



In Perfect Balance

BIG SKY YOGA RETREATS OFFER HORSES, "GOURMET RANCH" CUISINE, INDULGENT HOSPITALITY AND SOME OF THE BEST YOGA INSTRUCTION IN THE WEST.

By Mary Donohue
Photography By Larry Stanley
& Janice Cartwright



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ISO: Spunky woman seeking spiritual and physical clarity. Must love horses and gourmet food. Previous riding experience helpful but not required. Must be willing to try new poses...

Imagine a love affair between a rugged, independent rancher of means and a lovely, spiritual entity with a thousand-year history from the Far East. An unlikely pairing? Not at all, particularly if the marriage partners are western riding and eastern yoga. This is not a marriage of convenience but an unexpected relationship that works! So when Big Sky Yoga invited me to experience one of their signature getaways, I was both intrigued and a little nervous. (My most frequent yoga mantra is "Why don't I do yoga more often.") Then I did what the adventurous have done since Lewis and Clark: I headed West! I needn't have worried; my cowgirl yoga retreat was just that, an immersive, pampering escape from my routine chores and obligations. Goodbye laundry and conference calls! Hello rustic luxury, gourmet slow food, peaceful and supportive yoga instruction and horses, horses, horses!

Montana. Even for those of us who live in the West, Montana is epic. Landlocked and expansive, it delivers on the big sky promise with an attitude to match. That said, my iPhone easily located a double soy latte in the state's smaller hamlets. Even with this caffeine support, there were more fine western art galleries than this cowgirl could cover. It is here that Big Sky Yoga was conceived.

After a successful run as the proprietress of Georgetown Yoga in the nation's capital, Margaret Burns Yap packed up her Namaste, said adieu to the Beltway and set out to become the cowgirl she knew she was inside. Her Big Sky Yoga offers retreats to match a variety of tastes, from stays at a working, family-owned ranch to luxe retreats at a riverside resort, the latter complete with afternoon wine receptions among other upscale amenities.

you'll find urban affectations are shed on a walk through the restored historic district. Pick up a cold-brewed iced coffee at the independently owned Coffee Crossing (and be sure to take a "people treat" from the bowl on the counter!). It's best to have your pocketbook handy if you collect art; Livingston's galleries include museum quality western traditional and contemporary art. On a local's suggestion, we grabbed a casual lunch at Mustang

Fresh Food and Catering. A cottage restaurant evocative of a Provencal café with a western flair, it bridges the historic downtown and residential area. Mustang's sandwiches, soups and pastries would be in demand anywhere. I followed my refined tomato bisque cup of soup with a seasonal pumpkin cupcake. Next to us a gentlemanly band of rugged, camouflage-clad hunters perched on delicate white bistro sets, enjoying their hearty sandwiches among the vases of fresh cut wildflowers. The Yellowstone River is a mere few blocks walk from Mustang and goes on to bisect Paradise Valley, home to celebrities and other notables drawn by the area's natural beauty (The Yellowstone River was featured in the memorable film, *The River Runs Through It*).

Just outside Livingston, we veered north on U.S. 89 for the remaining 25 minutes to our retreat. Clyde Park, named for the Clydesdale horses raised there in the late 19th century, is home to the Double T River Ranch. The ranch offers ample privacy but easy accessibility, i.e. no four-wheel drive required. Our first pleasure was settling into our cabin, one of two sharing the banks of the Shields River. Vibrant kilim rugs and artwork with a modern, but not edgy feel complemented the straw-colored log walls and gorgeous, distressed-wood floors. Both of the heavy log or carved wood beds were dressed in soft linens and inviting quilts that enveloped one in a cocoon of warm layers after a day on the mat AND in the saddle! With full kitchens as well as common living and dining areas, every convenience was available, at any time. Attention to detail was evident in touches like the hand-made artisan tiles on the kitchen backsplash which depicted western scenes such as a bronc rider in action, or a Native American on horseback.



BREATHE IN WARRIOR II
WITH A COWGIRL SPIN

I opted for Big Sky Yoga's Luxe Cowgirl retreat at the Double T River Ranch in Clyde Park, Montana. Swooping over golden fields, the Alaska Airlines Q-400 delivered me to the Bozeman airport on a warm autumn afternoon. I retrieved my bulging black duffel bag (I was told to pack for everything from sun to snow) under the watchful gaze of an enormous bronze grizzly bear sculpture, whose startling larger than life (?) size was somewhat tempered by his Winnie-the-Pooh pose. After picking up a rental car and meeting up with a girlfriend from San Diego, we headed East on I-90 through rolling hills and rangeland, enchanted by the small herds of grazing dulce de leche-colored pronghorn antelope that dotted the easy hour-long drive to the Double T.

A must stop on this sojourn is Livingston, Montana. About halfway between Bozeman and Clyde Park, Livingston lays claim to "three stoplights and 14 art galleries." Hip(py), chic and cowboy all rolled into one,





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP THE WRITER, AN EXPERIENCED YOGINI, FOUND THE BIG SKY YOGA INSTRUCTION TO BE SOME OF THE BEST SHE'S EVER EXPERIENCED. CHEF-PREPARED CUISINE LOVINGLY PRESENTED MADE THIS YOGA RETREAT A TRUE TREAT. THE YOGA BARN UNDER THE BIG SKY.



Our own cabin included a double room with two Queen beds, plus two additional single bedrooms—each with a Queen or King bed. We were assigned two Cabin-mates, and all of us shared one very large, spa-worthy bath with spacious double sinks, and one additional powder room. While this arrangement could have felt awkward, it didn't—it was like a “girls only” summer camp for grown ups! Single or double private, en suite accommodations are also available in the ranch house and cottage; be sure to ask ahead to find the perfect combination for your needs. Regardless of accommodation or prior affiliation, our retreat group mixed it up daily, at meals, in yoga class and on the trail, embracing the opportunity to spend quality time with a dozen diverse, unique women. Fellow cowgirlyogis included a Certified Public Accountant, Pharmacist, Wildlife Veterinarian, Stay-at-home Mom, Personal Assistant to the rich and (in)famous and others; each supporting one another in giving and receiving what they needed from the retreat experience. Developing effortlessly and organically, the female camaraderie at our retreat was a priceless element of the Big Sky Yoga retreat experience.

Kate Huston is the founder of Waywardraven Farms and Personal Chef Services in Bozeman, Montana, and was our retreat's private chef. We began each day with Kate's discreet, in-cabin coffee service that served as our wake up call; the aroma and gurgling sounds of coffee brewing drawing us into the day. I enjoyed my first cup of the day on our cabin's veranda and was silently greeted by a bald eagle perched above the river! Specialty organic teas by Hill Botanical were

an enjoyable alternative to the coffee, particularly in the evening. Gourmet meals were taken together in the stunning dining room of the restored barn, on a large table invariably dressed in elegant linens. Kate uses local ingredients and provided sumptuous daily entrée options. The menu was diverse and delicious, from sustainably raised meats to vegetarian dishes, many prepared from ingredients harvested that day from Chef's own farm. This “Golden Door cum Ponderosa” cuisine included specialties such

as succulent lamb kebabs and Moroccan aubergines! Kate's skill was evident and her gourmet yet healthy offerings always left us supremely satisfied: full, but never lethargic. Evening meals were wittily paired with wine selections from Oregon's Namasté Vinyards and eastern Washington's 14 Hands Wines (14 Hands Wines recently partnered with Return to Freedom, a charity seeking sanctuary for the West's overabundant wild horses). Once provisioned, we were off to the serene yoga studio perched in the barn's loft, or down to the corrals to giddy-up with wrangler Janice Cartwright (yes, Cartwright!).

In the yoga studio Margaret welcomed us under the barn's soaring heights and windows, which afforded views of the meadows and Crazy Mountains

beyond. Making introductions, she ensured each person's needs were met with mats, blocks and blankets. A willowy, comely brunette, with strong features and expressive doe eyes, Margaret was soon guiding us through asanas (poses) in a way I have never experienced in any yoga class. Each asana was fully deconstructed and each element addressed mindfully to achieve proper body alignment and avoid injury. I was astonished as I began to understand how to achieve poses I have struggled with for years.



Within the group, we each found our own practice to attend to, at our own level. Any peer pressure to “do the pose” was completely absent. I almost declined Margaret’s hands-on adjustments, but was surprised when they softly helped me find my pose, with no uncomfortable pushing and prodding. Several of us at the retreat had chronic injuries or post-surgical concerns and in each case, Margaret found us the appropriate modifications to both honor our limitations while building strength and developing flexibility. In subsequent classes, we applied this restorative foundation to very active, flowing, and fitness-like vinyasa practices. Margaret also led us in several poses that enhanced our suppleness while riding, or might even be performed on horseback. With a minimum of one yoga class daily—several of which spanned two hours or more—this practice, while peaceful, was physically challenging. Though beginners are welcome, those with some familiarity with yoga may get the most out of this experience. With our newly lithe bodies and calm minds, we then met the horses.

Though Margaret hails from the yoga business, the equestrian component of Big Sky Yoga’s Cowgirl Yoga retreat never plays second fiddle. The Head Wrangler Janice, a petite, mature woman with elegant features also runs her own working ranch and brings a no-nonsense sensibility to the retreats. Janice’s string of horses are not the well-worn animals, hardened of mind and body, often found nose-to-tail on commercial trail rides. I was happy to see these horses, all lively, full expressions of the equine race. Janice and her cowboy partner Ron, as well as Margaret’s stunning daughter Jesse, compose a family committed to natural horsemanship methods. These principles formed the basis for our interactions with the horses, both in and out of the saddle.

Before pairing a cowgirl with her horse, Janice studies participants’ bios and experience, adds a liberal dose of Montana Horse Sense (also the name of her horsemanship training business) and a dash of divination to partner each cowgirl with the most appropriate mount. A true retreat in horsemanship, we learn to observe and interpret horse behavior, as well as catch, groom and tack up our horses. In the saddle, instruction is given on the foundation of a balanced seat and soft hands.



TOP LEFT THE WRITER AND FRIEND PAM YOCHER, WHO WAS AWARDED THE COWGIRLS VS. CANCER SCHOLARSHIP THIS YEAR AT BIG SKY YOGA. **TOP RIGHT** MANY YOGA ASANAS (POSES) CAN BE MODIFIED FOR PRACTICE ON HORSEBACK.

For the adventurous among us, the saddles are removed and we ride bareback! I was honored to ride Ron's little reining gelding named KC, jet black save for a tiny white star between his eyes. I approach KC and we breath into one another's nostrils, an equine introduction that satisfies us both. Later, Ron gives us an impressive bridleless riding demonstration on KC.

Big Sky Yoga's retreat structure is a perfect equine introduction for wanna-be-cowgirls or those seeking more experience before considering becoming a horse owner themselves. That said, all levels of riders are welcome and more experienced cowgirls are also catered to. One morning, Margaret, Ron and I headed out to check the trails we would later use as a group, cantering together to the top of a hill overlooking Janice's ranch. Below us, those seeking more instruction polished their skills in the round pen. I casually mentioned that I've always wanted to try gaited horses and, like magic, my next two mounts on the trail are a big, sweet, chocolate paint Tennessee Walking Horse (TWH) gelding named Sundance, and a fiery Palomino TWH gelding named JD. Fun!

Our group trail rides provided an opportunity for each cowgirl to put into practice her newly acquired skills, whether they are riding techniques, yoga mind/body relaxation and mindfulness or simply increased appreciation for our blessings and one another. We ride, sometimes in a line, sometimes side-by-side, in groups and alone—at least with our thoughts. We walk peacefully through streams and pass through grasses that tower over us. We trot with a joie de vivre along gorgeous riverbanks and canter freely through woodlands; each pair of two creatures moving as one. Though we depart Montana and Big Sky Yoga soon thereafter, we take home with us bolstered confidence and compassion to support us in our daily endeavors, treasured memories of new friends, both two- and four-legged, and a promise to ourselves to begin planning for our next cowgirl adventure!

Check out Big Sky Yoga at: bigskyogaretreats.com
For your photography needs in and out of the saddle, contact Montana Photographer Larry Stanley Photography: montana-photographer.com



Cowgirls vs. Cancer *Healing with horses and yoga.*

Through Cowgirls vs. Cancer, Big Sky Yoga provides Cowgirl Yoga Retreat scholarships to yoginis who have experienced the physical, emotional and financial hardships of breast cancer. In 2011, the second year of the program, Big Sky Yoga hosted four cancer survivors in Montana on Cowgirl Yoga retreats. These healing and rejuvenating retreats provide something positive to look forward to and help the cancer kickin' cowgirls to regain an internal sense of peace and balance. Through current fundraising efforts, Big Sky Yoga is hoping to award all-expenses-paid retreats to several breast cancer survivors every year, in part through purchases of custom Cowgirl tees (click on the Cowgirls vs. Cancer link on Big Sky Yoga's website: www.bigskyogaretreats.com). These tissue weight, body-hugging tees are super soft but also sexy! Yeehaw & Namasté!



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