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Indiana County, Pa.: Summer Festivals Celebrate Area's History

Driving from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, Pa., takes about five hours—a fact that most travelers take for granted. But before there were roads or even rail lines, it used to take three to four weeks to make the arduous journey between the two cities by wagon. So imagine the impact that the construction of the Pennsylvania Main Line Canal in 1828 had on the region, cutting the trip to just four days.

“It was the Jet Age at that time,” explained Jack Maguire, treasurer and past-president of the Saltsburg Area Historical Society, of the 104-mile waterway that ran through Saltsburg, connecting Johnstown with Pittsburgh. It was also the lifeblood of the small town for more than 30 years, located at the confluence of Loyalhanna Creek and the Conemaugh and Kiskiminetas Rivers.

Saltsburg Canal Days, which takes place June 5-7, celebrates this historical route, as well as the history of the town, which is named for its role as one of the leading salt producers in the nation in the 1800s. The three-day festival takes place along the path of the canal, which has been preserved as part of the West Penn Trail.

While the festival, which features a parade, lots of entertainment, fireworks and food, is definitely worth a visit, the town itself is the main attraction. Beautifully restored historic buildings dating from the early 1800s line the streets; a short walk takes you right up to water's edge. Make sure to visit the historical society's museum, located in the Rebecca B. Hadden Stone House, to see hundreds of items donated by local Saltsburg residents, including a painting of actor and local boy Jimmy Stewart, painted by his sister when he was still in college. The collection is like a living time capsule, documenting the clothes, furniture, art, and lifestyle of the Saltsburg area for the last 200-plus years. And if you build up a hunger, stop into the newly opened Ida Jean's Café, which is located in a lovingly restored 1913 building that even contains an authentic ice cream parlor soda fountain.

If you like small-town festivals, you might also want to consider visiting other events in the Indiana County area, including the Hoodlebug Summerfest on June 12. The 10-mile Hoodlebug Trail, which is named after a self-propelled passenger coach that ran on the abandoned railroad track on which the trail is built, connects the towns of Indiana and Blacklick, where it intersects with the Ghost Town Trail. Homer City, a charming town that sits about halfway along the trail, holds a parade and festival, and you can also visit the town's museum, which sits in a restored caboose along the trail.

You can make it a full-festival weekend by driving the short distance to the Jimmy Stewart Airport, located in Indiana, PA, for the Jimmy Stewart Airport Festival on June 13-14. There are many activities for the whole family to enjoy, including a pancake breakfast, WWII Big Band-era hangar dance, Lease Aviation flights and EAA Young Eagle flights for kids, and a hay wagon tour of the airport.

“Special attractions this year include Jimmy Stewart’s personal Cessna 310, which we rescued after it was abandoned in Texas and slated to be destroyed,” said Rick Fuellner, flight line operations. “There will also be WWII-era military planes, biplane rides and a host of other vintage airplanes.”

If you prefer running to flying, the Run with the Deer Flies 25K and 15K trail runs, hosted by the Indiana Road Runners Club, might be more your speed. The challenging course, which includes hills, rocks, pipeline roads, swamps and a water crossing, will take place on July 26 at Yellow Creek State Park in the aptly named Penn Run, Pa.

For more information
Indiana Co. Tourism: VisitIndianaCountyPA.org

Insider Tip:

When you’re on the Hoodlebug Trail, check out the abandoned incubator factory located in Homer City. State-of-the-art at the time, it provided incubators to companies all over the world.