

History comes to life in Staunton



Kids can dress in period clothing at the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum in Staunton.

Staunton is a bustling small city full of urban flair and history, having escaped the ravages of the Civil War despite its strong role. Pronounced “Stanton,” this Virginia jewel lies just two hours west of Richmond in the heart of Shenandoah Valley. Its stately red brick downtown is refreshingly compact, perfect for families to explore both on foot and by stroller.

Within short blocks of this National Historic area, you’ll find plenty of attractions for kids and adults. The Visitors Center is centrally located and excellent, filled with information about the area. Kids enjoy visiting Camera & Palette Museum as well as the Jumbo Antique Fire Engine Museum. They can also watch neat demos of glass blowing at Sunspots Studio and even make their own ornaments.

No visit to Staunton is complete without a visit to Pufferbellies Toys, a beloved local landmark. Another surefire hit is riding the old-fashioned free trolley around town, including out to beautiful Gypsy Hill Park. It’s a great way to take a break while still getting to know the “Queen City of Shenandoah.”

As for the adults, checking out the many art galleries, movie theatres, and music halls is a real treat. Don’t miss the chance to view Trinity Church’s 12 gorgeous Tiffany windows. While you’re at it, be sure to see the world’s only re-creation of London’s Blackfriars Playhouse at the American Shakespeare Center.

Just next door is the newly renovated Stonewall Jackson Hotel. Perched on a hill, it offers an outstanding vantage point overlooking the city. With its indoor pool and inexpensive parking, this is an ideal spot for either families or couples on a getaway weekend. The nearby Mill Street Grill and Depot Grille, located in a converted old train station, are quite family-friendly. Just ask for the brown paper with crayons!

Woodrow Wilson, our 28th president, was born in Staunton. Enjoy an engaging tour of his charming Presidential Library and the adjoining home containing the family belongings, even the president’s crib. Children especially enjoy playing with old-fashioned toys at the Kids’ Corner and going on a scavenger hunt through the museum to earn a prize.

Kids also learn about pre-WWI student life by dressing up in period clothing. They attend “class” in an old school room with simulated lessons, even requiring them to stand to answer questions. Don’t miss the outstanding World War I Trench Exhibit with real paraphernalia, gas masks, uniforms, and weapons. With lights, sound, and a recreated trench, families experience a taste of the wartime conditions for our dedicated “doughboys.”

Last but not least, feast your eyes on the President’s 1919 Pierce-Arrow limousine. His gleaming “horseless carriage” is an amazing sight to behold. Totally restored, it often appears in local parades.

Another major attraction is the Frontier Culture Museum, the only living history museum of its kind. Within a two-mile paved loop via an optional shuttle, visitors embark on a fascinating journey into our collective American past. Thousands of farmers and rural craftsmen bravely left their homelands of Ireland, Britain, and Germany during the 1600s and 1700s in search of a better life.

Exploring the diverse origins of these pioneers, the museum has reconstructed its working farms in the “Old World” section. There are historical interpreters throughout museum, all dressed in authentic period costume and who are ready for ques-



Natural Chimneys State Park is just outside Staunton. Photos by Loretta Sherwood.

tions. They are extremely knowledgeable and welcoming, adding another level of learning to the experience. In the “America” section, visitors see for themselves the rigors of daily life for the early settlers of Shenandoah’s backcountry.

This outdoor museum also shows the origins of the kidnapped West Africans. Brought in chains, they were forced to work on colonial America’s farms and plantations. This exhibit displays the roots of these African-Americans in what is modern-day Nigeria. The solid huts made out of dried mud are truly impressive.

As you exit the city, you’ll quickly notice the bucolic countryside of rolling hills, green meadows, and serene country roads. If you are up for a drive by pastoral farms dotted with silos, head out to Natural Chimneys State Park. Take a short hike up above the chimneys for a spectacular view and then stroll along the river. Note that this is a rural location without cell reception.

With rare shield formations, the Grand Caverns are another unusual attraction in the area well worth a visit. Check out the signatures of Confederate and Yankee soldiers written on the cavern walls while on break. Thankfully these breaks did

not take place at the same time. **RPM**

Libby Carty McNamee, a local writer, lawyer and mommy, would love to drive President Wilson’s Pierce-Arrow limo out to Natural Chimneys State Park.

IF YOU GO...

Frontier Culture Museum

www.frontierculture.org
Phone: (540) 332-7850
Address: 1290 Richmond Avenue, Staunton
Admission: \$10 for adults, \$6 for ages 6-12, and free for wee ones.

Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum

www.woodrowwilson.org
Phone: (540) 885-0897
Address: 20 N. Coalter Street, Staunton
Admission: \$14 for adults, \$5 for ages 6-12, and free for tots.
(Both museums welcome field trips and homeschoolers with special group rates.)

Stonewall Jackson Hotel

www.stonewalljacksonhotel.com
Phone: (540) 885-24401
Address: 24 S. Market Street, Staunton
Rates: Variable