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Visiting Pennsylvania

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Introduction

Nestled within the heart of the northeastern United States, Pennsylvania stands as a fascinating patchwork of diverse landscapes, rich history, and vibrant culture. Often referred to as the "Keystone State," it bridges the cultural and geographic divide between the Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern regions. For tourists, Pennsylvania is a tantalizing blend of urban sophistication, historical intrigue, and natural splendor, offering countless opportunities for exploration and adventure.

To begin your journey, there's no better way than to explore Philadelphia, the city where it all began. As one of the most historically significant cities in the United States, Philadelphia offers a compelling mix of old-world charm and modern flair. Here, one can trace the steps of the Founding Fathers, indulge in culinary delights like the iconic Philly Cheesesteak, or immerse in world-class art and culture. Nearby, the rolling countryside offers a serene retreat from the city's hustle, with quaint towns and picturesque landscapes.

Venture westward to find Pittsburgh, a city that has reinvented itself from a steel town to a vibrant center of education, technology, and arts. Positioned at the meeting point of three rivers, Pittsburgh's stunning skyline and innovative spirit make it a must-visit for any traveler. The city offers an appealing mix of outdoor activities, panoramic vistas, and a rich industrial heritage waiting to be discovered.

Pennsylvania's rural regions, such as the Pennsylvania Dutch Country, offer insights into a simpler, more traditional way of life. Here, communities like the Amish and Mennonites open doors to a world untouched by time, where hand-crafted goods and farm-to-table experiences create a unique cultural tapestry. It's a place where life's pace slows, offering a reflective pause that's as compelling as it is educational.

For outdoor enthusiasts, Pennsylvania is nothing short of paradise. The Poconos and the Pennsylvania Wilds provide the perfect playground for activities ranging from hiking and fishing to winter sports. With majestic mountains, lush forests, and pristine waterways, Pennsylvania is an outdoor lover's dream at any time of year. The state parks scattered throughout provide sanctuaries of beauty that beckon exploration and introspection.

Lastly, the cultural experiences in Pennsylvania go beyond its famed sites and cityscapes. From world-class museums and theaters to quirky festivals and traditions like Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania's cultural fabric is as diverse as its people. Culinary delights await at every corner, offering everything from hearty Pennsylvania Dutch dishes to the mouthwatering comfort of Hershey's chocolate

creations.

This guide aims to provide prospective tourists with a comprehensive journey through Pennsylvania, shining a spotlight on the unique aspects of the state that make it a cherished destination for both domestic and international travelers. Whether your interests lie in history, nature, culture, or cuisine, Pennsylvania has something to offer, promising an unforgettable experience in the Keystone State.

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CHAPTER ONE: Philadelphia & The Countryside

Welcome to southeastern Pennsylvania, a dynamic region anchored by one of America's most historic cities and complemented by a picturesque and diverse countryside. This area, often the first taste of Pennsylvania for many visitors arriving through Philadelphia International Airport, offers a compelling blend of urban energy and pastoral charm. It's where the story of the United States took shape, set against a backdrop of rolling hills, winding rivers, and communities that range from bustling suburban centers to sleepy, historic villages. Understanding this region means appreciating the symbiotic relationship between the vibrant metropolis of Philadelphia and the surrounding counties - Bucks, Montgomery, Chester, and Delaware - each contributing its unique character to the regional tapestry.

Philadelphia itself exerts a powerful pull. It's a city that wears its history proudly, yet hums with contemporary life. Walk its streets, and you transition seamlessly from cobblestone alleys echoing with centuries past to broad avenues lined with gleaming skyscrapers and modern institutions. Situated strategically between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, the city's geography has long influenced its development, fostering commerce and culture. While later chapters will delve into the specifics of its countless attractions, understanding Philadelphia's role as the regional hub is key. It's the economic engine, the cultural heart, and the historical cornerstone for southeastern Pennsylvania, drawing people from the surrounding countryside for work, education, entertainment, and, of course, its world-renowned historical significance.

The atmosphere in Philadelphia is unique - a blend of East Coast intensity and a more down-to-earth, neighborhood-centric attitude. It's a city of distinct quarters, from the stately squares of Society Hill and Rittenhouse to the bohemian vibe of South Street, the Italian Market's bustling energy, and the trendy boutiques of Old City. Exploring these areas on foot is often the best way to capture the city's essence. Philadelphia is undeniably a major urban center, yet it often feels more accessible and less overwhelming than some of its larger northeastern neighbors. Its grid layout, designed by William Penn himself, makes navigation relatively straightforward, at least in the central core. It's a place where pivotal historical moments coexist with cutting-edge culinary scenes, major league sports, and thriving arts institutions.

But the Philadelphia region is far more than just the city limits. Venture beyond the urban core, and you enter "The Countryside," a collection of counties that offer a different pace and perspective. This isn't a remote wilderness, but rather a populated landscape where history, nature, and community intertwine. It's an area shaped by early settlement patterns, Revolutionary War encampments, agricultural traditions, and the later development of commuter suburbs. The transition can be gradual, with

inner suburbs giving way to more open spaces, preserved farmland, grand estates, and charming small towns that seem worlds away from the city's hustle, yet are often just a short drive or train ride.

Heading north and slightly east of Philadelphia brings you to Bucks County. This area has long attracted artists, writers, and free spirits, particularly around the town of New Hope, perched scenically on the Delaware River opposite Lambertville, New Jersey. New Hope buzzes with an eclectic energy, its streets lined with art galleries, unique shops, restaurants, and theaters. The legacy of the Pennsylvania Impressionist art colony that flourished here in the early 20th century still permeates the air. Nearby Doylestown serves as the county seat and boasts architectural marvels built by the eccentric historian and tile-maker Henry Chapman Mercer – Fonthill Castle, his concrete fantasy home, and the equally arresting Mercer Museum, showcasing pre-industrial tools and crafts.

Bucks County is also deeply intertwined with Revolutionary War history. Washington Crossing Historic Park marks the pivotal site where George Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware River on Christmas night 1776 to launch a surprise attack on Hessian forces in Trenton. The park spans both sides of the river (managed separately by Pennsylvania and New Jersey) and offers museums, historic buildings, and reenactments that bring this crucial moment to life. Driving along the Delaware River on roads like Route 32 (River Road) provides miles of scenic beauty, passing through quaint villages like Lumberville and Point Pleasant. Inland, Bucks County retains a rural character with covered bridges, rolling farmland, working wineries, and numerous opportunities for finding antiques or enjoying a stay at a historic bed and breakfast.

West of Philadelphia lies Montgomery County, a diverse area that blends significant historical sites with bustling suburban towns and pockets of preserved nature. Perhaps its most famous landmark is Valley Forge National Historical Park. This isn't a traditional battlefield park, but rather the site of the Continental Army's challenging 1777-1778 winter encampment. Sprawling over 3,500 acres, the park offers reconstructed log huts, original structures like Washington's Headquarters, monuments, and miles of trails for walking, biking, and driving tours. It's a poignant landscape that speaks volumes about the perseverance and sacrifice required during the nation's founding struggle. Visiting Valley Forge provides a vital piece of the Revolutionary War story that complements the events commemorated within Philadelphia itself.

Montgomery County is also home to a significant portion of the Schuylkill River Trail, a multi-use path following the river corridor, popular for cycling, running, and walking. It connects Valley Forge to Philadelphia and extends northwestward, offering recreational access through towns like Conshohocken, Norristown (the county seat), and Phoenixville. Phoenixville, in particular, has experienced a renaissance, transforming from an old steel town into a lively hub with breweries, distilleries,

restaurants, and a restored historic theater, the Colonial, famous for its appearance in the classic horror film "The Blob" and its annual "Blobfest." The county also includes parts of the affluent "Main Line," a string of communities along the historic Pennsylvania Railroad tracks known for their gracious homes, established neighborhoods, and respected educational institutions.

Journey southwest of Philadelphia, and you enter Chester County, renowned for the stunning beauty of the Brandywine Valley. This area, straddling the Pennsylvania-Delaware border, is characterized by its gentle hills, meandering Brandywine Creek, historic stone farmhouses, and a rich artistic and horticultural heritage. It's Wyeth country, inextricably linked to three generations of celebrated artists: N.C., Andrew, and Jamie Wyeth. The Brandywine River Museum of Art, housed in a converted 19th-century gristmill in Chadds Ford, showcases an unparalleled collection of their work, alongside other Brandywine School artists and American illustrators. The museum's setting, overlooking the creek, is as inspiring as the art within.

Chester County's crown jewel for many visitors is Longwood Gardens. Originally developed by industrialist Pierre S. du Pont, this is one of the world's premier horticultural display gardens, encompassing over 1,000 acres of outdoor gardens, woodlands, meadows, and spectacular conservatories brimming with exotic plants. From intricate fountain shows choreographed to music and dazzling seasonal displays (especially at Christmas) to educational programs and performing arts events, Longwood offers a multi-faceted experience that draws visitors year-round. Beyond Longwood, Chester County boasts charming towns like Kennett Square, the self-proclaimed "Mushroom Capital of the World," which celebrates its fungal fame with an annual festival. West Chester, the county seat, offers a vibrant downtown with historic architecture, boutiques, and a lively restaurant scene centered around its university. The county also maintains a strong equestrian tradition, visible in its numerous horse farms and events like the Point-to-Point steeplechase races.

Adjacent to Philadelphia to the west and south is Delaware County, often affectionately called "Delco." As the site of the first Quaker settlements under William Penn's charter, it holds a significant place in Pennsylvania's early colonial history. The county offers a mix of densely populated inner suburbs bordering the city and more open, greener spaces further out. Ridley Creek State Park provides a popular oasis with its extensive trail system winding through woodlands and meadows, past the historic Hunting Hill Mansion. Tyler Arboretum, another gem, offers acres of plant collections, historic trees, and natural landscapes to explore. Towns like Media, the county seat, pride themselves on a strong sense of community, often billing itself as "Everybody's Hometown," with a trolley line running down the main street and a calendar full of local events. Swarthmore, home to the prestigious college of the same name, features beautiful campus architecture and leafy residential streets. Delaware County effectively bridges the urban environment of Philadelphia with the more pastoral landscapes found further west in Chester County.

A key theme connecting Philadelphia and its countryside is their shared history, particularly from the colonial and Revolutionary periods. Events didn't just happen within the city limits; the surrounding counties were crucial theaters of war, supply routes, and sites of strategic importance. Battlefields like Brandywine (primarily in Chester County) and Germantown (now within Philadelphia city limits but historically a separate village) mark significant engagements. Washington's Crossing in Bucks County and Valley Forge in Montgomery County represent critical moments of leadership and endurance. Driving through the region, you'll encounter countless historical markers, preserved farmhouses that witnessed troop movements, and old mills along creeks that once powered local economies. This historical layer adds depth to explorations beyond the city.

The relationship between city and countryside is also defined by modern connectivity. Southeastern Pennsylvania is served by SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority), one of the nation's largest public transit systems. Its Regional Rail lines radiate outwards from central Philadelphia deep into Bucks, Montgomery, Chester, and Delaware counties, making it feasible to base yourself in the city and take day trips to the suburbs, or vice versa. This network facilitates the daily commute for thousands but also offers tourists a convenient way to explore without constantly needing a car, especially for accessing towns situated along the rail lines. Major highways also crisscross the region, providing efficient road access, though traffic, particularly during peak hours, can be significant, requiring some planning.

Visiting this region allows for a wonderfully varied itinerary. You can spend days immersed in the historical gravity and cultural vibrancy of Philadelphia, then easily transition to the gentle pace and scenic beauty of the surrounding counties. One day might involve exploring world-class museums and dining in nationally acclaimed restaurants, while the next could be spent hiking in a state park, strolling through a renowned garden, visiting an artist's studio in a riverside town, or sampling wine at a local vineyard. This ability to mix and match urban and rural experiences within a relatively compact geographic area is one of the great strengths of visiting southeastern Pennsylvania.

The changing seasons each bring their own appeal to Philadelphia and The Countryside. Spring sees flowering trees burst into color across the city's parks and squares, while gardens like Longwood and Tyler Arboretum awaken spectacularly. Summer is prime time for festivals, outdoor concerts, Phillies baseball games, and enjoying the region's waterways. Autumn is particularly beloved, as the rolling hills of the countryside ignite in brilliant shades of red, orange, and gold, making scenic drives along routes like River Road in Bucks County or through the Brandywine Valley especially rewarding. Winter brings a festive atmosphere to the city with holiday markets and light displays, while the quiet beauty of snow-covered fields and

woodlands offers a different kind of charm in the countryside, perhaps enjoyed from the warmth of a historic inn.

Accommodation options reflect the region's diversity. Philadelphia offers a full spectrum, from luxury hotels and trendy boutique establishments to reliable chains and budget-friendly choices. In the countryside, options range from modern hotels in suburban centers to historic inns, charming bed and breakfasts often housed in centuries-old buildings, and vacation rentals that allow for a more immersive local experience. Campgrounds are also available in state parks like Ridley Creek and French Creek (partially in Chester County), providing opportunities for those seeking closer contact with nature. Planning where to stay might depend on whether you prioritize easy access to city attractions or prefer the tranquility of a country setting as your base.

Ultimately, the Philadelphia and The Countryside region serves as a microcosm of Pennsylvania's broader appeal. It encapsulates the state's deep historical roots, its blend of urban sophistication and rural landscapes, and its capacity to offer diverse experiences within easy reach. Whether you are tracing the footsteps of revolutionaries, admiring artistic masterpieces, indulging in horticultural wonders, or simply soaking in the atmosphere of a vibrant city and its charming surroundings, southeastern Pennsylvania provides a rich and fulfilling introduction to the Keystone State. It's a region that invites exploration, promising discoveries around every corner, from the heart of the city to the quietest country lane.

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