

Amish

Heritage Trail

By Emily Fagan #99408.



When Mark, my husband, and I found ourselves in Elkhart, Indiana, I was keen for a taste of the “real” Amish culture. But how? Asking this question at the Elkhart visitor center, I was handed the Amish Heritage Tour CD, which turned out to be a fantastic guided 90-mile loop tour through the small towns and picturesque farmlands that make up Amish country. Professionally recorded, this personal electronic escort proved to be a knowledgeable, charming and humorous tour guide. I popped the CD into our truck’s CD player, and suddenly we were swept away into the layered history of Elkhart County.

I had grabbed a map for the tour from the visitor center, but I never needed to consult it while Mark drove. The directions on the CD are easy to follow.

A woman’s voice indicates where to turn and when to hit the

pause button in anticipation of a specific landmark. A man’s voice describes the history of the area and explains what you are seeing out the window. Accompanied by sound effects, music and dramatizations of certain historical moments, the CD draws you into a history

that ranges from the discovery of the region by LaSalle in the late 1600s to the arrival of the railroad in the 1800s to the explosion of the RV industry in the last half century.

Eventually, as you wander onto Amish soil and leave the familiar and somewhat typical stories of American history behind, the CD tour guide changes gears, offering many insights into the lives led by the followers of Jakob Ammann.

Before embarking on the tour, we stopped at McDonald’s in Elkhart for a bite to eat. We had heard that

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first sighting of a black Amish buggy pulled by a black horse made us both jump and point “Wow, it’s real!”

The photos and articles in books and magazines had never been totally believable. Yet here it was. For all of the latest gizmos and gadgets, medical miracles and scientific breakthroughs that define American culture today, we still count among ourselves a group of people that quietly turn their backs on all that stuff.

“What a contrast. New versus old. Complex versus simple. Colorful versus plain.”

Elkhart was suffering due to the stalled RV industry, but a step inside this iconic fast-food joint proved just how special Elkhart is.

The Uniqueness of Elkhart

Featuring several flat-screen televisions, a two-sided fireplace and a cluster of comfy couches, this was not the golden arches of Anytown, USA. Elkhart is unique. Always the top producer of RVs from the first rickety trailers of the 1930s to the sleek machines of today, Elkhart is now responsible for half of all current RV manufacturing. And it has created these marvels of sophisticated mobile living while sharing loose borders with the Amish, a society that prizes the plain, simple, stationary life.

When the CD guided us out of Elkhart, we stopped briefly at Bonneyville Mill where beautiful beds of irises bloomed in a vibrant spray of color. We learned from our CD guide that Mr. Bonney had been done in by his lust for wealth.

After the railroad bypassed Bonney’s mill, thwarting his plans for it to become the center of a small city, he turned to counterfeiting, which was ultimately his undoing.

A life driven by that kind of ambition is unknown to the Amish, and with the next few turns in the road, we found ourselves deep in Amish country. The

Our CD tour guide admonished us for staring at their outfits and gawking at their buggies. “Avoid applying your sense of standards to their life choices. Show respect. Don’t take photos.”

I tuned the CD out as I concentrated on the back of the buggy in front of us. It was a large black wooden box sporting a bright red triangle. The box squatted between two large, black and slightly inwardly canted wheels. In front, a single black horse clip-clopped along.

New Versus Old

Bearing down on us from the opposite direction was a massive silver 18-wheel semi-tractor-trailer truck with dancing orange flames emblazoned on its front grill. Another semi was right behind it. What a contrast. New versus old. Complex versus simple. Colorful versus plain. Delivering goods as part of a vast cross-continental distribution network versus staying within the distance that one horse can trot before it tires.

The countryside unfolded before us in the rich greens and browns of Amish farmland and the clear blue and white of the sky above us. As more and more buggies appeared on the road, our CD tour guide told us about their customs.

The farmhouses are painted white because it is plain, unlike their red non-Amish counterparts. Church buildings don’t exist, and the three-hour church services take place every other Sunday

in each other’s homes. Children don’t attend school beyond the eighth grade, and if they are not yet the state-approved age for leaving school, they simply repeat eighth grade until they are old enough. The Amish score better than other children on standardized tests in all areas but vocabulary, and many speak a dialect of Swiss-German in addition to English.

The Amish don’t carry insurance and don’t pay into government insurance programs, as they never make workers’ compensation or social security claims. Instead, they rely on each other and take care of their elderly themselves. However, they do pay all the other taxes the rest of us pay.

I tried to get my head around these tidbits of information, but it all scattered as we passed an enormous bulk food co-op store housed in a mammoth industrial building. There were hitching posts running along the entire side of the building, and there were easily 30 or 40 black horses and buggies tied up while their owners were shopping. Suddenly the closeness of this community began to sink in.

Land of Hitching Posts and RVs

Buggies, not cars, were in the majority here. We passed a small building with a sign out front: “Dentist.”

Three horses and buggies were tied to the hitching posts while their owners got dental work done. There were hitching posts outside every store and buggies in every home’s driveway.

We turned onto a lane and found ourselves alongside a Jayco trailer holding area. Rows of identical Designers and Jay Feathers were lined up on the grass, ready to be delivered to dealerships around the country. Directly across the little lane was a classic white Amish farmhouse. Several buggies stood unhitched in front of the barn. The clothes line was filled with clothes flapping in the breeze. On the side of the house was a large vegetable garden where a bonneted woman was busy with a hoe. I had read that the Amish work in the Jayco factories. I hadn’t realized they also live next door.

Our tour guide on the CD suggested we stop at the Sunrise Bakery. What a great suggestion. We opened the door and floated inside, as if levitated by the aroma of fresh-baked pie. Behind a long counter lit by a sputtering gas lamp, a young boy in suspenders and two young girls in long dresses with aprons and bonnets were busily working at several large tables. Sleeves rolled up and arms covered with flour to their elbows, the girls were singing as they kneaded large lumps of dough. The sun streamed through the windows behind them, and the boy laughed as he said something in German that made the girls giggle.

Vivid Memories

I almost wanted to tip-toe out backwards, as I felt like an intruder on the most idyllic scene. I have never seen teenagers behave with such happy and free spirits. But the boy greeted us warmly when he saw us, and in perfect American-accented English he lured me back. "Try the donuts," he said, holding up a plate of donut pieces. I am not a donut person, but those donuts were pure heaven. In no time, Mark was buying a fresh, raspberry pie and I was pouring tea to go with it. I desperately wanted to take a photograph of these Amish youths, but I busied my fingers with the pie instead of my camera. Sadly, I don't have a formal visual record of those precious moments in that bakery, but they will be vivid in my memory forever.

We sat outside on a bench and watched the buggies trotting by. The Amish world moves at a slower pace, but it is every bit as purposeful as the world around it. The drivers were intent on getting to their destinations, and not one horse that passed us was merely walking. Instead, the horses ran with their buggies in tow, manes flying and all four feet in the air at times.

We made another stop at the German Cheese House, where we sampled every imaginable style of longhorn cheese. The pride of the shopkeepers was tangible as they suggested we try first one, then another and then many

others. Just as my belly was filling, I met a man who makes regular visits to this part of the country to restock his pantry with Amish delicacies.

"Get the Amish Plate at the Blue Gate Restaurant in Shippshewana," he told us. "It will be the best meal you ever had." We didn't make it there, but we did get to Yoder Popcorn, where the specialty is Tender Tiny Whites made from the little kernels on the end of the cob.

The Amish shopkeepers were all uniformly welcoming and polite, and it was hard not to see them as yet another "living museum" of actors playing a role for tourists in period costumes. I had to keep reminding myself that the homes, families and life expectations and ambitions that our hosts returned to each evening were radically different from most Americans today. Interacting, or not interacting, with the society around them is a hallmark of Amish culture.

Persecuted mercilessly in Europe in the 1500s, the Amish decided it was best to sever as many ties as possible with society at large, keeping their community tightly knit but avoiding social dependencies beyond that.

Simplicity and humility define their world view, but their determination to

saw many Amish women mowing their lawns with big, powerful gas mowers while their husbands rode behind teams of horses in the fields.

Our CD guide brought us back to reality in Goshen. Just those few hours in Amish country had warmed our souls and awakened in me thoughts of simpler values, of what is "real" and of what really matters.

Wending our way out of Amish country to what was once the town of Locke, our electronic tour guide took us back to the days of the early railroads, when the success or failure of a town depended on whether the rails came through town. In the case of Locke, the rails passed three miles south of town to avoid a swamp. Locke's businessmen raised enough money to build a train station right on the rails, and planned to connect that station to their town with an elaborate horse-and-buggy system of transport. Six days after the train made its first stop at their new station, a rival group of businessmen founded a new town, Nappanee, right next to the new depot, effectively shutting out the town of Locke and stealing their station. Soon, Locke faded into oblivion while Nappanee became an important center of commerce.

"Suddenly the closeness of this community began to sink in."

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be self-contained and self-sufficient is what has led them to avoid technology. Using electricity would make their community dependent on the society that provides it. Likewise, purchasing gas to fuel engines, installing telephones or using computers or the Internet would diminish their independence.

Living Off the Grid

Long before it was fashionable, they specialized in living "off the grid." However, each church district interprets these generalized rules of distancing themselves from neighboring society differently, and we



Amish home across the lane from the Jayco trailer holding area.
Photo by Emily Fagan #99408.

As I listened to this story set against the backdrop of all we had just seen and learned in Amish country, the idea of disconnecting from society-at-large seemed to have its merits. The town of Locke had been self-sufficient before the promise of the railroad, but once the rails arrived, Locke disappeared, trumped by a smarter group of people with a better idea for how to be “connected.” In a way, isn’t this the kind of scenario the Amish are trying to avoid? Self-sufficiency brings peace of mind and true independence.

Our CD tour guide next brought us to a portion of US Route 6, the nation’s longest highway, which links Providence, Rhode Island, with Long Beach, California. Is it possible that inside a country held tightly together by railroads, highways, phone and electric lines, television, radio, airplanes, satellites and the Internet, a society can thrive without all that?

The RV manufacturing towns of Goshen and Elkhart gave us something of an answer. Averaging seven to eight children per family, Amish society is growing by four percent a year. In need of more land, they interact with the communities that surround them to raise capital for expansion without borrowing. Tourism and RV manufacturing are ideal jobs, but it takes them off the farm and reduces their separateness.

One family man was quoted in a local paper as saying that, while he valued his time with his family during his layoff from his RV factory job, if the job became available again he would happily return to work. This conflict between core values and the demands of the larger society surrounding them has always challenged the Amish.

Our experiences on the Amish Heritage Trail stayed alive in our minds for a long time after our visit. Driving the trail and visiting the Amish, even so briefly, was both refreshing and thought-provoking. If you have a day for sightseeing in Elkhart County, invite the CD tour guide into your car, and let it take you through 90 miles of this special American landscape. 🏡



Escapees Amish Back Roads HOP TOUR

While we enjoyed a self-guided tour of Amish country with a professionally made recording, Escapees will be offering a far more in-depth Amish experience as part of the 2010 Escapade in Goshen, Indiana.

On September 15, 2010, the **Amish Back Roads HOP tour will take members beyond simple sightseeing along the roadways and into the houses, businesses and schools of the Amish, ending with dinner in an Amish home.** The personal interaction that can be had with both the tour guides and the Amish people on this tour will make it a priceless experience.



For more information about this and the Michiana HOP tour, turn to **page 17**.

Amish Heritage Trail CD

The Amish Heritage Trail CD is available at the visitor centers in Elkhart and Goshen. The loop tour officially starts and ends in Elkhart; however, if you fast-forward to a later track on the CD, you can begin your tour in Goshen or any other location. Simply return the CD to the visitor center when you complete your tour.

The official Website for Amish tourist activities in Elkhart County is **www.amishcountry.org**. The Amish Heritage Tour can be downloaded from this Website before you arrive in Elkhart County, so you can burn your own CD or load it on an iPod or other device to play in your car.

One of the stops on the Amish Heritage Trail is the RV/MH Hall of Fame. We found that driving and enjoying the Amish Heritage Trail took the better part of a day. The RV/MH Hall of Fame also deserves more than a brief visit, so combining the two activities in one day could make an overly full day.

RV Factory Tours

A visit to Elkhart County is an excellent opportunity to take an RV factory tour. A list of the local RV plants, their tour schedules and locations is available at the visitor centers. We found that the RV manufacturer we wished to visit was not included on the visitor center list. However, a quick look at the manufacturer’s Website revealed their tour schedule.

On our Website, **roadslesstraveled.us**, we share more stories and photos of our experiences in this unique part of Indiana.

