

# SOUTHERN FARM & GARDEN™

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*Most Americans are unfamiliar with “farm stays”—both the term and the travel niche, yet there are more than 1,000 farm stays here in the United States offering experiential farm vacations that will leave the family talking about when they can return. And the surprising part? Many farm stays are within easy reach of some of our largest metropolitan areas.*

## A Rural Experience

*Farm stays are a well-loved weekend and vacation alternative*

The kids come bounding out of the cottage, boots on, egg basket in hand, ready to start the morning chores. “Will the chickens bite?” “What do they eat?” “Why does the rooster crow?” And, from their parents trailing behind, “How do we know the eggs we collect won’t have chicks inside when we crack the shells to make an omelet?” Gasp!

“So begins a morning with guests on my farm,” says Scottie Jones, owner of Leaping Lamb Farm and Founder of the U.S. Farm Stay Association, Alsea, Oregon. “These aren’t friends over for the weekend. These are strangers paying to stay with us on our farm. They are looking for a rural experience, and we are happy to acquaint them with our daily lives as farmers.”

Enter the American farm stay, a nascent movement with European origins, offering the opportunity to stay overnight, for a weekend or a week, on a working farm in any of our 50 states. While it sounds romantic to visit an agriturismo (agritourism property) in Italy, a gites (farm house) in France, or a schlaf im stroh (Sleep in the Straw) in Germany, a number of American farmers are offering to exceed all expectations, as well as save you a heck of an airfare and jet lag.

Have you ever said, “Gee, honey, let’s go stay on a farm?” If you said: 1) No, you had not considered staying overnight on a farm; 2) You didn’t even know there was an option to do this; 3) But, wait, why would you want to do this?; and 4) How would you even go about finding one?—then you are in good company. Most Americans are unfamiliar with both the term and the travel niche, yet there are more than 1,000 farm stays here in the U.S. offering experiential farm vacations that will leave the family talking about when they can return. And the surprising part? Many farm stays are within easy reach of some of our largest metropolitan areas.

Farm stays are a well-loved weekend and vacation alternative in Europe. They represent a retreat to the country for a relaxed stay with good food, fresh air, unplugged devices and a sound sleep (until the rooster crows). For urbanites, this is just the respite they need to return back to their city lives refreshed and, honestly, less cranky. A number of European governments jumped in to support this lodging model in the early 1980s as concern for rural out-migration and the vibrancy of their small farms increased. There have been similar issues in the U.S. ever since the end of World War II, when many family farms collapsed or were consolidated into the large industrial ventures that have made American farming a world leader in efficiency and production.

As for the introduction of farm stays as an alternative revenue source for smaller farms, we’re a bit late to the party. What Italy did for its farms is similar to Vermont’s decision in the 1990s to promote farming as a tourism commodity, but that was only one state. Today, Vermont is a leader in agritourism as a solution to small-farm, and thus rural community sustainability. The reality is that only with increased interest in local food have other states come to recognize agritourism, including farm stays, as a diversification strategy as important as niche crops and livestock production.

“A farm stay is lodging on a working farm or ranch that you pay for,” says Scottie Jones. “Accommodations vary from rooms in the farmhouse to a separate cottage, a converted barn, a yurt, a campground, or simply a place to pitch your tent on ‘the back 40.’ Farms vary in acreage and landscapes. Meals may or may not be included, although you can usually expect some form of breakfast with eggs you collect fresh from the coop. The activities are as diverse as the operations (and the hosts themselves) and may involve helping with chores, milking a goat or cow, watching and trying your hand

Top: Blg Bluff Ranch, California. Bottom: Scottie Jones and Paco, Leaping Lamb Farm, Alsea, Oregon.





Dawn Robertson



Greg Jones



Greg Jones



Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.

~ Albert Einstein ~

Top: Overlooking East Fork Farm, Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina. Bottom Left: 1895 farm house at Leaping Lamb Farm viewed from the vegetable garden. Right: Rudy, a Copper Moran rooster, Leaping Lamb Farm. Far right: Walpole Valley Farms, Walpole, New Hampshire



Who wouldn't want to eat farm-fresh food, see livestock and crops upclose and even eat veggies fresh from the garden?

Scottie Jones



Jacqueline Caserta



Dawn Robertson

at cheesemaking, herding cattle into a new pasture, or even picking and stomping grapes. Many of the farms are fairly unstructured, believing you will glean the most by watching and listening, as well as unplugging and playing, reading a good book, visiting unencumbered with friends and family. It's all about the place and the rhythm of the countryside."

Who wouldn't want to eat farm-fresh food, see livestock and crops close enough to touch and smell them and even eat veggies fresh from the ground? There's a new appreciation for the work of farming and ranching, even if only for the weekend. Life on the farm is completely different from the familiarity of the urban experience. Once home, decisions at the grocery store may be tempered because of a newfound understanding about small farm America, the importance of diversified local crop production, even the price at the farmers' market.

For most Americans, there is no family farm to return to, so farm stays offer a friendly face to farming and a way to visit and stay in our rural countryside. It's a place to ask questions to which, a century ago, every kindergartner knew the answer. (No, chickens don't bite.

They eat bugs and grass and grains. The rooster wants to let everyone know he is the top chicken. Eggs only hatch into chicks after 27 days of a hen sitting on them, and a rooster needs to be part of the equation—though a rooster is not necessary for egg production, only the chick part. Whew!) And, a farm is a place to connect to nature with a hands-on approach and reconnect with each other—all digital devices turned off and forgotten for a few days.

"What most travelers would not know or think about is the importance these farm stays provide the farms' for their financial health and sustainability," says Scottie. "Many small farms are not profitable selling livestock or crops because it is impossible to compete with the economies of scale favored in commercial production."

Even if a farm has found a niche, it often will not produce enough profit for college tuition or a retirement plan. Farming at any level is a risky venture, with many events beyond the control of the farmer—the price of feed, the weather, market and commodity pricing, to name a few of the risks. Because of this, for small farms (defined by the U.S. Department

*Continued on next page*

Top: Gate to the apple orchard, Leaping Lamb Farm Middle left: The Inn at Valley Farms, Walpole New Hampshire. Bottom left: Collecting eggs at East Fork Farm, Marshall, North Carolina





Paul Roderick



Top: Rosie and her triplets. Bottom: The summer garden at Leaping Lamb Farm, Alsea, Oregon.

*Farm stays are relatively new to America. Farmers tend to be hospitable people by nature, so more mouths at the dinner table is all in a day's work.*

of Agriculture as grossing less than \$100,000 per year) one or more members of the family often work off the farm with a "day job" to make up the difference and to cover additional expenses.

While Farm Stays are relatively new in the U.S., farmers are increasingly seeking opportunities to diversify into what the USDA terms Added-Value Products. The added value here is the offer of accommodation. Farmers tend to be hospitable people by nature so more mouths at the dinner table are 'all in a day's work'. For the farm it just makes sense, and benefits to the local community are noticeable in retail sales, restaurant meals, hired help -and local gossip about the strangers in town!

"Families that stayed at my farm had the time of their life: feeding the chickens, collecting eggs, brushing the donkey, holding a baby lamb, searching for carrots in the garden, splashing around in the creek, hiking the trails into the woods on our farm, and finally sitting

around the dinner table at the end of the day, tired and dirty and happy they could be a part of the farm. They tell their friends, who then visit, who tell their friends," says Scottie.

"This is how a movement starts as more people find out about farm stays. It's not a huge jump from farm stays to farming as we look for a new generation of farmers to continue an American tradition that built this country so long ago."

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*Scottie and Greg Jones are sheep farmers, at Leaping Lamb Farm, in Alsea, Oregon. Scottie is the founder and Executive Director of the U.S. Farm Stay Association, a national travel site and trade association for farm and ranch vacations. She has been farming for 13 years.*

*Scottie holds a Master's degree in Medieval Archaeology and an MBA. She has worked as an archaeologist, in the arts, in retail, and at a zoo, before becoming a farmer. None of her career choices or degrees prepared her for birthing lambs, trimming hooves, or bucking bales of hay when she moved to the farm!*

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