

where time stands still

Embrace the simple way of life with a trip to Amish country in Iowa, Indiana and Illinois.

—By Linda Egenes



(Clockwise, from top) buggy rides, an Amish boy making his way home, a horse-drawn buggy road sign.

You know you've arrived in Amish country when signs alert you to share the road with horse-drawn buggies, and telephones and electricity are practically nonexistent.

In some rural Midwest Amish communities, it is common to park your car next to a hitching post, eat a meal with an Amish family, take a ride in a horse-drawn buggy or tour an Amish farm. In others, you can explore the back roads yourself, stopping to buy eggs at an Amish road stand, or pastries and jam at an Amish bakery. Either way, you'll step back in time and savor the simple charms of Amish country life.

FAMILY FRIENDLY

Amidst the gently rolling hills of south-east Iowa, the Amish community of approximately 800 in Bloomfield is thriving. Start your tour at the antiques-filled Davis County Welcome Center, set in a historic 1910 Sears, Roebuck and Co. mail-order house. There, you'll find maps to nearby Amish businesses.

Yoder's Kountry Korner is the largest store in the area. Housed in a new, Amish-crafted building with an expansive rough-hewn pine porch, the store has an eclectic display of Amish-made indoor and outdoor furniture, miniature and full-size wagons, horse tack and quilts. At the doorway, giant chimes ring in the wind like church bells.



amish faith

Called “The Plain People,” the Amish originally came to America from Germany and German Switzerland in search of religious freedom. The first Amish settled in Pennsylvania in 1736, and now an estimated 180,000 Old Order Amish and other Amish denominations are spread throughout 22 states.

Following a literal interpretation of the Bible, the Amish value family, community and faith, and shun worldly things. In isolated rural communities separate from mainstream society, they make their living by farming or working with their hands. They speak German as their first language; dress in modest, antiquated clothing; and live without electricity, automobiles or telephones. From their bonnets to their buggies, they try as much as possible to live as their 17th-century forefathers did.

“We get people from as far away as Colorado and North Carolina,” says co-owner Enos Yoder, a shy, bearded young man dressed in traditional Amish garb—denim broadfall pants with suspenders, black vest and black hat. Like most Amish businessmen, Yoder relies on word-of-mouth advertising.

Listening to Yoder describe the business is a bit like hearing a recitation of the family tree. “My brother Jake and I bought the business two years ago,” he says. Another brother crafts the miniature wagons, and still another makes the store’s harnesses, bridles and collars. Their mother, Lydia Yoder, stitches the quilts with her helpers.

Heading toward Drakesville, you’ll pass a one-room Amish schoolhouse

and spacious, white-washed Amish homes. Amish families average eight children, and many farms include a smaller home for the grandparents called a “grossdawdy” house in German. If there’s washing on the line and a black buggy in the driveway, you know you’re looking at an Amish farm.

Graber’s Country Store and Discount Foods is the next stop. The Amish love a bargain, and one section of the store is filled with salvaged goods from groceries to building tools.

“We sell to both Amish and ‘English,’” says Mattie Detweiler, an Amish woman who with her husband, Joe, has worked part-time at the store for five years.





(Clockwise, from left) Menno-Hof Visitors Center, Deutsch Kase Haus cheeses, horse-drawn buggy.

Amish people buy irons that run on gas and Coleman kerosene lanterns to avoid using electricity. Amish straw hats, a huge assortment of men's work boots and original versions of the *Dick and Jane* readers also sell well.

HOMEMADE HOSPITALITY

Shipshewana, Indiana, a small town of only 537 residents, is the heart of the third-largest Amish population in America, with more than 19,000 Amish throughout LaGrange and Elkhart counties.

"Most homes have porches and rocking chairs, where people can watch the world go by," says Beth Thornburg, executive director of the LaGrange County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "There are hitching rails to tie

up horse-and-buggies all over town. It's not unusual to see 15 buggies in a row."

Start your tour at the Menno-Hof Visitors Center, an interactive museum set in an Amish-style house and barn. Here you can explore multimedia exhibits on the Amish faith and climb inside a replica of a 17th-century ship Amish and Mennonites took to America. Inside the Amish kitchen, there are Amish bonnets and broad-brimmed straw hats. Feel free to copy recipes and peek inside the cupboards.

"The Menno-Hof was started in 1988 by a group of concerned people who wanted to tell our story in a better way," says Joseph Yoder, the visitor center's director of five years. Like many of the town's residents, Yoder's parents were Amish, and he is now a member of the

closely related Mennonite faith, also characterized by the simple way of life.

From the museum you can head to the Deutsch Kase Haus, a German cheese house founded in 1979 by local businessmen, including an Amish family. "It was started to ensure a market for the Amish dairy farmers in the area," explains Dick Bylsma, head of

know before you go

Just as when you visit a different country, it's good to know something about Amish customs when you visit an Amish community. Ask permission before photographing Amish people, their homes, farms and businesses. Remember that the Amish keep Sundays for worship, so plan your trip for other days of the week, when Amish shops are open.



Trust in your neighbor is a refreshing sight.

Canadian cooperative, sells 21 varieties of cheese, 11 of which are made onsite, including Colby, Pepper Jack and a vegetable cheese made with nine different dried vegetables. Many mornings, you can watch the cheese being made through a window.

Ready for lunch? Try Amish home-cooking at Auction Restaurant, or stop at the Blue Gate Restaurant to sample Amish-style homemade noodles, chicken pot pie and Amish peanut butter spread on homemade bread. After lunch, shop for Amish-made crafts at Reigsecker's Marketplace or take a ride in an Amish horse-drawn buggy.

sales. The store, now owned by a

Tours must be scheduled in advance and require a minimum of 10 people, although the staff tries to group people together.

"Because this community is plain and not filled with tourist attractions, you have a chance to see how the Amish really live," says Eads.

Armed with a map of Amish businesses, stop first at Wilson's, where Willard Helmuth and his sons assemble kitchen cabinets. From an upstairs room, you can watch the Amish carpenters working below. Showrooms include Amish-crafted furniture, quilts and novelty items such as lazy Susans, banana hangers and an ingenious wooden breadbasket that collapses into a trivet when not in use.

"You'll find that Amish furniture makers do use machines," says Theresa Binion, an Amish descendent who is director of the Arthur Amish Country Visitor's Information Center. "But they're run by compressed air rather than electricity."

Beachy's Bulk Food and Bakery, outside of Arthur, is owned by an Amish family and attracts both Amish and "English" looking for bargains. Rows of dry goods such as noodles, dried fruits, baking goods and candy line the shelves. Your mouth will water at the Saturday morning display of Amish-baked items, from snickerdoodles to sticky buns and pies. Bring some home for a sweet memory of your trip to Amish country. ●

amish events

KALONA FALL FESTIVAL

September 29–30, Kalona, Iowa
Kalona Historical Village
kalonaiowa.org

Set near the largest Amish settlement west of the Mississippi, this event features homemade food, demonstrations of Old World crafts and entertainment. Visit the Amish Grandpa House and Iowa Mennonite Museum and Archives inside the historical village.

OLD FASHION FARMING DAY

July 29, Shipshewana, Indiana

Hosted by an Amish family on a historic Amish farm, this event features demonstrations of wheat threshing, corn shredding, hay cutting and horse shoeing. It includes lunch prepared by Amish school students.

MENNONITE RELIEF SALE

August 25–26, Arthur
Otto Center in Illinois

This event offers auctions, Amish and Mennonite-made meals, homemade ice cream and opportunities to buy Amish-made furniture and goods. All proceeds go to third-world countries and local charities.

CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

The town of Arcola, just west of Interstate 57 in central Illinois, is a good place to start your tour of Illinois Amish country, which includes 4,500 Amish in surrounding areas. The town's brick streets, 19th-century buildings and globe streetlights give it a vintage look. "It's a laid-back atmosphere, a step back in time," says Susan Foster, executive director of the Arcola Chamber of Commerce and Tourist Information Center.

At the Illinois Amish Interpretive Center, exhibits help you learn about the Amish lifestyle and culture. A film by renowned photographer Raymond Bial honors the Amish with portrayals of their Amish faith and lifestyle through artistic renditions of clothing, homes, plain furniture and other artifacts of Amish life.

"The best way to have personal contact with Amish families is to sign up for a meal or tour of an Amish home or farm," advises Stella Eads, director of the interpretive center and Amish Country Tours.



CALL, CLICK OR VISIT

AAA can help you map your journey through these Amish communities. Click on aaa.com for TripTik routings, TourBooks or hotel reservations.

Linda Egenes is author of *Visits With the Amish: Impressions of the Plain Life*.