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## MAVIS

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BY JILL NOVOTNY  
PHOTOS: JILL NOVOTNY AND BETSY STEIN

# THE LUXURY OF HOSPITALITY

An early peek at the **REID CREEK GUEST LODGE**, offers a slow-paced, authentic experience on a 300,000-acre working ranch.

“I’ll meet you by the buffalo wearing pajamas,” the text message read. The plane was still taxiing down the small runway, and my phone pinged repeatedly. I wondered if it was an auto-correction or what it might mean, but I didn’t spend much time on it as the next message popped up. It was from Mitch, the head of hospitality for Wagonhound, who had helped me arrange the trip. He had recently sent some rather intimidating driving directions that had conjured up images of long empty roads without signs, tumbleweeds, and vultures circling. “Don’t worry about those directions,” Mitch said. “The CEO of Wagonhound was on your flight, so you can just follow her.”

I was nervous and had no idea how I would recognize her, even on such a small flight from Denver to Casper. We walked into the tiny airport past a big statue of a buffalo wearing pajamas. Ok, well, that settled that. And there was my traveling companion, my stepmom Betsy, in for this journey from her farm in Vermont. We hugged and walked over

to the one and only baggage claim belt. As I waited for the rental car, checking anxiously around for someone that looked like a CEO, I looked back over to baggage claim, and there was Betsy, chatting with Andrea Nicholas Purdue. I knew even before I noticed her crisp Wagonhound-branded jacket; she radiated energy, poise, and authority, lighting up the dim, low-ceilinged room as she talked with my stepmom like old friends.

Andrea’s family history stretches back to the ranches of the 1800s, with relatives on her father’s side working as the last generation to use all horsepower. “It’s amazing to talk to them about that. We have a bunch of old photos of them on the farm,” she told us excitedly. Her father was raised on a cattle ranch in Nebraska, where his dad was the general manager. “His big focus was soil health,” she continued. “He grew up during the Dust Bowl and really saw what happens if you don’t have soil health. He was a soil scientist and focused on the health of the land. That really sunk in with my dad and became one of the core values

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Some of the herd gallop up to the fence to greet us.



A campsite picnic augments a horseback ride.

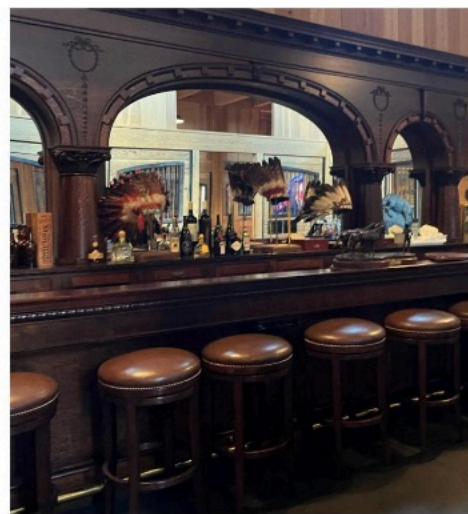




here at Wagonhound: caring for the land; partnering with it.”

After moving to San Diego with the Navy, Andrea’s father started an investment firm there, and when he could, he returned to ranching, first in Montana and then by building Wagonhound in the late 1990s. It was initially a reassembly of several small historic ranches in the area that had broken up over time. The Wagonhound Holdings now sit on about 300,000 acres as a commercial ranching operation. “We raise Red Angus and have a farming operation as well,” explained Andrea. “We grow alfalfa hay that we use internally and have a feedlot and the horse operation. The genesis of the horse operation was to raise a great ranch horse for the cowboys to use. They’re extremely athletic in the performance arena too. We have cutting and reining lines and are well-known for our success in Western competition.

“I came on board a couple of years ago; my career up until that had always



**Top:** The décor of each building is rustic-lodge luxury, with historical details and handmade touches.

**Above:** This bar, located at the Headquarters, was moved from Nebraska, and built c. 1880.

been in finance,” explained Andrea. “But ranching was obviously a big part of our lifestyle growing up. And when I came in, it was a good time to look at the business and decide where to move forward and where to pull back. The lodge wasn’t used much in the summer, and I thought that was a great opportunity to invite guests. I feel very strongly about the connection between humanity and nature. It’s really powerful. The lodge was a way to touch more people, to invite families, friends, or business colleagues in to experience what it’s like to be in the middle of nowhere and connect to the land around you. It’s a butterfly effect, even if it just makes you breathe for a second, to feel joy in being outside. And then, you know, maybe you treat the gate agent at the airport just a little kinder or have a little more patience. That can really spread.”

As we walked around Reid Creek Lodge, the drama of the sky with high clouds catching the rainbow and red



The youngest ranch hand.



Andrea Nicholas Purdue.



The author shows off her catch.

sunset felt like a performance scheduled for our arrival. The silence was incredible. Even the gravel underfoot made a sound so distinct in the quiet that my ears picked it up in detail I’d never experienced. No cars, lights, people, or signs of population in any direction; it was easy to imagine looking out over these quiet lands hundreds of years ago.

**T**he 8,000-square-foot lodge was an existing ranch building, recently renovated to accommodate guests. Unlike a hotel, the lodge’s open floor plan is cozy and familial, centered around the large fireplace and long dining table. Guests share the house and eat together, so they are typically a group, such as a large family looking for space for everyone to stay together, a business team on a retreat, or friends seeking an adventure. Rates start at \$15,000 a night, which includes a private chef and a wide range of activities in

a customized itinerary.

We stepped inside, greeted by Mitch McElwain, the head of hospitality for the lodge. He introduced us to our private chef (who soon became like a friend on the trip) and showed us around the lodge and to our room. Mitch glowed with enthusiasm for the property and his job. He grew up on and around Wagonhound. His brother now runs the ranch’s outfitting operation. Fascinated by history, anthropology, and archaeology, as well as passionate about people, camping, hiking, and being outdoors, it seems Mitch found his calling.

We sat with Mitch, Andrea, and some fellow travelers, discussing our itinerary as our family-style dinner was served. What did we want to see and do? Mitch had drawn up an itinerary before we arrived based on our conversations about our interests, but he emphasized how flexible it was. We decided we wanted to meet the baby horses, explore and hike, and, of course, ride. Otherwise, we

were open to trying anything. E-biking? Fishing? Archery? Betsy and I looked at each other and laughed.

As it turned out, fishing was one of my favorite parts of the trip. We caught and released fish and then took out paddle boards for a brisk paddle, hoping not to fall into the slightly-too-cold water.

We took a drive in the afternoon, looking for a place to hike. Though Mitch knows the area and many of the details of the landscape, there is always more to discover. “There aren’t really any hiking trails; we just make our own. That’s what’s so great about this place,” Mitch intimated. So, instead of a carefully planned hike, we just drove off in one of the Wagonhound-branded white trucks until we saw an inviting-looking boulder, pulled over, and went for it. Sometimes the path up wasn’t clear; sometimes, it was tricky, and we had to find another way. Like a maze of our own making, we wound our way through

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The barn aisles attach to the arena.  
Bouldering.



Betsy aboard Hollywood.  
Andrea Nicholas Purdue.



The foals had just been weaned.



Mitch's brother, Dax McCarty, the head of outfitting on the ranch.



Look closely. Can you find me?



Fishing on the pond.



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narrow passages, pulled up to steep ledges, and wandered between flowers and shed horns to whatever overlook or vista we decided to explore.

Over the course of the trip, I became enamored with bouldering. I love the open-ended nature of the exploration, the child-like freedom of climbing without (much) fear, and the way the obstacles pushed us into a gentle competition to see who could get up the highest or find the most interesting route. After our hike, Mitch spotted an overhanging rock and smoothed the sand below it. Almost immediately, he pulled up a nearly perfect carved arrowhead. I looked at him quizzically, “Did you plant that here? Is it real?” He handed it to me with a grin, “I just saw the spot and thought, it looks like a place someone might have sat on a rainy day and made something. Once you know where to look, you can find amazing things. This place just has so much history.” As I shook my head and I stared at it, he explained other findings made in the area, including a wooly mammoth uncovered nearby. Looking around the wide landscape of rock outcroppings, low trees, and grasses, I imagined the animals and people that had inhabited, known, and crossed these lands. It was truly humbling and almost unreal—so unlike my day-to-day urban lifestyle.

On one of our trail rides, we followed our guide, a cowboy named Cougar, over hills, through herds of cattle, and across rocky streams. Reserved and quiet, he was just how I pictured a quintessential Wyoming ranch hand. I felt silly; he surely judged us for our strait-laced English riding gear and eager questions. Halfway through our ride, we stopped atop an especially lovely hill crest, and he took a deep, smiling breath and finally spoke, “Isn’t it the most beautiful view?”



Later, we spent time with Cougar and his wife, Heather, who manages the ranch’s horses. We rode the horses in the arena, practicing some reining skills and learning about the horse operation, which has seen great success. Wagonhound Land and Livestock was the 2018 recipient of the Zoetis AQHA Best Ramada Award, which honors the contributions of ranch horses to the heritage of the American Quarter Horse. Heather and Cougar had their 3-year-old daughter and new baby with us, crawling and playing in the dirt, riding the horses, and tagging along on the chores.

“The cowboy lifestyle is really your whole life,” said Andrea. “Caring for animals isn’t a nine-to-five thing, so you need to love it. Your spouse and kids need to love it. It’s a whole family affair.” Andrea told us that Cougar and Heather had actually met while working on the ranch and married there as well.

On our final day, we enjoyed a long

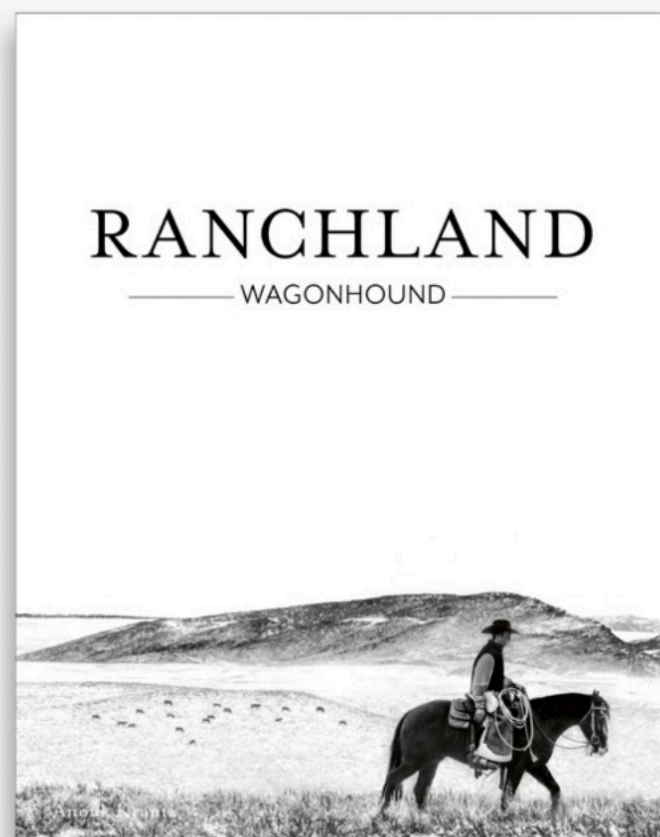
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**This spread:** Headquarters, a two-story building filled with a rich collection of art, western craftsmanship, historical artifacts, and more from the family collection, is a 45-minute drive from the lodge on the other side of the property. The building’s sculptures, both indoors and out, range from table-top to life-sized. In

addition to a wide variety of modern hand-crafted Western items such as saddles, braided rawhide, and clothing, there is also a stunning collection of rare, carefully preserved, Native American artifacts on display. The building is also home to a mechanical bull, arcade, carriage collection, two bars, multiple sitting areas, and dining rooms.







**RANCHLAND:** *Wagonhound* is a stunning and rare-perspective large-format art book by renowned French photographer Anouk Krantz. Born and raised in France, Krantz moved to New York City in the late 1990s and following college worked at Cartier's North American headquarters. Anouk later studied at the International Center of Photography in NYC and has since developed several notable bodies of work, including *Wild Horses of Cumberland Island* (2017), *West: The American Cowboy* (2019), and *American Cowboys* (2021). Her work has been praised internationally and has appeared in prominent galleries and museums. She is renowned for her large-scale contemporary photography and use of space that defines her elegant, minimalistic style.

Awarded Best Photography Book of 2023 by the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Krantz's



latest work takes a close look at *Wagonhound*, a 300,000-acre ranch in Douglas, Wyoming. (See page 70.) Her stunning photographs provide an outsider's perspective into the spirit of the American West and its enduring strength. The book includes a powerful foreword by celebrated American travel writer and poet Gretel Ehrlich and other heartfelt contributions by historians Jeremy M. Johnston and Don Reeves, as well as a new poem written by legendary Russell "Red" Steagall, along with many others.

Anouk's exquisite fine art photography offers a rare window into the cowboy ranching culture and land stewardship of this historic ranch and the breathtaking American West. The pages reveal the daily and seasonal rhythms of the ranch and the lives of the men and women cowboys, whose long, hard days start and finish in the dark.

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