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Agritourism Explained and Explored

Agritourism, a niche of ecotourism, is a growing sector of travel, attracting visitors to farms and ranches in the U.S. and abroad, sometimes for a few hours and sometimes for a week-long stay. Here, we offer six ideas for discovering agritourism.

By Greg Haggard

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Monterey Bay, California, is known as John Steinbeck Country. The rich landscape is also home to the newly created River Road Wine Trail. Ag Venture Tours specializes in wine tasting, sightseeing, and agricultural education tours of the Monterey Bay region of California, including the bounty of world-famous Salinas Valley.

Texas's Hill Country is ripe with farms and ranches to visit as well as an up and coming wine destination. Drive to the German-influenced town of Fredericksburg and indulge in local farm cuisine. Plan to stay for a weekend of wine tasting.

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By definition, agritourism means visiting a working farm or ranch or agricultural-based operation for the entertaining opportunity to learn about the products and heritage, and possibly enjoy a hands-on activity. In turn, agritourism yields a potentially sustaining income for the producer. Here, we've expanded that definition to include a vast cultural perspective of locally produced natural foods and beverages that visitors can discover worldwide. It gives us the chance to be modern-day explorers into the creation of foods that we eat, to see the difference between the field and the grocery store, to pick and taste, walk the land and look at the crops, and learn how to plant and when to harvest. Most importantly, agritourism offers the ability to connect with something or someone that sustains us.

Emmentaler, Switzerland

If the name sounds familiar, here's a clue. It's tasty, holey, and comes from Switzerland. The king of Swiss cheese, Emmentaler AOC is produced in the canton of Bern, where cheese-making can be traced back to the 13th century. The green hills and valleys of the Schweizer Mittelland region provide abundant grass and hay for cows to feed upon creating a luscious fresh untreated milk used to make Emmentaler Swiss cheese. And that's just the most famous of the agricultural products stemming from the bounty of the land. There's plenty more. Emmentaler offers the agritourist a wealth of educational, cultural and tasty activities.

The capital city of Bern is an easy city to fly into and begin a tour into the Alpine wonderland of Switzerland. For a good introduction into Swiss mountain culture visit the **Swiss Alpine Museum**. The permanent exhibit will enhance knowledge on Alpine agriculture, folklore, and ways of protecting the Alps. Afterwards, consider attending an onion market where stands of local producers sell hand-braided bunches of onions. Sample a slice of onion tart and quench thirty mouths with a pint of local beer, another specialty of the region.

From Bern, head to the countryside of Emmentaler via a short train ride. Best electric bikes from the railway station for an extra boost to assist with pedaling the rolling hills to the **aloe-dairy** in Affoltern for an afternoon. Tours are available to watch how Emmentaler AOC cheese is made, as well as the opportunity to make cheese. There are dairy equipment exhibits, a restaurant, and dairy shop, plus a Herdeman's cottage dating from 1741 that displays cheese making on the open fire.

Look for the label "Emmentaler Rauschig" (Emmentaler Rustic). This applies to the highest quality natural foods traditionally prepared by small producers. **Marbach-Schuggins Alpine Dairy** is an example of a quality specialty product. Water buffalos can be seen wandering the pastures where the shaggy giants produce milk for fresh buffalo mozzarella cheese. Visitors can make reservations with **Emmentaler Tourism** to tour the farm, see the herds, and watch the production process. Afterwards, get some exercise via the ancient farmer's sport of Horsemans, a club-swinging sport much like golf that originated in the Emmentaler region 300 years ago. Today, Horsemans is a performance sport played all over Switzerland's agricultural areas. Contact **Emmentaler Tourism** for more information on where to play.

100 Day overnight to experience "sleep on straw", which means spending the night in a barn on a bed of comfy straw. The price is right for the budget traveler or group at 20 to 28 francs per person. Included in the price is a Swiss farmhouse breakfast. In picturesque Emmentaler try **Bräuhof**. Or visit the "sleep on straw" association's website for more ideas on places to try a farm stay.

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