

A Tour of Milford, Pennsylvania



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A stream of new visitors, renewed civic pride, and a legendary hotel have made Victorian-era Milford the latest East Coast idyll. T+L charts the resurgence of a great American village.

There were two things I knew about Milford before I ever saw the place. First, it is the site of a famous and very beautiful natural phenomenon, the name for which is archaic and not found in contemporary dictionaries: *fluviarchy*, meaning a network of waterfalls. Milford is set on an escarpment 100 feet above the Delaware River, so streams flowing through and around the town must cascade down wooded cliffs to reach it. As they do, they form what is said to be the most dramatic fluviarchy east of the Rockies.

Second, the town used to host the annual Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conference, which drew all the heavyweights: Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, Robert A. Heinlein, Harlan Ellison, L. Ron Hubbard. One year Kurt Vonnegut attended, and afterward he worked Milford into his novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965). His protagonist crashes the conference and blurts out drunkenly, "I love you sons of bitches... You're the only ones...crazy enough to realize that life is a space voyage, and not a short one, either...." The sci-fi conference is no longer held in Milford, but on my first visit to the town, I was alert for even the slightest trace of its aura.

"Climb to the top of the Knob," my waitress at the Milford Diner told me at breakfast, "and you'll understand what all the fuss is about." The Knob is a 400-foot bluff that towers above one end of Broad Street, the town's main thoroughfare. It's a steep 20-minute climb to the top, and when I reached it I could see all of Milford, a comely village of tree-lined streets and handsome Victorian buildings with bell towers, gables, steeples, and cupolas in profusion. The Delaware River flowed past in a gentle southward arc. Both river and town were set into a wide green panorama extending to a distant periphery of cliffs. Not a single smokestack or other industrial intrusion lay in sight. Milford looked like a Currier & Ives print come to life.

Like many other New Yorkers in the aftermath of 9/11, I had started thinking about getting a place in the country as a weekend retreat. My old friend Sean Strub, the publisher of POZ magazine, had bought a hunting lodge next to a rushing trout stream in Pike County and fallen in love with the all but untouched Victorian village nearby. Soon he started the glossy *Milford Magazine*, and then, with former corporate executive Richard Snyder, bought a dilapidated, 120-year-old Italianate building—the Hotel Fauchère, on Broad Street. It was on the National Register of Historic Places, but its first floor had been converted into doctors' offices and the rest was vacant. Strub and Snyder set about restoring it to its original splendor.

The Fauchère is now a major reason people visit Milford. It is only one of many historic buildings that locals have carefully restored, but as one can tell from the names in Strub's copies of the Fauchère's old guest registers—William Tecumseh Sherman, Sarah Bernhardt, Andrew Carnegie, Mae West, Babe Ruth, and Presidents Roosevelt, Roosevelt, and Kennedy—it has played a lively role in Milford's history. In the late 18th century, when life here revolved around logging camps and bluestone quarries, a circuit judge named John Biddis bought the land that is now Milford, laid out streets in a tidy grid, divided them into parcels, and went to Philadelphia to sell them. Biddis extolled Milford's scenic beauty and the purity of its air as a respite from the increasingly dirty city. (It also helped that, because Milford was 900 feet above sea level and home to a colony of bats, it was virtually free of mosquitoes.) The pitch appealed to an affluent clientele, who engaged some of the best architects of the day to build houses on their new lots. James Pinchot, a wallpaper manufacturer from a local lumber-rich family, set his sights the highest of all. In 1863, he hired Calvert Vaux, the codesigner of Central Park, to create an elegant Second Empire post office for Milford, and a few years later he retained Richard Morris Hunt, the architect of Biltmore, the Vanderbilt estate, to design a lordly mansion for himself—the magnificent, turreted Grey Towers, high on a hill at the edge of town. Today, of the 655 buildings in Milford's historic district, 400 have been officially declared "historically significant."

By the mid 19th century, Milford had become well established as a summer resort for the eastern upper crust, and in New York City, 85 miles east, Louis Fauchère took note. The Swiss-born Fauchère had already made a name for himself as the master chef at New York's world-famous Delmonico's restaurant, the birthplace of lobster Newburg and the Delmonico steak. He opened the Hotel Fauchère in 1852, and as he had hoped, caravans of his devoted New York patrons followed him out to Milford.

The town's golden age lasted until World War II, after which, as Americans took to faster cars and the new interstate highways, the tourist trade began to slacken. The Fauchères finally closed the hotel in 1976, and as far as the outside world was concerned, Milford all but slipped out of sight.

In the 1990's, weekenders and second-house hunters like Strub rediscovered Milford while searching for a non-Hamptons. Then came 9/11, and the desire for a safe haven from the city grew more intense. "Summer never ended that year," recalls Joe Fretta, owner of Fretta's, a landmark pork shop in New York's Little Italy that moved to Milford in the 90's. "People kept coming all fall. They extended their vacations."

Art galleries and book and antiques shops catering to upscale travelers have started to appear, and long-established merchants have adjusted their inventories accordingly. “We used to sell only paperbacks,” says Hillary Anthony of the secondhand shop Books & Prints at Pear Alley, “but lately our clientele have increasingly become serious, high-end readers, so now we also have hardcovers and collectible books.” (On one recent visit, I saw a 40-volume set of works by Washington Irving.) Meanwhile, Milfordians have taken steps to revive some of the town’s old luster. They have replaced asphalt sidewalks with locally quarried bluestone slabs, planted trees and curbside lawns, and installed old-style streetlamps.

The Fauchère reopened in 2006, after five years of painstaking work to bring back the building’s original features while adding contemporary boutique-hotel amenities. Within two years, it was selected to join Relais & Châteaux. Bright-striped awnings now shade its front porch, and its hallways display paintings by Hudson River School artists, conjuring the spectacular landscapes and enlightened local patronage that once drew artists to Milford. In the restaurant, chef Michael Glatz interprets Louis Fauchère’s classic dishes and has added a few creations of his own, among them “sushi pizza,” made with tuna tartare, flying-fish eggs, and a crust of tempura-fried rice.

Since 2001, the population of Pike County has soared 26 percent, making it the fastest-growing county in the Northeast. But 33 percent of it is game preserves, conservation easements, and state and national forests. For its green legacy, Milford can thank James Pinchot’s son Gifford, appointed by Theodore Roosevelt in 1905 to be the first head of the U.S. Forest Service and now known as the father of the American conservation movement. “Ours is the greenest county within a hundred miles of New York,” Strub told me. “If East Coast urban sprawl continues at the present rate, it will eventually surround the county, but it won’t possess it. From above, Pike County will look like Central Park, a patch of green in an urban desert.”

Downstairs at the Fauchère, the informal Bar Louis has acquired, if not a scene, then a regular gathering of Milfordians and visitors who compare notes on life in Milford. On summer days, they might have kayaked on the Delaware, hiked in the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, or toured Grey Towers. In winter, they might have skied, snowshoed, or browsed in the galleries and shops on Broad Street. They might have enjoyed live music at the Waterwheel or Muir House, or attended an American Readers Theatre play, the Black Bear Film Festival, or a chamber music concert.

While other American towns work to reinvent historic areas far less intact than this living town, Milford has simply carried on and entered a new era. Perhaps it really is possible to live, forward-looking, with the lingering aura of another time, not to mention the parallel universes and altered states evoked by the old sci-fi writers who once convened here.

Getting There

Milford is a 1 1/2-hour drive from New York City and 2 1/2 hours from Philadelphia. Take exit 46 off I-84 to Rte. 6.

Where To Stay

Hotel Fauchère

Great Value 401 Broad St.; 570/409-1212; hotelfauchere.com; doubles from \$200.

Lodge at Woodloch

A woodsy spa resort near Milford. 109 River Birch Ln., Hawley; 866/953-8500; thelodgeatwoodloch.com; doubles from \$975, including meals and activities.

Where To Eat and Drink

Hotel Fauchère

401 Broad St.; 570/409-1212. Chef Michael Glatz, formerly of the Inn on the Blue Horizon in Vieques, oversees the formal **Delmonico Room** (dinner for two \$163) and **Bar Louis** with bistro-style “global cuisine” (dinner for two \$50). The new **Pâtisserie Fauchère** (570/409-1246), in the Victorian house next door, offers fresh-baked pastries and breads, and coffee.

Milford Diner

301 Broad St.; 570/296-8611; breakfast for two \$10.