

JIM THORPE, PA: The Switzerland of America

BY VANESSA ORR

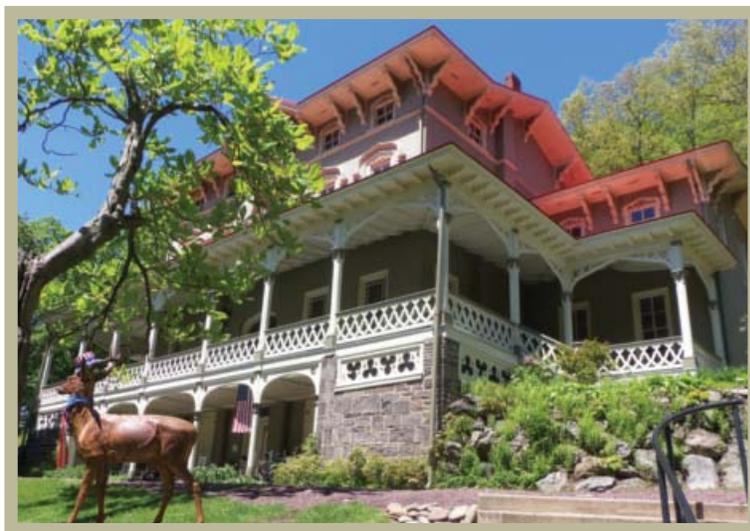
Looking down over the town of Jim Thorpe, PA, from the top floor of the Asa Packer Mansion, it's easy to understand why the builder of the Lehigh Valley Railroad and founder of Lehigh University decided to build his stately home among its hills. The town, which seems to be carved right out of a mountain, is filled with Victorian-style homes; high-steepled churches nestle against charming shops and cozy inns. A few minutes' jaunt in any direction takes a visitor right back into the wilds; a classic opera house awaits those looking for entertainment just at the top of the hill.

Originally known as the Borough of Mauch Chunk, the town of Jim Thorpe is both classic and quirky. In 1953, seeking to attract business, civic leaders made a deal with Jim Thorpe's wife, Patricia, to rename the town after the renowned Olympic athlete and to create a monument to the Oklahoma native, who began his sports career 100 miles away at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, PA. Today, a memorial park located alongside North Street (Rt. 93) boasts two statues of Thorpe holding a football and throwing a discus, as well as an abstract sculpture. Thorpe's monument sits on a mound that includes soil from Oklahoma as well as from the Olympic stadium in Stockholm where Thorpe won gold medals in both the decathlon and pentathlon in 1912.

Visitors to Jim Thorpe will find an array of activities to do, whether interested in outdoor adventure, culture or history or fine dining. I highly recommend the newly renovated Broadway Grille & Pub at the historic Inn at Jim Thorpe, which is located right on Broadway, one of the town's main thoroughfares. Sit inside and enjoy the ambiance of a more elegant time, or sit on the outside balcony and watch the town in action; the bar also features live music at night to invite patrons in. One of the things I like best about Jim Thorpe is that many of



A view of the town of Jim Thorpe from Packer Hill Road.



The 18-room Asa Packer Mansion was built in 1863 at a cost of \$14,000.

its restaurants are located within restored Victorian gems; during a later dining experience at Crave at 66, also on Broadway, I got the chance to wander into their intimate

backroom bar, where one of their specialties includes absinthe cocktails. And while I did avoid that temptation, I admit I tried the absinthe ice cream dessert—which, yes, is as sinful as it sounds.

The architecture in the town is nothing less than awe-inspiring; walking down Race Street at night to return to my room at the Hometown Inn felt like wandering through the alleys of merry old England. Many visitor accommodations are found in these restored Victorian homes, which are surprisingly roomy; my suite featured a comfy sitting room, a bedroom, a large bathroom (with a clawfoot tub!) and its own terrace, one of three room styles on the premises. The Mauch Chunk Opera House, located just one street over, is also an architectural jewel; the vaudeville theater has been in service since 1882, and I practically swooned when I realized that I was in the same room, looking at the same stage, where Mae West once performed. While the acoustics were incredible, you just can't beat that type of ambience.

One other must-stop is the Asa Packer Mansion, located just another short walk (uphill) from the center of town on Packer Hill Road. The home of philanthropist and railroad magnate Asa Packer, the home was built in 1863 at a cost of \$14,000. The 18-room Italianate mansion still contains original 19th-century furnishings, which Packer's last surviving child, Mary Packer Cummings, willed to the Borough of Mauch Chunk when she died in 1912. The home remained sealed and undisturbed for 44 years, when the Jim Thorpe Lions Club opened it to the public in 1956.

When he died at age 74 in 1879, Asa Packer was worth \$54.5 million. For a time while Mary lived in the house, she was actually the wealthiest woman in America, and the

second wealthiest woman in the world, behind Queen Victoria. The queen actually gave the Packer family a peacock table that still stands in the ladies' parlor. From the hand-stenciled and sanded parlor walls to



Victorian homes line Race Street.

the pink drapes lined with 18 carat gold-bullion thread from Paris, the house is a tribute to the success of a man who started life as a dirt farmer.

While the views from inside Jim Thorpe's classic homes are incredible, there's nothing

like actually getting outside and seeing all that the town has to offer. I spent an afternoon hiking up Glenn Onoko Mountain, home to four awe-inspiring waterfalls. The hike itself is over difficult, rock-strewn terrain, but the views are well worth the effort. I'd advise going with a guide; Sky Fogal of Pocono Whitewater Adventure joined me for the hike, and shared stories of growing up in the area. Turns out that the area's high school cross-country team is renowned for their endurance and ability to run up hills; can't imagine why since every street in town does seem to lead up a mountain. For those who prefer other outdoor activities, the company also offers 'mild to wild' whitewater rafting trips, family style adventures, rail-trail biking and Skirmish paintball games played on 50 different fields over 700 acres.

If you really want to mountain climb, but don't want to do it on your own two feet, you can take advantage of an all-terrain Pinzgauer tour, which includes splashing in the mud, fossil hunting and climbing along shear rock faces in a place called Hades Hollow. And yes, that ride is exactly what it sounds like. The all-wheel drive, light utility vehicles are used by the Swiss Army; and while the ride is rough, there's pretty much



A ride in an all-terrain Pinzgauer gives new meaning to 'off-roading.'

nowhere that these beasts won't go. Tours last from one to three hours, and while you might be a little sore when you get back—despite the Pinzgauer being described as the Ferrari of off-road capable vehicles—it's a lot of bone-rattling fun.

For more information on any of these activities or the town of Jim Thorpe, contact the Pocono Mountain Visitors Bureau at 570-421-5791 or visit www.poconomountains.com.

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