

MOUNTAIN PARADISE

A sportsman's year-round playground set on about 14,000 acres, Montana's Yellowstone Club redefines the club concept.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY ALLEN AND THE YELLOWSTONE CLUB





THE YELLOWSTONE CLUB IS NICKNAMED “PRIVATE POWDER” FOR THE EPIC SKIING ON THE CLUB’S PRIVATE MOUNTAIN.



The drive from Bozeman, Montana, to the Yellowstone Club takes about an hour, along a meandering road that follows the trophy trout waters of the Gallatin River. The river, the woodlands, and the snow-capped mountain peaks announce this as a sportsman’s dream landscape. Not long after the entrance to Big Sky Resort you reach the gates to the Yellowstone Club. The club’s 13,600 acres aren’t surrounded by fences, but they aren’t needed, given that the club’s security force is staffed by former Secret Service agents.

Overkill? Not when you have a club whose members include some of the world’s wealthiest and highest-profile individuals. “I’ve been around clubs for 50 years,” says Tom Weiskopf, professional golfer, a Yellowstone Club member since 1999, and designer of the club’s 18-hole golf course. “City clubs, private clubs, and golf clubs—but this is the greatest accumulation of members I’ve ever been around. Everything is a private experience and everything you can imagine doing can be done on this piece of property. If you can’t find something to do, you’re not trying.”

The Yellowstone Club pretty much redefines the club concept. The single biggest amenity of the club—the one that has distinguished it from day one—is that it has its own ski mountain. This is a true mountain, not a private ski hill like those you might encounter in New England. Pioneer Mountain is 9,860 feet and offers more than 2,000 skiable acres, which

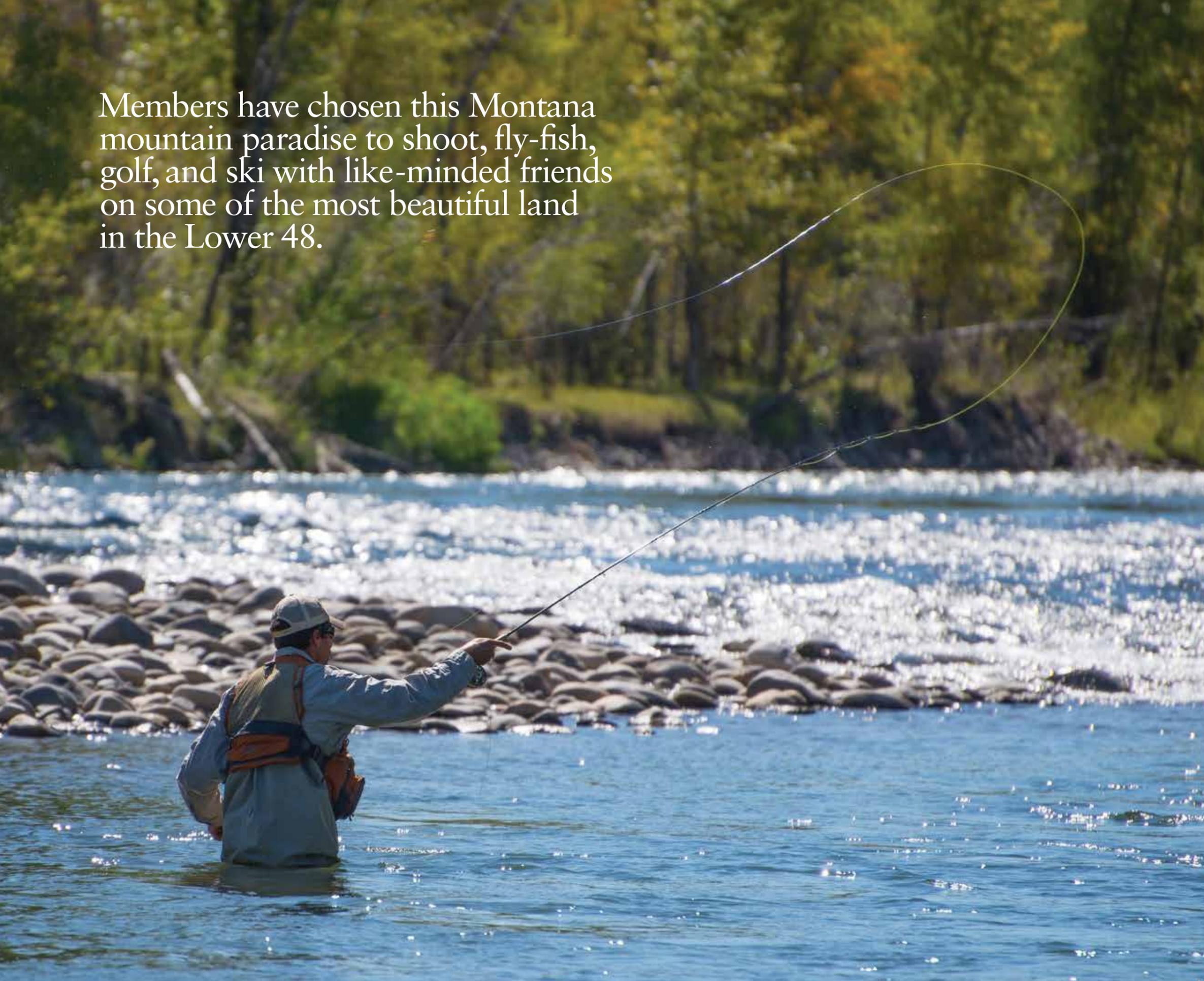
makes it larger than Deer Valley Resort in Utah or Sun Valley in Idaho. The experience of gliding through powder with your best buddy, or carving the corduroy with your kids—accompanied by just a couple dozen other skiers—and doing that all day long and for days on end is the biggest selling point of the Yellowstone Club and why it’s been dubbed “Private Powder.”

Add access to the adjacent 6,000 acres of Big Sky and Moonlight Basin combined, and the deal sweetens considerably for those who love snow and the outdoors. But as at so many Western resorts built on the concept of celebrating winter, there are plenty of Yellowstone Club members who came for the winter but stayed for the summer, as the resort says.

“People here are very like-minded,” says Laurie Weiskopf, wife of the golf legend and a fan of all the club offers in summer. “They are low key and they are here for a good time to enjoy themselves. They check their egos at the gate and come for great days that go on forever. You might have eight or nine wardrobe changes in a day, from horseback riding to skeet shooting to fly-fishing. You really have to schedule your days.”

There are just 460 members—the cap is 864—and while they could clearly join any club anywhere, members have chosen this Montana mountain paradise to shoot, fly-fish, golf, and ski with like-minded friends on some of the most beautiful land in the Lower 48. Not surprisingly, the price of entry is steep. Members must commit to buying or building a home, which can start at

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about \$4 million for a condominium and \$5 million for a private home—but prices often rise well into eight figures. There is a \$300,000 membership deposit, annual club dues of \$36,000, and annual property owners association dues of \$10,000. Only members, their families, and guests have access to the club, with the number of guest days restricted. The idea, at base, is that highly successful people want to play and socialize with other highly successful people. The houses, which can be vast log homes or modern aeries built by brand-name architects, are like compounds within the larger compound of the Yellowstone Club itself.

The Yellowstone Club was founded by lumber baron Tim Blixseth in 1997. He enlisted Weiskopf to build the golf course, courted legendary ski filmmaker Warren Miller to be director of skiing, and hired Olympic skier Hank Kashiwa as a goodwill spokesperson. Blixseth leveraged early members like politician Jack Kemp and cycling champion Greg LeMond to attract new prospects.

Financial troubles during the recession brought Blixseth's ownership to an end and the club defaulted on a \$375 million loan in November 2008. Not long after that, Sam Byrne, a member and the Boston-based owner of the CrossHarbor Capital Partners hedge fund, came to the rescue and bought the club. In the last two years alone, the club has sold nearly \$1 billion in real estate. Byrne has also given the club a new vision and brought a youthful energy, making it even more family oriented.

"Our initial goal when we purchased the Yellowstone Club was to get it back on solid footing. With that goal quickly realized, we've continued expanding the appeal of the club to all ages and all seasons," Byrne says. "Now in our sixth year, real estate sales are up and our membership is growing and trending younger. Summer activities continue to expand and members are spending more time at the club every season. Each year we are releasing new real estate and enhancing our amenities. Our most immediate plans are to complete the construction of our new golf clubhouse and to continue with the creation and expansion of our base village."

The 140,000-square-foot Warren Miller Lodge has become the club's vibrant heart. In summer, "the crowd at the Friday night barbecues can range between three hundred to five hundred guests every week," says General Manager Hans Williamson. "We had a cavernous basement at the lodge that was originally meant to be a ballroom but we rebuilt it, adding a basketball court and theater and calling it 20 Below, restricting it to members' kids twenty and under. But there are lots of big kids at the club, ages forty, fifty, and sixty, so the restriction lasted about five minutes and we opened the doors to everyone. We have huge dodge-ball games and members gather during breaks in the ski day or *après-ski*."

Under Byrne, the club has greatly expanded its summer offerings, adding mountain biking and developing serious shooting opportunities.

"We started trap three years ago, and two years ago we



added skeet shooting,” says Williamson. Noting that the shooting range is above the golf course and offers dramatic views of the Gallatin Mountains, he continues “we plan to add five stand in the next year or so.”

While many bring their own guns, the club has Beretta 12-gauge shotguns available, as well as an instructor, and offers a shooting series throughout the summer by age group. Williamson is especially proud of the club’s 3D archery course, where you can use your own bow or a club-provided Genesis compound bow, and walk through a meadow and encounter “live” Styrofoam targets of elk, deer, and other wildlife. Members rave about it, including Laurie Weiskopf, who says, “Tom and I went out with Sam Byrne and his son on the 3D range and then we went out and bought bows the next day. It’s great. I’ve also taken up skeet shooting and I like to target shoot.”

While hunting is not permitted on the club acreage, Williamson says, “the number of avid hunters among members is growing.” Bird hunting in the eastern part of the state or the adjacent Dakotas is easy to arrange with club-approved outfitters. For example, Dennis Kavanagh owns and runs Montana Bird Hunts and is primarily based around Big Timber, Montana; the club has referred members to that operation (montanabirdhunts.com). You can fly-fish in streams on the property, but most dedicated anglers head for the Gallatin or Yellowstone Rivers, or take a trip to the fabled Madison River. The club

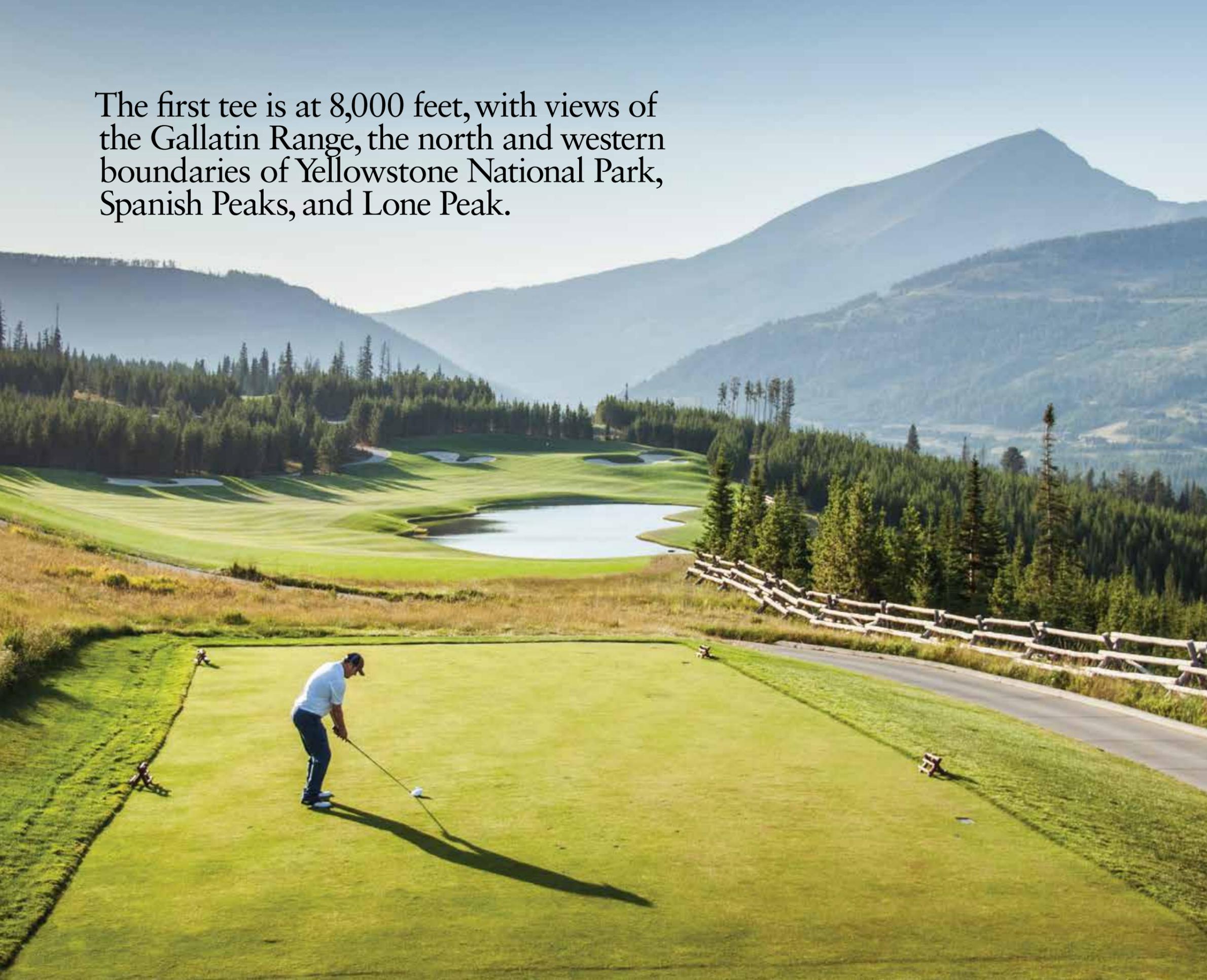
offers a heli-fishing excursion to the Madison, so what would be a two-hour drive each way is a five-minute helicopter flight. The club has a travel concierge who makes all such arrangements, and Geoff Unger Outfitters is a preferred local guide. There’s also the world-class golf course, which was a challenge even for a master like Weiskopf.

“I’ve built 67 golf courses around the world and this was far and away the most difficult site I’ve ever worked on,” he says. “A lot of wetlands infiltrated the property, and there was a lot of rock and bad soil conditions, all on a very tough grade. There are wildlife corridors that were an environmental concern. It took four years of golf course construction, given that in this part of Montana, there are only about four months of construction per year. It was the most challenging site but it was fun because you had to solve problems all the time.”

The first tee is at 8,000 feet, with views of the Gallatin Range, the north and western boundaries of Yellowstone National Park, Spanish Peaks, and Lone Peak. Tom Weiskopf calls it, “an unbelievable setting, with a panoramic view of mountain ranges. When you’re out there, you might see moose, elk, Rocky Mountain goats, black bear, or mule deer. It’s like playing golf in a zoo.”

The social aspect is paramount (even for members with large private homes), and the club’s chef, Rob Waltz, oversees all dining at the Yellowstone Club.

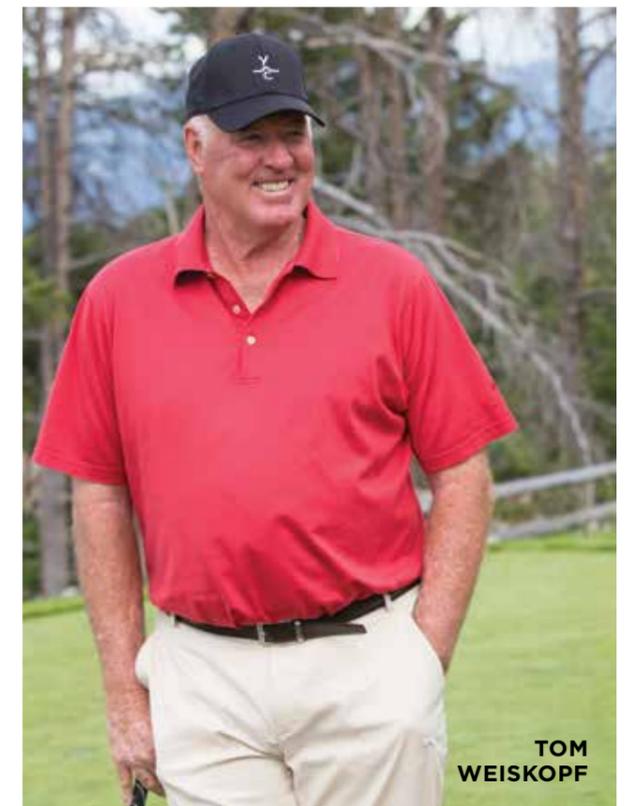
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Apart from the Warren Miller Lodge, members can dine at the recently renovated Rainbow Lodge, which has amazing views of Lone Mountain and is open all day. Timberline Café offers lunch seven days a week during ski season, is available for hosting private events in summer, and offers wine dinners. The Bighorn Barn offers casual lunch and “après-ski” dining seven days a week during summer, and the Camphouse Grill serves at the club’s pool.

“One of the challenges to growth here has been the number of flights in and out of Bozeman,” Williamson acknowledges. “So we’ve been active in increasing commercial flights. We’ve also established Yellowstone Club shuttles that focus on the Northeast corridor, where many members are from. These are 737s that serve Westchester County Airport near New York City and the airport in Bedford, outside of Boston. We’ve also worked to establish a customs office in Bozeman, so the airport accepts international flights, with customs by appointment, which is great for members coming from outside the country.”

Sam Byrne’s vision, says Williamson, is to make the Yellowstone Club a world-class resort. It’s why they’ve added shooting facilities, snowmobiling, and cross-country skiing trails, not to mention lift-accessed mountain bike trails. “A member once said to me that the Yellowstone Club is the one place that in your fifties that you’ll probably meet your next best friend,” Williamson says. “I think that sums up the club pretty well.” 🍷



**TOM
WEISKOPF**