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Next Level Bliss in Vermejo, New Mexico

A GREAT RANCH EXPERIENCE EXPANDS YOUR MIND, REVEALING A SUBTLER TRUTH, THE INNER MONOLOGUE SEMINAL TO EVERY ONE OF US.

By Si Si Penaloza





Vermejo thrives as a diplomatic beacon to travelers looking to explore America's working ranch heritage. After acquiring three parcels totaling more than a million acres, media-mogul Ted Turner has transformed northern New Mexico into a playground for sporting and nature enthusiasts whose patronage supports ambitious conservation efforts. With Vermejo, Turner achieves the best of philanthropic humanism: polytheistic, generous,

endlessly open to transformation.

Vermejo thrives over nearly 600,000 spectacular acres, encompassing vast stretches of prairie — at 6,500 feet — to snow-capped peaks at 13,000 feet. From Park Plateau in the Raton Basin through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, meet the largest privately owned single property in the country. Vermejo embodies the genre-defying resorts we are starting to see in the luxury space, the handful of global properties that simply confound catego-



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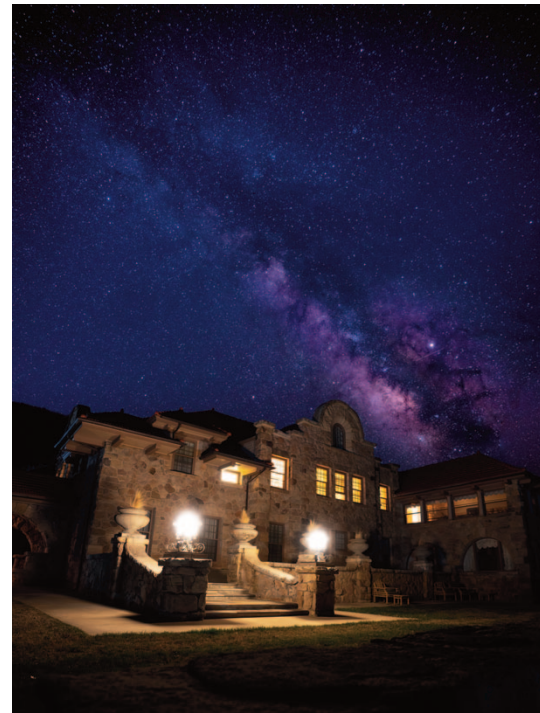
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rization. The reserve operates at a staggeringly high level, yet still feels raw and rugged.

As I walk beneath the ponderosa pines, fresh air swells sweetly in my lungs. Little wonder Vermejo was born of a father's love for his child. Chicago business magnate William H. Bartlett first looked into the property when his namesake younger son developed tuberculosis. In 1898, his doctor prescribed the dry air and sunshine



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"AN ARCHITECTURAL JEWEL SET IN A NATIONAL TREASURE, CASA GRANDE EXEMPLIFIES HOW RICHLY LANDSCAPE AND HISTORY INTERTWINE, HOW DEEPLY A SENSE OF PLACE CAN FIRE THE IMAGINATION."



"...THE 25,000-SQUARE-FOOT MANSION WAS GUIDED BY TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE PROPERTY IN ITS PRIME."

of the American Southwest. Built at the dawn of the 20th century, Casa Grande was constructed by Joseph Lyman Silsbee (a mentor to Frank Lloyd Wright) as Bartlett's private sanctuary. In 1926, *Los Angeles Times* baron Harry Chandler bought the property; his new Vermejo Park Club drew the likes of Cecil B. DeMille, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and President Herbert Hoover. On my first night in the grand ballroom, it was easy to imagine Fairbanks kicking back with a chilled Manhattan, as rutting elk battle just beyond the bricks and mortar.

Once in a generation, the stars align — Turner purchased Vermejo in 1996, with an emphasis on managing wildlife. Land banking requires foresight and fiscal stamina; had the billionaire cowboy conservationist not prevailed, think glorious alpine tundra chopped up and sold. After enjoying Casa Grande as a private residence for a few seasons, he opened it to hotel guests. Turner's renovation of the 25,000-square-foot mansion was guided by turn-of-the-century photo-

graphs of the property in its prime, meticulously retaining the seven-bedroom home's original Victorian ambiance. An architectural jewel set in a national treasure, Casa Grande exemplifies how richly landscape and history intertwine, how deeply a sense of place can fire the imagination.

Fly fishing for native Rio Grande cutthroat trout inspired my pilgrimage here, following in the footsteps of a century of anglers who ventured to Vermejo to catch this elusive species. This "private national park" sets the gold standard — a world-class trout fishery across 30 miles of vodka clear streams and 19 fishable alpine lakes. Lead Fishing Guide Sam Hirt drives us out to a particularly spellbinding stretch of stream. My Ito Tenkara fly rod is perfectly suited to this terrain. As I make my first series of tight, aerodynamic loops, I'm hypnotized by the mineral-rich waters, as if the stones themselves may speak. The hubristic spoils of this fly-fishing Narnia make it easy to embody the angler you wish to be. Mellifluous and mischievous at once, Sam dexterously ties flies while speaking watercolor casting prose, infusing intricate technical tips with playful banter. I finally spy a svelte cutthroat in a seam of current, near impossible without Costa's copper silver mirror polarized sunglasses. A sudden shiver vibrates up the line, I set the hook and net a 12-inch beauty. Releasing it back to the river releases feel-good endorphins of the highest order.

By dusk, I'm off on a guided game drive with Tricia Rossettie, Lead Wildlife Biologist, through a living Smithsonian diorama aboard a safari-style ATV. Fifteen minutes in, we spot



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a bear cub bumbling down the meadow; moments later, a massive herd of bison emerges from the treeline. My heart swells at the sheer sight, saber-tooth butterflies somersaulting in my chest. Rossettie's ravishing tales of species reintroduction, her remarkable ability to interpret a new world of frontier sights and sounds, is an absolute rush. You're in the hands of a companion who is gracious, curious, and above all kind. As we're passed by thundering antelope, the night evolves into a heady mix of scholarship and



“On the culinary front, Executive Chef Giovanni Lanzante is a virtuoso of robust modern American specialties, crafted with locally sourced seasonal ingredients.”

mischievous, epiphany and existentialism, precisely the contrast that gives each encounter its gravitas.

At sunrise the next day, I'm in awe of the all-female run Vermejo stables. Misty King uses her vast experience to help both novice and advanced riders deepen their horsemanship. Within a few hours, I spark up a true rapport with Red, a frisky sweetheart of a thoroughbred. King's trailside anecdote of putting herself through school by selling homemade peach pecan pies is pure oxygen for the soul. We scale a steep ridge to a promontory offering a bird's eye view of the land; it's here on horseback that I witness the prairie below in perfect vegetative order. Subliminally, I had perceived the intrinsic harmony surrounding me, but had yet to verify this with my own eyes.

On the culinary front, Executive Chef Giovanni Lanzante is a virtuoso of robust modern American



specialties, crafted with locally sourced seasonal ingredients. Vermejo loyalists favor his elk and bison steaks sizzling on hot stones, paired with squash and kale from the kitchen's onsite garden. After a day in the saddle, recovery proteins in the form of warm trout salsa served over smoldering juniper chips deliver a smoky flavor and euphoria specific to this place.

Jade McBride, Managing Director of Ted Turner Reserves, has certainly succeeded in building a team spirit that cultivates and retains top talent. Vermejo's renowned team culture and the phenomenal guest experience are really just two sides of the same coin. Embedded in the ranch's core values: putting people first and pursuing excellence with integrity. The staff here rises to a guest's most whimsical requests — from a surprise proposal picnic by hot air balloon to a pillow fort of epic proportions for a pair of ram-bunctious twins. After a week of unwinding at Vermejo, your heart will swell in ways you cannot fathom. Such kindred places don't reveal full character all at once; like human love or a memorable bottle of Beaujolais, they blossom over time. ❖

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