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High desert oasis delivers on its relaxation promise

Black Butte Ranch goes low-key as other resorts go big



1/4 – A family of four rides bicycles past Phalarope Lake at Black Butte Ranch. There are more than 18 miles of paved trails at the Central Oregon resort. (Submitted photo)

By JOHN GOTTBURG ANDERSON

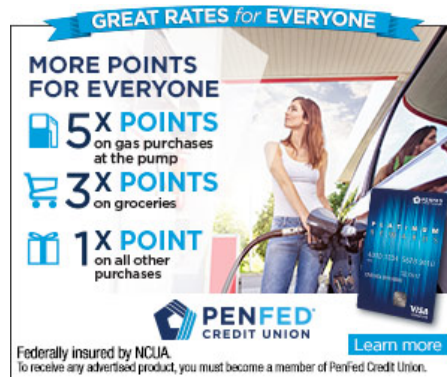
For The Register-Guard

JULY 31, 2016



BLACK BUTTE RANCH — Miles of gentle foot and bicycle trails wind around Phalarope Lake and follow a linked series of ponds to the source waters of Indian Ford Creek. They skirt a white-barked aspen grove and cross marshy Big Meadow, sharing the grasses with horses and livestock, on a nature trail with viewing areas for dozens of colorful species of birds.

This is summer at the 1,830-acre Black Butte Ranch. The nearest Central Oregon resort to the Willamette Valley, just 100 miles east of Eugene via Santiam Pass, the 45-year-old destination property delivers on a promise of relaxation.



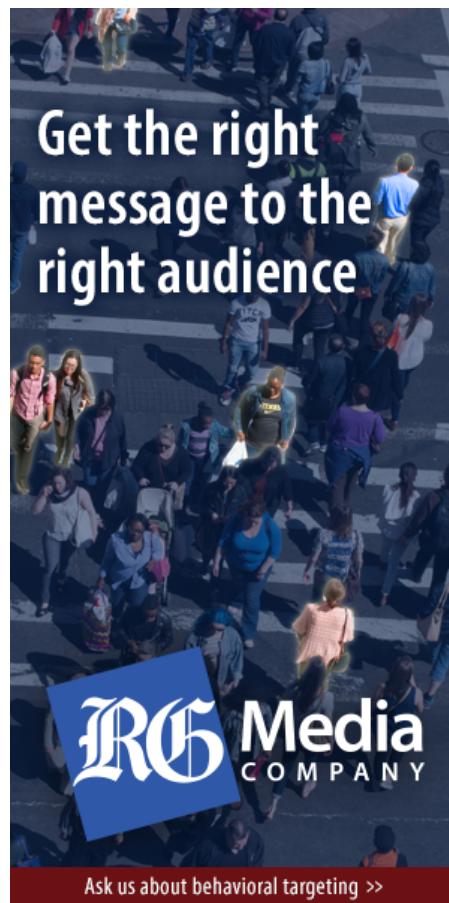
Families may enjoy summer visits when swimming pools are open and other activities, including golf, tennis and horseback riding, are going full bore, but Black Butte Ranch, known as BBR, thrives on serenity. Other resorts are all about hustle and bustle, but Black Butte even banishes overhead street lights, enhancing a “night sky” program that makes the heavens come alive.

Across U.S. Highway 20, the 6,436-foot summit of Black Butte — the volcanic cone after which the ranch is named — beckons hikers who want a moderate challenge: A 2.3-mile trail climbs steadily from a parking area, on the northwest side of the butte, to a fire lookout tower. Its counterpoint is tiny Aspen Lake, in the South Meadow neighborhood of Black Butte Ranch, where super-sized crayfish skitter between submerged rocks so long as they don’t feel the tremble of a footstep along the grassy path that extends just a few hundred yards around the tarn.

Perhaps the most gratifying trail is the one that crosses a long, wooden bridge that spans a marsh beside a beaver pond, next to the 11th and 12th fairways of the Big Meadow Golf Course. It leads to gentle Paulina Springs, which percolates from rocks and earth in a tranquil grove of pine and fir trees. Signs urge intruders to tread the fragile ecosystem here by foot only, a request that visitors appear to respect.

Lakeside complex

The hub of Black Butte Ranch always has been its lodge. From the time Brooks Resources began developing the resort in 1970, this single structure contained executive offices, the fine-dining restaurant and lounge, and a handful of guest rooms. During the years, some functions have been relocated and the dining facilities have been renewed.



But it wasn't until this year that BBR fully reinvented the central area beside Phalarope Lake with the opening of its new Lakeside complex. Three years in the making, the complex comprises a trio of buildings — a bistro, a pool and recreation center, and an activities center. There long had been a swimming pool and snack bar here, but they had gone without an upgrade for many years.

"The premise," said Scott Huntsman, general manager since 2008, "was this: How do we bring life back to the heart of the ranch? We wanted to inject new life, draw people back and retain property values."

Owners — all but 12 of the resort's 1,251 lots are developed — mobilized behind the proposal. By a whopping 72 percent vote, they approved a \$5,000-per-lot assessment to rebuild the Lakeside area. The ranch broke ground in September 2014, and the Lakeside Bistro opened on June 27, 2015, on time and on its \$11.5 million budget. It brought "a renewed energy and vitality to the heart of Black Butte Ranch," sales and marketing director Kendal Daiger said.

Designed by Hacker Architects of Portland and built by Kirby Nagelhout Construction of Bend, the complex is made up of complementary modern structures with low, slanted roofs, light pine décor and large windows that accent their spacious feel. Not a single right angle was used.

Bistro and pool

The Lakeside Bistro, which stands nearest to the lodge, is a casual establishment with seating indoors and out. In summer, diners can watch stand-up paddlers, kayakers and fly fishermen on nearby Phalarope Lake. Espresso drinks and pastries are served in the morning; salads, sandwiches and brick-oven pizzas make it popular with poolside diners.

The Lakeside Pool is a new water feature, 80 percent larger than its predecessor. With an "infinity pool" design, it ranges in depth from 9 feet down to about 6 inches, or wherever a toddler's knees fall. One section is reserved for lap swimming, the balance for water play.

Although the pool closes seasonally, an adjoining outdoor hot tub (with a capacity of 24) is open year-round. It is a perfect

place to relax after a day of downhill skiing at Hoodoo Ski Area, 13 miles west atop Santiam Pass, or cross-country skiing right at BBR, which has groomed trails across its two golf courses and full Nordic equipment rentals.

The pool and hot tub are served by a new recreation center with locker rooms, a weight and fitness room, a co-ed sauna and a retail shop. Bicycle rentals are available here, along with directions to the four other swimming pools and 18 tennis courts spread around the ranch.

Lakeside's third building is its activity center, whose particle-board walls and bare rafter beams give it an unfinished look. That's as intended, leaving it with a casual appearance. Classes in things such as pottery and cooking appeal to children and their parents alike, and there are plenty of other games, crafts and sports equipment rentals, as well as a small playground area.

Golf and riding

One recent morning, I enjoyed 18 holes of golf on the Glaze Meadow course, which underwent a \$3.75 million renovation in 2012 that was acclaimed by Golf Inc. as the country's best makeover. It's one of two championship courses here. Both Glaze and Big Meadow offer a special family package priced at just \$60 after 4 p.m. through summer.

Designed by John Fought (whose brother, Jeff Fought, is BBR's director of golf), the Glaze Meadow course was at once open and challenging. That was especially true on the third and fifth holes, where my chip shots rolled off hard greens and down short hills into appropriately named Hazard Lake. But the broad fairways of the back nine, flanked throughout by home sites, offered beautiful views of the surrounding Cascade landscapes, and I stopped worrying about my score and simply enjoyed the - sunshine and crisp air.

Black Butte Stables, beside the resort's general store and across Bishop's Cap road from the welcome center, maintain a herd of more than 80 horses. As I golfed, a friend joined co-owner Kristy Prosser on a two-hour ride through Deschutes National Forest land on the east and south sides of the ranch, climbing a low hill to views toward the Cascade crest.

Prosser and her partner, Cody Koch, own all the horses, the tack and the Forest Service use permit. In summer, they lead rides for beginners as well as advanced riders. In fall, wilderness pack trips are popular for a clientele that ranges from hunters to overnight campers.

We followed our exercise with a visit to the spa, open year-round within the Glaze Meadow Recreation Center. Deep-tissue and Metolius River stone massages inspired us to take late-afternoon naps before we headed for our evening meal.

Dine and stay

Our delicious dinner at the luxurious Lodge Restaurant included heirloom tomato salad and ricotta gnocchi starters, followed by coffee-rubbed pork tenderloin and miso Chilean sea bass entrées. A meal of this quality stands up against any fine-dining restaurant in metropolitan Bend. Many of the herbs and vegetables were grown at the ranch's own garden or at nearby organic farms, and all meat and seafood were regionally sourced.

BBR has three main restaurants — the lodge, the bistro and Robert's Pub, beside the golf course in the Big Meadow Clubhouse — and snack bars and other recreation centers and the Glaze Meadow Clubhouse.

Service is cut back during fall and winter, when overnight lodging costs are substantially lower than they are in the high season. Then, lodge rooms are priced from \$110, ranch cabins and condominium units less than \$200, and full homes for as little as \$245 a night.

But even in summer, options are extensive and reasonably priced. Guests may choose between private lodge cabins (\$220), two- and three-bedroom cabins and condos (as little as \$275), and 120 vacation homes (from \$365) — many of them pet-friendly. A new mid-week package enables families to stay for a free fourth night with a paid three-night stay.

A little history

This acreage once was a swampy territory visited only by migrant Indian tribes, trappers and surveyors. For a time, a pioneer family maintained a 160-acre homestead as a summer residence. Early in the 20th century, according to historian Peggy Lucas, a consortium of cattlemen made this headquarters for their Black Butte Land and Livestock Co., although their inability to fully drain the marshland made it unproductive for forage grain.

Later, a timber company took ownership, followed by a wealthy California couple who hired a resident manager to maintain the property as their summer home. The state of Oregon rejected an offer to buy the grounds for development as a state park, but in 1970 the Brooks Scanlon Co., based in Bend with its board of directors in Minneapolis, bought 1,280 acres with a promise to preserve its natural environment while developing the property.

The Brooks real-estate division began developing the property almost immediately. It hired engineers and land planners and put home sites (priced at about \$8,000) on the market late in that first summer. In the following year, the lodge was completed, followed by a nine-hole golf course, a swimming pool and tennis courts.

In 1987, Brooks sold the ranch to the Black Butte Ranch Homeowners Association, with members in 33 states and eight foreign countries. This group continues to own the ranch. The full-time, year-round residential community of about 350 makes up less than 10 percent of the entire BBR community, according to Huntsman. A majority of owners, he said, come from the Willamette Valley, and many of them have had a stake in the ranch, through multiple generations of the same families, since its origin.

John Gottberg Anderson, who lives in Bend, can be reached at johngottberg@gmail.com.

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IF YOU GO

Information and lodging: Black Butte Ranch. U.S. Highway 20, 8 miles west of Sisters (Welcome Center at 13899 Bishops Cap); www.blackbutteranch.com; 541-595-1252, 800-452-7455

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