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Wealthy City Dwellers Seek Refuge From Coronavirus at Remote Ranches

Urbanites are riding out the pandemic in shared ranch communities in low-density states like Montana, Wyoming and Utah, despite pleas from local and state officials to stay away

By Amy Gamerman

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When Mark and Jenny Mummert heard about the coronavirus pandemic, they cut short their vacation in Cabo San Lucas, flew home to Atlanta to pick up one daughter and their two dogs, and chartered a flight to Ulery's Lakes—a gated community at the Moonlight Basin resort in Big Sky, Mont., where they bought 23 acres for \$975,000 in 2014.

“We are holed up in our little guest house,” said Mr. Mummert, 50, CEO of Arco Design/Build, a construction company. They arrived in March. “We flew out here with no return flight. We are not going back until this is over.”

Urbanites who own homes in shared ranch communities in sparsely populated states such as Montana, Wyoming and Utah have settled in to ride out the pandemic, convinced that they will be better insulated there from the threat of the new coronavirus.

But western state and town officials, local residents and even

managers of some resort communities are discouraging more from coming, concerned that small regional medical centers are not equipped for an influx of critically ill patients.



Sleeping quarters in the Mummerts' guesthouse, a 3,600-square-foot barn-style home on 23 acres in Ulery's Lakes, at Montana's Moonlight Basin resort. PHOTO: JANIE OSBORNE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“We're a mountain community of less than 3,000 people. If all of a sudden we have a rise in our Covid-19 cases, it has the potential to overwhelm our local hospital,” said Candace Carr Strauss, CEO of Big Sky Chamber, a non-profit local advocacy group for the unincorporated community, which is home to several large residential resorts. “We are not encouraging people to come at this time, for everyone's health and safety.”



Mark Mummert. PHOTO: JANIE OSBORNE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Big Sky is partially in Gallatin County, which has about 36% of the state's 332 confirmed cases, more than any other county.

Big Sky's Yellowstone Club, where list prices start at \$3.85 million for an undeveloped half-acre lot, emailed its members in mid-March—the peak of its ski season—asking them to stay away. Many members were already there. The slopes are closed along with all club amenities, except one restaurant offering curbside pickup.

“We discouraged new members from coming,” said Krista Traxler, director of marketing for the Yellowstone Club, who said about 15% of club members are in residence.

Gallatin County’s Big Sky Medical Center, the closest hospital to the Yellowstone Club, Moonlight Basin and Spanish Peaks Mountain Club, another resort community, has only four beds. The other option—Bozeman Health Deaconess Hospital, with 83 beds—is an hour’s drive away.

Christopher Coburn, public information officer for Bozeman Health, the integrated health-care system that oversees both medical facilities, said one person is hospitalized for Covid-19, but would not disclose where this person is being treated or where they are from.

“Due to patient privacy concerns, we can’t comment on the residency of the patients,” Mr. Coburn said, adding that Bozeman Health plans to “significantly increase capacity” at both hospitals for a potential surge in cases.



A home at the Yellowstone Club, an exclusive ski community in Big Sky, Mont., where undeveloped lots are priced from \$3.85 million.

PHOTO: TONY DEMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Meanwhile, the local rumor mill has been working overtime.

“I’ve got homes that are empty right now that I’m not touching—I’m leaving them dirty because I am worried that someone may have brought [Covid-19],” said Barbara Van Erp, 58, a property manager whose HC Services maintains 23 vacation homes for out-of-state owners in Big Sky and Moonlight Basin. “One of my clients has a cleaning person who self-quarantined after hearing that someone she cleaned for had dinner with someone at the Yellowstone Club who later came down with the virus.” Ms. Traxler declined to say whether any club members had developed coronavirus symptoms.

On March 26, Montana Governor Steve Bullock issued a stay-at-home order. “People were still having small gatherings until they did the shelter-in-place thing—I never thought it would happen here. We were supposed to have people over to dinner, but we canceled,” Mr. Mummert said.

Gov. Bullock has since ordered out-of-state visitors to self-quarantine for 14 days.

Jim Taylor, 74, a principal director of Hall and Hall, a ranch brokerage firm, and his wife, Anne Kent Taylor, 72, who has a travel consultancy, have been hunkered down since late March at their 5,000 - square - foot vacation home at Sun West, a 2,000-acre ranch community on the Madison River near Ennis, Mont.

The Taylors, who live year-round in Billings, built the Sun West home for about \$2 million in 2008. The ranch community on the Madison River has 21



Sun West, a 2,000-acre ranch community on Montana’s Madison River, has its own equestrian center (lower right.) PHOTO: RYAN DAY THOMPSON

families and few shared facilities.

“When you’re in town, you’re stuck in a house—you can basically walk up and down the street and that’s it. We’ve got our horses here and 2,000 acres to walk around on and ride on—it just seemed like the place to be,” Mr. Taylor said.

Soon after their arrival, the couple learned that their 45-year-old daughter, who Ms. Taylor had just visited in Chicago, had been diagnosed with Covid-19. The Taylors voluntarily quarantined themselves in their 5,000-square-foot home for 14 days, although they continued to hike and horseback ride. (Neither developed symptoms.) “Nobody is having anybody over for dinner or anything like that—we are very strict with ourselves,” said Mr. Taylor. And while the local medical facility is



A view of the mountains from Sun West in Montana. PHOTO: RYAN DAY THOMPSON



Cabin homes at Victory Ranch a 6,700-acre preserve outside Park City, Utah, are priced from \$2.395 million.
PHOTO: JASON SPETH

“excellent to a point,” he said “I would likely get airlifted to Billings if it got bad.”

More than 200 members and their guests have flocked to Victory Ranch, a 6,700-acre preserve a 30-minute drive from Park City, Utah, where cabins finished in local moss stone and decked out with high-end kitchen appliances are priced from \$2.395 million.

“We have hundreds of members lingering in what would be our off-season—a lot have brought friends and family to stay with them,” said Michael Bratcher, Victory Ranch’s chief operating officer and general manager. He has asked them to check in and register their guests. One home-

owner is hosting 13 people. Although the club has scaled back amenities and services, it is delivering groceries to members’ cabins, offering curbside pickup from its restaurants, and lending out bikes and helmets, and disinfecting them after each use.

Jason Lee, 46, a Chicago technology consultant who is an

owner and investor in Victory Ranch, was there for a ski weekend with his family on March 20, when Illinois’s stay-at-home order took effect. Instead of returning to “We decided being at a ranch community in the west was very much a social-distancing measure,” said Mr. Lee, who has yet to build a home on the 4-acre parcel he purchased with



VICTORY RANCH



The interior of a cabin at Victory Ranch. PHOTO: JASON SPETH

his brother in 2017 for \$450,000.

As of April 8, Wyoming is the only state without a Covid-19 fatality. Some out-of-state families have decamped to their homes at 3 Creek Ranch, a private golf and fly-fishing community in Jackson, Wy., where a five-bedroom home is listed for \$16.495 million.

Although Governor Mark Gordon hasn't issued a stay-at-home order, the town of Jackson has done so. One 3 Creek owner, who asked not to be named, left his home in New York City for his compound there in mid-March. He has limited his social interactions to trips to the supermarket.

"They're out of paper towels and soy milk and now frozen pizzas," he said. "If you wanted to buy frozen pizza, it was some brand you never heard of."