

# Life & Culture

TRAVEL

## Brandywine Valley: A great weekend trip



The Hotel Du Pont in downtown Wilmington, Delaware, opened in 1913, is a truly elegant experience, transporting visitors to a bygone era. Shown here is the hotel's recently (and gently) refurbished lobby. Courtesy of Hotel Du Pont

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Nicole Pensiero For South Jersey Times

Sometimes you find a treasure in your own backyard, so to speak. In our case, this girlfriends' getaway to the beautiful Brandywine Valley — less than an hour's drive — was to someplace we'd only visited previously in dribs and drabs: a holiday season visit to Longwood Gardens for one friend; a long-ago afternoon admiring Linda McCartney's photography at the Delaware Art Museum for me. After a few hours exploring the region, we were asking ourselves why we hadn't done this sooner.

Named for a river that in its upper reaches is as slender as a creek, the Brandywine Valley stretches 35 miles from the rolling hills of southeast Pennsylvania to the northern part of Wilmington, Delaware. The entire region, as we quickly discovered during our two-day visit, is steeped in history, beauty and culture. Plus, it's fun.

Travel almost anywhere in the region, and you're likely to encounter the name du Pont. The first member of this notable clan to arrive in America, Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, emigrated from France in 1799. Three years later, one of his sons, Eleuthère Irénée, established a gunpowder plant beside the Brandywine River in Delaware, which you can still visit (the Hagley Museum). By the early 20th century, the family business had grown into the world's largest chemical company. The du Ponts eventually became one of the richest families in America. They poured a good deal of their wealth into their homes and into philanthropic endeavors; their "fingerprint" is found nearly everywhere in the Brandywine Valley.

### MUST-SEE SITES

For our getaway, we were determined to fit Winterthur in our schedule so we could check

out the special exhibit, "Costuming 'The Crown,'" about the fashions for the popular Netflix series about the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. Yet we knew that it would just be one of several stops during our weekend visit; the big challenge was narrowing down the list of things to see and do.

The historic and magnificent Hotel Du Pont, located in downtown Wilmington, proved the perfect jumping off point for our weekend adventure. The Grand Dame of downtown Wilmington, the Hotel Du Pont opened in 1913, and remains a true "Gilded Age" icon. Host to everyone from Amelia Earhart to John F. Kennedy to Reese Witherspoon, it is the epitome of elegance and charm. The 12-story hotel's breathtaking Gold Ballroom — which plays host to countless weddings and special events throughout the year — reminded me of something you'd find in a European palace.

The holiday season is the Hotel Du Pont's busiest time and there are plenty of events on the calendar, a Breakfast with Santa (Nov. 30) and holiday season brunch every Sunday in December. The Hotel Du Pont is also home to a recently opened food court, called Deco; check out Spark'd, a pastry shop led by Leah Steinberger, the hotel's executive pastry chef. (Be sure to try the macaroons.)

We were surprised to learn there's also a 1,250-seat theater located inside of the Hotel Du Pont, called the Playhouse on Rodney Square. In addition to a full schedule of Broadway touring productions, there are also several holiday-themed shows coming up, including a performance by Mannheim Steamroller on Dec. 1 and The Illusionists: Magic of the Holidays from Dec. 13-15. The Playhouse, which opened in conjunction with the hotel in 1913, is only two blocks away from the Grand Opera House on Market Street,

another popular venue featuring live music.

On our first evening in Wilmington, we strolled down Market Street to a buzz-worthy restaurant called Bardea Food & Drink. The fact that this expansive, 120-seat restaurant and bar was packed on a Thursday night was a clue that we were in for a great meal. Bardea, which opened last year, offers modern interpretations of traditional Italian and Mediterranean dishes, served in portions ideal for sharing. We feasted on an array of delicious dishes, ranging from pizza to pasta.

The next morning, we enjoyed a "down home" diner breakfast at Libby's Restaurant, a popular, cash-only eatery popular with locals. It was certainly not fancy, but we enjoyed a great breakfast at a great price. We had another excellent meal while exploring the region at the Centreville Café, a combination café and gourmet food store that offered especially tasty quiches. The highlight of our culinary adventures was dinner in the Green Room, which had us equally dazzled by the cuisine, the décor and the service.

### EXPLORING THE AREA

Some highlights of our two days exploring the region include:

The **Nemours Estate**, a 77-room mansion, and the largest formal French gardens in North America. Built in 1909-10 by Alfred I. du Pont for his second wife, Alicia (in an apparent attempt to win her love), the opulent Louis XVI-style chateau reflects the family's French heritage. Modeled after the Palace of Versailles, the five-story mansion features marble floors, a bowling alley, billiards room and an antique car collection in a nearby chauffeur's garage. The estate features nearly 200 acres of scenic woodland and is worth spending several hours to explore. We especially enjoyed the introductory film about

the life of Alfred du Pont and his three marriages — the last of which proved rewardingly happy for the millionaire philanthropist. Home and garden tours are both offered.

Located on 1,000 acres of rolling meadows, hills and gardens, **Winterthur** (pronounced "winter-tour"), is the former home of collector and horticulturist Henry Francis du Pont, and is a premier museum of American decorative arts. Along with the 175-room mansion, there are also 60 acres of gardens and meadows, as well as an area called the "Enchanted Woods," a magical children's garden complete with a flower labyrinth, fairy cottage and Troll Bridge. We were enthralled with the special exhibit, "Costuming 'The Crown,'" which will be at Winterthur until early January. Some 40 costumes from the television series are on display, along with interactive film clips and information about the research and detail that went into each outfit. Any fan of the show — and even those who have only heard of it, but are interested in the royal family — will find this exhibit quite fascinating.

The **Delaware Art Museum**, which has an elaborate collection of pre-Raphaelite art, as well as works by Wilmington native, painter Howard Pyle, who was hugely influential to his student, N.C. Wyeth, best known as an illustrator of classic children's books until his death in 1945. The artwork of the three generations of Wyeths — N.C.; his son Andrew, and Andrew's son, Jamie — are the focus of the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

We decided that we need more time to further explore the beautiful Brandywine Valley, a slice of culture and beauty right in our own backyard.

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