

Wild horses roam freely across Vermejo's sprawling grounds



H O M E O N T H E R A N G E

On a spectacularly untamed stretch of land nearly the size of Luxembourg, Vermejo is a quintessential American retreat with an eye to the future. By Ann Abel

For decades now, media-mogul-turned-philanthropist Ted Turner has been one of the biggest private landowners in the United States. At first, his ranches in the American West – he once set out a goal of owning land from the Canadian border to the Mexican one – were private playgrounds for his family and friends. Eventually he opened some of them

as hunting and fishing lodges, to fund his research and conservation work.

And then, in 2016, Turner shifted to ecotourism, creating an offering that would appeal to all sorts of nature lovers, not only sportsmen. I was at his flagship, Vermejo, a Ted Turner Reserve, for the splashy launch of Casa Grande, a multimillion-dollar renovation of the early-20th-century estate

house. The opulent architecture matched the scale and majesty of the Vermejo estate, which spans 2,367 jaw-dropping square kilometres in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

“Ecotourism is on the rise all over the world,” he told me at the time. “Everybody is interested in the planet. It’s the most interesting thing we experience in our >



Clockwise from top left: fly-fishing in one of the area's 19 fishable lakes; the reserve's Costilla Fishing Lodge, and the snowcapped Sangre de Cristo mountains beyond; a suite at Casa Grande, once Ted Turner's private quarters; an up-close encounter with the American bison



lifetime. We don't know if there's life on any other planet. If there is, we're not going to see it in my lifetime. This is all we've got. We might as well enjoy it."

The funny thing was, for all the grandeur of that house, the guest experience was more along the lines of a scrappy dude ranch. Staff and guests ate from the same buffets. Trophy heads hung on the walls, and people were buying bottled water by the pound. Early guest feedback was not good.

And so, they brought in the new managing director, Jade McBride, formerly of The Ranch at Rock Creek in Montana and Amangiri in Utah, putting him in charge of elevating and eco-fying the experience.

What a transformation it's been. As of last year, all the accommodations had been renovated, most of the trophy heads were gone, and single-use plastics were absent. When I visited again in May, the guest experience, service and dining were on par with any luxe ranch in the American West.

Whip-smart guides lead guests on archery expeditions and horseback rides, while mountain biologists and conservation specialists lead morning game drives to view bison and other wildlife. Best of all, there's no one else there. If you're in Yellowstone, there can be 50 vehicles looking at one buffalo. At Vermejo, you get 50 bison all to yourself.

The bison are a particular draw, as Turner has had a longstanding fascination with them. He brought them back from near extinction, starting nearly 40 years ago with just three at Vermejo. Now, says McBride, they aim to manage the herd to around 1,400. In addition to being interesting to look at, they reproduce quickly and are considered a sustainable food source – in evidence not only at Vermejo, but also across the other Ted Turner Reserves and Turner Ranches as well as his Ted's Montana Grill restaurants.

The commitment to conservation goes further than resuscitating one species and localising the supply chain. Between

Vermejo and two ranches in southern New Mexico, Turner owns about 4,451 square kilometres of the state and 8,094 square kilometres across the US. The land is almost entirely under conservation management and is the cherry on top of his philanthropic and sustainability work, including the Turner Endangered Species Fund, the Turner Foundation and the United Nations Foundation, which he created in 1997 with a \$1 billion donation and which put forth the Sustainable Development Goals that the travel industry is now abuzz about.

In his 80s today, Turner's thoughts have turned to his legacy. The move into ecotourism wasn't so much a business decision as a pragmatic one. "The estate plan calls for the donation of the land to a charitable organisation for conservation science work and sharing that knowledge with the world," says McBride. That status hinges on sharing it not only with scientists (like the state's forestry service, which is using research done at Vermejo) but also with anyone who wants to make the trip to New Mexico to see it. If that's what it takes to regenerate the land, then everyone wins. Maybe the bumper stickers on the ranch vehicles say it best: Save Everything. vermejo.com ↪

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: AMANDA HOWELL, KIRK EDWARD GITTINGS, JEN JUDGE, SEAN FITZGERALD