

In Bird-in-Hand, witnessing Pa. Amish firsthand



Meet the Amish - New tour takes visitors to their farms, homes and businesses

By Diane Stoneback of *THE MORNING CALL* (Allentown)

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A family's worth of laundry, in somber shades of black and blue and gray, is neatly pinned to a high-flying clothesline that runs between the barn and the farmhouse.

A buggy, with its back parked toward us, is visible just inside an open barn door.

The view that greets us as we pull up and park in the driveway conveys what I'm feeling. At last, there is an open back-door. A way to meet members of Lancaster County's Amish community personally and learn more about their way of life, in their words.

Amish VIP (Visit-in-Person) Tours, a new offering from Amish Country Tours, affords visitors an experience that rises above treating the Amish as a tourist attraction, whether they're riding in their buggies or working as clerks at shops and roadstands.

Take one of these three-hour, evening tours, which start in the parking lot at The Amish Experience, 3121 Old Philadelphia Pike, Bird in Hand, and you'll visit an Amish dairy farm at milking time, the workshop of an Amish craftsman and the living room of an Amish family's home. The people you meet will vary, depending on the night you take the tour.

The size of the group, limited to 14 people, enables participants to hear the words of their Amish hosts and ask any questions they have.

And at the tour's final stop, visitors sit down for a conversation with an Amish family. It's a time for honest-to-goodness, old-time, face-to-face conversation, rather than Twittering or Facebooking with faceless friends. It's a free-form exchange of information.

Observes the Amish housewife who welcomes us into her home and gets the conversation going by asking where her visitors are from (Canada, New York, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania), "This isn't one-sided. We like learning about you, too."

Although the dairy farm visit and a home visit are fairly similar from day to day, the craftsman can range from a blacksmith or basket maker to a gourd-grower/decorator or carpet weaver.

Brad Igou, a Lancaster County native, sociologist and avid student of Amish culture, organized the tours at the request of tourists he has met as president of The Amish Experience at Plain & Fancy Farm.

"The Amish do not have one way of thinking about their world, any more than other Americans do. They are individuals who have certain things in common with each other but also have their own ideas, pleasures, challenges and problems," he says.

To meet the Amish, the tour ventures beyond Routes 30 and 340, which are lined with outlets, shops, eateries and other attractions and are two of the most heavily-traveled thoroughfares in Pennsylvania Dutch Country.

As the sun sets, our minibus loads up and threads its way along narrow country roads. As we pass verdant cornfields, our guide offers a running commentary:

Amish history begins in 1525 in Zurich and moves to North America when William Penn guarantees religious freedom to people settling his colony... Lancaster is home to the oldest and second largest Amish settlement in the world. An Ohio settlement is first; a Northern Indiana settlement is third... About 29,000 Amish live here. Most have large families, with seven children or more. Fifteen percent have more than 10 children... Despite all of the attractions and pressures of the outside world, more than 90 percent of Amish youths decide to keep their faith.

As we close in on our first stop, the driver tells us most Amish farmers work their fields with horses or mules because it helps keep farms small and therefore helps preserve the Amish way of life.

But Sam, the Amish farmer we're visiting, tells us more as we gather to watch the afternoon milking session in his barn. He shows visitors how diesel engines power the milking machines' vacuum pumps and run the freon compressor that keeps the milk cold until it's collected.

He adds, "We have to make sure our milk doesn't test too high for bacteria and doesn't contain antibiotics. The dairy takes samples and checks them. If there's trouble, I have trouble.

"If our milk is too high in bacteria, I'll be penalized. The dairy will not collect my next load of milk," he says. "If it tests positive for antibiotics and has been poured into the tanker with all of the other milk that's been collected, I have to pay for the whole load-- \$8,000 to \$12,000. You can see why we're very careful," he explains.

As he describes milking his herd of 30 cows twice a day -- at 4:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.-- he jokes, "I wish someone would invent a five-day cow so I could have weekends off."

As a young city-slicker swats at flies circling his head he asks, "Why are there so many flies?"

"Welcome to farm life," Sam answers.

At our second stop, Sylvia shares her craft of soap-making with visitors who crowd into her kitchen.

"Practically everyone made their own soap at one time," she explains. "It was the way to use tallow or lard that was left over from butchering."

She pours cranberry oil into a fresh batch of soap and pours the mixture into a wooden mold to cure.

"There are lye soaps and fancy soaps," she says. "Different people need different soaps. We have 13 children and each one's skin is different."

Among the kinds she makes are goat's milk and ground almond, lavender, sweet orange and honey oatmeal. While some visitors quickly purchase a few of her soaps, others explore the family's beautifully groomed flower and vegetable garden and coax a farm kitten to come close enough to be petted.

At our third and final stop, we sit in a circle and take turns answering John and Sylvia's question about where we're from. Although a few of us confessed nervousness while en route to the face-to-face conversation, inhibitions melt away quickly.

John tells the group he has given up farming.

"Milk prices have dropped to the lowest point in 30 years while my costs to produce it have tripled," he says. He and his sons have taken other jobs.

"Will any of your sons go back to farming?" asks one visitor.

"I doubt it. They're making more each week than they'll ever make at farming," he answers.

Sylvia mentions that her sister is no longer Amish.

"We still talk when we can. We just don't discuss church things," she says.

Our hosts answer questions about Amish courtship. That's a Sunday evening activity when young people (16 and older) attend "socials." Almost all, they say, will meet their mates at these functions.

They express concerns, too: about cell phones distracting drivers and endangering everyone else on the road ... about needing to widen berms so that all the buggy's wheels will remain on paved road when they move over to let other vehicles pass... about drivers who blow their car horns or cut back into traffic so sharply after passing the buggies that they frighten and endanger the horses.

As a horse and buggy clatter past the home's open window, Sylvia answers a final question: "Do you worry about your children deciding to leave the Amish community for our world?"

There's an uneasy pause, until Sylvia answers, "We're concerned. We hope and trust that they will be satisfied. Even though the grass might seem greener on the other side, it mows just as hard."