

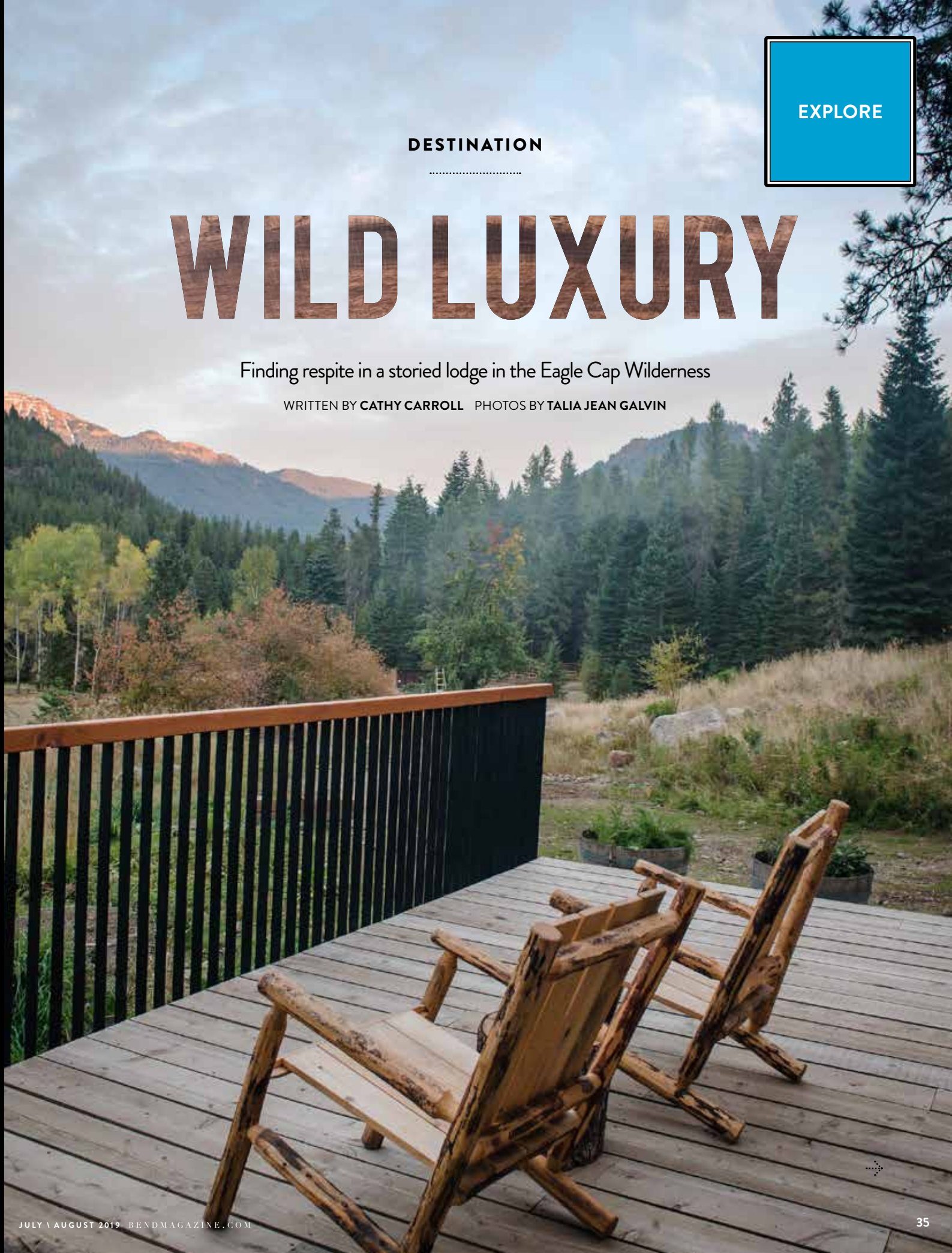
EXPLORE

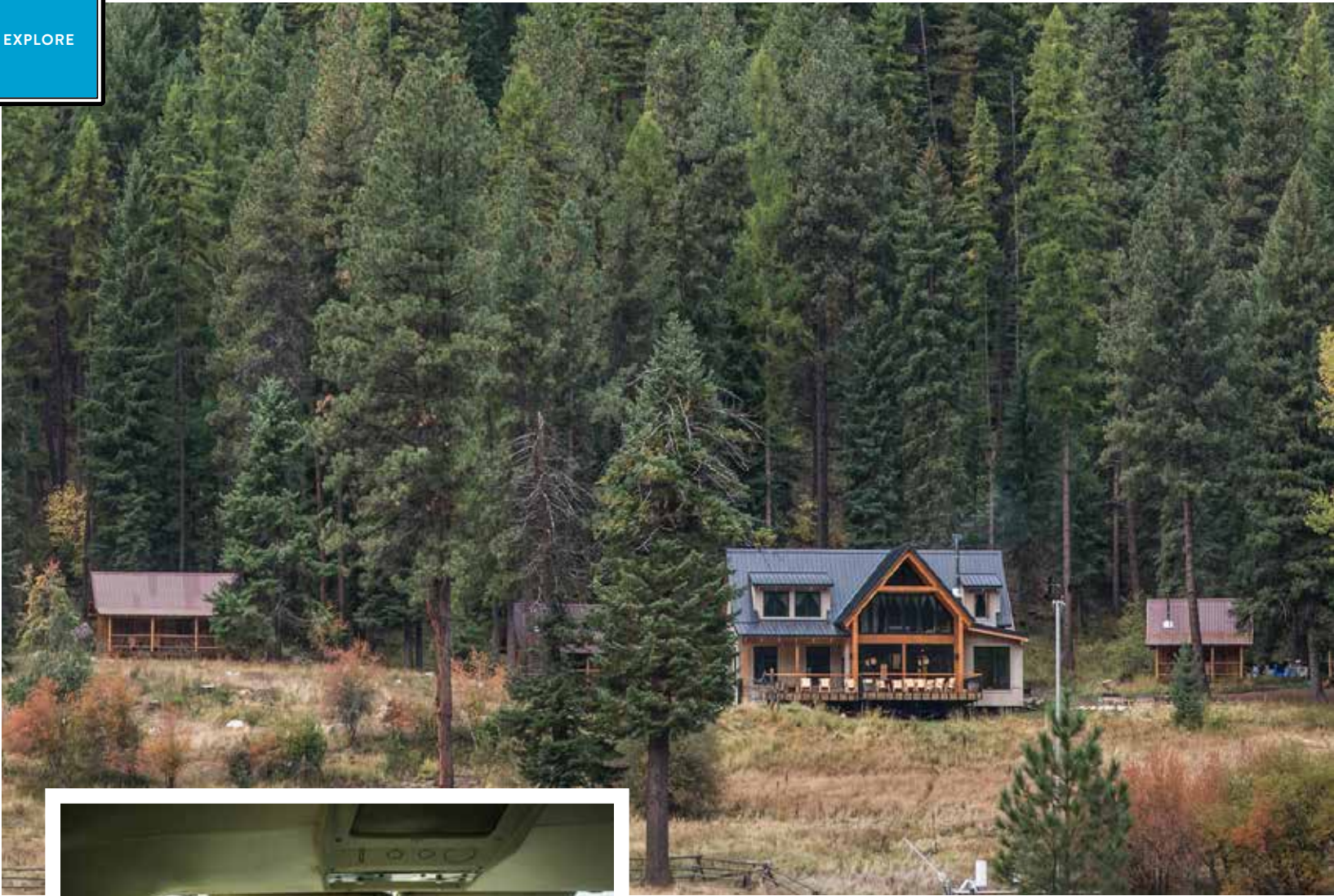
DESTINATION

WILD LUXURY

Finding respite in a storied lodge in the Eagle Cap Wilderness

WRITTEN BY CATHY CARROLL PHOTOS BY TALIA JEAN GALVIN





Joe Spence, piloting his four-seat Cessna, is rhythmically chewing gum, gliding the craft amid dozens of 9,000-foot granite peaks that yield to high ridges—sleeping giants with great, forested fingers reaching down into the glaciated valleys of the Wallowa Mountains in northeastern Oregon. The wild, trout-laden Minam River ribboned through, sparkling in the sun.

Spence has been making the twenty-minute flight west from tiny Enterprise, Oregon, into the Eagle Cap Wilderness for thirty years, a reassuring thought when thick legions of ponderosas, standing at welcoming attention, gesture toward a grassy, bowling-lane-sized airstrip.

Putting the wheels on the ground, Spence’s gum-chewing doesn’t skip a beat as he lands at the Minam River Lodge, which is enjoying a renaissance after it had lay dormant and neglected for a decade.

Its reinvention had been fraught with obstacles so powerful, though rational minds feared the land might be cursed, that natural forces conspired to dash mortal efforts.

The five-foot, four-inch Spence, his hands in his pockets, cocked his head to one side as he strolled a few feet toward three women from the lodge staff, perched on some cut wood, one with a banjo, another with a guitar.

“Winter’s come and gone, a little bird told me so,” the trio sang to him, harmonizing the Gillian Welch tune. “...Been so lonesome, shaking that morning chill.” Quaking aspens added gentle percussion. That’s how people say thank you in this piece of wilderness—and it goes to the heart of how a core group of the staff here drew on timeless skills—from art, agriculture and architecture to country grit, backwoods know-how and well-honed project management, to realize a vision shared by a man with memories, a mission and money—who couldn’t have reopened this place without them.

That sense of love for this place set the stage for me to fall hard for it, too.



LEFT The lodge occupies one of the few pieces of private land in a vast swath of forested wilderness.

RIGHT A multi-year restoration effort forged strong bonds among the staff.



EXPLORE

THE RIGHT STUFF — HARD WORK

It took six years to recreate the last remaining public lodge in the Eagle Cap Wilderness before it opened in May 2017. Owner Barnes Ellis had first discovered it in the late 1980s, while working as a reporter at *The Oregonian*. “I loved the place for its rugged beauty and the romance of living in the wilderness,” said Ellis. “I never forgot it.”

He’d left journalism in the early 1990s and had gone into investing in Portland. In 2009, he’d heard that the lodge was for sale. Two years later, he paid \$605,000, to buy it—a fraction of what he would pay to revive the lodge in an inspired-by-nature style.

He had hundreds of loads of building supplies, from heavy-timber trusses to delicate solar panels, flown in. Workers harvested trees from the lodge’s 126 acres, skidding them across the frozen river, milling lumber on-site, recycling materials from the original structures, hand-building nine guest cabins, a 4,000-square-foot lodge, a house for staff—everything down to curating works of local artists, from historic photos for the walls to handmade ceramic dishes. When they were finally done, they—well, they weren’t.

“They couldn’t leave,” said Ellis. “The place has a certain pull to it. Also, I have a lot of faith in them. We have been through a lot together.”

Ellis and construction superintendent-turned-lodge manager Isaac Trout didn’t seek staff with traditional hospitality resumes. Those best suited to welcoming guests were already there, the hand-picked team that helped build it.

“This place has a certain pull to it. Also, I have a lot of faith in them. We have been through a lot together.”

A CHIEF, THE DUDES AND AN INVESTOR

The Minam River Lodge lies on the edge of Nez Perce ancestral lands, hunting grounds for bighorn sheep and deer, which drew the tribe in 1400 A.D. In the 1870s, Chief Joseph's band of Nez Perce summered and gathered huckleberries here. As the U.S. government drove them out, Joseph gained fame as he called for freedom and equality, futilely. By 1890, settlers were homesteading on the lodge property.

Fur trappers, miners, loggers and ranchers followed. In 1950, Erma and Mert Loree built the original Minam River Lodge, bringing materials over the mountains by mule. The lodge bustled with hunters hungry to hunt black bear and elk in "Mert's Meat Locker." Less than a mile away, Red's Horse Ranch, a local legendary dude ranch, drew silver screen celebrities such as Burt Lancaster as well as carousing cowboys.

Over the years and a succession of owners, the lodge fell into disrepair. When Ellis bought it in 2011, he hadn't seen it in more than a decade. Looking back, he's glad about that. "I would've scared myself out of it," Ellis said. ❖





HOSPITALITY, ORGANICALLY

In the garden outside the lodge, one of the women who'd played guitar and sung to the pilot earlier that afternoon was now cultivating hundreds of organic vegetable plants, from heirloom tomatoes, Swiss chard and lettuces to tender herbs and heart-shaped radishes in a forty-foot-long greenhouse.

The fare travels mere feet to the kitchen of Chef Carl Krause, who's tapped into the terroir. He lays alder wood over smoldering coals, subtly heightening the umami of pork and grass-fed beef from Wallowa family ranches. (He'd gotten an assist when a guest, piloting his own plane, clipped an alder on the landing.) He'll forage for morels between the cabins, or tell guests who hike there to pluck porcinis while en route, so he can incorporate them into fresh pasta dishes.

Krause learned Native Americans would eat the cambium layer of ponderosas and made an extract of the bark's heady, cinnamon-vanilla aromas. It adorns summer peaches and vanilla ice cream and is the signature of the Old Minam bourbon cocktail. Sip one on the lodge deck as the sun slips below the ridge.

The lodge guest book revealed others felt as I did there, be it a family from Switzerland or those who signed, "Happily Close, Joseph, OR." Carrie Brownstein, co-founder of the punk-indie trio Sleater-Kinney and the *Portlandia* cable series, wrote, "Immensely grateful for the reprieve from both city life and the busyness of my own brain. Wonderful company, conversation, food and experience." Another entry simply said, "Best place in Oregon. Possibly, Earth."

GETTING THERE, HIKING AND RIDING

The Minam River Lodge is a rare piece of private land, the only one open to visitors in the Eagle Cap, the state's largest wilderness area, with 359,991 acres. Access it by hiking or on horseback, 8.5 miles, or via small plane.

Minam River Lodge Trail and Hiking Guide by Douglas Lorain details easy strolls and week-long jaunts amid peaks, canyons, four rivers and nearly sixty alpine lakes — all from the lodge porch. Downloadable from MINAM-LODGE.COM

Reserve riding trips from the lodge as far in advance as possible. Details: MINAM-LODGE.COM **13**

