

A wide-angle photograph of a river at sunset. Two people are in a blue inflatable raft in the lower center, fishing. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow and long reflections on the water. The background is filled with silhouettes of evergreen trees. The overall mood is peaceful and nostalgic.

# MIDSTREAM IN MONTANA

YOUR REFLECTION IN THE RIVER LOOKS A LITTLE DIFFERENT  
ON YOUR 50TH BIRTHDAY, BUT WHEN YOU'RE PULLING ON  
TROUT WITH OLD FRIENDS, IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER

By





*As salmon flies hatch in early summer, trout rise to take dries on the Blackfoot River. It's the perfect setting for old friends to reconnect.*

f we're lucky, we get to experience many milestone birthdays. Some are more fun than others. Eighteen and 21 stand out, as the rest ebb toward the reality that we're no longer young bucks who can battle through everything with the resolve of an age-defying vampire.

This past May, I turned 50. A big one for sure, but it wasn't so much the number; it was more about coming to terms with being "old" that was messing with my head. I'm standing midstream in the river of life, gazing at the rocks and riffles below and casually glancing upstream for any fishy spots I may have missed along the way.

Some guys go a little haywire as they wade further into midlife. They may jump into an expensive sports car or start dating a girl half their age. I didn't take that tack, but I did end up with an arm-sleeve tattoo, and I adopted an 80-pound, misunderstood pit bull. I didn't see that coming.

Since rounding 40, birthdays have made me glum. I enjoy celebrating with friends and family, but in silence my mind flip-flops from thoughts of accomplishments to opportunities that slid past and boyhood dreams that went unfulfilled. For 50, I wanted to get out of my own way, plop myself in the middle of a mountain range, hang out with old friends and, of course, catch fish.

I live on a pancake called Florida. The only elevation I get is when I see my dermatologist, whose office is on the fifth floor of a downtown building. The mountains were calling me. I wanted to cast flies for trout and float down rivers as timeless as time itself. But turning 50 is not like turning 30. I didn't want to sleep in a tent. I didn't want to cook my own meals. I wanted to be spoiled — and why not, I've earned it.

**Splurging**

The idea of setting off on a DIY trout adventure sounded appealing, but when I broke it down, that meant I'd have to purchase a couple of new fly rods — I'm a saltwater fly fisherman, and the smallest rod I own is a 7-weight — flies, cold-water fly lines, tippet and more. It would've cost me a few thousand dollars for the necessary gear, not to mention the research needed to find a spot. I didn't have the time or energy for that. Hell, I'm 50. It's OK to let someone else do a little work for me. That's how I stumbled across Paws Up.





*Vin Panecasio, the fly-fishing newbie (bottom left), caught the first trout of the trip and the largest.*



Situated on a 37,000-acre property outside of Missoula, Montana, Paws Up is more than twice the size of Manhattan. The working ranch resort offers private homes of various sizes and safari-style wall tents for accommodations. But the best part is, the place is set up for every type of mountain activity you could think of, from horseback riding to rock climbing.

The plan was to meet my longest-tenured friend, Vin Panecasio, who lives in Las Vegas, and spend as much time outdoors as possible. Vin and I became friends in kindergarten, and we've stayed close for 45 years. We'd also posse up with Dave Hebert, another high school buddy, who moved to Bozeman, Montana, for college and never left.

Before departing, I set a few rules for myself: 1) I would eat whatever the hell I want (I would refer to this rule daily, as Paws Up employs

Michelin-caliber chefs); 2) I would drink whatever the hell I want; and 3) I'd take a digital detox, no social media, no news. That was about it.

We met at the airport in Missoula and were whisked away to the ranch. Our itinerary included two days of fly-fishing, a guided hike and an ATV tour. Upon arrival, all of our expectations were blown away. Every detail at the resort is done to the nines. The decor, the rooms, the restaurants and the staff were all incredible. We even had heated toilet seats in our two-bedroom suite. Fifty wasn't feeling so bad.

### Hitting the River

The Blackfoot River runs through the Paws Up property. Norman Maclean used this river as the setting for his book *A River Runs Through It*. And unlike almost every Mountain West trip I'd ever



*Paws Up is a working ranch resort where guests can live out their dream of being a fly-fishing cowboy.*

been on, river conditions were perfect. Clear water and just the right amount of flow. We were between hatches, but the fishing was steady.

Our 28-year-old guide, Cole Carlson, is infectiously happy and clearly loves his job. Despite rowing the river day after day, he's still astounded by the fish and the scenery. We chatted as we got our fishing licenses, and Cole asked the perfect question: "You guys have any time constraints today?" None at all, let's fish till our arms fall off.

We drove off the property to the upper section of the Blackfoot above the north fork to get in a longer float. "I like to guide this section because you hardly see another boat," Cole says. The beauty of the valley put my mind at ease. It was June, but there was still snow on the mountain peaks in the distance. The air smelled of fir and pine, and a forest ressemblant of Christmas trees clung to the hills. As we approached the put-in, a few salmon flies fluttered about — the river is life.

Vin has never been a die-hard angler. If it weren't for me, he probably wouldn't fish much at all, but he does love it, and I think he loves me for taking him. You couldn't wipe the smile off his face as he flopped his dry fly with a dropper nymph below it upstream and wiggled the rod tip trying to mend the line. He'd never fly-fished, but he caught the first fish of the trip — and the biggest.

Letting the river move us along, I chatted with Cole and did my best to drop my fly in deep pockets along the bank. I miffed the first three bites — the saltwater strip-set is ingrained in my muscle memory. Cole laughed each time and assured me there'd be more fish.

Watching my fly, I saw a trout rise and sip it into its mouth, its red cheeks emerging in a quick flash as the puffy, white pattern disappeared. I lifted the rod tip and made a half-decent trout-set to hook the

15-inch cutbow, a rainbow-cutthroat hybrid. The fish leapt out of the river and flexed into a boomerang against the yellowish-red canyon walls. The scene, the fish, the company — it was pure magic. I even enjoyed catching whitefish, which Cole called Rocky Mountain bonefish. They were quick to pounce on the dropper, and I wasn't complaining.

We floated a 6- or 7-mile section of river. I didn't keep a tally of how many fish we caught, or how many we missed. It didn't matter. My mind and my soul were at ease, and that was the goal. Our daily decisions included choosing which section of river might fish best and whether to have a burger or a steak sandwich for lunch. Nothing more, nothing less.

Our buddy Dave met up with us for our second day on the river. The fishing continued at a steady pace. We each landed cutbows and whitefish, and spotted a few real trophies. Dave is an ace fly-fisherman, and his tips helped us improve our game. As the day wore on, my strip-set disappeared, and my connection rate improved. The weather was cool and dry. I couldn't have asked for a better setting.

That evening, we attended a chuckwagon dinner cooked over an open fire beside the river. A guitar player sang on a small stage, beers flowed freely, and we feasted on cowboy ribeyes that would make Fred Flintstone jealous. I didn't want the trip to end, but I left feeling revived and ready to drift downstream through the next half of life.

I think Maclean said it best in the closing words of his novella: "Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it." 🐟