

Rockefeller Rustic

BIG SKIES, BIG MOUNTAINS AND LIMITED RESIDENTIAL OPPORTUNITY—
JUST 42 HOMES!—MAKE MONTANA'S LATEST UPSCALE DEVELOPMENT,
THE KOOTENAI, AN HONEST-TO-GOODNESS LUXURY.

By Elizabeth Exline

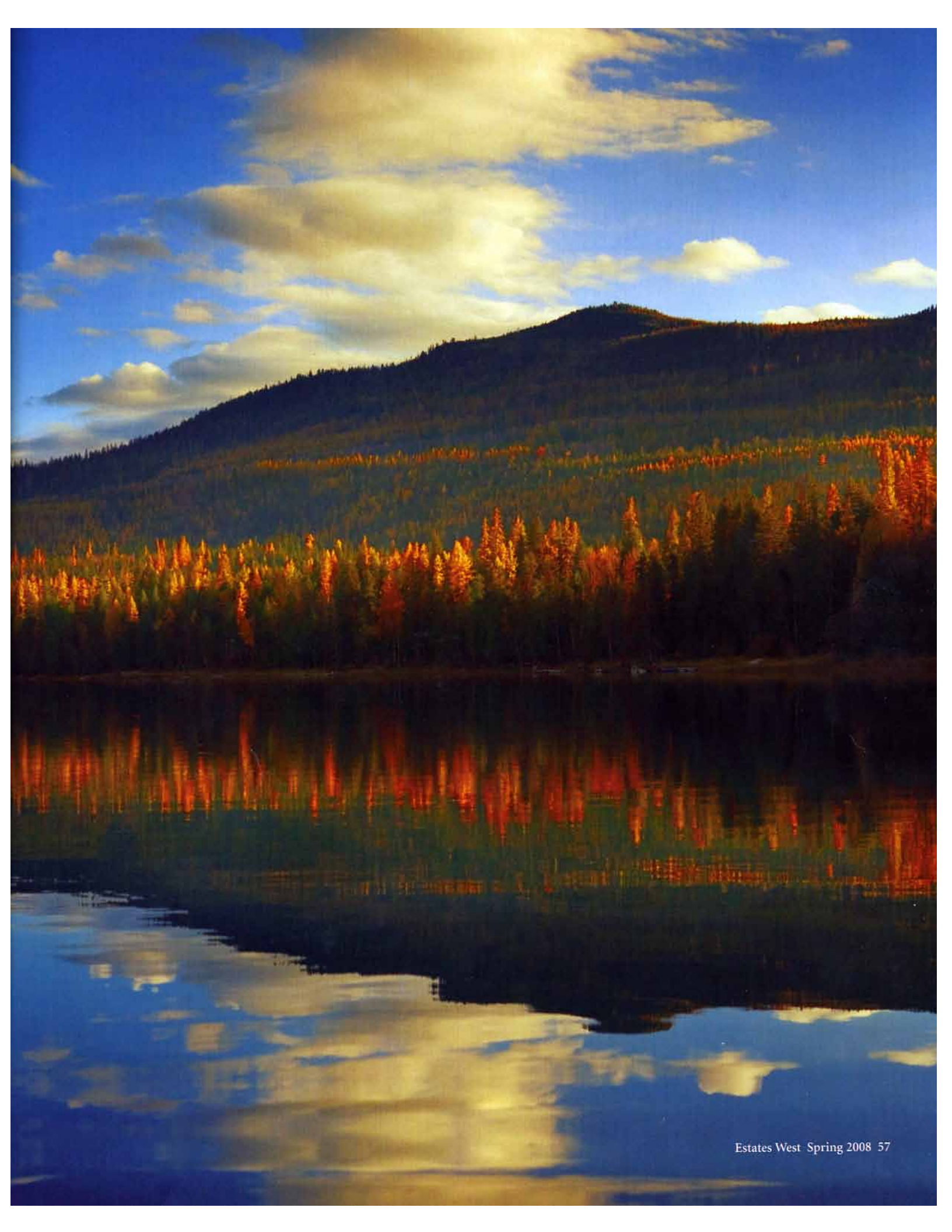


WITH ELEGANT CABIN HOMES, the 14,000-sq.-ft. Kootenai Lodge and every amenity one would expect from a contemporary resort, The Kootenai—at first blush—belies its history. Its comprehensive indulgence in today's residential demands makes it seem like it was tailor-made for modern homeowners. But look a little closer, and you'll see that its history is everywhere. In fact, The Kootenai's ghosts inform practically every last nook and cranny of its current incarnation.

The development's roots stretch back to 1906, when the Anaconda Copper Company's Lewis Orvis Evans and

Cornelius Kelley purchased 2,700 acres of land near Bigfork, Mont. The duo developed a summer retreat within their acreage, crowning it in 1919 with a hunting lodge designed by architect Kirtland Cutter. Theirs was an idyllic spot, especially as one of The Kootenai's three principals and partners, Jerry Peisach, paints it. "Polo ponies, women [with] parasols, kids gamboling on a large lawn playing croquet," he says. "It was just a very elegant, special, private enclave for, quite frankly, the aristocracy at the turn of the century here in the West."

Despite its auspicious start, the retreat didn't age well. In time, the buildings fell into disrepair; the land was sold off;





MOVING IN In total, The Kootenai will consist of 11 restored and updated cabins, as well as 31 new homes built in a similar architectural style. (Each home includes four to five bedrooms and ranges between 3,800 and 6,300 square feet.) As of press time, one residence has been sold, and five were due for completion this summer. Prices range from \$2 million (unfurnished) to \$7 million. 406.837.3000, WWW.THEKOOTENAI.COM





and all that remained of that glamorous Western enclave were 42 acres of relatively level ground populated by crumbling structures and stately, centuries-old trees.

But hope had moved in across Swan River. Paul Milhous, a businessman with experience in acquisitions and development, and his Montana-born wife built a home for their family in a comfortable spot overlooking The Kootenai. For 15 years, Milhous watched as the property declined; and to hear him talk about it, he lamented every rotted log. “I think I should’ve been born from 1900 to 1930,” he says. “That’s my era...So it was really my passion when I came in here to restore it back as good as it was when it was new.”

Milhous fulfilled his promise. In 2005, he and his brother and business partner, Robert Milhous, purchased the property and began its painstaking restoration. “There’s so much ‘me-too’ product,” Peisach observes. “There’s so much stuff that’s trying to create the illusion of reality, but those projects are born out of cornfields somewhere or ex-farmland.” The Kootenai, he contrasts, is

simply an extension of its own lineage, the next generation of residential exclusivity. And that was the vision he and the Milhous brothers abided by, even when it wasn’t financially convenient. “The discussions that we have where there’s a debate between the economics and doing it right—doing it right wins out every time,” Peisach promises.

Peisach and the Milhouses cite an abundance of examples to support this claim. The placement of the homes and roads, for instance, often deferred to the foliage. (“We went to the county and got zoning on one-way streets,” Milhous says. “We saved 176 trees just by doing that.”) Additionally, the 31 newly constructed homes will follow in the tradition of the 11 restored cabins by wearing hardwood floors, rock fireplaces, tall ceilings and expansive decks.

But it’s the Kootenai Lodge that most tested the principals’ commitment. Originally built as a summer haven with large pine logs, wood chinking, cathedral ceilings and mezzanines for after-dinner entertaining, the Lodge was in a sorry state by the time Milhous got to it. “If it had been another 10 years,” he predicts, “it probably would’ve fallen down.”



Instead, Milhous and his partners raised the lodge; hand-dug crawl spaces; installed plumbing, heating and air-conditioning ducts; and poured a new foundation. They documented the placement of the inch-and-a-half-wide, tongue-and-groove maple flooring before taking it up to install the ductwork. Afterward, they replaced the floor exactly as it had been, sanded it and refinished it. All 1,200 windowpanes were sanded and reglazed to preserve the original glass; and even the rock fireplaces, after being dismantled to install new flues and damper systems, were meticulously replaced to stand as they originally did. “If you take a picture of what it was in 1917 when it was built,” Milhous says of the Lodge, “that’s what it looks like today.”

But looks can be deceiving, and The Kootenai’s modern amenities make the property arguably better than what was first built. The Lodge, instead of having six bedrooms around the courtyard, now has a bar, media room, catering kitchen, card room and a sales office that will eventually

become a guest hotel room for The Kootenai’s residents. Concierge services, a museum, a fitness center, a nature center and the expertise of an outdoor recreation director are just a few of the perks Evans and Kelley overlooked but are represented here today. And the residences, built and furnished by the San Francisco-based firm Warren Sheets Design, are fashioned to be as turnkey as possible. The result is 2,400 feet of lake and riverfront property, replete with a white-sand beach, that’s positioned to be enjoyed once again but also, ironically, like never before. **EW**

getting there

Located in Montana’s Flathead Valley, The Kootenai is 15 minutes away from Bigfork and 45 minutes away from Kalispell’s Glacier International Airport.