ADICTED?

OUR TEENS CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT THEIR PHONES—
AND THE CONSEQUENCES ARE TROUBLING
The lush Brandywine Valley has cast its spell on many a nature-lover. Among them: several well-heeled philanthropists of the du Pont family, three generations of Wyeths, and our writer. Stretching out from Wilmington, Delaware, and crossing the Pennsylvania border to points west, it's a bucolic area of inspiring landscapes, botanical wonders and vestiges of Golden Age opulence. Here are three spots that make the region well worth a visit.
LONGWOOD GARDENS
Bright lights? Dazzling hydraulics? The main attraction in Longwood's Summer of Spectacle is a recent $90 million revitalization of the 5-acre "fountain garden" that industrialist and engineer Pierre S. du Pont masterminded nearly a century ago.

Inspired by the grand allées of European villa gardens, du Pont originally designed the fountain display as the crowning gem on his estate in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, where he threw lavish parties for friends and family.

By 2014 the waterworks had deteriorated and were closed for a major upgrade. Basically, "[We] peeled back the surface of the garden to install new infrastructure," explains Longwood Gardens President Paul Redmond. More than 80 U.S. and European firms were involved in the "restitching" of a system that now includes 5 miles of new water pipes, 9,000 cubic yards of concrete and 4,000 refurbished pieces of Italian limestone.

Anticipation runs high as my friend Jan and I wander Longwood's elegant terrace gardens and pathways, waiting for a fountain show. At 1,077 acres, the property epitomizes just what is possible when you have a grand vision and a whole lot of cash. It's home to 11,000 types of trees, shrubs and flowers that erupt year-round in a rainbow of colors and scents in some 40 indoor and outdoor gardens (including a grand conservatory), fertile meadows and woodlands.

Grateful that predicted rains haven't materialized, we sip on locally brewed Oro Blanco wheat beers—made with grapefruits grown on-site—while admiring a display of symmetrical boxwood and Linden plantings. Quiet falls as flowing water leads us into a new stone grotto.

At 7 p.m. we take seats outside the conservatory, and it's showtime. Soon, bold music fills the night air. Towering plumes of water sway to the rhythm, keeping the beat as the soundtrack moves from a Mozart overture to the mezzo-soprano of Édith Piaf to the playful strains of Mancini's "Pink Panther." One moment the water looks smoky, then air cannons boom. Sprays of water twirl and crisscross, their colors morphing like dancers changing costumes.

Whereas du Pont's original fountains relied on 386 jets, the new computer-controlled design deploys more than 1,700 jets and LED lights to sculpt water and create visual effects, from basket-weave patterns to flames that miraculously shoot out of the water (the flames, Redmond explains, are achieved by injecting propane into the water column). Today, the fountain's plumes reach 175 feet.
Longwood Gardens’ Summer of Spectacle features fountain performances on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and runs through Sept. 30. Special fireworks and fountain shows are scheduled for Sept. 2 and 16. Advance tickets are available and recommended.

BRANDYWINE RIVER MUSEUM OF ART

Happily, the spring-into-summerlong fountain unveiling coincides with a retrospective show just down the road at the Brandywine River Museum of Art in honor of what would have been Andrew Wyeth’s centennial birthday.

Around the same time the du Ponts were busy building and expanding their grand châteaux (including nearby Nemours, which some have called “America’s Versailles”), N.C. Wyeth, illustrator of children’s classics such as Treasure Island and Kidnapped, purchased a home in the same valley. He and his wife had five children, three of whom—Andrew, Henriette and Carolyn—would become painters, as would Andrew’s son Jamie.

It goes without saying that Wyeth works figure prominently in the museum’s collection. Housed in a refurbished 19th-century mill, the building synthesizes the original stones and dark wood with modern, gleaming glass walls that overlook the Brandywine River, prompting visitors to contemplate the landscape outside while admiring painted interpretations of it. The museum and nearby conservancy sit on 15 acres and include a creekside trail with native plantings.

As geography and lineage would have it, there is a connection between the Wyeths and the du Ponts. The museum traces its origins back to George A. “Frolic” Weymouth (his mother was a du Pont), a driving force in the formation of the Brandywine Conservancy in the late 1960s. The conservancy rescued the old mill and protected its surrounding lands—including the agrarian landscapes that had inspired many a Wyeth painting—from developers.
IF YOU GO

WHAT TO SEE

Nemours Mansion & Gardens
Can’t get enough of the du Pont pomp and properties? Check out stately Nemours, the playground of Alfred I. du Pont and his wife, Alicia, for whom he built this 77-room, late-18th-century, French-inspired estate with 300 acres of formal gardens to explore. nemoursmansion.org

WHERE TO EAT

In Kennett Square, head to Philter (philtercoffee.com) for a caffeine fix, or Talula’s Table (talulastable.com) for a quick bite or a full meal at the chef’s table. Portabellos (portabellosforkennettsquare.com) hits the spot with rich mushroom soup and crêpes, along with a mouthwatering stroganoff with beef short ribs over black-truffle potatoes. Antica (antica.com) in Chadds Ford features savory Italian specialties with a local flair. Note: Many restaurants in this area are BYOB due to pricey liquor licensing.

WHERE TO STAY

The Fairville Inn (fairvilleinn.com) is centrally located and offers an array of lodging options, from rooms in the sunny main house to private cottages. I could hear the chorus of spring peepers from my back deck. Breakfast includes made-to-order omelets and an array of bite-size baked goods.

Formerly part of the Winterthur estate, The Inn & Spa at Montchanin Village (montchanin.com) boasts elegant period rooms in 11 historic, restored buildings.

The local Hilton Garden Inn (hilton.com) has its own restaurant that has won second place twice in the local mushroom-soup competition at the annual Mushroom Festival (this year, Sept. 9-10). Roughly 65 percent of U.S. mushrooms are grown in the region.

WHERE TO SHOP

At Phillips Mushroom Farms (philipsmushroomfarms.com), you’ll find exotic mushrooms—pom pom, lion’s mane, maitake—growing and learn why this area is known as “the mushroom capital of the world.” The store carries on the motif with everything from glitzy mushroom ornaments to mushroom supplements and cookbooks. You can take home some fresh fungi for cooking, too.

The eclectic gift shops at Longwood Gardens, the Brandywine River Museum of Art and Winterthur offer everything from fresh plants and native seeds to gorgeous coffee table books and prints.
Andrew, who was known to locals as "Andy," didn't have millions to manifest his vision, but he did have the luxury of time. He often worked in egg tempera, an ancient medium made with dry pigments mixed with egg yolk and distilled water. Painstaking layering allowed him to produce rich landscapes with warm and varied surfaces.

During a visit in late March, I take advantage of the shuttle-bus tour of the Wyeths' homes and studios (now part of the museum collection) as well as the nearby Kuerner Farm, which Andy found endlessly fascinating and immortalized in many of his masterpieces.

Fans of the Wyeth legacy will appreciate the charming family photos, original furniture and Wyeth artwork that fill the crowded homestead where Andy and his siblings grew up. Just steps up the hill, with a huge Palladian window and good north light, is N.C.'s studio. Aficionados will recognize familiar props such as the tricorn hat and glassware that appear in some of his paintings.

Stepping into Andy's modest work space, which he occupied from 1940 until 2008, I almost expect to find the artist at his easel. His brushes remain at the ready on a palette, while various sketches and studies are tacked to the walls and scattered across the wooden floorboards. It still looks like a working studio.

Afterward, I spend a few hours admiring all generations of Wyeth art hanging in the museum.

The exhibit "Andrew Wyeth: In Retrospect," with 100 of the artist's finest works, from early watercolors and rarely seen studies to his final tempera, "Goodbye," runs through Sept. 17. The Wyeth house, studios and farm tours are one hour each...
and are offered from April 1 to Nov. 19.

WINTERTHUR
It's hard to imagine another nearby attraction rivaling Longwood Gardens in the big-spending category, but the estate of Henry Francis du Pont does just that—albeit with an obsession of a different sort. Winterthur is an imposing nine-story, 175-room house that can only be called gargantuan. (Downton Abbey comes to mind.) And it contains one of the world's most renowned collections of American furnishings and antiques.

I decide on arrival to take the tram through the gardens. They're less formal than those of Longwood but no less lovely. An antiques collector and trained horticulturist, du Pont preferred natural landscaping that blended with the hills and forest. Swaths of blue blooms (scilla and chionodoxa, our tram driver informs us) blanket the March Bank, which is blooming right on schedule.

As we reach the mansion's grand front door, I imagine being a party guest back in the day. Four generations of du Ponts lived on this nearly 1,000-acre estate, from 1837 to 1951, until the house was opened to the public and its incumbent residents moved into the "cottage" (now the gift shop). With 90,000 objects inside, Winterthur is considered the world's premier museum of 17th- through 19th-century American antiques and decorative arts. Much of the collection is on display in both the period rooms and the galleries.

Once inside, a guide leads us into rooms decorated to represent different historic genres, with a focus on the spaces the family used when entertaining in the 1930s and 1940s. A quick elevator ride and we're suddenly immersed in opulence, later making our way down to an Empire-style room from 1933, all marble and gilt.

As my eyes dance from priceless object to priceless object, I have to confess that my senses are a bit overwhelmed after the relative simplicity of the Wyeth sites. Winterthur's collections are so vast that you can even book a customized tour of, say, Chinese export porcelain or just Chippendale furniture.

Soon, the sunny gardens lure me back outside to wander and think about how we humans interpret and play with our surroundings.

Local writer Amy Brecoint White adores all things that bloom, the evocative paintings of Andy Wyeth and anything sautéed with mushrooms.

[SIP. CELEBRATE. STAY.]

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