

Just Plain hospitable

Families open homes, businesses to give visitors a more personal view of the Amish way of life

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Art made from vegetables is on display at Smucker's Gourd Farm outside Kinzers, in Salisbury Township.

Thirteen Englishers filed into an Amish home near Gordonville on a recent evening and perched politely on folding chairs. Sunset light speared through the open windows, bathing the front room in fiery orange. A clock chimed loudly. Amish. English. Separate worlds. What the heck were they going to talk about?

Then the Amish husband uncorked a joke. One story started tripping over another. The conversation rolled nimbly from root beer to motorcycles to stupid tourist tricks. Peals of laughter rang out.

By the time tour guide JoAnn Raber coaxed the visitors back into the van, dusk had swallowed the surrounding fields. Nobody wanted to leave. Chalk up another successful night on the Amish V.I.P. Tour.

That stands for Visit in Person, a new enterprise of the Amish Experience at Plain & Fancy Farm on Route 340, east of Bird-In-Hand. The idea is to offer visitors quality face time with real Amish farmers, craftsmen and families, said Brad Igou, who owns The Amish Experience with Bette Ranck and Chuck Romito.

"It's a way to humanize the Amish experience" in an intimate, personal setting that few tourists — or locals — ever know. For a Manhattanite to step into an Amish barn at milking time is "almost like going to another country," Igou said.

But both sides of the cultural divide profit by the exchange, he added. Common bonds trump the trappings of jobs, customs and religious beliefs. "The comment we hear is 'Wow, the Amish are people just like we are.' "

The tour was introduced as a pilot last year but ramped up to full speed in July. Excursions leave from the Amish Experience Theater at 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, through the end of October. Seating is limited to 14 people. Tickets cost \$39.95 and are generally targeted to adults. Cameras are banned. The daily tours are being paired this season with a separate Saturday-only Underground Railroad Tour.

Each V.I.P. excursion visits a farm and an Amish cottage industry, such as a weaving shop. The 3½-hour circuit on a recent Wednesday included stops at a dairy in Upper Leacock Township, a gourd crafting operation near Kinzers and the household near Gordonville.

Raber, who drove while delivering her Amish 101 lecture with a broad urban accent, said she retired here from the big city 10 years ago. "I speak New York," added Raber, who happened to be chauffeuring mostly fellow Empire Staters.

Visitor Sandra Riley said she was born in Kingston, Jamaica, but has long lived in New York. Two couples were visiting Lancaster County while on the way back to retirement homes in Florida. But the farthest-traveled guests were Olivier Klein and his two sons, Hugo and Nathanael, of Paris. Most of the group members were making their first foray to the land of pin-neat corn rows and no Sunday sales.

Stop one was the Riehl dairy farm outside the tiny settlement of Monterey. The V.I.P. group proceeded directly to the Riehls' bank barn, which had a basketball hoop bolted to the siding. About 30 cows munched grain in low-ceilinged stalls. A young Amish woman demonstrated automated milking techniques. Her audience raised their hands to touch the flexible vacuum tube that channeled warm milk to a refrigerated tank.

No electric lines serve the building, Raber explained; power came from the diesel engine throbbing outside. Before she could continue, one of the 1,500-pound Holsteins licked her. "I told her to do that," the Amish woman joked.

Some of the guests headed to the garage to look at Amish buggies, which they found to be finely polished and crafted out of contemporary materials such as fiberglass and vinyl. "That's not what I expected," said Debbie Reese, a wide-eyed, red-haired woman from Sarasota, Fla. "I expected plain Jane."

Bob Waite, raised on a dairy farm in the Lake Champlain Valley of Vermont, said he was impressed by the lushness of the

Amish countryside and the toughness of Amish feet. "I can't believe [the farm woman] walking around the barn in her bare feet," Waite said.

Back on the bus, Raber fielded a flurry of questions about Amish life. Do Englishers often convert to the Amish church? Not according to Raber, who said fewer than 100 outsiders have ever done so.

Do shunned people ever return to the fold? "Yes," Raber said, "you can come home. It's a long way home and tough on the knees."

Riley's companion, Lloyd Riffkin, of New York City, reflected on the Riehls' well-equipped barn and puzzled over the dearth of diesel-powered Amish vehicles.

Local Old Order Amish do not drive cars for the same reason they do not ride bikes, Raber explained. Church members venerate home and family life. They ride in cars but they do not own vehicles that can quickly remove them from that orbit. "You don't want to do everything in a hurry, hurry, hurry," said Raber, heading east toward White Horse.

The road was a groove through deep corn. The sky had muddied, and a few rain drops splashed against the windshield. Amish commuters bobbed by on foot-powered scooters. Dairy cows seemed to pose in the distance.

The next stop was the farm of Levi Smucker, who had ditched his 40-cow herd. Gourds are his livelihood now, the straw-hatted entrepreneur told the V.I.P.ers while leaning casually in the doorway of his shop. He said it all started more than 15 years ago when a man from Mississippi pulled into his driveway at 317 Springville Road, Kinzers.

The Southerner was curious about Amish people and intent on striking up a conversation. (It was just the kind of potentially disruptive encounter that seldom bears fruit, according to Igou.) However, in this case, it did. Smucker said he became "very good friends" with the guy, who introduced him to gourds.

Now, Smucker and his wife grow thousands of the vegetables, which he washes, dries, hollows out and sells as birdhouses and decorations. Their daughters paint lighthouses on the hulls, and horses and flowers and birds. "It was a hobby at first," the Amish man said, "but it grew into an amazing business."

A few people bought handsome pieces to take home. "It's like some kind of movie, isn't it?" said Raber, gazing upon the multitude of gourds. "The Pods!"

She led the way back to the bus and drove to the last stop of the evening, at the home of John and Anna Stoltzfus. Those are pseudonyms; the couple asked that their last name not be used. Despite their reluctance to be singled out in print, the Stoltzfuses were gregarious and quick-witted.

John jumped right into leg-pulling mode as the V.I.P. tour arrived at the antique shop behind his house. "Why don't you hit the switch so those folks can see?" John asked innocently. A visitor automatically turned to flip on the lights before remembering: "Oh yeah! The Amish don't have electricity!"

Seated in the living room, the group looked around curiously. "Our vision of what your life is is what we see on television," offered Debbie Reese's husband, Ron Reese.

John Stoltzfus recalled the time that passers-by stopped him while he was mowing his yard. "Those people were so puzzled," Stoltzfus said. They were shocked to learn about Amish refrigerators and Amish bathrooms. The tourists also thought that Amish couples slept in a bed with a board in the middle, a custom that went out with the Middle Ages.

The Stoltzfuses readily discussed their day-to-day lives, including how John had "robbed the cradle" by marrying Anna when she was 19. The conversation moved on to transportation. "I'm not a saddlebred man," John pronounced with alacrity. "I like a standardbred. They come off the race track and they go faster. I don't like to waste time on the road." And no wonder. John works 10-hour days as a mason.

His wife had overslept by 30 minutes that morning and still got up at 5. She makes and sells root beer, gardens and cans food (pickles yesterday, corn today) and, of course, hosts V.I.P. guests. "We did it once last summer," she said. "We enjoyed it so much. We get a kick out of it."

V.I.P. Tour tickets may be purchased in advance at the Amish Experience Theater, 3121 Old Philadelphia Pike, Route 340 at Plain & Fancy Farm, Bird-in-Hand, PA 17505; or by calling 717-768-3600, ext. 210; or visiting www.AmishExperience.com.