Pennsylvania

By Tom Kirvan

KEYSTONE STATE LINED WITH HISTORY, NATURAL BEAUTY

Pennsylvania, known as the Keystone State, is a microcosm of American history, culture, and natural beauty. From its bustling urban centers to its picturesque countryside, the state offers something for everyone. Rich in historical significance, economic diversity, and geographic charm, Pennsylvania is a destination that encapsulates the spirit of the United States.

With a population of more than 12.9 million residents, Pennsylvania is the fifth-most populous state in the U.S. The population features strong German, Irish, Italian, and African American communities alongside growing Hispanic and Asian populations. This diversity is reflected in Pennsylvania's vibrant food scene, festivals, and cultural institutions.

Geographically, Pennsylvania is incredibly diverse. The state is bordered by six others and is marked by rolling hills, lush forests, and fertile farmland. The Appalachian Mountains run through the center, while the western part of the state gives way to the Ohio River Valley. Pennsylvania also boasts Lake Erie in the northwest and the Delaware River in the east, adding to its varied landscape.

The state capital, Harrisburg, lies along the Susquehanna River and serves as a hub of government and history. The Pennsylvania State Capitol building, with its iconic green dome, is a must-see for its grand architecture and art.

While Harrisburg holds the reins of government, Pennsylvania's largest and most populous city, Philadelphia, takes center stage as a cultural and historical powerhouse. Known as the "City of Brotherly Love," Philadelphia is where America's independence was born. Its vibrant neighborhoods, museums, and food scene make it a top destination.

The state's second largest city is Pittsburgh, which is located in western Pennsylvania and is at the junction of three rivers – the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio. With a population of approximately 300,000 residents, Pittsburgh has long been known as the "Steel City" for its dominant role in the U.S. steel industry forged by Andrew Carnegie, one of the greatest philanthropists and industrialists in American history.

Pennsylvania's past is interwoven within the fabric of the United States. Originally inhabited by Indigenous peoples, the state became a haven for religious freedom under William Penn, a Quaker who founded Pennsylvania in 1681. It was one of the original 13 colonies and played a pivotal role in the American Revolution.

Fast Facts

Capital: Harrisburg
Population: 12.9 million
Highest Point: Mount Davis (3,213 feet)
Of Note: Punxsutawney is home to the nationally famous, weather forecasting groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil.

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Philadelphia served as the nation's capital during the Revolutionary War and again in the early years of the republic. The state also holds deep Civil War significance, with the Battle of Gettysburg being a turning point in the conflict. From the industrial boom of the 19th century to its contributions in shaping modern America, Pennsylvania has always been a cornerstone of the nation.

Pennsylvania's economy is as diverse as its geography. Historically, the state was an industrial powerhouse, with Pittsburgh leading in steel production. While manufacturing remains important, Pennsylvania has transitioned into a more diversified economy. Key industries now include health care, education, technology, and agriculture.

The state is a leader in energy production, particularly natural gas, coal, and renewable energy. Its agricultural sector is renowned for dairy, mushrooms, and apples. Pennsylvania's small towns and markets, such as Lancaster County, also offer a glimpse into traditional Amish farming practices.

Top 5 Must-See Tourist Destinations

- **Independence National Historical Park:** No visit to Pennsylvania is complete without a stop at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. This UNESCO World Heritage Site includes Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were debated and signed. The nearby Liberty Bell, a symbol of freedom, draws millions of visitors each year. Walking through these hallowed halls is a journey back to the birth of the nation.
- **Gettysburg National Military Park:** For history enthusiasts, Gettysburg is sacred ground. The site of the Civil War's most famous battle and President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, this national park offers preserved battlefields, informative museums, and guided tours. Standing on Little Round Top or gazing across Pickett's Charge brings the history of the Civil War to life in a profound way.
- **Fallingwater:** Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Fallingwater is a masterpiece of modern architecture nestled in the Laurel Highlands. Built over a waterfall, this iconic home blends seamlessly with its natural surroundings. Visitors can tour the house and marvel at Wright's innovative use of space, light, and materials.
- **Hersheypark and Hershey's Chocolate World:** Known as the "Sweetest Place on Earth," Hershey, Pa. is a delight for families and chocolate lovers. Hersheypark offers thrilling roller coasters, water rides, and family-friendly attractions. Hershey's Chocolate World provides an immersive experience in the world of chocolate-making, complete with samples and the chance to create your own candy bar.
- **Pocono Mountains:** For outdoor enthusiasts, the Pocono Mountains are a year-round paradise, while also serving as a popular destination for honeymooners. In the summer, the region offers hiking, kayaking, and scenic drives, while the winter months are perfect for skiing and snowboarding. Resorts like Camelback and Great Wolf Lodge make the Poconos a popular spot for families. The region's serene lakes, waterfalls, and trails provide a peaceful escape from city life.