

Nature adventures and history in Jim Thorpe, PA

Art and exercise blend to create a summer vacation not soon forgotten

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Looking for nearby adventure for our summer vacation, we headed across the George Washington Bridge, west on Route 80, to Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania. Jim Thorpe is nestled in the Pocono Mountains, alongside the Lehigh River. It is a historic town, surrounded by abundant opportunities for nature adventures.

Originally named Mauch Chunk (Mountain of the Sleeping Bear), the town was in its heyday in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as it was the center of anthracite coal mining and the Lehigh Valley Railroad which transported the coal. The wealth of the town at the turn of the 20th century is reflected in magnificent mansions and formidable churches whose spires are highlighted against the lush mountainside.

Tourists were drawn to Mauch Chunk by the mountains, river, and the famous Switchback Gravity Railroad. This 18-mile track, originally designed to transport coal, became America's first roller coaster. At the time, the town was the second most popular tourist destination in the United States, after Niagara Falls.

When the Great Depression hit, it ruined Mauch Chunk's economy for many years. In the 1950s, the town changed its name to Jim Thorpe in memory of the renowned Olympian who was considered the greatest athlete of the century. This change and the

creation of an inspiring Jim Thorpe memorial on the east side of town was an effort to bring the tourists back.

Gradually, tourists have returned, attracted by the restored historic buildings, the creation of a beautiful bike trail along the Lehigh River, the growing popularity of whitewater rafting and kayaking on the river, and the establishment of art galleries and innovative restaurants.

We coasted down the Lehigh River Gorge bike trail for 25 miles while taking in the scenery of the steep, tree-covered mountainside leading down to the white water below. An occasional waterfall brought a welcomed, refreshing blast of cool air. When we reached the bottom of the trail, rather than turning around to head back uphill, we were picked up by the Pocono Whitewater Rafting van (www.whitewater rafting.com) and driven back to our car.

We were so impressed by the staff and equipment of Pocono Whitewater that we rafted down the Lehigh River with them the next day. Enthusiastic river guides provided some local commentary as we drifted down the Class I and II (gentle

"rapids," occasionally engaging in water fights with the other rafters to cool off.

We were told that thrill seekers can experience more powerful rapids further upstream, especially on scheduled dam release weekends. Again, the humorous and helpful staff, excellent equipment and

emphasis on safety were impressive.

Over the past 20 years we have stayed at dozens of bed and breakfasts, but had a unique and inspiring experience staying at Hill Home Forge (www.hillhomeforge.com). This art gallery/B&B alone was worth the trip to Jim Thorpe. Both Nic and Eileen East are gifted artists who built their magical haven using Olympian feats of imagination. Their sprawling contemporary home, situated on the forest-covered mountainside just five minutes from town, is a feast for the eyes (and the stomach).

Nic is a master of stained glass and his geometric creations decorate many of the windows, doors and lamps. Ironwork sculptures incorporating common objects such as gears and computer parts are found in a sculpture garden. Wood carvings which incorporate ingenious Escher-esque designs are delightful surprises. An expansive deck with homemade furniture looks out over the forest and was the perfect place to relax after a long hike.

The Woodland Suite and Woodland Loft are exceptional rooms offering king sized beds, vaulted ceilings, powerful A/Cs, remote controlled ceiling fans, electric fireplaces, and of course, more art. The suite has a pull-out couch, dining area and kitchenette stocked with microwave, refrigerator and colorful ceramic plates.

Eileen is an outstanding cook and offers a choice of fruit-loaded Belgian waffles, French toast stuffed with caramelized apples (don't miss it), and omelets cooked to order. All ingredients come from a local, organic farm and are fresh and delicious.

Attached to their house is a vast studio where the Easts offer anything from a short tour to week-long classes in creating stained glass or jewelry. Nic and

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Eileen provide a window into the art world, not only in their own home, but through their recommendations of restaurants/art galleries in town.

On the other side of town awaits a more traditional Victorian style B&B called Angel of the Morning (www.angelofthemorningbb.com). The owner, Rosemary Fauzio, is an angel herself. A coal miner's daughter who grew up in the area, she had a career in sales in New Jersey, and then decided to return home and open a bed and breakfast two and a half years ago.

Her home radiates her own personal warmth and builds on an angel motif. The Angel Suite has a queen-sized bed and an adjoining room with a powerful Jacuzzi. We especially appreciated a relaxing soak after returning from our long bike ride. The Anthracite Suite features a king-sized bed and beautiful wooden wall-to-wall cabinets.

Breakfast is served in the dining room at an antique table, under a beautiful chandelier. On one wall is a floor-to-ceiling mirror which is framed in ornately carved mahogany. We were served fresh berries with yogurt, delicious buckwheat pancakes and a scrumptious egg dish. Fauzio provided an enlightening view back to the days of coal mining in Mauch Chunk as her family owned 40 acres of anthracite coal mines. She, too, had excellent restaurant recommendations.

Our favorite restaurants included Café Origins (www.cafeorigins.com), Moya (www.jimthorpemoya.com), Flow (www.thecccp.org) and Macaluso's (www.macalulosdining.net).

Café Origins, which is decorated with a Thai Temple theme, smells vaguely of incense, plays soothing music and serves wonderful salads, wraps and smoothies.

Flow is built into the mountainside (which can be viewed by dining outdoors in the back), and sits directly over a mountain stream (which can be viewed through a window in the floor of the restaurant). Flow serves delicious salads and creative entrees. Flow's owners also run an art gallery next door. Part of the display in the gallery is Victor Stabin's series of U.S. postage stamps featuring prominent scientists.

Also of interest in the town of Jim Thorpe is the Old Jail Museum (which is the site of the hanging of the Molly Maguires, immortalized in a Sean Connery movie of the same name), Mauch Chunk Museum, Old Mauch Chunk Model Train Display, old-fashioned train rides along the Lehigh River, the Italianate Asa Packer Mansion and the Mauch Chunk Opera House, still host to concerts and plays.

We left Jim Thorpe well-exercised, well-fed, relaxed and inspired to go home and do an art project.