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# VALLEY GARDEN RANCH

A HISTORIC RANCH IN MONTANA'S MADISON RIVER VALLEY REELS IN AN ACTIVE FAMILY CAPTIVATED BY THE SLOWER PACE, SPACIOUS SKIES, AND SILVERY TROUT.

BY DEBORAH DONOHUE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER WADE



The romance and thrill of fly-fishing for rainbow trout and other aquatic beauties in Montana's cold, crystalline waters was the perfect lure to entice a high powered metropolitan couple to ditch their city suits and don their Carharts. The couple and their brood found their Nirvana near Ennis, Montana at Valley Garden Ranch, an eight-thousand-acre sprawl of pristine Montana real estate located on a bench beneath a bluff, above the spectacular Madison River Valley. The valley was once the hunting grounds of the Flathead, Bannack and Shoshone tribes, and was visited by Lewis and Clark in 1805. The area is also steeped in the colorful history of the truly wild west that surrounded the gold rush of 1848. The stagecoach stop at the headquarters of the Garden Valley Ranch was on the route to Virginia City, a hotspot for bushwhackers, miners, vigilantes and other ne'er-do-well, including suspected outlaw "Club Foot George," and Henry Plummer. Plummer was a sheriff who allegedly went crooked, robbing miners and burying his treasures in the area of Bannack, Montana. Both were unceremoniously hanged under suspicious conditions. The lingering intrigue and the legacy of gold swirling through the streams still lingers today.

The better part of that romance with the Old West was the motivation for building a family compound where multiple generations could take in the sweeping vistas encountered by those early settlers and adventurers, and where life could unfold amidst the ever changing natural beauty.

The preferred location for the family compound was a separate parcel within the acreage of the Valley Garden Ranch. It was the most beautiful area on which to site what would be a modest main lodge and three outlying cabins. Once the parcel was acquired, the planning began. The intent was to complete the project inside of a year. An expert team was assembled with Kirk Michels as architect. Blue Ribbon Builders and Design Associates would helm the building and Interior Design respectively. Chris Wagner handled landscape design and Scott Kelsner, the stone masonry. Dave Gregor was the log expert and Rick Zaik of CenterMark Industries built the custom cabinetry. According to Lynette Zamboni of Design Associates, "This project was completed on an accelerated time frame making it an exciting challenge requiring precision planning and execution. The communication and teamwork made that possible."

THIS PAGE: THE MADISON LODGE'S DINING ROOM—ACTUALLY A SCREENED-IN PORCH—IS USED PRIMARILY IN THE SUMMER; IN COLDER WEATHER, THE SCREENS ARE REPLACED WITH GLASS PANELS. OPPOSITE PAGE: THE WELCOMING GREAT ROOM IS THE HEART OF THE HOME. FOUR WELL-LOVED CLUB CHAIRS SURROUND AN OTTOMAN UPHOLSTERED IN A PIERRE FREY FABRIC. AN ANTIQUE TIBETAN DRUM IS REPURPOSED AS AN END TABLE.

# W

ith the nearby Madison River (and its tributaries) and Ennis Lake nearby, the compound would serve as a fishing retreat for the multi-generational family—and for friends who could also enjoy a variety of other sports, including hiking, skeet shooting, kayaking, paddle boarding, hunting and horseback riding, along with skiing in the winter.

Living areas were distributed about the property to ensure a sense of privacy, but everyone could come together for dinner at the lodge or for roasting marshmallows at the fire pit.

The Valley Garden Ranch is also a working cattle ranch. Black Angus enjoy the views with a 250 head, free-roaming elk herd that grazes on planted alfalfa before heading up to bed on nearby National Forest land. Deer, moose, antelope, bears and mountain lions also populate the ranch habitat, along with a vast variety of bird species. A conservation agreement is in place ensuring the land will never be developed.

The personality and character of the family compound structures are in harmony with one another, though each has their own unique flavor. The Madison Lodge is the main house, an unpretentious two bedroom, whose rooms embody an eclectic mix of styles and furnishings. The Fletcher Cabin, also known as the Artist's Cabin, has a modern flair with its bold colors and geometric painted floor. Its approach and entrance are traditional, while the bedroom's wall of twenty-foot windows opens onto a vista of the Madison River for a hefty dose of artistic inspiration. The period Lake Cabin could easily transport its lucky occupant back into the homesteading days of years gone by with its vintage furnishings and cozy bedding.



The Artist's cabin is purposely eclectic, where modern, rustic and found pieces coexist without a formal, themed feeling. A custom made bed and leather chairs share the space with an antique bedside table and a hair-on-hide dresser. A wall of glass offers views of the Madison River. Above the fireplace is an etching of the mountain visible outside.

“The view from the home is like looking out on the Serengeti. There is no one else in sight.”

~Valley Garden Ranch homeowner.



THIS PAGE: BURLAP PENDANT LIGHT FIXTURES AND HARTMAN & FORBES HAND-WOVEN GRASS SHADES ON THE WINDOWS—ALONG WITH A MULTI-LAYERED WHITE ANTIQUE FINISH ON THE CABINETY—LEND TEXTURAL INTEREST IN THE KITCHEN.

OPPOSITE TOP: A GUEST BEDROOM IN THE MADISON LODGE HAS “FISHING POD” PENDANT LIGHTS BY TUCKER ROBBINS ABOVE HEADBOARDS UPHOLSTERED IN A BUFFALO-CHECK FABRIC; CUSTOM MADE HAIR-ON-HIDE STOOLS GRACE THE FOOT OF EACH BED.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: INSIDE THE LAKE CABIN, A BED BY ARTISAN GEORGE JACQUES IS ACCENTED WITH LINENS FROM PINE CONE HILL. THE CHANDELIER IS FROM OLD CALIFORNIA LANTERN COMPANY. THE ANTIQUE TABLE AND CHAIRS WERE PURCHASED FROM SUMMER ANTIQUES IN UPSTATE NEW YORK.



THE MADISON LODGE'S GREEN ROOM SERVES AS A FAMILY ROOM AND LIBRARY. COLOR SATURATED WALLS AND A CUSTOM RUG INTERPRETED FROM A NAVAJO PIECE HOLD MOLESWORTH-STYLE CHAIRS AND A COFFEE TABLE CRAFTED FROM AN ANTIQUE DOOR.



The third cabin, known as the Family Cabin, incorporates a bit of the Adirondack style from upstate New York, as do the rest of the dwellings. For instance the roof of the main house has a late 1800s shingle style roof, tightly cropped, its shingles a seamless skin of flowing lines. While seemingly incongruous perhaps with the western sensibility, the style is reminiscent of the buildings in national parks, including many in nearby Yellowstone, one of them being the Bird Museum there. The Adirondack elements also create a lodge-like feeling, an homage to the great camps and the owners' love of fishing.

Building materials for all dwellings reflect the nature of the surrounding terrain. Architect Michels drove around the ranch, harvesting all of the stones used in the buildings directly from the ranch property. Boulders that had been honed by glaciers were collected, along with surface stones that had seen centuries of exposure to the elements, their patina richly layered with organic

textures that only Mother Nature could create. Magnificent flared logs of lodge pole pine (whose tree roots were extracted) grace the exterior entrance to the Madison Lodge. The root bases were coped (carved) to fit into the indigenous rock, giving the impression they are literally growing out of the stone itself. Cabinetry wood is from an old granary on the ranch. The floors are reclaimed, skip-planed Douglas fir.

The Lake Cabin was actually an old barn discovered by Michels. It was disassembled and restacked where it stands today. The little cabin's exterior is round logs, the interior hand hewn wood with traditional chinking. The compound's fire pit is composed of massive Montana moss rock boulders, surrounded by Frontier flagstone. Lovely ponds stocked with trout are within a stone's throw of the back of the lodge, completing the sense that one has stumbled upon an old fishing complex out of time, whimsical, unpretentious and utterly inviting. ♪

*And when white moths were on the wing,  
And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
I dropped a berry in a stream  
And caught a little silvery trout.*

*William Butler Yeats*



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