

GO DEEP

IN SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA



By Crystal Smith Hammon

Pennsylvania's mountainous Laurel Highlands draw all kinds of travelers, especially those who like to immerse themselves in a region, not simply to see its highlights, but to acquire a deeper understanding of a culture, a way of life. Whether you gulp it all at once from a giant goblet, or sip it from a tiny thimble in multiple trips, this 3,000-square-mile region of southwestern Pennsylvania has an embarrassment of nourishing beauty and experiences.

If you can travel in autumn, so much the better. The Great Allegheny Mountains of Fayette, Westmoreland and Somerset counties consistently rank among America's top fall foliage destinations, especially during the last two weeks of October. "If I ever have an accident while driving, it won't be because I'm texting," one local resident said. "It'll be because I'm gawking at the view."

In any season, the convergence of art and nature within the Laurel Highlands is notable.

Nobody highlights that marriage better than one of America's most influential aesthetes, Frank Lloyd Wright. Wallow in Wright's famous ken for bringing the natural world indoors at *Fallingwater*, *Kentuck Knob* and *Polymath Park Resort*. Hustle and you can manage all three sites in one day, but you'll need to plan ahead. Each site offers tours by reservation only.

Wright was an agnostic who identified God with Nature—with a capital N. He viewed form and function as a spiritual union. Perhaps that's why people sometimes describe their first sight of Fallingwater as a sacrament comparable to receiving the eucharist.

Nearby *Ohiopyle State Park* is a dream for hikers and kayakers. For everyone else, there's a stellar observation deck on Main Street in the tiny town of Ohiopyle. Waterfall fanatics, don't leave the vicinity without stops at Cucumber Falls, Upper and Lower Jonathan Run Falls and Fechter Run Falls.

This splendor is an easy drive from a pri-



vate fishing lake and lots of trails for hiking and mountain biking at *Oak Lodge*, an 800-acre retreat in rural Stahlstown, where you can choose between cabins and hotel-style rooms. The cabins are anything but rustic, with heated floors, hot tubs, fireplaces and screened-in porches. Before you turn in for the night, linger with hot chocolate or an adult beverage on your porch. Breakfast at The Café comes with your stay, but it's only open for dinner seasonally.

Plan ahead and you won't be left to forage for dinner. The masterminds behind the Frank Lloyd Wright experience at



Polymath Park Resort, Heather and Tom Papinchak, orchestrate a coveted, reservation-only dining experience at *TreeTops Restaurant*. They combine award-winning cuisine with tours of Polymath Park Resort, which has been featured on *CBS Sunday Morning*.

American art and history collide in Westmoreland County.

American history buffs will find compelling historical yarns in Greensburg and surrounding Westmoreland County com-

munities. The region's identity was profoundly shaped by agrarian landscape and the early coal and coke industry. Its culture is beautifully conveyed at *The Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Breaking Ground: Landscape and Labor in Southwestern Pennsylvania*. The Westmoreland marks its 65th anniversary in 2024 with 65@65, opening on February 11.

A short walk from The Westmoreland, relax in elegant B&B accommodations at *The Grandeur Estate*, a mansion built in the early 1900s by coke and coal magnate, Thomas Lynch. The Lynch family sold the sprawling property in 1945. It served as office space for an insurance company for several decades.

Owner/innkeepers Tony and Julia Taneja purchased it in 2020 and embarked on an uncompromising restoration before opening it as The Grandeur Estate in 2023. The couple's extraordinary warmth is a splendid counterpoint to 17 opulent suites. Exquisite mahogany woodwork and gold-leaf ceilings adorn the B&B's common areas. In an intriguing twist, the original owner commissioned a Tiffany window depicting his grandparents' farm in Dungarven, Ireland. At some point, the window was removed. In 2001 it was rediscovered at an auction and acquired by The Westmoreland, where it now hangs.

With The Grandeur Estate as home base, explore nearby Latrobe, the birthplace of the droolworthy banana split and two American icons, *golflegend Arnold Palmer* and the arbiter of goodness, *Mister Rogers*. The local airport is named for Palmer, whose statue stands outside the main terminal. Drive past two private homes where Rogers was born and raised, or see an open exhibit that memorializes him on the upper floor of the *Fred M. Rogers Center at Saint Vincent College*. Another local gem is the *Lincoln Highway Experience*, a deep dive into America's first coast-to-coast highway, designated in 1913, when Americans began to explore the U.S. from sea to shining sea, empowered by new roads and the first automobiles.



Nemacolin: A Destination All Its Own

If you have a champagne pocketbook, book at *Nemacolin* in Farmington, Pennsylvania. This 2,200-acre haven is the epitome of luxury, landing it as a favorite on many lists of high-end resorts. To wit: Nemacolin's Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired, AAA Five Diamond hotel, *Falling Rock*, has 24-hour butler service. *The Grand Lodge* at Nemacolin reopened reimagined suites near the end of 2023.

The once-private retreat was purchased in the mid-1980s by the founder of 84 Lumber Company, Joseph Hardy, who died on his 100th birthday in 2023. Now managed by his daughter Maggie and grandson P.J., Nemacolin has every imaginable amenity, from championship golf courses to a working zoo. It's also the backdrop for a dazzling, sometimes whimsical, \$45 million art collection, which you can tour by appointment.

In the lobby of *Falling Rock*—in the wild, so to speak—I counted 14 Tiffany lamps. "Aren't you afraid a child will come along and break one?" I asked Amanda Shane, art and gallery director at Nemacolin. "No," Shane laughs. "The Hardy family is really passionate about weaving art into life. They want it out in the open where guests can enjoy it."

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