

Summer is an ideal time to explore State College



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Stephanie Kalina-Metzger/For The

A water lily sits in the pond at the Botanical Gardens in State College.

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STATE COLLEGE — State College isn't just for university students. It's a great place to visit if you are short on time, but yearning for a change of scenery.

During a recent overnight excursion, my husband and I took a leisurely stroll around town to window shop and enjoy a bite to eat downtown before visiting The Arboretum at Penn State. Afterward, we donned our helmets, safety vests and sneakers to zip around Tussey Mountain on Segways before returning to the Nittany Lion Inn where we enjoyed dinner on the terrace at Whiskers before settling in for a relaxing overnight stay.

Shopping and dining

Downtown is perfect for poking around, and parking is plentiful and relatively inexpensive. The three parking garages located in downtown State College are easily accessible and open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Visit on a Sunday and parking is free, except during certain special events, or Penn State home football weekends. You won't pay an arm and a leg for rates that cost \$1 per hour from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and are half price during the hours in between.

Should you wish to kick off your day with a little caffeine, you'll easily find the brew for you. Because this is a college town, there are no shortages of coffee shops. Whether your taste buds prefer organic, exotic or Dunkin' Donuts, you'll have a variety of coffee choices. Do yourself a favor, though, and treat a friend to Saint's Café to share a mile-high, multi-layered slice of their sumptuous carrot cake. You'll thank me for the tip, trust me.

Searching for a unique gift for that special someone? You'll likely find it here. Boutique shops line the streets and offer everything from jewelry, to kitchenware, used books, apparel and accessories.

Restaurants around town are plentiful as well and offer a wide variety of fare. Choose from ethnic cuisines like Indian, Thai or Greek, or just grab a quick bite from ubiquitous array of pizza and sub joints.

Arboretum at Penn State

During your trip, be sure to visit The Arboretum at Penn State, where you can stroll through the H.O. Smith Botanic Gardens, which are open from dawn to dusk. Parking is ample and free, and so is the self-guided tour.

Grab a map and a seasonal display plant list available at the entrance to guide your way among the flora. Allow yourself an hour to stroll the grounds and observe the many plants that line the walkways in between several specialty gardens. Take time to relax on a bench to observe the Oasis Garden, a raised pool filled with lotus plants and water lilies, or inhale the heady scents of the Rose and Fragrance Garden, which is comprised of more than 100 varieties of roses. Enjoy the bees and butterflies as they dance their way along the many flowers in the Pollinators' garden designed especially for them.

The "Childhood's Gate Children's Garden," which opened July 7, is sure to be a hit with children.

"It's a unique space for exploring nature, fostering wonder and celebrating the plants, animals and geography of Central Pennsylvania," said Kathleen Reeder, event and marketing coordinator. "Designed for visitors between the ages of 3 and 12, this garden will serve as a place for families to enjoy the outdoors, learn together and discover the natural world."

Highlights of the garden, which was five years in the making, include a glass house, a limestone cave and 200 varieties of trees and water features.

Happy Valley Segway Tour

Whether you just want to explore the Penn State campus, or take in the beauty of nature, Happy Valley Segway Tours Rodney Frazier and DrueAnne Schreyer are ready to give you the grand tour of whichever territory you prefer.

My husband and I opted for the Tussey Mountain Nature Tour on a new Segway X2 PT. The deeply treaded, larger tires on the X2 enable riders to traverse a variety of terrain from gravel to dirt and hills. After a brief lesson led by Frazier and Schreyer, we took off across the Tussey Mountain golf course, climbed the steep hill that skiers tackle in the winter and glided over the large scenic expanse of ground that hosts a variety of summer and winter activities.

During the last half of the trip, we climbed the steep mountain into Rothrock State Forest where we beheld the splendor of the wildflowers and the beauty of the mountain laurel and rhododendron.

Overnight accommodations

State College is home to a variety of overnight accommodations from bed and breakfasts to hotels available in a variety of price ranges.

The Hampton Inn and Suites was recently honored with the 2014 TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence Award for maintaining an average rating of four or higher out of a possible five, based on traveler reviews.

If you prefer to stay in a more historic hotel, the Nittany Lion Inn, a member of the National Trust Historic Hotels of America, is a good choice. Located on campus, the property is home to two on-site restaurants, “The Dining Room,” which offers an elegant dining experience and the more casual “Whiskers,” which contains a courtyard where patrons can dine al fresco on warm summer nights.

State College is known for its top notch fireworks display on the Fourth, and the wildly popular Arts Festival held in mid-July, which attracts about 100,000 visitors each summer.

There’s still time to mark your calendar for the upcoming 3rd annual Pennsylvania Organic FarmFest. The event, designed to foster awareness of sustainable living, will be held on Aug. 1-2 at the Grange Fairgrounds at Centre Hall. For more information, visit <http://farmfest.paorganic.org>.

Though it’s hard to believe that we’re halfway through the summer season, there’s still plenty of fine weather ahead for family fun, and State College is a great place for the outdoor explorer.

For learn more information on planning your own trip to the area, go to www.visitpennstate.org.