

Vacation on the Farm

Berks County Farm Bureau Member Finds New Way to Diversify



Lewis Martin, right, and his wife Marilyn, examine a starfish while on a tour of Maine farm operation.

Story by Rebecca VanderMeulen

Dennis Rex prefers not to fuss over the particulars when he takes a vacation from his dairy farm near Andreas, Schuylkill County.

Phoebe Bitler appreciates that sentiment. She was born into a dairy-farming family and now runs the Vista Grande dairy outside of Fleetwood, Berks County, with husband David and son Jesse. And she understands farmers' need for occasional excursions away.

That's why, between the duties of running a farm with about 120 milking cattle, 150 young stock cattle, 35 bulls and 35 beef cows, Bitler, a Pennsylvania Farm Bureau member, organizes educational bus tours to farming operations throughout the United States and Canada. Her side business, Vista Grande Tours, claims dozens of repeat customers like Rex and his wife, Paulette.

The guide Bitler made for a 2010 tour of the southeastern U.S. detailed, down to 15-minute increments, when the bus would arrive at each stop and what time it was expected to leave each morning.

"You don't have to worry about the rooms. You don't have to worry about the meals," Rex says. "It's amazing how she can get everything on schedule, right on time."

Some years Vista Grande offers one tour. Sometimes there are four, depending

To find out about upcoming tours, contact The Bitler's at (610-944-0541) or vgf@early.com.

on how much time the Bitlers can get away.

The business has no website and rarely advertises. Farmers and retired farmers from Pennsylvania and other mid-Atlantic states learn about the tours through word of mouth or from Bitler's husband, a cattle broker. Each person who comes on

a trip ends up on Bitler's mailing list. The buses fill quickly.

Bitler learned how to plan bus tours as a Penn State Cooperative Extension home economist in the early 1980's. In 1996, she planned an educational tour on the way to take 4-H participants to the World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wis. So many families went along that Bitler realized many farmers aren't good at planning vacations because they seldom leave home.

Vista Grande Tours was born.

Like many farm families, the Bitlers look for ways to diversify their farm income. For Phoebe, the success of her first tour as an extension agent led to her home-grown farm tour business.

But for other producers, visiting farms during tour stops helps generate ideas of their own. A number of farmers, some with agritainment business and others also looking to diversify, gain inspirations during these vacations, Bitler said.

On one tour in 2004, a Bucks County couple stopped at a farm that was making jam, and they went back to their own farm and started a side business of their own, Bitler said.

"Even the retired folks who go along will take back ideas to their sons and daughters," she said. "It's neat to see the ideas people get."

Since 1997 Bitler has run trips from Florida to Nova Scotia, Canada. Clients have visited Kentucky horse farms, Georgia peach orchards and the Prince Edward Island Preserve Company in Canada.

Bitler researches points of interest online and finds destinations by studying magazine articles and lists of speakers at agricultural conferences. "I just always have my ears open, and I'm a very inquisitive person," she says.

She and David first check out places she finds to decide which make the best stops. They ask people at local diners for suggestions of where to stay and visit.

Bitler thinks her day job helps her build rapport with farmers who are reluctant to let in a bus tour.

A Florida alligator farmer was cautious about letting the group in because he didn't want to open himself up to animal rights activists. But she says her persistence paid off with a security code to enter the farm so the group could see how alligators are hatched and raised for meat and hide.

"We want nothing more than to see what real people do and how they're doing it," Bitler says.

Clients enjoy meeting other farmers and learning more about how food is grown.

While touring the South, Rex was astonished to learn how heavily the farms he visited relied on migrant labor. "Every owner of those businesses told us the same thing," he recalls. "If they didn't have the migrant workers, they'd be out of business."

Lewis Martin, who with wife Marilyn is semi-retired from a farm that produces eggs for flu vaccines, says he'd rather learn than relax on vacation.

He's seen Prince Edward Island potato fields that abut the Gulf of St. Lawrence and one of the Vidalia sweet-onion farms that only exist in a small region of Georgia. "I know exactly what the fields look like and what the processing plant looked like," says Martin, who lives near Mifflinburg, Union County.

Bitler doesn't plan to expand her touring business – the dairy takes up enough time. But she'll keep it running as long as she has clients.