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Outfitting and dude ranch big business in Montana

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(Photo: Courtesy Photo)

It's not unusual for tourism-related businesses to combine services, such as the dude ranch stays, pack trips and guided hunting trips offered by JJJ Wilderness Ranch out of Augusta, said Norma Nickerson, director of the Institute for Tourism & Recreation Research at the University of Montana.

Providing a blend of related offerings, which all revolve at least partly on providing horses for riding and pack trips, "allows such businesses to be a little less seasonal," she said. "They also get a different clientele in the summer enjoying dude ranch activities or scenic pack trips than those who might relish hunting trips in the fall."

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Those sorts of services – dude ranches, pack trips and outfitter-guided hunts – are common throughout Montana and contribute a lot to state and local economies, Nickerson said.

Overall Montana, a state of 1 million residents, experienced 12.3 million travelers from out of state in 2016, according to ITRR surveys. Those visitors spent an estimated \$3.5 billion in the state last year and directly supported some 38,300 jobs, up to 52,630 jobs counting a ripple effect.

Outfitting business 'robust'

The bureau study projected that out of state visitors spent about \$268 million on outfitter and guide services alone in Montana in 2015, or about 7 percent of the total. Such travelers dropped \$18.4 million on outfitters and guides in the 13-county Central Montana tourism region, which includes Cascade County, or about 4 percent of their total spending.

"Our business is robust," said Mac Minard, executive director of the Montana Outfitters & Guides Association. "We ranked sixth in the category of spending by nonresident travelers to Montana, a category topped by fuel; restaurants and bars; retail sales; lodging, and groceries and snacks. And nobody comes to Montana just to drive, eat and drink and stay in motels. Outfitter and guide led trips are one of the main drivers bringing tourists to the Big Sky State."

There are about 550 active licensed outfitters in Montana, split between hunting and fishing roles, with some doing both, he said. They employ an estimated 1,600 seasonal guides, with many of those spending the rest of the year in such roles as teachers, college students and even winter ski instructors.

Outfitters do not have to be licensed for other increasingly popular roles, such as leading hiking trips, trail rides and tours of national parks, Minard said.

It's hard to give a typical price that outfitters charge, he said, since they provide a whole range of services and fees that can vary by the number of days in a trip, how fancy the services provided are and whether the guests are responsible for lining up their own lodging and meals.

But in general, guided Montana elk hunts can vary from \$2,500 to \$18,000 a person per week, while anglers might pay from \$2,500 to \$7,000 for a week's guided fishing.

Chinese Wall a goal for some Montanans

A vast majority of sportsmen taking part on guided hunting and fishing trips are not Montana residents, but there is some growing interest by Montanans in related trips, Minard said.

"Most Montana hunters and fishermen figure they are knowledgeable and equipped well enough to take care of their own trips," he said. "But there some Montanans who seek help to fulfill a bucket list goal, such as taking a pack trip to the Chinese Wall in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area, because figure they don't have the horses or background knowledge to do it themselves."

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The small towns located near the mountains, rivers and forests that draw outfitted pack trips or dude ranch stays benefit greatly from those services, Minard said.

"There's hardly a business in towns like Augusta that doesn't benefit from outfitters and dude ranches, which buy most of their supplies locally and hire seasonal wranglers, house keepers and other workers," he said. "And the tourists stop in town for fuel, groceries, burgers and beer and maybe a peak at an art gallery or T-shirt shop."

Dude ranch stays provide western flavor

The state tourism institute does not have current research available about the economic impact of Montana's dude ranches.



Pam Gosink, executive director of the Montana Dude Ranch Association, said visitors come to capture some western flavor. (Photo: Courtesy Photo)

But Pam Gosink, executive director of the Montana Dude Ranch Association estimates it to be well over \$13.7 million a year, for the association's 19 guest ranch members. She bases her calculation on a survey by the national dude ranch association that showed Montana dude ranches averaged nearly 300 guest per year, paying an average weekly rate of \$2,434 to capture some of the cowboy flavor of Montana.

In addition, there are another 54 guest ranches listed on the state of Montana's Visit Montana website that are not members of the Dude Ranch Association, Gosink noted. If they were factored in the \$13.7 million estimate of the economic impact would be considerably greater, she said.

Weekly fees for dude ranches range from about \$1,800 to \$4,400 per adult for a six- or seven-night stay, she said.

The Montana Dude Ranches Association classifies its 19 member ranches into three categories:

- Five working dude ranches in which some of the activities center around experience as a cowboy, such as helping with a cattle drive or roundup or doing ranch work such as checking fences or making sure the livestock has water.
- Eleven dude ranches that offer horseback riding, but have other recreational activities, such as fly fishing, guided hikes, rafting and campfires.
- Three resort dude ranches that offer western activities with higher-end amenities and experiences.

Operating dude ranches can help working ranchers diversify their operations, Gosink said.

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