

Amish V.I.P. Tour

BY PETER CRESCENTI

Have you ever wanted to get up close and personal with a member of Pennsylvania Dutch Country's Amish community? Now you can, with the Amish V.I.P. Tour. V.I.P. stands for Visit in Person, and that's exactly what you do.

"The V.I.P. tour is not like a regular tour where we stop at Amish shops for the purpose of buying crafts or baked goods," says Brad Igou, president of Amish Country Tours. "This tour is really designed to provide close personal interaction with the Amish. The result is that the Amish are seen as real people, dispelling many of the preconceptions and myths so many of us have of them. This is not about re-creating another culture, visiting a replica Amish farm, or having people dress up and impersonate characters. This is meeting real people one-on-one, where they live and work."

The tour, which takes a maximum of 14 people per trip, leaves from the Amish Experience Theater in Bird-in-Hand (next to the Plain & Fancy restaurant), Mon. through Fri. at 5 p.m., and it lasts about three hours.

Our first stop was at Sam and Susie Riehl's 36-acre dairy farm, where the affable Sam gives a primer on getting milk from cows to the breakfast table. The Amish don't use electricity, so all the machinery—from the vacuum pump that extracts milk from the cows to the cooling tank—is run on diesel power. The Riehls support themselves on milk sales and income from Susie's crafts shop.

But fewer than half the Amish own farms, so most of them earn a living as craftsmen or tradesmen, or in retail. Amos Stoltzfus, for instance, is a metal worker by day and a carpet weaver by night. He works on a compressed-air loom built by his father. The second stop on the tour might also visit a basket weaver, soap maker, gourd farmer (he paints and sells them), blacksmith or wood worker. There's a conversation about what these Amish do, not a lecture, and where appropriate guests are invited to give the work a try.

The final stop for most visitors will be the most intriguing. You're invited into the home of an Amish family, to spend an hour chatting in their living room. Fourteen chairs circle the room as the Amish—in our case John and Sylvia Lantz—reveal much about their family, faith and culture. John, a former dairy farmer, works in a natural-foods store, and Sylvia makes crafts and jellies. Their two young daughters make lovely greeting cards.

A propane lamp in the dining room provides the only light in the house. John opens a window and says he's putting on the air conditioning.




But like more and more Amish, they're tapping into solar power. John says that Amish don't own cars, but there is no prohibition against them riding in one.

Every Amish we met along the way wanted to know where each of us was from, and once the formalities were out of the way, the Q&A began. John told us about his work, and then someone asked about language. The Amish speak three: English, German and Pennsylvania Dutch.

Sylvia spoke enthusiastically about Amish wedding traditions. Amish are married in their parents' homes, only on Tuesdays or Thursdays. There are anywhere between 300 and 500 invited guests, and to accommodate them, Amish homes are emptied of virtually everything that isn't nailed down. Quickie extensions are built onto the house, too. A walk-in cooler is rented to store the food, and three stoves are rented to cook it. Stuffed chicken is the main dish.

Witness, the Harrison Ford movie about a hunted cop who hides out in Amish country, is the closest most of us have come to seeing the Amish as individuals. Now there's a better way, among people who are as happy to meet you as you are to understand them.

Tours run June through October. For dates and ticket information, call 717/768-3600, ext. 210 or visit AmishExperience.com. 

Peter Crescenti is the executive editor of this magazine.

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