



Take A Trip to Amish Country

From vivid fall colors and satisfying comfort food to farmers markets resplendent with Amish quilts and crafts, learn what Lancaster County, Penn., has to offer.

By Kimberly Button

In this article ...The Landscape of Lancaster Understanding the Amish Lifestyle Retail Adventures: Central Market and The Old Country Store Down-Home Cooking and Country Cuisine Discover What Life was Like at Landis Valley Museum There seems to be increasingly fewer places in this world where it's perfectly acceptable to just slow down and enjoy the simple pleasures of life, such as the goodness of home-cooked food, quiet afternoons spent leisurely tending the gardens or fellowship with family and friends.

Even if you've managed to carve out your own tranquil spot at home, the hustle and bustle of life is sure to intrude on your calm once you leave. Though much of the world seems to be moving at a quick speed nowadays, there's still an entire region where the pace is much slower and where old-fashioned ways are predominant.

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If you're searching for a destination where you can not only recharge your spirit, but also find inspiration for time-honored crafts, mouth-watering comfort food and traditional farming techniques, look no further than Lancaster County, Penn.

The Landscape of Lancaster

Lancaster County is known for its rolling hills and vast farmlands, as well as for its homegrown foods and laid-back lifestyle.

Yet there is one facet of Lancaster County you won't find anywhere else in the world: the oldest Amish community in the United States. With approximately 25,000 Amish living in Lancaster County, also known as Pennsylvania Dutch Country, this picturesque area has truly been able to hold on to the simpler ways of life.

The Amish are a religious sect who have shunned modern day conveniences in an effort to preserve family traditions and a sense of community.

The Amish are just one of the three Anabaptist-related groups that live in Lancaster County; the others are the Mennonites and the Brethren. All three deeply religious groups strongly believe in the authority of the Bible, as well as in the importance of brotherhood, family and community.

The differences among the religious groups can be found in the way that they worship and dress, as well as in how much modern technology they're willing to allow into their lives.

© Kimberly ButtonThe Old Order Amish and Mennonites have the strictest rules; when most people think of the Amish, they're envisioning this sect, which wears modest clothing of solid colors, avoids electricity and most other modern conveniences, and works primarily in the fields and on farms.

With so many Amish and other Anabaptist-related groups in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania Dutch Country has become known as an area that has successfully been able to hold onto old-fashioned ways in spite of the onslaught of technological advances.

That's not to say that there aren't any bustling cities or congested roadways in the county, but 65 percent of the land is dedicated to farming and other agricultural pursuits.

In the small towns with intriguing names such as Paradise, Bird-in-Hand and Intercourse, roadside markets are standard,



quilting is one of the most popular activities, meals are based on what is currently growing in the fields and the evenings are peacefully pitch-dark and quiet.

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© Kimberly Button Understanding Amish Lifestyle

While you might come to Lancaster County to find inspiration from the Amish's crafts, cooking and farming techniques, you'll probably soon find yourself with more questions than answers.

For many who are not familiar with the religious values of the Amish, their lifestyle might seem a bit puzzling. You might find yourself wondering things like, "Why do the Amish shun cars, yet they're allowed to use bicycles and scooters?" or "If the Amish refuse to use electricity, then why do I see lights on throughout their homes?"

Because the Amish are so often misunderstood, one of the best ways to understand their lifestyle is to visit the Amish Country Homestead and the Amish Experience Theater located in Bird-in-Hand. The Amish Experience Theater, an "experiential theater" that features special effects, is a great way to unobtrusively learn about the Amish way of life and their religious beliefs.

After gaining a better appreciation of the Amish lifestyle, you can take a tour through the Amish Country Homestead, a nine-room home that recreates how true Amish families live. Here, you will see what it's like to live a truly simplistic lifestyle without the luxuries of the modern world. After touring the sparsely decorated home, visitors can walk through the yard to see laundry hanging on an outdoor clothesline, a traditional Amish site, as well as a small garden tended by the Amish.

With an aversion to using automobiles, the Amish's main mode of transportation is a horse and buggy. The image of an Amish family slowly making their way down the side of the road as modern-day cars speed by is a common one throughout Pennsylvania Dutch Country. To have an appreciation for the struggles the Amish must face using this old-fashioned mode of transportation, be sure to take a horse and buggy ride with one of the many operators found in Lancaster County.

As you sit on a narrow bench inside the wooden carriage and listen to the horse's hooves clip-clopping along the asphalt, you'll probably become very thankful for the modern-day convenience of the automobile. The Amish must utilize their old-fashioned carriages in the freezing temperatures of winter and the stifling heat of summer, during heavy rains and in the darkness of night, all the while battling with the high speeds of cars, tractor trailers and motor coaches that share the road just a few feet away.

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Retail Adventures: Central Market and The Old Country Store

While the Amish's mode of transportation might make you appreciate modern marvels, a visit to the area's farmers' markets will probably make you nostalgic for old-fashioned crafts and homemade goods.

It's at these farmers' markets that you can really get an appreciation for Pennsylvania Dutch Country's agricultural pursuits. Lancaster County is the most productive non-irrigated farming county in the United States, with 421,000 acres of farmland. Of the 5,910 farms in the county, over 99 percent are family owned.

There are several farmers' markets throughout Lancaster County, yet the most popular is the Lancaster Central Market in downtown Lancaster.

Central Market is the nation's oldest publicly owned farmers' market, continuously operating since the 1730s. Housed in an 1889 Victorian market building, Central Market's stands are brimming with the usual fare of fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs.

Unlike many farmers' markets, though, you'll also find Amish- and Mennonite-run stands stacked high with homemade quilts, pot holders and pillows. Here, you'll have a chance to talk with the women who create the crafts and you'll learn more about the meaning behind the Amish's use of only dark, solid-colored fabrics and simplistic designs.

If you're inspired to begin quilting after admiring the Amish's hand-crafted creations, then a trip to The Old Country Store is definitely in order. Located in Intercourse, on the site where the town's first store was opened in 1833, the historic country store retains an old-fashioned charm while showcasing crafts from more than 300 local Amish and Mennonites.



It would be nearly impossible not to find crafting inspiration while walking around the quaint store located in the heart of Amish country. The walls are loaded down with hundreds of bolts of fabrics ideal for quilt making and if you are new to quilting, don't worry. It seems that nearly every quilting book in existence is stocked in The Old Country Store. For even more inspiration, head upstairs to The People's Place Quilt Museum, which has rotating exhibits featuring the finest quilts.

Quilting isn't the only attraction in The Old Country Store, though. Cookbooks are also plentiful and you'll find plenty of collections of local recipes as well as many of the popular "Fix-It and Forget-It" series of cookbooks that are published in this tiny town.

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Down-Home Cooking and Country Cuisine

If you enjoy down-home country cooking, Lancaster County is known for its culinary heritage. Known as the "Garden Spot of America," there are plenty of comfort foods to enjoy at the small, family-owned restaurants that can be found throughout the towns. Nearly every restaurant offers their own version of traditional Pennsylvania Dutch Country treats such as shoofly pie, whoopie pies and chow chow.

Lancaster County is also home to culinary history as the spot where America's first pretzel bakery was started. Pretzels continue to be a popular aspect of Lancaster County food scene and visitors can try their hand at twisting pretzel dough at one of the area's pretzel factories.

One of the most well-known food industries in Pennsylvania Dutch Country is Kitchen Kettle Village. For anyone who has ever labored over canning a few jars of preserves or pickled vegetables, you will be amazed at Kitchen Kettle Village's Jam & Relish Kitchen. What started out as a small home business run out of a garage in 1954 has grown into one of the area's largest and most well-known attractions.

The canning kitchen at Kitchen Kettle Village makes over 70 different kinds of jams, jellies and relishes, all made in old-fashioned ways and even bottled by hand.

All day long, visitors to the canning kitchen can watch as large, steaming vats of fruit jellies and spicy relishes are created and left simmering on the industrial-sized stoves before being carefully ladled into glass jars. The local women who work in the canning kitchen can produce around 5,000 jars of jellies or relishes each day and secure every steaming jar lid by hand, averaging one jar every two seconds.

Just walking through the retail store of the Jam & Relish kitchen is sure to inspire new taste creations you can enjoy at home. A majority of the products can be taste tested, so you can discover for yourself if carrot jam or elderberry jelly is a taste you actually enjoy. Whether you decide to try new recipes in your own canning pursuits or purchase jars of pre-made jams and jellies, your tastebuds will never be the same after experiencing the varied tastes of Kitchen Kettle Village.

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Discover What Life was Like at Landis Valley Museum

Though traditional ways are still prevalent in Lancaster County, there was a time when day-to-day chores were even more old-fashioned. Discover what life was like in the area hundreds of years ago at the Landis Valley Museum, a living-history village of Pennsylvania Dutch life.

Located in Lancaster, the Landis Valley Museum recreates what life was like for the early German immigrants who settled to the area in the 1700s.

Wanting to preserve the German immigrant's early culture and traditions from this time period, brothers George and Henry Landis started collecting Pennsylvania German objects from the 1700s and 1800s. By the 1920s, their collection included over 75,000 objects. In 1953, the state of Pennsylvania acquired the small museum the brothers had started on their homestead.

Today the Landis Valley Museum owns over 100,000 objects from early rural America and features a collection of 27 buildings that bring the story of the early Pennsylvania Dutch to life. Many of the buildings are historic structures that were relocated to the sprawling museum. Visitors to the Landis Valley Museum can enjoy living-history demonstrations, such as weaving decorative roping or spinning wool.



Also located on the museum's grounds is the Heirloom Seed Project, which strives to preserve seeds from heirloom varieties of herbs and ornamentals that have historical significance for Pennsylvania Germans from 1750 to 1940.

For a first-hand experience of what life is like living on a Pennsylvania Dutch farm, book a stay at one of the area's many working farms, such as the Verdant View Farm Bed and Breakfast located in the town of Paradise.

Don and Ginny Ranck own this fourth-generation dairy farm that supplies milk to the Land O' Lakes Cooperative. The Rancks milk their 40 cows every morning and evening, and invite their guests to watch or even try their hand at bottle feeding a baby calf. Guests at Verdant View can hike along the railroad line that cuts through the couple's 118-acre farm or just sit and watch Amish horse and buggies pass along the quiet road.

The Rancks make sure that each and every one of their guests feels like a part of their family by inviting them to breakfast each morning.

"I like to have the fellowship over a meal," Ginny Ranck says. At the family breakfast, guests can enjoy milk and yogurt from the Ranck's dairy cows, eggs from their neighbors and meats that were produced on the farm. As everyone joins hands and sings the Johnny Appleseed song before digging in to their farm breakfast, it seems that a new family has been formed in a region that values fellowship and community so much.

Pennsylvania Dutch Country is more than just a destination where people can go to observe the Amish way of life. At its heart, Lancaster County is a testament to what was best about our ancestor's way of life and a beacon toward the way that life should be ... a world where family and community are honored and the simple pleasures of life can be peacefully enjoyed.

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For more articles like this one, consider reading Hobby Farms Home.

About the Author

Kimberly Button is a freelance journalist. To learn more about Button's works, visit www.kimbutton.com