

Our jeep is sputtering through the dust, trailing a herd of white-rumped pronghorn — an antelope-like creature that is the second-fastest land animal on earth — when a bull bison looms out of the scrub of mesquite. The sheer size of him delivers a primal shock to the senses. The blunt, Paleolithic forehead, the helmet of coarse hair, that formidable hump of bone and muscle, set in iconic silhouette against the stark afternoon light.

A hot wind blows across the desert of southern New Mexico. As we slow, an army of cicada drumroll our approach and the massive head turns. Even at 100 feet, we're closer than he's comfortable with. He blinks a testy eye and snorts. We exit the jeep and he grows visibly irritated, flicking his tail and defecating — "first sign he's getting ready to run," hisses David Barfield, our guide. As I snap the camera, the bison paws at the ground, positively quivering at the prospect of a good fight. "That's it," David says, firing up the engine, "time to go."



A charging bison can outrun a cowboy on a horse. A female will see off a bear. Bison are stubborn and deeply unpredictable. There are 1,500 of them here on Ladder Ranch, 20 miles west of the small town of Truth or Consequences, some of the 50,000 owned by the CNN founder Ted Turner across his US properties. At 245 sq miles, the riparian Ladder is small by Turner's standards. His 15 other ranches include one, the Flying D in Montana, so vast it has its own weather pattern. But then Ted Turner has always thought big.

Best known for founding the first 24/7 cable news channel in 1980, Turner has also won the America's Cup, owned the Atlanta Braves and donated a billion dollars to the UN. He co-founded the Nuclear Threat Initiative and set up the Goodwill Games to promote links between east and west during the cold war. In 2003, however, he stepped down as vice chairman of Time Warner following its disastrous merger with AOL and, forced to redefine his life, increasingly turned his focus to the environment.

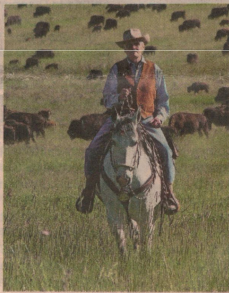
He dedicated his ranches to conservation and became a leading proponent of "rewilding" — using his land to reintroduce and support endangered species that once roamed the western plains. In 2015, he set up Ted Turner Expeditions, an eco-tourism business that would let tourists visit his three New Mexico ranches, learn about his environmental objectives and stay in his houses. "I have too many places to enjoy them all myself," he told local reporters at the launch of the newly refurbished house on his Vermejo Park Ranch last June. "This has really been a wonderful experience, and it gives me something to live for beside cable television."

This is an American safari, but with temperatures nudging 102F in summer, it's a strictly dawn or dusk pursuit. We've been searching for the herd since sun-up, rumbling across hillsides dense with prickly pear, across high mesas and flowing creeks. Every so often we stop to explore — David leading the way, stick in hand, carefully divining for rattlesnakes. We follow, pacing around the ruins of a 19th-century homestead, through the fossil-embedded corridors of narrow slot canyons, under rocky overhangs with walls covered in petroglyphs and from whose sandy floor charred cobs of prehistoric corn can still be unearthed, left over by the Mimbres, indigenous Indians who lived a thou-



The rewilded West

On a mission to save the bison, media mogul Ted Turner has opened his vast ranches to tourists. *Bella Pollen* enjoys an American safari



Above: bison roaming free at Ladder Ranch

Left: Ted Turner at The Flying D Ranch in Montana

Bottom left: cougar biologist Tricia Rossetti working at Ladder Ranch
Kate Russell

sand years ago. Elevation and scenery changes with bewildering speed. Barely an hour later, in a damp forest of ponderosa, David gives me a leg-up into the stilled boughs of a 300-year-old sycamore tree, to better glimpse the seemingly endless panorama.

Ladder Ranch is a conservation party to which all are welcome — a rich and varied habitat for mammals, amphibians, insects and reptiles. Turner employs a medley of biologists passionate about the glorious Frankenstein project of bringing virtually extinct creatures back to life. Focus is currently on the Mexican grey wolf, the Bolson tortoise and the Chiricahua leopard frog. "Cute, huh?" David says mistily, inviting me to admire huge vats of kicking tadpoles.

Bison, though, are the money shot. A few miles along the track from our lone male, we eventually come across a herd of mothers and calves grazing in front of the hazy foothills of the Gila Mountains. It's a profoundly moving sight — as if they'd always been there, as if nothing had ever changed.

Once upon a time — or, as Turner himself puts when I interview him by email, "long before humans made such a mess of things", bison numbered upwards of 35m. Unfenced, unchallenged, they ruled the great plains of North America from the Ice Age to the late 18th century, when the Spanish arrived with their feral horses and thirsty European cattle, bringing seismic changes to the native habitat of the New World. Bison constituted an entire way of life for the Ameri-

can Indian. When the US government was mulling over the vexing problem of how to decimate the native population, elimination of their primary source of survival must have seemed an awfully efficient solution. Destruction of the herds began in 1850. Storybooks have immortalised the exploits of Sherman, Custer and Buffalo Bill, but the heroes of popular culture are often the villains of history's killing fields. Not even the veneer of economic validation — hungry railroad crews, a fashionable beaumont back east eager for fur and leather — could account for the gleeful gratuitousness of the ensuing slaughter. Twenty years on, the bison was all but extinct, paving the way for the advent of that most lucrative of national industries: cattle.

Turner's grand idea is to try to restore something of what's been lost, using the scale of his properties to recreate a 21st-century open range. There's a story Turner tells about growing up in Georgia. As a 10-year-old, he liked to shoot squirrels. When he'd shot all his own, he poached those of his neighbours. After his parents were fined by the courts, he swore that one day he'd amass enough land to hunt wherever he wanted. By the millennium, he'd become the largest private landowner in the US, with 1.9m acres. "I think bison are unique," he tells me, "majestic animals that represent the old American West. When I learnt their population had dwindled to just under 1,000, I vowed that one day I would raise a few of my own."

Turner bought Ladder, an early 18th-century cattle ranch, in 1992. He stripped out the cattle and all the trappings of the business — the power lines, the outbuildings, all 250 miles of



Above: one of the verandas at Ladder Ranch

Below: a mule deer at the ranch, photographed for the FT by Kate Russell

fencing — then he turned his bison loose.

New Mexico has a history of breaking dreamers. It was here that the conquistadors searched for the illusory Seven Cities of Gold. Here, too, where Geronimo sought revenge for the murder of his wife and children. The four-hour drive to Ladder from Santa Fe tracks a more recent but no less brutal culture via the *Breaking Bad* suburbs of Albuquerque to Los Alamos, birthplace of the atomic bomb. The Chihuahuan desert is unforgiving but it is the bison's natural habitat. Blessed with tough stomachs and a slow metabolism, they

In the ranch house's master suite, I feel somewhat Goldilocks-ish sleeping in Turner's four-poster bed

don't strip out the willow that stabilises the banks of the creeks and thus the ecosystem. While cows require inoculating and artificially inseminating, bison are nomadic roamers, "vastly cleverer than cattle," David says, double-looping the chain on one of the property's few gates, "If I don't secure this right, they'll figure out how to open it with their noses."

Gradually Turner proved that bison were not merely a rich man's plaything. The meat of the grass-fed bison was leaner, richer, and hormone-free. From the get-go, demand was high. Bison, it turned out, were twice as profitable as cattle.

A blood orange sun slips into the grasslands as our jeep draws up to the unpretentious five-bedroom ranch house. Turner's shadow is ever-present in the photos and inspirational books in his office. Decor by the actress Jane Fonda, the third of his former wives, is a gently kitsch mix of lace curtains and chenille bedspreads. In the master suite,

where I feel somewhat Goldilocks-ish sleeping in Turner's four-poster bed, walls are painted the dusty pink of apache plume, a native shrub that lines the elk trails. A patterned carpet of tangled rose runs through the attic, giving it a comforting grandparental feel.

As light fades, I check out the nearby cowboy bunkhouse, which sleeps up to nine in funky three-bed rooms. For a family with kids, this has cooler credentials and is stuffed with Victorian miscellany including a pool table scavenged from Hermes, a ghost town on the property. The next hour I spend rocking mindlessly on the porch, sipping whiskey and munching Cheetos (despite the four-course dinner being prepared in the kitchen). Below me, javelinas snuffle under the trees for pecans while the green ribbon of cottonwoods edging Las Animas creek begin to sway and rustle under a blackening sky.

Lightning the next morning puts paid to our proposed hike and picnic. Instead, David takes me to soak in the geothermal hot springs of the historic Sierra Grande Lodge and Spa, a Turner-owned hotel in Truth or Consequences. Later, when the storm clears, I walk far up into the scrubby hills as evening light once again sweeps over the valley. In three days, I feel I've hardly covered a fraction of what's on offer in this extraordinary place.

Packing up my stuff to leave the next day, I pause to study a display cabinet of restored Mimbres pottery in the living room. The bowls have been painstakingly glued back together, fragment by fragment, creating an incomplete and fragile version of what once used to be. A metaphor, perhaps, for what Turner is trying to achieve.

Critics may point out that at a cost of \$3,000 a night for a couple, and with guides taking out a maximum of 10 guests at a time, few people will get to experience Turner's conservation successes first hand. But he has amply demonstrated what can be done for the environment with enough tenacity (and wealth). Having started with a seed stock of 100 head of bison, he is owner of the world's largest private herd. Other ranchers have followed suit. Today, bison is solid, if niche, business.

"I think that as long as there are enough people in this world who care deeply about each other and the environment, we're in pretty good shape," he says. "But the important thing to remember is that we're already behind, and there's still lot of work to be done."

This year he turned 79. "In my absence, everything I've worked for over the many decades will continue to receive the attention they deserve," he insists, professing his confidence in his children and various foundations.

For a man with a huge ego, this is an uncharacteristically humble statement. People tend to be inspired not by foundations but by individuals. When the "Mouth of the South" is gone, conservation in the west will need a new voice. Let's hope it's a loud one.

DETAILS

Bella Pollen was a guest of Ted Turner Expeditions (tedturnerexpeditions.com) at Ladder Ranch. Flights and transfers were provided by Dunton Journeys (duntonjourneys.com). Ladder Ranch is available on an exclusive use basis only; it costs \$3,000 per night for two people, then \$800 for each additional guest, including all activities, excursions and meals