

# It's Groundhog Day Year 'Round in Punxsutawney, PA

BY VANESSA ORR

It may not seem like it right now, but the fact is, spring is right around the corner. I can say this with certainty, because I heard it right from the source: Pennsylvania's world-renowned groundhog and prognosticator of prognosticators—Punxsutawney Phil.

There's nothing quite like waking up at an ungodly hour, hiking up the hill to Gobbler's Knob and joining 32,000 of your closest friends to watch a rodent predict the weather. It's dark, it's bitterly cold—and it's a ridiculous amount of fun. There's a certain level of camaraderie that develops when you realize that you're surrounded by people who have made the trek from across the country—and across the world—to stand shoulder to shoulder, anxiously awaiting word on whether Phil has seen his shadow.

This year, the news was good: Phil predicted an early spring. The roar that went up from the crowd was deafening; spontaneous dancing and singing broke out as everyone celebrated the fact that winter was on its way out. After the pronouncement, the crowd headed back down the hill in search of warmth, hot food and more festivities, which the welcoming town of Punxsutawney was more than happy to provide.

Now in its 127th year, the Groundhog Day celebration is what the town of Punxsutawney, or Punxsy, as the locals call it, is known for. Immortalized in the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, in which Bill Murray relives the same day over and over again, this yearly event attracts thousands of

people to the area to enjoy not only the ceremony, but the carnival-like atmosphere. Everyone from young families to frat boys to soon-to-be newlyweds who want to get married on this special day make the pilgrimage to the town of 6,000 to experience that one shining moment, hoping to hear that spring is on its way.

The town itself goes all out for its visitors, hosting groundhog story walks, hayride town tours, and of course a groundhog souvenir sale, held at the historic Panthall Hotel beside Barclay Square. Need a (fake) groundhog hat, statue or chocolates? You can find it all here. Built in 1888, the iconic hotel also offers shuttle service to Gobbler's Knob during the event, as do a number of other locations.

While the yearly event is Punxsy's biggest draw, its influence spreads far further. The town is now a year-round destination, with visitors coming to pose beside its 32 six-foot-tall Phantastic Phil statues, designed by artists from across the state. Tourists can get their pictures taken beside Phil's burrow, located in the Civic Center Complex in Barclay Square in downtown Punxsutawney, where Phil lives for the other 364 days of the year, or wander the main streets to see historic homes or to take in some shopping, which, naturally, will include more groundhog souvenirs.

Billed as "The Weather Capital of the World," the city is also home to the Punxsutawney Weather Discovery Center, located in the town's former post office. Exhibits include a Tornado Twisty Slide where kids can climb into the funnel and feel gale force winds before 'crashing' into foam buildings at the bottom and an AccuWeather Green Screen Forecast Station where they can become real-life meteorologists.

Adults will enjoy a tour of the Bennis and Latimer Houses, two well-preserved historic homes on West Mahoning Street. Built in 1903, the Bennis House was bequeathed to the Punxsutawney Area Historical and Genealogical Society with the stipulation that the structure was not to be changed in any way. Visitors can view hundreds of fine antiques and memorabilia, ranging from stereoscopes to wind-up Victrolas to Flow Blue china as well as mining, railroading, lumbering and farming objects. Special attention is given to the heritage of those who settled the area, including a stunning collection of Pysanky eggs highlighting the



*Phil surveys his fans before making his prediction.*



*Dress warmly...or dress like a groundhog. Or both.*

Eastern European influence.

There are plenty of places to eat as well, depending on when you're in town. If you go for the Groundhog Day festivities, you can find breakfast in year-round restaurants like Caterina's Café or The Well Coffee House or take advantage of special morning meals provided by the Elks Lodge, the Salvation Army, the Eagles Lodge or the John W. Jenks Lodge Room, among others. There are numerous lunch and dinner choices available as well, not only in Punxsutawney, but in nearby Dubois. I personally would recommend Luigi's Italian Ristorante on N. Brady Street in Dubois, where I enjoyed a fantastic Chicago-style Delmonico steak with a bleu cheese, butter and onion sauce, as well as a nice visit with one of the owners, who stops in at each table to make sure that everyone is enjoying his or her meal.

I think that what makes Punxsutawney most special is this welcoming attitude that the locals display, which according to frequent visitors, lasts year 'round. It's a small town with a big heart; something that makes you want to visit....again and again and again.

For more information and links to a number of central PA visitors' centers, visit the PA Wilds website at [www.pawilds.com](http://www.pawilds.com).

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