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Spotlight on The Berkshires

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World-class culture in the serene setting of Western Massachusetts in the month of August

Photo by John Ferrillo

When the asphalt sizzles in Boston and New York, and the beaches of the Hamptons and the Cape become overcrowded, savvy urbanites seeking a slice of culture with their R&R head for the Berkshires. Illustrious families like the Vanderbilts and Carnegies started the summering trend well over a century ago, constructing elaborate homes that rivaled the elegance of any French château. And today these hallowed estates have been lovingly transformed into state-of-the-art performance venues and luxurious B&Bs.

With its surplus of ivy-studded brick and colonial cupolas, the charming town of Lenox is the region's cultural hub. Both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edith Wharton wrote their masterpieces in the area, and the village honors its rich literary history with regular alfresco salons held at the Mount (EdithWharton.org), Wharton's opulent compound, now a National Historic Landmark.

Just west of Lenox, Tanglewood welcomes the Boston Symphony Orchestra during the summer months (BSO.org). From May through August, thousands of pilgrims unfold their lawn chairs to take in the sounds of classical, rock, and jazz beats. This August's lineup includes Yo-Yo Ma, Idina Menzel, and John Williams.

The world-famous dance festival Jacob's Pillow (JacobsPillow.org) also heats up in August with the Martha Graham Dance Company and the Malpaso Dance Company from Cuba, among others.

For visual arts enthusiasts, MASS MoCA (MassMoca.org) — about an hour outside of Lenox, in Williamstown — focuses on large-scale, complex installations that defy conventional museum settings, and features an impressive array of contemporary exhibits. Not to be missed is the ongoing Sol LeWitt retrospective, which spans the artist's career from 1969 to 2007.

Beyond the cluster of superlative summer arts venues, the Berkshires also prides itself on its rich tradition of small-farm produce. Lenox's Friday farmers market is a one-stop shop for picnic fixings, but you can also go directly to the source. Cricket Creek Farm (CricketCreekFarm.com) in Williamstown churns artisanal farmstead cheese, while Furnace Brook Winery (FurnaceBrookWinery.com), in nearby Richmond, is known for its choice varietals. Furnace Brook's 2012 Riesling and Cricket Creek's Berkshire Bloom, a cheese inspired by traditional Camembert flavor notes, make for the perfect pairing.

Pro Tip:

“Mount Greylock is the highest elevation in Massachusetts, and offers a beautiful view of the rolling hills found there and in neighboring Vermont. You can choose to hike up all 3,491 feet, or drive to the top lookout point and walk along the scenic trails.”

Jeremy Clowe, Norman Rockwell Museum