



# The Wild Wild West

David Leishman and his wife Janet run a successful guest ranch in Montana. David talks to Corporate America about the ranch, the industry in general and how he strives for success.

 The Bar W Guest Ranch is a family-owned and operated dude ranch located in Whitefish, Montana. From May 1 – October 31 the ranch provides an iconic western vacation experience for domestic and international vacationers.

The ranch offers six night all-inclusive package stays, featuring traditional western activities such as horseback riding, skeet shooting, archery, cattle work, roping, square dancing, fly fishing lessons and endless outdoor pursuits. The ranch can comfortably accommodate 34 guests between its main lodge, cabin and 'glamping' tents.

Dave Leishman tells us more about the ranch and the industry it operates within.

"On the broadest level we operate within the travel, tourism and hospitality industry," he begins. "It's a little intimidating that we are competing with Disney World. But within that marketplace there is a little niche for dude ranches and we are privileged to be there."

The dude ranch industry can be further broken down into three categories including; working ranches, dude ranches and resort ranches. The Dude Ranchers' Association describes them as follows:



#### **WORKING DUDE RANCH:**

These are working cattle or sheep operations. Your horseback riding adventures will be determined by the ranch's livestock and the work related to them. Be prepared to experience these activities first hand.

#### **DUDE RANCH:**

Horseback riding is central to these ranches. The cowboy in you will experience western riding and a variety of outdoor activities.

#### **RESORT DUDE RANCH:**

Horseback riding is featured, and these ranches offer an array of diverse activities and onsite facilities. These are apt to be the larger ranches.

David loosely describes himself as Managing Partner of the corporation, although he also adds that he owns the ranch with his wife, Janet, and they have been operating for 12 years. "Either way, it is the same thing with our responsibilities overseeing the entire operation," he explains. "I tell my friends that you take a hotel and put it on steroids then you have a Guest Ranch. The challenges are endless. Back when I had my main corporation, I would commute between Montana and Connecticut, spending two weeks a month in each location. One day I was in jeans, cowboy boots, and a cowboy hat sitting on the back of a pick-up truck talking with a man about hay, and the very next day I am in the legislative office building in Connecticut talking to a State Senator about energy reform – I would rather be talking to the man about hay any day!"

David jokingly describes the ranch as the '21st century wild West' although this is not too far from the truth as the ranch has televisions and internet access, along with cell phone reception. However he encourages guests

to disconnect from technology, which usually doesn't take too much convincing!

"It seems to happen naturally," he enthuses. "And it's refreshing for families and friends to be actively engaging with each other and nature.

"We're in a unique industry that doesn't necessarily prioritize technology or trends, and we see that as a good thing. It's actually vital to our success to remain authentic. From a marketing perspective, it's important to stay relevant and we need to be where our consumers are. We strive to have strong visibility in the digital and social media environments. We recently launched a new website and we have a strong presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter."

Whilst the summer months of June, July and August are busy with visiting families, the 'shoulder-season' months of May, September and October were initially more challenging to fill as children are in school, so family travel is minimal to non-existent. It is these months that David and Janet have focussed on for their more innovative western experiences.

"From our perspective these are ideal times to visit NW Montana as the cooler temperatures are perfect for horseback riding. In order to attract guests to these timeframes we decided to create signature Specialty Weeks in order to appeal to an adult audience.

We created four different weeks which include; Cowgirl Up, Cattle Drive, Adults Only Week and Photography Week. Cowgirl Up is a women's only week where cowgirls take over the ranch. Their week is unique because it features all of our regular activities but with special touches such as, two hour spa package, private wine tasting, and cowgirl dancing.

"The Cattle Drive week is designed for those guests that are interested in a working cowhand experience. Guests will actually round up cattle, brand, vaccinate and care for the herd. The cattle drive has been a wonderful addition to our program and while it attracts the more experienced rider we have also had beginners join us and they had a ball. It also offers something new for returning guests who enjoyed their initial package stay with us, but want to return and try something different.

"These weeks have become wildly successful, not only for the guests but for the ranch employees as we welcome the opportunity to switch things up."

With regards to the future, Dave has big plans to become the leading dude ranch and providing the most authentic western experience.

"The Bar W is an incredible product and has a great reputation and we have worked very hard to achieve that. We want to be considered as the best Guest Ranch in the United States within five years."



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