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COWBOYS & INDIANS

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Reba McEntire

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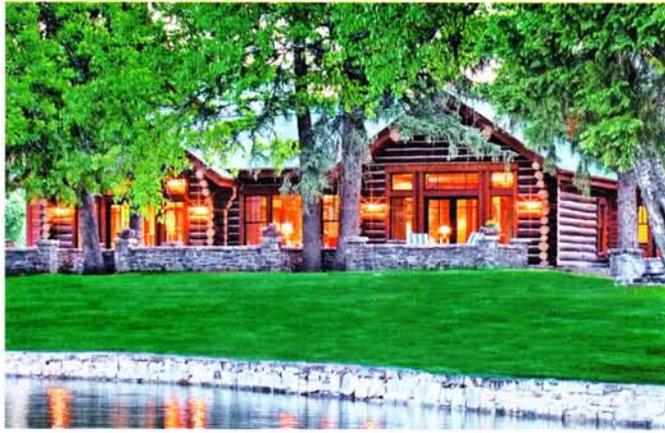
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COTTON EYE FOR THE KOOTENAI

Cue the tribal flute and background chant. Many stories hold that the Kootenai Indians originally lived to the east of the Rockies, on the prairies of the American Plains, but they were driven out either by famine or the Blackfoot tribe. Other tales present them as native to the Great Lakes region of Michigan. Regardless, apart from several bands that have settled in British Columbia, the Kootenai now primarily reside on the Flathead Reservation in Montana, and it's difficult to argue that they could have found a more ideal place to call home. Based on my experiences of both the Eastern Plains and the Northwestern United States, I think perhaps the Kootenai owe thanks to whichever tribe or ailment is to blame.

For those that don't believe me, just take a trip to Montana's Flathead Valley and check into The Kootenai Lodge. This appropriately named 42-acre property is surrounded by the Flathead National Forest and sits between two mountains upon the banks of Swan Lake. The property was discovered by two Anaconda Copper Company executives just more than a century ago. Cornelius "Con" Kelley and Lewis Orvis Evans purchased 2,700 acres, thinking they'd snagged the perfect wilderness getaway. But when Kelley became president and Orvis chief counsel of the company, nicknamed the Copper Kings, they had the means to transform their Northeastern sanctuary into one of the premier elite destinations of the American West. By the Roaring Twenties, Kootenai was playing host to the likes of Will Rogers, Charles Lindbergh, John D. Rockefeller, and Charles Russell.

The main lodge, a rustic masterpiece built by Kirtland Cutter, famed architect of California and the Pacific Northwest, was completely restored in 2006. The 10 remaining historic homes are currently receiving the same restoration treatment, soon to be accompanied by 32 new log cabins—each designed to pay homage to Cutter's original work. Kootenai residents are able to enjoy the nearby quaint art town of Bigfork, outstanding bull trout fishing, Montana's top golf course, 50 miles of backcountry byways, and sailing, canoeing, jet-skiing, and inner-tubing on Swan Lake. Or they can stay in and appreciate the good life, like the Western royalty that first experienced the Kootenai decades before. FYI: 406.837.3000, www.thekootenai.com.

—Jennings Brown