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Visiting Delaware

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Introduction

Welcome to the enchanting world of Delaware, affectionately known as "The First State." While it may be the second smallest state in the United States, Delaware is brimming with a diverse range of attractions that captivate visitors from all walks of life. This guide is specifically designed for tourists eager to explore the rich tapestry of experiences that Delaware has to offer, delving deeply into its unique and regional characteristics.

Delaware's historical significance is unparalleled, as it was the first of the thirteen original colonies to ratify the United States Constitution. This proud legacy of being "The First State" is celebrated through an array of historic landmarks, museums, and well-preserved sites that narrate the story of the nation's early days. From the cobblestone streets of New Castle to the grandeur of the du Pont estates scattered throughout the Brandywine Valley, history enthusiasts will find plenty to explore.

In the northern part of the state, you'll discover the vibrant city of Wilmington, brimming with cultural offerings, thriving restaurants, and scenic riverfront attractions. The picturesque Brandywine Valley, home to magnificent estates and beautiful gardens, presents a unique blend of natural beauty and artistic heritage. The region's connection to the influential du Pont family adds an additional layer of intrigue, inviting visitors to delve into the opulence of yesteryears.

Central Delaware, anchored by the state capital of Dover, provides an insight into the political and natural facets of the state. History buffs will relish exploring the Dover Green and its surrounding historic sites, while nature lovers will be drawn to the wildlife havens and state parks that dot the region. The iconic Dover Motor Speedway also adds a thrill for those seeking high-octane excitement.

The southern part of Delaware, renowned for its pristine Atlantic beaches, offers a quintessential coastal escape. Here, the towns of Lewes, Rehoboth Beach, and Bethany Beach provide sun-soaked attractions, delectable seafood, and a lively arts scene. Whether you're keen on lounging by the ocean, engaging in water sports, or exploring charming beach towns, Southern Delaware promises relaxation and adventure in equal measure.

With its strategic location in the heart of the Mid-Atlantic, Delaware boasts easily accessible transport links from several major cities, making it an ideal destination for both short getaways and extended vacations. The state's famous tax-free shopping also provides an added bonus for those looking to indulge in retail therapy without the added cost.

Prepare to embark on an unforgettable journey through Delaware, where the fusion of history, culture, natural beauty, and modern attractions makes for a truly unique travel experience. Whether you're a first-time visitor or a returning explorer, the wonders of Delaware await, ready to enchant and inspire.

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CHAPTER ONE: The History of Delaware

To truly appreciate the unique places you'll visit in Delaware, it helps to understand a little bit about how this small state ended up with such a layered and significant past. Long before Europeans dropped anchor on the shores of the Delaware River and Bay, the land was home to Indigenous peoples, primarily the Lenape (also known as the Delaware Indians). They lived along the waterways, utilizing the abundant resources of the forests and the water for sustenance, trade, and travel, leaving behind remnants of their presence that hint at a long history tied deeply to the land.

The curtain on recorded European history in Delaware rose in the early 17th century. While various explorers sailed by, it was the Swedes who made the first lasting mark. In 1638, under the leadership of Peter Minuit, a group of Swedish colonists established Fort Christina near present-day Wilmington, naming it in honor of their young queen. This settlement, part of the colony of New Sweden, marked the first permanent European foothold in the Delaware Valley, introducing European customs, architecture, and conflict to the region.

Their tenure, however, was relatively brief. The Dutch, already established in New Netherland to the north, viewed the Swedish presence as an infringement on their territory. In 1655, a Dutch expedition led by Peter Stuyvesant sailed into the Delaware River and easily took control of Fort Christina, absorbing New Sweden into New Netherland. This shift brought Dutch influence and governance to the settlements along the river, though the Swedish and Finnish settlers already living there were largely allowed to remain, adding another cultural layer to the young colony.

English dominance in North America soon put an end to Dutch control. In 1664, the English seized New Netherland, including the settlements on the Delaware. The land eventually came under the proprietorship of William Penn, the Quaker founder of Pennsylvania. Penn, seeking access to the sea for his new colony, acquired the "Three Lower Counties" along the Delaware River from the Duke of York in the 1680s. These counties – New Castle, Kent, and Sussex – formed the basis of modern Delaware.

Life under Penn was initially tied to Pennsylvania, sharing a governor and assembly. However, the geographical distance and differing interests between the more settled, established lower counties and the newer, Quaker-dominated Pennsylvania led to friction. The residents of the Three Lower Counties desired greater autonomy to manage their own affairs, reflecting a growing sense of distinct identity based on their earlier history and different economic focus.

By 1704, Penn granted the Three Lower Counties their own separate colonial

assembly, though they continued to share a governor with Pennsylvania until the American Revolution. This period saw the development of distinct political traditions and a strengthening of local governance in the three counties, laying the groundwork for their eventual separation and independent statehood. Towns like New Castle thrived as administrative and port centers during this colonial era, their architecture still whispering tales of these early days.

As tensions escalated between Great Britain and its American colonies in the 1770s, Delawareans were swept up in the revolutionary fervor. Despite having strong ties to both Pennsylvania and Maryland, and a diverse population with varying loyalties, the colony's assembly eventually declared its separation from Great Britain and from Pennsylvania on June 15, 1776, making a bold move towards independent statehood ahead of the formal Declaration of Independence.

Delaware played an active role in the Revolutionary War. While it didn't see major battles on its soil, Delaware provided soldiers to the Continental Army, most notably the famous "Delaware Regiment" led by Colonel John Haslet, known for their distinctive blue uniforms. Figures like Thomas McKean, George Read, and Caesar Rodney were instrumental in the political movements of the era, representing Delaware in the Continental Congress and helping to shape the new nation.

Caesar Rodney's legendary ride in July 1776 is a testament to Delaware's commitment to independence. Suffering from cancer, he rode through a thunderstorm from Dover to Philadelphia overnight to cast the tie-breaking vote for independence for Delaware in the Continental Congress. This dramatic dash underscored the critical importance of individual action in shaping the young nation's destiny and solidified Delaware's place in the revolutionary narrative.

Following the successful conclusion of the war, the newly independent states faced the challenge of forming a lasting union. The Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia brought together delegates from each state to draft a new framework for government. Delaware, despite its small size, was a vocal participant, particularly advocating for equal representation for states in the proposed Senate, a principle crucial to protecting the interests of smaller states within the new federal structure.

When the time came for the states to ratify the proposed United States Constitution, Delaware was eager to demonstrate its commitment to the new nation. On December 7, 1787, a convention of delegates met in Dover and unanimously voted to ratify the Constitution, becoming the first state to do so. This act earned Delaware its enduring nickname, "The First State," a title proudly displayed on license plates and commemorated in historic sites like the Old State House in Dover.

The 19th century saw Delaware navigate the complexities of a growing nation. Its position straddling the Mason-Dixon Line meant it had characteristics of both Northern

and Southern states. It was a slave state, but unlike its southern neighbors, slavery gradually declined, particularly in the northern parts of the state, influenced by Quaker abolitionist sentiment and industrial development that didn't rely as heavily on enslaved labor.

During the Civil War, Delaware remained in the Union, despite significant Southern sympathies among some of its population, particularly in the southern counties. The state did not secede, but its citizens fought on both sides of the conflict. This division reflected the state's unique cultural and economic blend, caught between the industrializing North and the agricultural South. Fort Miles, built later, reminds visitors of coastal defense needs shaped by such national conflicts.

Industrial growth, particularly in northern Delaware, marked a significant transformation in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The du Pont family, who had established a gunpowder mill on the Brandywine Creek in 1802, grew their company into a global chemical and manufacturing giant. Their wealth and influence profoundly shaped the region, leading to the creation of magnificent estates, philanthropic endeavors, and a lasting legacy visible in the museums and cultural institutions of today.

Meanwhile, agriculture remained a vital part of Delaware's economy, especially in the central and southern counties. The flat, fertile land was ideal for farming corn, soybeans, and eventually, poultry. The rise of the broiler chicken industry in Sussex County transformed the agricultural landscape and remains a significant economic driver, influencing the culture and landscape of rural Delaware.

The 20th century brought further changes. The growth of coastal tourism, particularly after World War II, turned quiet fishing villages like Rehoboth Beach into bustling resort towns. Improved transportation infrastructure, including highways like Route 1, made the beaches more accessible to visitors from surrounding states, cementing their role as major summer destinations and adding a lively, seasonal dimension to the state's character.

Delaware's legal framework also evolved, most notably becoming known as a favorable state for corporate incorporation due to its business-friendly laws and respected Court of Chancery, which specializes in corporate law. This reputation attracted numerous companies to establish their legal domicile in the state, contributing to its economy and creating a unique facet of its modern identity.

Through these various chapters of its past – from the Lenape people and early European settlers to its pivotal role in the nation's founding, the complexities of the Civil War era, and the growth of industry, agriculture, and tourism – Delaware developed the distinct personality it holds today. Each historical layer has left its mark on the landscape, the architecture, the culture, and the spirit of the state, creating the

rich tapestry that awaits exploration by curious visitors.

Understanding this history provides context for the sites you'll encounter, from the colonial streets of New Castle and the state capital in Dover to the industrial heritage sites along the Brandywine and the coastal fortifications. It explains why this small state holds such a disproportionate amount of historical weight and offers such a varied experience depending on which region you visit. The past isn't just preserved in museums; it's woven into the very fabric of Delaware life.

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