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PHOTO BY DEBORAH HUSO



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RESTING ON Pennsylvania's LAURELS

If you love Frank Lloyd Wright architecture, the great outdoors and creative craft brews, you'll love the Laurel Highlands.

BY DEBORAH HUSO



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Perched on the prow of a hill above the Youghiogheny River Gorge in southwestern Pennsylvania, Kentucky Knob is an unassuming house, with its low-slung roofline and sandstone walls rising like natural formations out of the ground. That was the intent of architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who designed the 2,200-square-foot “Grand Usonian” in 1954, toward the end of his career. He was 86.

A lifelong lover of the architecture that has evolved from the distinguished designer’s attention to blending buildings into their environment, I must confess that Kentucky Knob is my favorite of Wright’s vast portfolio of residences in the US. Unlike its famous neighbor Fallingwater, just six miles away, or Wright’s own sprawling home in Spring Green, Wisconsin, Kentucky Knob is the kind of Wright house one can imagine living in—cozy, light-filled, intimate and warm.

Like so much of the natural environment of the Laurel Highlands, with its rolling farmscapes, forested mountainsides, waterfalls and rivers, Kentucky Knob is a place that invites one to linger. And linger I do, imagining breakfast in the home’s delightful glassed-in dining room, as I gaze at the cut-out skylights of the enormous cantilevered roof above.

“This is the house that ice cream built,” Kentucky Knob’s manager Timothy Fischer says. It was commissioned by the late

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, THESE TWO PAGES: Kentucky Knob is built not *on* a hill, but *of* the hill; a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed dining room table, decorated with daffodils from the property, at Kentucky Knob; Fallingwater’s living room features expanses of glass; a classic view of Fallingwater’s southwest elevation; Four Seasons Brewing Company

I.N. and Bernardine Hagan, owners of the Hagan Ice Cream Company. Bernardine, an artist, was perhaps one of Wright’s more formidable clients, requesting changes typically anathema to the world-renowned architect, including an expansive, light-filled kitchen—such things were generally an afterthought in Wright’s designs—and an increase in the home’s footprint from 1,200 to 2,200 square feet. It was an easily accomplished task given that the home is composed of a grid of interlocking hexagons.

But the signature Wright features are all here: natural blend-into-the-hillside materials such as red cypress from the Carolinas, native sandstone, flagstone floors and compressed entryways opening to vast rooms with high ceilings. Wright visited the property only once during its

construction, which was overseen by local builder Herman Keys, whom the Hagans credited with making Kentucky Knob into the quiet masterpiece it is.

KENTUCKY KNOB’S FAMOUS NEIGHBOR: FALLINGWATER

Kentucky Knob might never have come to fruition, however, were it not for the Hagans’ friendship with Edgar J. Kaufmann, president of Kaufmann’s Department Store in Pittsburgh and owner of Fallingwater, the better-known Wright masterpiece. When Wright designed Fallingwater in 1935 at age 68, Kaufmann and his wife, Liliane, owned 1,600 acres of woods, rolling hills and rushing streams in the Laurel Highlands north of Ohio.

It was Wright who chose Fallingwater’s specific location on that vast acreage, positioning the home over the waterfall from which the striking house gets its name. With its cantilevered floors and terraces, the home appears to float over the water with no easily apparent foundation. The cantilevers helped earn Wright’s design the distinction of being recognized as the “best all-time work of American Architecture” by the American Institute of Architects.

Built of reinforced concrete and Pottsville sandstone quarried on the Kaufmanns’ property, Fallingwater resembles a sculpture of horizontal planes hovering over Bear Run and its waterfall, which one can access down a set of stairs directly from the living room.

Kaufmann’s son would later say

RIGHT:
The Great Allegheny Passage connecting
Ohiopyle and Confluence

BELOW:
Viewing platform of Ohiopyle Falls at the
Ohiopyle State Park Visitor Center



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A cider sampler at
Tattiebogle CiderWorks; a selection of wine at
Greendance Winery; Unity Brewing in Latrobe

of Fallingwater, “It has served well as a house, yet has always been more than that, a work of art beyond any ordinary measure of excellence.”

CHANGES OF SCENERY

Fallingwater’s inspiration was the landscape of the Laurel Highlands, and those who admire nature will find much to appreciate here. While snow sports abound at the area’s many ski resorts, there’s plenty to do in these parts long before the snow falls.

The Youghiogheny River is a big draw for its whitewater rafting adventures, but even in late fall, you can still enjoy water scenery with a stroll along the viewing platforms of Ohiopyle Falls at the Ohiopyle State Park Visitor Center.

I decided to follow the course of the Youghiogheny in a different

way, however: via a 23-mile round-trip bike ride along a portion of the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) connecting Ohiopyle and Confluence. The GAP, as locals call it, is a 150-mile hiking and biking path that stretches between Cumberland, Maryland, and Pittsburgh on the bed of the former Western Maryland Railroad lines.

The Ohiopyle-to-Confluence route is particularly lovely, as it offers river views its entire length and a gradual enough grade to make it suitable for cyclists with younger children in tow. The sleepy town of Confluence is a singular gem with its scenic location between the Youghiogheny and Casselman Rivers and its many cyclist-friendly lodgings and eateries.

BEER HERE

Nothing beats a cold brew after a long bike ride, and the Laurel Highlands deliver with nearly 20 breweries—not to mention more than two dozen wineries, cideries, meaderies and distilleries.

I headed north of Ohiopyle on the Laurel Highlands Pour Tour, a self-guided wine, beer and spirits trail that winds its way through the region, stopping first at the scenic headquarters of Tattiebogle CiderWorks, nestled in a rural setting near the community of Acme. With a name hearkening to the Scots-Irish who originally settled this region (*tattiebogle* is the Scottish word for a scarecrow), the venue features traditional and seasonal ciders, including some flavored with blueberries, black currants and pear.

From there, I moved on to Helltown Brewing in Mount Pleasant (I highly recommend the Buffy Hazy IPA) and then proceeded to the hip, urban-esque location of Unity Brewing in Latrobe to grab dinner. Unity has a farm-to-table kitchen on-site as well as innovative brews that might entice even the most reluctant imbibers, such as Orange Creamsicle IPA or Salted Caramel Espresso Blonde.

Whatever your preferred flavor of adventure, the Laurel Highlands likely has a landscape, activity or tasting to suit you. With the rolling foothills of the Allegheny Mountains as backdrop, this multidimensional destination has been an escape for urbanites for nearly a century—and it’s easy to understand why.

Travel Tips

Enjoy the Great Allegheny Passage—with no need to bring your own bicycle. Nearly a half-dozen outfitters in Ohiopyle offer bike rentals by the hour or by the day.

Find the perfect digs. There are a lot of options here, from overnight stays in Frank Lloyd Wright houses at Polymath Park to house-party atmosphere lodgings at Seven Springs Mountain Resort. Want something quiet and romantic? Then Oak Lodge in Stahlstown is the place; the main lodge and numerous cabins at this luxury bed-and-breakfast are set on 800 acres.

Try the local food. Sometimes the best local restaurants aren’t easy to find here, often tucked along country roads seemingly in the middle of nowhere. But learning where the locals go is worth the effort. Try Bittersweet Cafe in Farmington, a family-owned coffee and sandwich shop with grilled cheese concoctions to die for, and The Cafe at Oak Lodge in Stahlstown, with its intimate al fresco dining and melt-in-your-mouth maple-glazed ham and turkey sliders and pretzel beer cheeseburgers.

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