

# Experiencing Our Agricultural Heritage

## Agritourism: The Crossroads of Tourism and Agriculture

In the 1880s, America was excited to discover the big city, with its towering buildings and maddening but exciting pace. Today, the tides are turning, and city dwellers are turning out in groves to rediscover the countryside.

And it may not just be the asphalt and noise of the city that is prompting people to go to the farm. Folks are hungry for the experiential side of life. Experiences that include social settings, the outdoors and connections with our most basics — food and farming. A recent poll by the Nielsen Company found that, on average, people spend 127 hours and 26 hours per month respectively watching TV and using the Internet. So for those feeling electronic overdose, chances are, there is a farm near you to help you snap out of it.

Involved in agritourism for many years, Billie Vandever of Heyburn, Idaho says local and regional people are taking more interest in his corn maze and now his latest addition of one of the largest slides in North America that evolved out of a straw-bale pyramid.

“Tourists are flocking to the farms to experience the real taste of fresh fruits and vegetables, but they also just want to absorb the special ambiance they call ‘the countryside,’ ” said Jane Eckert of Eckert AgriMarketing. “People want that “Rural Bounty” of North America — the pick-your-own strawberry patches, the hayrides, the apple orchards, the pumpkin patches, and the corn mazes.

As a sixth generation farmer’s daughter, Eckert spent her adult life studying and promoting the marketing of agritourism and has now become one of the nation’s top experts on the issue. For 14 years, she helped her family’s agritourism business, Eckert’s Farm, in the metro St. Louis area, grow their business to over 400,000 guests a year.

According to the Travel Industry Association of America, tourists are increasingly traveling by cars, taking shorter trips and planning at the last minute, looking for new experiences and looking to strengthen family relationships by being together.

Agritourism is filling a tremendous need for recreation in a meaningful way. Not only does it help children (and parents) know where food comes from, but helps support America’s agricultural heritage and small farms.

While current agritourism statistics are not available, Eckert says the U.S. Census of Agriculture is now asking farmers about agritourism activities, numbers of which we should have in a year or so.

Melinda Geisler from the Agricultural Marketing Resource



Photo - Jane Eckert  
There's nothing like a wagon ride like this one at Tweite's Pumpkin Patch in Byron, Minnesota.

Center found that older USDA reports from 2004 show that 52,000 U.S. farms had earned some income from agritourism.

Eckert has established a list of directories with activities for the public on her Web site [www.farmstop.com](http://www.farmstop.com). However, to meet the growing demand for information, Eckert is undertaking what she calls Rural Bounty — a national database where the public can go to find any and all agritourism farms, ranches, wineries, and related businesses. (see Rural Bounty on page 27)

Eckert reports that most of us have a farm somewhere in our family tree. Maybe our parents were raised on a farm, or we have fond memories of spending summers on our grandparents’ farms. Agritourism rekindles the positive emotions from these family visits.

So in the end, agritourism is not just about farmers opening their farms to the public, but also about the public being able to reconnect to their agricultural heritage. And who knows, agritourism may rekindle that spirit of farming that seems to be latent in many of our hearts. So while it’s rewarding when farmers come to town and to the farmers market, going to the farm opens up a whole new realm of experiences. ■

► People enjoy the farm experience (pig races) at Honeysuckle Hill Farm in Coopertown, Tennessee. Owned by the Alsup family, events take place on a regular basis.



Photo - Jane Eckert

# RURAL BOUNTY

Whether you're a farmer or urbanite, you can join Jane Eckert in building this national agritourism Web site.



We all want to know where the agritourism fun is, and farmers are reaching out to the public in a big way. Until now, there has been no easy method for a visitor to find farms that offer agritourism activities.

Founder of Eckert AgriMarketing, Jane Eckert has become the North America's guru for helping develop and spread the word on agritourism. A prolific writer, speaker and promoter of agritourism, her company spent over a year of research and development on figuring out the best way to create a single-source directory for all farms, ranches, wineries and agritourism enterprises for all of North America. Determining that the Internet was the best place, Rural Bounty was born.

But Eckert needs your help. Rural Bounty has created the meeting place where the public can come and find the farms, but now the farms must register and provide the public the information. So if you're a consumer who knows of a great agritourism farm, encourage the owners to list their farm on Rural Bounty. If you have a farm with something to offer the visiting public, take the effort to get listed on Rural Bounty.

Up until now, Eckert has provided a listing of state agritourism directories as they existed on her farmstop Web site. However it has been an incomplete resource.

Rural Bounty will charge a small fee of \$45 per year for farms to list their products and activities that will be cross-referenced under appropriated categories in the searchable directory. As the Rural Bounty database builds, Eckert will unfold a major marketing campaign to introduce the Web site to the public.

"The public will be there, so we hope the farmers step up to the plate and get registered on Rural Bounty," Eckert said. ■



Photo - Jane Eckert

Downey's Farm Market near Brampton, Ontario, Canada.

Web Resources



[www.ruralbounty.com](http://www.ruralbounty.com) - [www.farmstop.com](http://www.farmstop.com)  
[www.eckertagrimarketing.com](http://www.eckertagrimarketing.com)