

United States

Travel on trial Home on the range in wild Wyoming

Amber Gibson checks in for a taste of ranch life in the American West – and there's even a kids' club

The goats at Brush Creek Ranch live a simple life – sleeping, cuddling and eating pretty much nonstop and producing milk for Medicine Bow Creamery. Plus, they have the best sunset views on the ranch. It is their human helicopter parents who are working nonstop for 16 hours a day, looking after the herd, milking the goats once or twice a day, breeding, birthing and making cheese. In Wyoming, I get to try my hand at caring for these loveable creatures.

"They are princesses and escape artists," says creamery manager Lindsey Washkoviak. "And they get very easily distracted by shiny things." Her husband and dairy manager Ben Elzay agrees, although he says their sweet looks belie a tough spirit. "Goats are tenacious," he says. "They would take over the world if we let them."

Each morning the does sprint across the dirt road from the doe barn to milking stanchions, lured with the promise of grains for breakfast. After their teats are cleaned with a bright blue chlorhexidine solution, and their milk is checked for quality, they are hooked up to a Surge milker, which can milk six goats at once. The gentle suction is much more efficient than hand milking, but I'm still keen to try the old-fashioned way.

I sidle up to a distracted brown goat on the end, planting myself behind the hungry mammal. Unlike cows, goats have two teats instead of four, and they are much smaller. I can only get three fingers around it, and I am told to be careful not to pull, but rather to pinch the base and squeeze. It's akin to piping pastry cream out of a pastry bag, putting pressure between my fingers and the base of my right palm.

After a couple of failed attempts, a thin but steady stream of milk squirts into the can I am holding in my left hand below. I'm a little underwhelmed by how much milk one goat produces;

Washkoviak tells me they are only getting about eight gallons of milk a day.

There are more than 60 goats in the herd right now, mostly baby goats or kids. I can pick out the three distinct breeds – floppy-eared Nubian goats, diminutively cute Mini Nubians which are cross-bred with Nigerian Dwarf goats, and larger, often bearded Alpine goats.

After milking, I head to the pens, where the kids scamper over to greet us. Five different baby goats immediately jump on me from all sides, eager to make new friends and show me how well they can balance on their hind legs.

"They explore the world with their mouths," Washkoviak says with a laugh. Dangling jewellery, shoelaces and acces-



▲ The goats are like playful puppies: Amber makes some friends

◀ On board: the Medicine Bow Creamery produces seven types of goat's cheese

'Goats are tenacious. They would take over the world if we let them'

sories are not advised when playing with goats. Neither are white trousers, which Elzay says a remarkable number of visiting guests foolishly choose to wear.

The goats are like playful puppies, enjoying neck scratches and rubbing behind their ears. I get to know a few of my new friends by name. Cumin and Dal are Lentil's daughters. Prada is especially feisty, trying to steal away her namesake sunglasses hooked on my shirt as her sister, Chanel, chews on my hair.

After carefully brushing off goat dung, goat hair and stray hay from my (dark) jeans, then thoroughly washing



my hands, it's time to taste the delicious final product. Medicine Bow Creamery is currently producing seven types of soft goat's cheese, including herb-marinated chèvre and an earthy O'Banon wrapped in grape leaves that have been soaked in gin produced at Brush Creek Distillery next door. We taste through a series from mild fresh chèvre to funky White Top, a Saint-Marcellin-style bloomy rind, all paired with dried apricots and figs, crackers and a glass of Crémant de Loire.

My favourite are the cubes of Bulgarian-style telemea feta, which is softer and creamier than traditional Greek feta. Feta is usually made from sheep's milk, but it can be made from goat's.

At the ranch restaurant, I order everything on the menu I can find with goat's cheese – chèvre and beetroot salad, charred avocado toast with goat butter and sour cherry cobbler topped with goat's milk sorbet. As I savour my last bite of goat's cheesecake at Cheyenne Club on my final night at the ranch, I look up at the brilliant smattering of stars in the obsidian sky. Wyoming is still the least populated of the United States, and I'm grateful I don't have to share my goat's cheese with too



many people. I can't wait to return here in spring, when I can bottle-feed the new baby goats and try the new hard cheeses still ageing in the cellar.

▲ Ranch out: the Cheyenne Club offers a seed-to-table dining experience

A two-hour Everything Goats experience at Brush Creek Ranch costs £145 per person. Rooms cost from £908

per person, per night, based on double occupancy with a three-night minimum stay, including meals and a range of complimentary activities and classes. Goat yoga and goat's cheese-making classes will soon be offered too. Overseas travel is currently subject to restrictions. See page 5

THE

VERDICT

Wild west

Wyoming is ideal for getting back to nature in wide open spaces. It's home to a large part of Yellowstone National Park, as well as plenty of ranches

Nobody does it feta

Medicine Bow Creamery's cheese offering may be in its infancy, but it is off to a roaring start. The chèvre, Bulgarian-style telemea feta and cabécou are exquisite, especially with a glass of bubbles

Sustainable solutions

Veg waste from the kitchens and greenhouse here help supplement the goats' diet, and their waste is used for compost. Char from the distillery's whisky barrels is even used in the Devils Tower Valençay-style bloomy rind cheese

LOST AND FOUND

Denied the dance floors of Ibiza, Ash Bhardwaj rediscovers the joys of human contact in Somerset and Oxfordshire



If anyone ever asks about my eight weeks at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, I tell them: "I learnt to tolerate discomfort." The discomfort of fatigue; the discomfort of being wet; of being hungry; running in circles; crawling through nettles; and polishing my boots.

I never really enjoyed these tasks, nor became particularly good at them, but I learnt to do them without complaint because I had no other option. I had chosen to attend Sandhurst and discomfort was part of the deal.

A similar thing happened with travel during Covid: no one enjoys changing their plans when a destination moved lists, but we learnt to tolerate it. Uncertainty became part of the deal.

An example: when the dance floors of Ibiza were closed by its government, and the island's travel status from Britain looked risky, I accepted the discomfort and found an alternative closer to home. Marston Park (marstonpark.co.uk), just outside Frome, is a creative retreat in the Somerset countryside. It is the brainchild of Charlie Bonham Christie (who owns the land) and Michael Fenna (a DJ and music producer). After a short trial last summer, they have been running events throughout this year, including a collaboration with Pikes Ibiza.

"We wanted to create an inspirational place," Michael said, "where peo-

ple would come and make fabulous things... rather than just talk about how fabulous they are. We've had directors staying here to finish film edits, authors writing drafts of their novels and painters teaching guests in between doing their own work."

The accommodation is in bell tents along one side of a lake, and they are filled with easels, crayons, oil paints and guitars, in case visitors forget their own creative tools, or want to dabble with their own ones.

On the other side of the lake is "the Terrace", a large, open-sided tent that

'This might be my favourite place,' said my wife. 'I've never found England so relaxing'

catches the evening sun, and has a bar, food truck and dance floor.

"This might be my favourite place that I've ever stayed," said my wife. "I've never found England so relaxing before, and this feels very far away from anywhere else. But, mostly, I just love being around people again."

The clientele was a mix of guests staying in the bell tents and locals who were "members" of Marston Park. It was easy to strike up conversation, and

I learnt about the challenges of producing a catchy dance tune, the intricacies of Frome's tarmacking industry and the challenges of multi-crop rotations in Wiltshire.

Just after we left Marston Park, the final restrictions were lifted, and we celebrated by going to Wilderness (wildernessfestival.com). I scoured the programme to craft an itinerary of novelty, stimulation and creativity, which started with morning yoga and wild swimming, progressed to poetry readings and art classes, and finished with bands and DJs.

The plan was scrapped when I walked into the arena and spotted a live band playing in a bar. I have no idea who they were, and I could barely tell you what instruments they had, but I was overwhelmed with the joy of dancing in public and jumped straight onto the dance floor with a huge grin on my face.

For the next two days I revelled in serendipity, from dragging someone wearing flip-flops up a muddy hill, to bumping into friends that I hadn't known were there. I tried to add some culture to my life by watching a talk about Jack Kerouac, but I was more interested in behaving like the Beat writer than hearing about him.

Sandhurst taught me that discomfort always, eventually, ends. And when it does, small pleasures taste all the sweeter.



► Ring the changes: inside one of Marston Park's bell tents, with its stock of artistic aids

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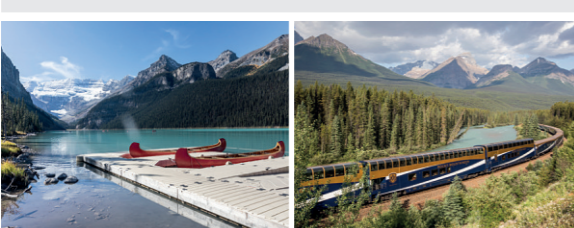
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