

TRAVEL

MAY 23, 2016 3:00 AM

Tarry awhile at Fishing Camp, in Colorado's last best wilderness

HIGHLIGHTS

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Tribune News Service



LAKE GEORGE, COLO. — "If you've tried three flies and still haven't hooked one of these guys," said Scott Tarrant, wading farther out into the Tarryall River, "remember what the old timers say. Foam is home. Follow the bubbles."

"Sounds like a beer drinker's election slogan to me," said Josh, the group's self-appointed comedian, peering into the ripples swirling around a fallen tree trunk.

"Bet they weren't fly fishermen, either," said Scott, camp manager at Fishing Camp, a fishing lodge in Colorado's South Park, three hours from Denver. "Fishermen would know that a line of bubbles is where two currents meet. It's like a conveyor belt sweeping fish and floating insects together. "

Crossing the river that morning, off for an early run in the Lost Creek Wilderness, I was thinking more about Kit Carson and Jim Bridger than I was about trout. Best-known of the fur trappers and mountain men that explored the Rocky Mountains in the early decades of the 1800s, Carson and Bridger camped in the "mountain paradise" they called South Park and knew it well.

But if it hadn't been for an invitation to a wedding at the historic Broadmoor Hotel, in Colorado Springs, I wouldn't have been at Fishing Camp at all. Without my dad along, hiking to our favorite mountain streams, learning which fly to use and how to spot the eddies where the trout lurked, fishing wasn't the same.

Especially memorable were his stories, full of boyhood recollections about lake fishing in Wisconsin. There was the time he struggled to haul a bass into the rowboat and a mean-looking snapping turtle suddenly lunged up and grabbed it, nearly taking off his finger. Or the one about the raccoon family that poached the pail of bluegills he'd left outside for no more than ten minutes.

After he was gone, the rods and reels went back in the closet for good. Five years later the wedding invitation arrived. And with it came

two nights at the legendary Broadmoor, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, a luxury vacation destination popular since the hotel opened, in 1918.

Which is where I learned about the Broadmoor's newest venture, three back-country camps inspired by the hotel's new owner, Philip Anschutz, a student and admirer of western traditions and history. With the Rocky Mountains right there in the hotel's back yard, the time was ripe for offering the kind of authentic wilderness and ranch experiences that adventuresome travelers say they want.

Accordingly, the Ranch at Emerald Valley, a cowboy-style outfit at 8,200 feet in the Pike National Forest, was the first to open, in 2013. Cloud Camp, at 9,200 feet on Cheyenne Mountain, opened the following year, in 2014. But for Anschutz, who told me he discovered Colorado during the summer vacations his parents organized, the idea of recreating an old-time fishing lodge, with a big front porch, pine plank floors, rustic log cabins to bunk in and family-style dinners, must have been percolating.

And there it remained, according to a spokesman in Anschutz's office, until the he was out for a drive and spotted an abandoned log cabin on a former homestead in South Park, the grassy valley that western scholar and author Bernard DeVoto called a mountain man's "paradise, the last place in the mountains where the old life could be lived to the full." When a little digging indicated that the cabin, on 76 acres, was not only next to one of Colorado's top-rated trout streams but that five miles of the river frontage was private land, Fishing Camp became a reality.

For all its connections with the Broadmoor, Fishing Camp is wonderfully rustic, the kind of place where everyone feels at home. But spartan it isn't. The main lodge, originally a homesteader's cabin, is now restored, rebuilt, re-chinked, reroofed, enlarged and insulated. The lighting and electricity have been upgraded to current standards. Bigger windows let in light and an improved pine board floor resists muddy boots.

Tapestry-sized Navajo rugs hang on the walls, surrounded by last century's western memorabilia: snowshoes, buckets, cowboy hats, antlers, several mounted fish, a decoy ducks, period lanterns, antique fishing rods, a collection of woven wicker creels and a canoe and paddle, the last propped overhead on the rafters.

Seven small log cabins, each different and sleeping two to eight guests, have also been updated, with new chinking and insulation. The door frames are old, the doors and screens are new. The rooms were small; the new rooms have been rearranged to add more space. Upgraded lighting, comfy sofas and chairs and framed 1930s magazine ads, promoting rods and reels, continue the theme. Some cabins have private baths; three of the smallest $\frac{1}{2}$ like so many 1950s and '60s wilderness camps $\frac{1}{2}$ share a single bath house. As for the wood frame screen door on my cabin, it swung shut with a comfortable "thunk."

With a limit of 22 guests at any one time, Fishing Camp's isolation, at the foot of the Lost Creek Wilderness, and its private stretch of river frontage really is "your father's fishing stream." You could spend all day walking along the bank, soaking up the scenery and the solitude. The fact is that the proliferation of highways, public parks, campgrounds and tourist trails have made distant trout streams more accessible, and therefore more crowded.

For experts, the Tarryall's turns and twists offer enough eddies, pools, snags and white water to challenge any skill level. And though Tarrant and his guides are catch-and-release sportsmen by choice, "Fishing Camp is a stream-to-table resort," he says. If you yearn for that old-time taste of wild rainbow trout, just caught and fried in butter, just ask.

As for eager beginners, you won't be bored holding a rod and watching a fishing line that never wiggles. Tarrant, who can snare a trout nearly on command, is a repository of facts about the climate, stream action, native insects and when they fly, and what a trout thinks as it rests in a quiet eddy. Even after all these years, I learned how to cast more effectively with less effort (and without throwing out my shoulder) and to pay attention to what's hatching that day.

Clearly, luring a fighting rainbow onto a hook is what Fishing Camp is all about. But don't stay away just because you don't fish. Bring the family fisherman along, and while he/she is catching dinner, take the car and explore South Park.

If you don't want to hike, ask about four-wheel jeep trails into the Lost Creek Wilderness, where a network of trails go from one photo op to the next: arresting rock formations, eagles' nests, marshy meadows, sage-covered sunny slopes and half-ruined pioneer cabin sites. Wannabe cowboys can take a guided horseback ride at Tarryall River Ranch, just off the highway, three miles south of Fishing Camp.

Also in the vicinity is a classic one-room school house, built in 1921, standing on the same site where its predecessor, built in 1898, once stood. Painted bright white, it perches on a small rise, a voice from a vanished age, like the fur trappers and like Ma and Pa in The Little House series of books, by Laura Ingalls Wilder. For the stories that paved the way for the Ingalls pioneering years, read Kit Carson and Jim Bridger's diaries, tales of South Park and beyond.

THE NITTY GRITTY: South Park is a region consisting of a series of meadows, streams and low peaks west of the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains and east of the Sawatch Range and Collegiate Peaks. Linked by river valleys to Middle Park and North Park, also in Colorado, it provided a thoroughfare for fur trappers traveling from Taos, New Mexico to Wyoming and Utah.

Fishing Camp, open April 1-Oct. 31, is located on Highway 77 in Park County, Colorado, between Jefferson and Lake George, 3.5 miles south of Tarryall Reservoir. Rates per night for two in a cabin start at about \$800 and include lodging, chef-prepared meals, snacks, coffee and tea, wine and alcoholic beverages, all guiding services and use of all fishing gear. Half day and full-day rates are also available. Book reservations at the Broadmoor Hotel, at (719)623-5112, or (844)602-3343, or go to www.broadmoor.com.

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