience it on minibus sculpture tours (£8) or by hiking between sculptures along 15 miles of trail.



Cathy and Peter Halstead
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In the bus I trundle along dirt tracks into a silver-green sea. Grass ripples against the remains of homesteader log cabins. From hillocks, far-off ranches appear, raised aloft on swells of grass that roll to the horizon. The sky is immense — not for nothing is Montana called Big Sky Country. Ahead, the Beartooth Mountains extend an immense barrier like a landfall.

A knobble on a distant bluff appears quite different up close. Ensamble Studio's *Beartooth Portal* is otherworldly; a huge asteroid of smooth concrete cleaved in two then propped to frame a view of the peaks.



Ensamble Studio's Beartooth Portal
IWAN BAAN/TIPPET RISE ART CENTER

So begins a tour of outlying sculptures at Tippet Rise. This is big country that demands big works. There's an assembly of jutting pylons in a dell like a deconstructed cabin (*Satellite #5: Pioneer* by Stephen Talasnik). In a fold between hills *Beethoven's Quartet* by Mark di Suvero is a mad truss of iron girders, which supports a spinning stainless steel curlicue. When you hit it with the rubber mallets provided, it rumbles like thunder rolling across the plains.

Each work stands alone. Your attention shifts between art and the austere grandeur of this landscape. There is, in art-speak, a dialogue, although to my mind the prairie has the final word. At a concrete cave, *Domo*, I'm watching grass pulse in the wind as classical piano music drifts from a speaker when a young warden walks by casually holding a rattlesnake. "They're not aggressive," she says brightly. "We just shoo them away."



Beethoven's Quartet by Mark di Suvero
ERIK PETERSEN/TIPPET RISE ART CENTER

I go for a walk afterwards, past a replica pioneer schoolhouse where willow tornados spin (*Daydreams* by Patrick Dougherty) and beyond the only tree on the prairie, Ai Weiwei's rust-red, denuded *Iron Tree*. Clouds sail across an immense sky. A herd of cattle drifts across slopes shaded by sagebrush. There's silence but for crickets, the whisper of wind and grass crunching underfoot.

After a mile or so I wind up at *Trilogy*. Until last year Louise Nevelson's 45ft-high piece was outside Detroit's Orchestra Hall. Now it's in a grassy vale — three inscrutable steel abstracts, liberated from the city, standing alone.

That strikes me as rather American west too.

James Stewart was a guest of Tippet Rise Arts Center (tippetrise.org). Fly to Billings Logan. The Pollard Hotel in central Red Lodge has [B&B doubles](http://B&Bdoubles) from £130 (thepollardhotel.com). Horse rides from £35 (paintbrushadventures.com)

Six more Montana trips

1. In search of the Old West

Small towns keep the Old West alive on this fly-drive. Places such as arty Bigfork beside Flathead Lake in the Glacier National Park, or Virginia City and Nevada City, former ghost towns whose saloons and stores, restored to their heyday of the late 1800s, could be sets for westerns. The copper town Butte sprawls on a plain beneath the Rockies. The route also takes in Big Sky mountain resort. Before Montana, there's western culture in Wyoming: rustic Dubois (pronounced "Dew-boyz"), rodeos and nightly staged shootouts in Buffalo Bill's town, Cody, plus a trip to Yellowstone National Park.

Details Fourteen nights' B&B from £2,107pp, including flights and car hire (americaasyoulikeit.com)



Nevada City
ALAMY

2. Earn your spurs

Zack Wirth's great-grandfather came to Montana to pan for gold in 1862. The grandfather of his wife, Patty, homesteaded in 1869. Stories of pioneer days are guaranteed over your week at Rocking Z ranch near Helena. You'll muster cattle and there's also a chance to learn ropework. The focus of this riding holiday, however, is the surrounding foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The couple lead trail rides with a focus on natural horsemanship. Meals afterwards are ranch-style around a shared table before the yarning continues in a saloon bar.

Details Six nights' full board from £2,414pp (inthesaddle.com). Fly to Bozeman Yellowstone International

3. Active adventures

In Montana they call Glacier National Park “the Crown of the Continent”. It’s better understood as the American west of your imagination: the Rockies’ twisty peaks, emerald lakes, forests rustling with elk and grizzly bears. It’s a supersized adventure playground for bikers and hikers. On this group trip you’ll hike the Iceberg Lake Trail — arguably Montana’s finest trail — cycle the awesome Going to the Sun road at sunrise and raft rapids on Flathead River. You’ll also spend a night at Many Glacier. It’s a great bolt-on to a week of solo touring.

Details [Six nights' full board](#) from £3,999pp (activeadventures.com). Fly to Glacier Park International



Glacier National Park
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4. Winter wonderland

Crowds vanish and the scenery takes over in Yellowstone National Park in winter. The Old Faithful geyser blows in a snowfield. There’s cross-country skiing among forests dusted white. The wildlife is easier to spot too — with a private naturalist guide you’ll visit the Lamar Valley in search of wolves and bison. After historic Bozeman things shift to Montana’s premier ski resort, Big Sky. Staying in cabins at cowboy-chic Lone Mountain Ranch, you’ll go cross-country skiing and fly-fishing. You’ll also take a horse-drawn sleigh to dine in a candlelit cabin while a cowboy strums. Magic.

Details Thirteen nights’ room only from £7,800pp, including flights and transfers (audleytravel.com)

5. On the road

Widescreen skies, limitless horizons — Montana is road-trip country. On this bespoke fly-drive you’ll experience its wide-open spaces, starting at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument before swooping through mountain scenery along the terrific Beartooth Highway for Wyoming’s Yellowstone National Park. Back into Montana there’s awesome scenery in Glacier National Park and fine backroad touring: Great Falls for the home of cowboy artist Charles Marion Russell, First Nations history along the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, a cruise down the Missouri River. Treat yourself to a Stetson and cowboy boots in Bozeman.

Details Thirteen nights’ B&B from £3,295pp, including flights and car hire (bon-voyage.co.uk)

6. Best of the west

This small-group tour packs the best of Montana (not to mention bits of Wyoming and South Dakota) into 12 days. Guides from the Crow and Blackfoot tribes provide native perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn and their Great Falls homeland respectively. From Helena you'll cruise the Missouri River and you'll experience the stupendous Glacier National Park from the seat of a vintage bus as well as a river-raft. Other destinations include Badlands and Yellowstone national parks (the latter for three nights) and Mount Rushmore.

Details [Eleven nights' B&B](#), plus some extra meals from £5,215pp (intrepidtravel.com). Fly to Rapid City



Mount Rushmore
GETTY IMAGES

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/inside-the-wild-american-state-with-an-unconventional-art-scene-5wlkn0pml>