

# Surrounding States Say: Click Me! Click Me!

Our neighbor states really want us to come see them. Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania and West Virginia all vie for our weekend visits, so they've all built state tourism Web sites to promote their inns, cafes, museums and, inevitably, covered bridges. Most share some basics, such as hotel and restaurant search engines, discount offers and photos of handsome people shopping for antiques. But some do it better than others, providing information and even entertainment as they slip us the hard sell. **Steve Hendrix** compares them.



	Virginia Tourism Corp., <a href="http://www.virginia.org">www.virginia.org</a>	Maryland Office of Tourism, <a href="http://www.mdisfun.org">www.mdisfun.org</a>	Pennsylvania Tourism Office, <a href="http://www.visitpa.com">www.visitpa.com</a>	West Virginia Division of Tourism, <a href="http://www.wvtourism.com">www.wvtourism.com</a>
<b>The Overall Vibe</b>	Virginia is for lovers of slick, interactive consumer info. The Old Dominion boasts one of the most info-packed and useful tourism sites in the region (and its venerable slogan is all over it).	Surprisingly for an affluent state, Maryland's tourism site lags well behind its regional rivals. Balky search features, outdated info and scant details suggest that you may be better off stopping at an interstate welcome center for your travel planning.	The hippest and most sophisticated site we tested, and the one with the most personality (the hilarious Groundhog Day films alone ensure that). Such features as the Shunpiker's Guide, back-road travel and tips from real tourists lend a human voice to the tourism boilerplate.	A less ambitious site that still holds plenty of specific information, as long as you're willing to hunt for it.
<b>How It's Put Together</b>	The home page is a fairly clean starting point, with a lack of jumpy, blinky elements and a premium on a single seasonal photo. There's a small monthly-highlights calendar, a 13-box tool bar along the top and a pulsing string of links to thematic "gateways": Beach, Wine & Spa, Outdoors, etc. Accommodations are divided into seven categories, from cabins to resorts, with each being searchable within regional divisions, then further by county and city. Dining, shopping and attractions are organized the same way.	The generic home page features lots of plain squares with simple text links. Nothing flashes and nothing moves, with the exception of a central photo that rotates among a crab, a raft and a Revolutionary War soldier. A column of text on the side links to attractions, transportation and other categories of varying degrees of usefulness. Instead of maintaining a detailed lodging list, Maryland provides a link to Travelocity and handful of local B&B associations.	The first page features a scattering of quick links to hotels, activities, ski reports, maps and an insanely detailed events calendar. The most innovative contraption is an iTunes-meets-YouTube-style "Playlist" that lets readers share suggested itineraries for weekend travel.	The home page greets us with a rotating beauty shot of the state's ample natural Wild-and-Wonderfulness and boasts a lengthy statewide events calendar along the side. Eight "mini-Web sites" break the state into such themes as history, outdoors, weekends and nightlife. The nuts and bolts of lodging, attractions and deals are all jammed into a drop-down menu called Visitor Information.
<b>Special Goodies</b>	The site's list of discounts and packages is a long one, about 350 deals spread across three categories. We did find a few plums (a two-for-one deal at the Homestead in March, for example), but most seem to be of the 10-percent-off-your-midweek-hotel-room variety.	The site offers about 20 romantic, family and golf discounts around the state. (Lameness demerits for leaving Christmas specials up into February.) Our head was most turned by the offer of a free night at the lush Inn at Easton when you book Friday and Saturday (through March).	In addition to the range of ad hoc offers from hotels and attractions, look for the statewide specials that Pennsylvania Tourism organizes periodically, such as a just-ended winter deal that gave you one night free at more than 175 hotels.	Scant pickings on the "Hot Deals" page, a short list of offers limited mainly to a golf discount card and a break on admission to a Parkersburg glass factory. The best of the lot are deep discounts at some of the state's excellent state park lodges.
<b>Best Surprise</b>	An events generator for any bracket of dates during the year. For example, plug in May 11 through May 13 on the Festivals/Fairs/Parades page, and you'll get a rundown of, well, festivals, fairs and parades occurring that weekend.	The site offers real-time chatting with a "Maryland certified travel counselor." I asked for info about touring lighthouses and within three minutes someone named MStrickland came up with several useful links.	Road trips! Almost 60 meticulously researched driving itineraries, divided by region or interest, from amusement parks to wineries. The day-by-day plans include specifics on lodging, restaurants and attractions.	The excellent summaries of West Virginia history on the Culture and Heritage page. Our favorite was the frank review of the state's coal legacy.
<b>Biggest Pain</b>	The graphically intense pages can take several beats to load.	There are several. Despite a half-hour's effort, the search engine could find only seven antique stores in all of Maryland, and zero restaurants; the road-trip itineraries include no phone numbers, maps or route suggestions; dead-end links.	The home page features a different local visitors bureau each time you load it. A nice touch, but we had to refresh about 20 times before we got back to the car-show link that had caught our eye earlier.	Finding a hotel or restaurant is cumbersome, as every category — from lodging to education — is channeled through a single search engine called the Travel Planner.
<b>Purplest P.R. Prose</b>	"Meet Virginia's Journeys of Passion"	"You'll find the key to his or her heart in Baltimore."	"Come, discover an amazing land of rich history, striking beauty and endless adventure."	"Each small-town shop is bound to hold a hidden gem."