



# THE ROAD TO POCONO DOWNS

CHAMPION BUTCHERS, VICTORIAN BEER BARONS, A LAZY RIVER RAMBLE AND SOME DREADED YANKEE YOUNGSTERS.

LUZERNE COUNTY

MOHEGAN SUN AT POCONO DOWNS

A personal odyssey to the hidden gems along the way.

Up above Allentown, [Route 309](#) is an on-again off-again two-lane blacktop that winds toward the [Wyoming Valley](#). Shiny diners, one-horse patch towns, practitioners of taxidermy, small family farms and the aftermath of coalmines dot the landscape.

The valley is shaped like a croissant. It was carved by the Susquehanna through the folded Appalachians. And pretty much without warning, as 309 splits into a divided four-lane, [a granite marker](#) that pays tribute to a comic-strip boxing hero rises up along the shoulder. It's [Joe Palooka](#), known to previous generations as the "Champion of Democracy," a cartoon pugilist created by native son Ham Fisher.



Don't blink or you'll miss the [Joe Palooka monument](#) along the shoulder of Route 309.

Our destination is [Pocono Downs](#), the racetrack home of actual living champions. Also home to a mighty fine array of local beers, summer ales, sloppy joes, shrimp po'boys, cowboy ribeyes, cheesy sliders, hummus and tzatziki, Buffalo wings, tuna rolls, pot stickers and one amazing pizza called (appropriately enough) The Italian Stallion. Yup, we can take matters into our own hands quite nicely round here.

Actually, the marker tells us that this particular Pocono foothill has been named Mt. Joe Palooka, a pretty fair indicator as to the scrappiness of the area. People around here are used to gettin' 'er done by taking matters into their own hands.

Lest we forget, [the magic of a roadtrip](#) is what we find around the corner and over the next hill. And there are plenty of happy pastimes up ahead before the first exciting post time at the Downs. Perhaps it's best to simply offer the intrepid racetrack roadtripper an itinerant array of activities, eateries, scenery and all matter of spontaneous whatnot – all within a few clicks of Pocono Downs. Let's buckle up and click the hotlinks to dig in deeper. Download the map, grab the wheel and head for the hills. In the meantime, we'll look for you around the bends and back roads.

## 1 HARTMAN'S GRAND CHAMPION BUTCHER SHOW



Pull over; it's pork!

Roadtrip rule #4: Pull over whenever we see a pig statue, because, with any luck, it means local home-smoked pork. At [Hartman's Butcher Shop](#), heading north on 309 in New Tripoli, the

mouthwatering collection of tasty butchery treats is no baloney. Heck, they're national champs for the beef jerky! But the real surprise is the party in our mouth they call the cheesy beef sticks. Sound advice: keep a cooler in the ragtop's trunk.



An endless collection of pickled tripe, hot bologna, jalapeño dogs and hillbilly jerky, just to name a few deli case masterworks.

## 2 BEHOLD: THE BLUE COMET DINER!



A painting of the original Blue Comet, whose tracks still run right past the diner, hangs in the back room.

Getting closer to Wilkes-Barre along rugged Route 309, we can't pass up the beautiful [Blue Comet](#). As we chow down on eggs over easy and golden home fries (\$1.45!), we lose count of the cars of a big old freight train as it rumbles on past. (Overheard from a confiding waitress with a fabulous beehive hairdo: "I'll never, ever, never get married again. Now, who gets these beautiful stuffed peppers?")

## 3 CHECK INTO A VICTORIAN MASTERPIECE RESIDING IN A BEER BARON'S MANSION

Every nook and cranny of the [Frederick Stegmaier Mansion](#) is chock-a-block with gilded paintings, woven tapestries, brass fantasies, ornate wazoos, Tiffany everything and sudsy memorabilia from the [Stegmaier beer fortune](#).

It took Joe Matteo nine obsessed years to restore this downtown Wilkes-Barre B&B into a stunning



Old man Stegmaier turned his German beer-brewing chops into a 19th century fortune. (And no, the place is definitely, probably not haunted. We slept like Victorian beer barons.)



experience of true Victorian splendor. A night here in 600-thread count luxury is living as well as one possibly could in the late 19th century. Of course it doesn't hurt to discover a luscious 21st century selection of pastries outside our bedroom door in the morning.

## 4 ON TAP: GREAT FOOD AND PLENTY OF BEER AT BART & URBY'S



About a couple dozen beers are on tap at [Bart & Urby's](#) in downtown Wilkes-Barre, from local hero Stegmaier (their Oktoberfest is awesome) to Victory Storm King Stout. A better-than-bar-food menu with the likes of sushi-grade seared tuna, homemade empanadas and hand-cut sweet potato fries is icing on the cake.

## 5 OUTLET ARMY AND NAVY SELLS GOOD THINGS CHEAP

How about a six-pack of "sox" for 2.99? Camo t-shirts and canvas rucksacks at bargain prices. Or sturdy Dickies workwear for a song. Also, stock up for the end of the world with a tasty variety of MRE's said to stay fresh for 9 or 10 years. (We found the spicy penne to be not terrible at all.) This place is a hoot.



[Outlet Army and Navy](#)

**6 JUST MAYBE THE BEST CHOCOLATE MILK IN THE ENTIRE FREE WORLD.**



Just outside of town is [The Lands at Hillside Farms](#). It's a dairy farm with a store and restaurant across the road. Cheese and yogurts and chocolate milk that'll make you feel like a 7-year old again. A very lucky 7-year old.

**7 DOES THIS HORSE MAKE US LOOK FAT? A SLOW RIDE IN THE WOODS ON THE BIGGEST HORSE WE'VE EVER SEEN.**

John Mertz has been putting people up on gentle horses at [Deer Path Stable](#) for more years than he'd care to count. He put us up on Baron, no doubt the largest animal we've ever had the honor to sit upon. (John said this was the one animal on earth that might handle our girth without complaint. A hint we should



*High atop Baron, we can't help wonder what kind of conditioner he uses to keep his mane so silky smooth.*

drive on past the next barbecue joint we happen to see?) Old Baron paid us no mind, and seemed to enjoy his routine stroll through Deer Path's meandering, sun-dappled trails. Our ride was a very good 45 minutes or longer – just \$28 cash money well spent.



*John Mertz is a very funny guy. He'll put you in a good mood and in a good saddle at Deer Path Riding Stable. Riding our own horse is a great warm up for watching 'em run at Pocono Downs.*

**8 DOWN THE LAZY RIVER WITH A PADDLE SURE BEATS UP THE CREEK WITHOUT ONE...**

Off the horse and into a kayak. It's a whole other kind of trail ride. The good folks at [Susquehanna Kayak & Canoe](#) are a short ride from Wilkes-Barre along a beautiful winding road that hugs the shoreline of the Susquehanna River. We take a van a few miles upstream and climb into a kayak and let the lazy current push us back down. Along the way we watch bass jump, hawks circle, minks slink and a gigantic bald eagle soar overhead. It's so relaxing and quiet here, we forget to hear ourselves to think.



*In spring, the river is high and the rapids are, well, rapid. Summer waters are shallower, slower and mighty peaceful.*

**9 YOUNGSTER YANKEES IN A BEAUTIFUL MOUNTAIN BANDBOX.**

As we're mighty partial to the Phillies and Pirates (yup, we're National Leaguers all the way), it's a little weird to walk into beautiful PNC Field where the Triple A [Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Yankees](#) play ball. It's like watching dreaded rivals of the future



*There ain't a bad seat in the house where the young Yankees learn their craft. The hot dogs go down with a cold draft, too.*

earn their pinstripes. Lucky for us the Pawtucket Red Sox take it to the Yanks this afternoon, but in deference to the home team fans surrounding us, we don't holler too happily. (We reserve our vocal chords for the horses later on tonight.)

## 10 TONY'S IN KINGSTON: SANDWICHES AND OMELETS WITH EXTREME PERSONALITY.

Roadtrip rule #7: Avoid eating anything that's bigger than your head. Every rule has its exception, however, and in this case it may be [Tony's Fat Bastard](#) omelet. Many eggs envelop homemade sausage, meatballs, onions, cheese, hot peppers - all topped with some red gravy and a side of sausage. Good luck with that.



Tony's grill master and owner: "I'm a porketta patriot."

For our money (and for our tummies), we stick with the tried and true porketta hoagie. Owner Jimmy Zambito (son of Tony) is a madman with a spatula. The secret: grilling the long rolls inside and out. A masterpiece for your mouth. (Caveat: if you're offended by extreme Tea Party sympathies, you may wanna order for take-out. The joint is decorated the way Rush Limbaugh sounds.)

[Tony & Sons Diner](#)



"Probably the best Roadfood destination in Northeast Pennsylvania."  
— [Roadfood.com](#)

## 11 IS IT A GARAGE OR A COFFEE SHOP? YES!



Right around the corner from Pocono Downs we find Lispi's, the weirdest and perhaps most beautiful old coffee shop/lunch counter ever. It's attached to

an auto repair shop so we might get our car inspected, our oil changed, maybe even arrange a tow. Then enjoy a cup o' joe and maybe a cruller. Where Rt. 315 meets Fox Hill Road.

## 12 IT'S BETTER IN GROUPS AT MOHEGAN SUN AT POCONO DOWNS

When we finally make it to the track – just in the nick of post time, we meet a whole gang of friends who have the beer buckets chilled and the wings ordered extra hot. The track at [Pocono Downs](#) is a splendid oval, with a gorgeous backdrop of mountain foliage. We have a ball watching the horses' pre-race parade and one of our railbirds is absolutely convinced that we should peel our eyes for a horse that's pooping. ("That's the one to pick," he argues. "It'll lighten the load!")



There are all sorts of strategies on how to pick a horse. We happen to like the name of this one.

Well, we don't see that kind of action, but in the sixth race the number 5 horse speaks to us: Urbino Hanover, out of Pennsylvania's own Hanover Shoe Farms. The best pacers in the world come out of that farm, so who are we to argue with success? To make a 2-minute race story even shorter, thank you, [Hanover Shoe Farms](#). Urbino comes in like he should and we fill up the beer buckets again and still have pocket change for the roadtrip home. Here's to the road (and racetrack) ahead!

For more adventures of  
**The Shunpiker's Guide**, poke  
around at [visitpa.com/shunpiker](http://visitpa.com/shunpiker).



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## LUZERNE COUNTY

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### 1 Hartman's Butcher Shop

7291 Autumn Rd, New Tripoli, PA  
(610) 298-8232

### 2 The Blue Comet Diner

45 S Church St, Hazleton, PA  
(570) 455-3071

### 3 Frederick Stegmaier Mansion

304 South Franklin Street  
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18702  
(570) 823-9372 [stegmaiermansion.com](http://stegmaiermansion.com)

### 4 Bart & Urby's

115 S Main St  
Wilkes Barre, PA 18701-1611  
(570) 970-9570 [bartandurbys.com](http://bartandurbys.com)

### 5 Outlet Army and Navy

113 S Main St  
Wilkes Barre, PA 18701-1611  
(570) 822-4305

### 6 The Lands at Hillside Farms

65 Hillside Rd  
Trucksville, PA 18708-9615  
(570) 696-2881 [thelandsathillsidefarms.org](http://thelandsathillsidefarms.org)

### 7 Deer Path Stable

Old State Route 940  
White Haven, Pennsylvania 18661  
(570) 443-5000 [deerpathstable.com](http://deerpathstable.com)

### 8 Susquehanna Kayak & Canoe

Ardee's Foodrinkery Route 92  
Falls, PA 18615  
(570) 388-6107

### 9 PNC Field

235 Montage Mountain Rd  
Moosic, PA 18507-1765  
(570) 969-2255

### 10 Tony & Sons Diner

708 Wyoming Ave  
Kingston, PA 18704-3813  
(570) 288-6612

### 11 Lispi's Cocktail Lounge

Fox Hill Rd  
Wilkes Barre, PA 18705  
(570) 823-9578

### 12 Pocono Downs

1280 Highway 315 Blvd  
Wilkes Barre, PA 18702-7002  
(570) 831-2100 [poconodowns.com](http://poconodowns.com)

