

5 must-see spectacles in Central Jersey



Central Jersey Go
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There are just some sights that a camera can't capture in all its glory — those sights that no matter how many times to see them, you can't help but mutter wow under your breath.

Here in Central Jersey, we may not have a ball dropping in Times Square, a parade of partygoers in New Orleans or glasses clacking in Munich, but we do have quite a few sights that only we, in Hunterdon, Middlesex, Somerset and Union counties, can call our own.

In a region stuffed to the brim with iconic events, jaw-dropping scenery and one-of-a-kind happenings, we have plenty of our own displays that only New Jerseyans can appreciate. Have you checked out all these must-see spectacles yet?

Balloons rising at Festival of Ballooning

Every year for the past 36 years, the QuickChek Festival of Ballooning, held at the Solberg Airport in Readington, both begins and culminates with one feat — the mass ascension of up to 100 hot air balloons from around the world twice a day, making for a sky full of colors, shapes and excitement. That will repeat at the festival this year from July 26-28.

"One balloon up in the sky is beautiful, but 100 are spectacular," said Russ Mensch, media director for the QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning. "They all start out in an empty field in duffel bags and when they're up in the air, there is this 'aweness' and it even holds true for those of us that are working there. We are in the middle of everything and we just stop and look up at it — it's that appealing."

For a sight: QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning from July 26-28 at Solberg Airport, Readington; for tickets visit balloonfestival.com

Tailgating at Far Hills Race Meeting

The 98-year-old Far Hills Race Meeting, otherwise known as "The Hunt," which takes place at Moorland Farm every year, may focus on Steeplechase As-

sociation racing but there's also another big reason that New Jerseyans eagerly shell out \$100 or more a person to attend — tailgating.

An untethered gathering of all that's plaid, designer and drunken, The Hunt regularly attracts 30,000 people, and has been known to result in some unruly behavior. However, don't let that deter you — this unmatched celebration is quite the festive way to enter fall by seeing some serious antics.

For a sight: Far Hills Race Meeting on Saturday, Oct. 19 at Moorland Farms, Far Hills; for tickets visit farhillrace.org

Greek eats at St. George Greek Festival

With 25 Orthodox Greek churches throughout the state and at least 20 Greek festivals from May through October, "Greek festival season" in New Jersey is no joke, and that kicks off every year with St. George Greek Orthodox Church of Piscataway's festival, which will take place for the 46th annual year this year from May 16-19.

As one of the largest and oldest Greek congregations in the state, St. George puts on quite the celebration with authentic Greek cuisine, live Greek music and folk dancing, all of which attracts about 15,000 annual guests.

"It's the 'kefi' that makes us different — the level of energy at the festival," said Arete Bouhlas, publicity manager of the festival. "Some festivals say they end at 11 p.m., but they're quiet by 9:30 p.m. By 12:30 a.m., we have to kick people out."

For a sight: St. George Greek Orthodox Church of Piscataway's Greek Festival from May 16-19 at 1101 River Road, Piscataway; \$2 entrance fee; for more information visit gocnj.org/festival/

Bicycle racing at Tour of Somerville

Somerville is always bustling with visitors thanks to its many restaurants and shops. However, one day of the year — this year on Monday, May 27 — the nation's oldest bike race takes to the streets of the borough with its iconic 76-year-old race which brings in more than 1,000 professional and amateur cyclists and 20,000 spectators every year to see the pros flying through the usually-quiet streets.

Don't worry, there's also plenty of



Fresh Loukoumades, Greek Fried Honey Puffs, are a fixture at the St. George Greek Festival. FILE

family-friendly activities that also take place at the historic event. This year, the Tour of Somerville will begin with its Memorial Day Parade at 9 a.m., followed by a family fun ride at 9:45 a.m. before the pros begin racing at 10:30 a.m. and ending with an awards ceremony at 6 p.m.

For a sight: Tour of Somerville on Monday, May 27 begins at Somerset County Courthouse at 20 N. Bridge St., Somerville; free for spectators; visit tourofsomerville.org

Hot dogs galore at NJ Hot Dog Tour

There's only one reason that people from 48 states and three countries would flock to the Garden State year after year — food. And what's a more iconic New Jersey food than the hot dog? At the annual NJ Hot Dog Tour, which will be held for the 16th year on Saturday, August 24 this year, some of the nation's biggest hot dog lovers and friends will gather for a six-hour bus tour throughout the Garden State.

Here, meet about 80 hungry (and ambitious) hot dog lovers, all characters in their own right, as they start their journey at the Galloping Hill Inn in Union before heading to about five other



Balloons rise at the QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning. FILE

restaurants. You'll have to keep an eye out for next year's, though — it's already sold out for 2019.

For a sight: NJ Hot Dog Tour on Aug. 24 which is currently sold out; contact Erwin 'Benzee' Benz for more information at benzee95@hotmail.com

Jenna Intersimone writes the weekly *Central Jersey Go* column, which appears Fridays in the *Courier News* and *Home News Tribune* and spotlights five weekly local destinations.

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