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A Complete Guide to Ohio's Amish Country

Written by RICH WARREN Updated 07/16/20





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It's a place of stunning pastoral beauty—rolling forest-covered hills, pastures filled with grazing cattle and running horses, and red barns and weathervanes polka-dotting the landscape. A constant cavalcade of horse-drawn buggies traverse the winding roads, their bearded and bonneted occupants waving a friendly hello to those they pass.

Welcome to Ohio's "Amish Country," an area in the east-central portion of the Buckeye State, primarily in Holmes and Wayne counties but with some spillover into neighboring ones. About 45,000 of the world's 330,000 Amish reside here, a population that at least equals and often surpasses that of the better-known Pennsylvania Dutch Country. Since 1809, when the first of their numbers arrived, they've been living amicably beside their "English" neighbors, a term they use to describe anyone who's not Amish.

I grew up about 30 miles from this area and have watched it transform from a sleepy backwater to one of Ohio's top tourist attractions, the state highways clogged with traffic on weekends, the sidewalks of Berlin (Amish Country's largest town) thronged with visitors. Like so many others, I return here frequently, charmed by what seems like a place rooted in another time, the friendly residents happy to share details of their simple lifestyle with travelers. During these many years and multiple visits, I've learned not only how to beat the crowds but where to find the best bets of what to do and experience.

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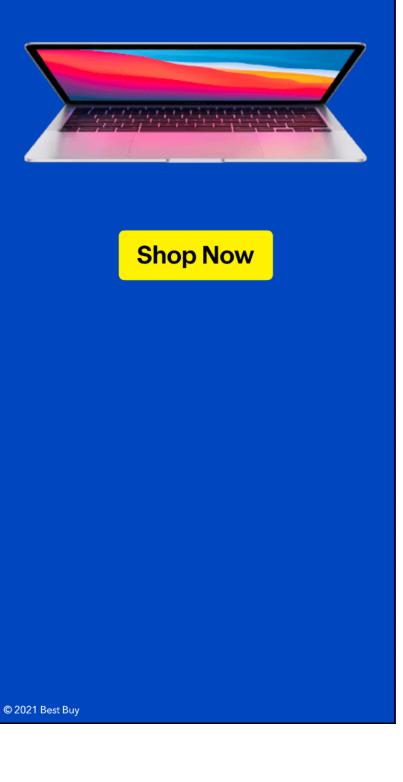
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When you first arrive, get yourself a map. Yes, an old-fashioned paper map since GPS sometimes fails in this very rural area. Make sure it's a detailed map outlining the many county and township roads that wind their way through this hilly country. Then just point your car down one of them and travel in whatever directions look appealing. Not only will you get away from those crowded highways, but you'll also see the Amish people living their lives—farmers at work in their fields, women hanging out the laundry, children walking to and from their one-room schoolhouses. Plus, you'll find dozens of little shops with Amish artisans selling their hand-made candles, leather goods, baskets, or brooms, sometimes in shops beside their homes.

Let yourself happily get lost in this gorgeous landscape.

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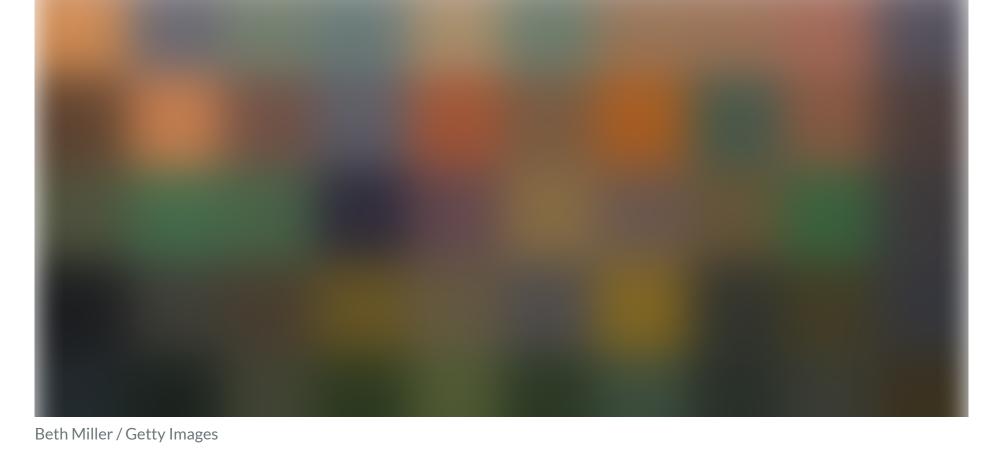
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What to See and Do

To visit a working Amish farm, go to The Farm at Walnut Creek, where you can watch plowing, threshing, sowing, and milking, and inside the typical Amish home, you can see quilting and baking demonstrations. Up on the hilltop behind the farm, there's a whole ranch of hundreds of exotic animals, including giraffes, lemurs, bison, kangaroos, and zebras. You can either drive through on your own or take a wagon ride where guides provide a running narrative. In either case, the animals can get up close and personal. (A prized photo I have of my brother is of him literally going nose to nose with a camel.)

In the evenings, you can now do more than just sit and digest your heavy Amish dinner. Nightlife options include two theaters, including the 512-seat Ohio Star Theater, which offers a cavalcade of productions, even Amish musical comedies! Down the road, Amish Country Theater offers a frequently changing variety show with comedy skits interspersed with musical acts.

Also consider a stop at the Amish and Mennonite Heritage Center, where the highlight is the Behalt, a 10-by 265-foot cyclorama illustrating the history of Amish and Mennonite people from their 16th-century beginnings in Switzerland to the present day. The brilliantly colored 360-degree painting took 14 years to complete. In Sugarcreek, a must-see is the World's Largest Cuckoo Clock, a 24-foot-tall structure with displays on the half hour of hand-carved whirling dancers with a wooden Bavarian oompah band playing polkas.

Tours

Your serendipitous driving might not take you past some of the must-sees in Amish Country, so you might consider booking an excursion with a company like Troyer Amish Tours, whose proprietor, Richard Troyer, has Amish blood in his lineage and has spent a lifetime learning every corner of Amish Country. His two- to three-hour van tours are customized to whatever his guests want to see or experience, and along the way, Troyer gives insight into the Amish religion and lifestyle. He'll point out things you otherwise might not notice on your own, like the solar panels atop some people's homes. Yes, the Amish are allowed to have electricity, provided they produce it themselves and are not connected to the grid.

Both Troyer's and another company, Amish Heartland Tours, also can arrange dinners at Amish people's homes, allowing you to interact with an Amish family face-to-face and learn fascinating details about their lives. One Amish woman once told me how she and her neighbors compete on laundry day to get the clothes out on the line first. You might even hear a little Amish humor, like the joke about the Amish flu: First you get a little hoarse, then you start feeling buggy.



Courtesy of Holmes County Tourism Bureau

What to Eat in Amish Country

Think of Amish cuisine as an extreme form of comfort food-fried chicken, beef and noodles, a peanut butter spread with honey mixed into it, even noodles piled atop mashed potatoes. A few unique twists include the Amish propensity to pickle anything in sight, like eggs, beets, or garlic. They're also fond of salads, like the Haystack, with its many layers of vegetables, ground beef, and even crushed Doritos. A special regional delicacy is Trail Bologna, made in the tiny town of Trail. Wood-smoked and with a special blend of seasonings, this bologna heated up as a warm sandwich with melted Swiss cheese on top is a small piece of heaven.

And it's an understatement to say the Amish have a sweet tooth. They're especially famed for their pies-both the straight-ahead variety and also Amish "fry pies" with the filling inside a fried, half-moon shaped crust that can be eaten in your hands.

One of the legendary dining destinations in Amish Country is **Der Dutchman** in the hilltop town of Walnut Creek (try to get a seat by the window with its sweeping views) and its sister restaurant, Dutch Valley, adjacent to the Ohio Star Theater. At both these establishments, dinners can be served a la carte or family style with huge serving dishes brought to your table. Nowadays, servers ladle out whatever you request from the famed all-you-can-eat buffet. Do NOT forget to leave room for a piece of one of the two dozen kinds of pies available.

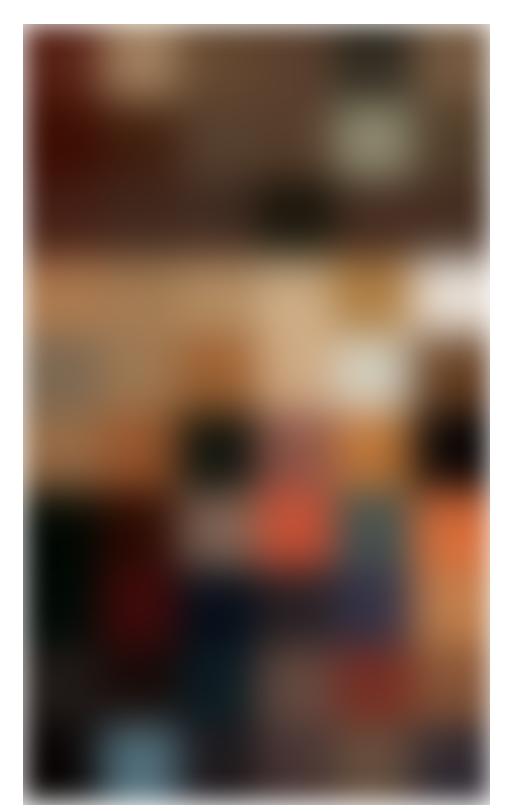


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My favorite restaurant is Mrs. Yoder's Kitchen in Mount Hope where all the classic Amish items are on the menu as well as more nontraditional fare like stuffed pepper loaf or cabbage casserole with mushroom sauce and onions. The choices differ every day based on whatever Gloria Yoder or her staff feel like whipping up. I'm also partial to a place called Chalet in the Valley, where the Swiss and Austrian cuisine includes schnitzel and bratwurst.

Swiss cheese is perhaps the main culinary draw in Ohio's Amish Country. At Heini's Cheese Chalet, more than 80 varieties are available, but my personal favorite is Guggisberg Cheese, where the milder, creamier Baby Swiss variety originated. You can watch the cheese being produced through large windows in the retail shop, housed in an impossible-to-miss structure with a distinctive bell tower.

Any number of bakeries offer enticing fare, including ones adjacent to Der Dutchman and Heini's, but make it a point to find a little hole-in-the-wall place way out in the countryside called Miller's Bakery. Inside an unremarkable cinder-block structure on a narrow township road, an alluring array of fresh-baked breads, pies, and pastries can be found, which you'll smell even before you walk in the door. Miller's is especially known for its seven kinds of cheese tarts, cookies the size of pies, and enormous apple fritters. It's best to get there early in the day. By noon, the baked-fresh-each-day items are starting to sell out.



Courtesy of Holmes County Tourism Bureau

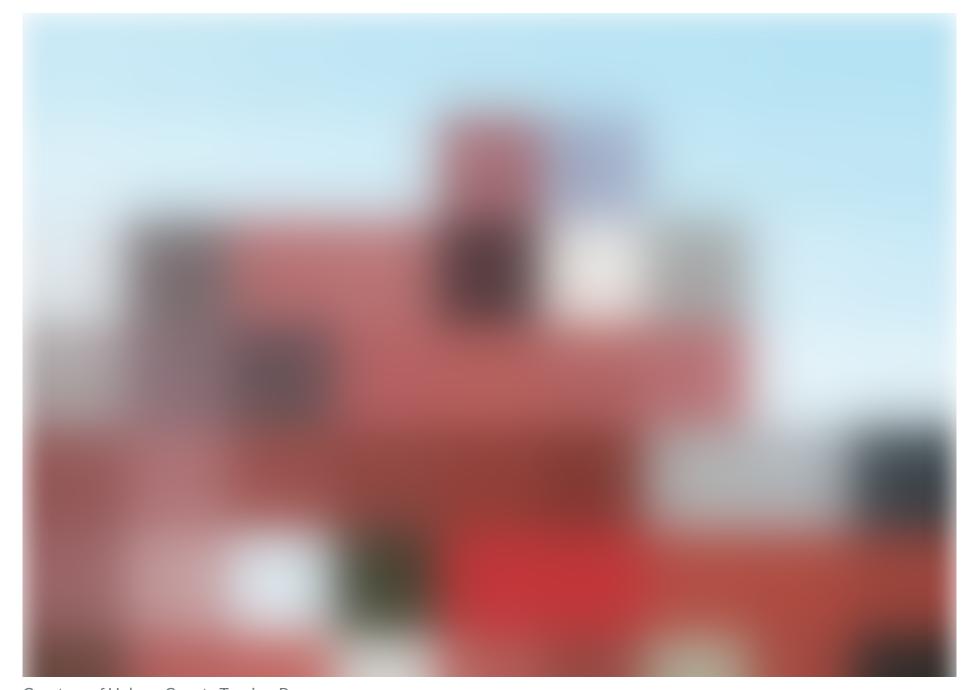
Where to Stay

Accommodations in Amish Country range from the upscale to rustic cabins surrounded by woodlands. Be aware that many establishments require a minimum two-night stay during high season.

Upscale lodging options include The Inn at Honey Run, an adults-only resort on 56 largely wooded acres where choices include rooms inside the inn itself, hillside "honeycombs" built into the earth, and private cottages. Onsite fine dining is also available. Next door, The Barn Inn appears to be one of the red barns on an Amish farm—and long ago, it once was! It's now been renovated top to bottom and transformed into a bed-and-breakfast with deluxe rooms, each with its own distinctive decorations.

In Berlin, Donna's Premier Lodging offers cottages, suites, and villas all within walking distance of downtown and secluded chalets and cedar log cabins in the woods outside town. A number of special add-on packages are available for those looking for a romantic getaway.

My favorite is Holmes With A View, a half-dozen one- and two-bedroom suites complete with fireplaces and kitchens on a ridge overlooking the breathtaking Doughty Valley. A number of Amish farms are close by and the charming little town of Charm is off in the distance.



Courtesy of Holmes County Tourism Bureau

Shopping in Amish Country

Berlin, the unofficial "capital" of Amish Country, offers the greatest concentration of shops in one place with a bit of everything available, including a huge antiques mall. Just outside town, Schrock's Heritage Village has a number of interesting retail outlets like a leather store and Ohio's largest all-year Christmas shop. Farther down the same highway, the Walnut Creek Amish Flea Market has 50 vendors under one roof. And on a hilltop overlooking Charm, Keim Lumber has recently rebranded itself as simply

"Keim," which is fitting because so much more than building supplies can be found in its cavernous 125,000-square-foot space, including housewares, toys, and games.

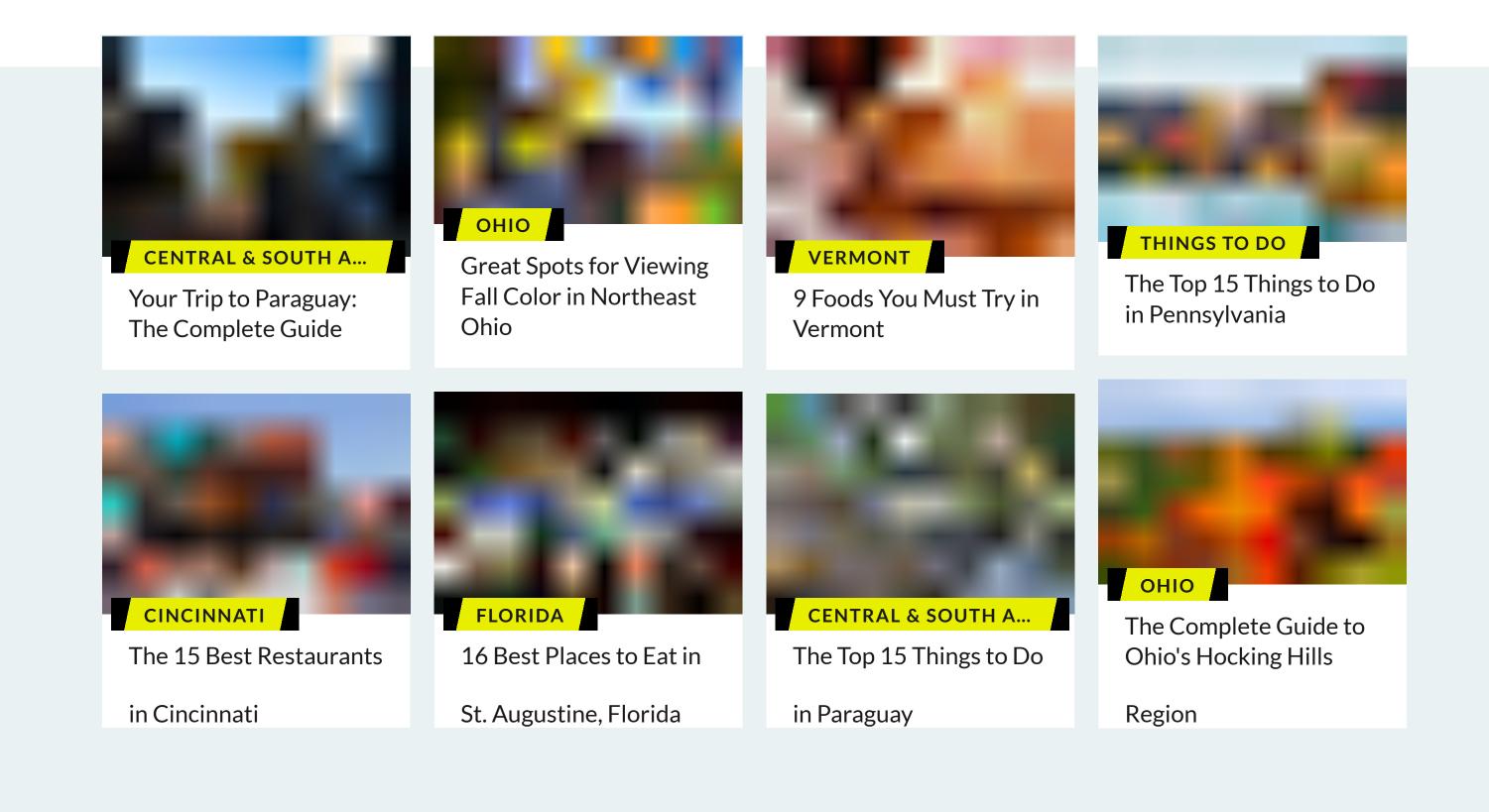
Similarly, Lehman's Hardware in Kidron sells a whole lot more than nuts and bolts and has become a tourist destination in its own right. Even bus tours stop here. When it opened six decades ago, it catered primarily to the Amish, stocking merchandise that didn't require electricity, like old-time cooking stoves. Nowadays, much more modern merchandise can be found in its nearly quarter-mile long series of showrooms. But you can still find a butter churn if you want one!

Ohio's Amish have made a name for themselves making cabinetry and furniture, with 400 local manufacturers and 30 retail stores selling their finely crafted work. Larger places like Homestead Furniture also sell gazebos and lawn furniture and have an interior design department offering advice. I prefer popping into the many smaller establishments like Farmerstown Furniture, where the cherry rocking chair in my living room was made.

Likewise, Amish quilts are in high demand with places like Gramma Fannie's Quilt Barn and Helping Hands Quilt Shop being good places to see or shop for these exquisite works of folk art, many with unique Amish motifs. I always take first-time visitors to Miller's Dry Goods in Charm, where you can not only see the quilts but can also purchase material from the 8,000 bolts of fabric to make your own.

But remember...there are all manner of little shops out on those country roads selling everything from Polish pottery to hand-made belts, hickory rockers, weather vanes, and roll-top desks. Perhaps you'll even find an Amish woman and her children selling baskets beside the road. Take time for some conversation—you may well be talking to the person who's made what you're buying!

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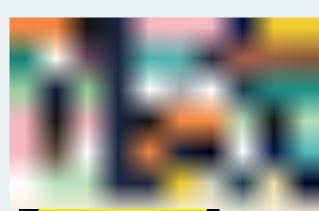


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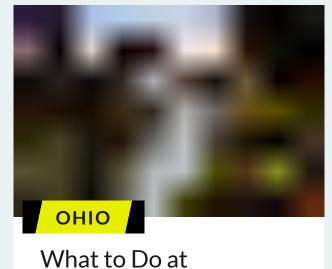




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