

Delightful Duke

Smack in the middle of Somerset County, one of the state's largest privately owned parcels of undeveloped land beckons

by **Lauren Payne** • Photos by **Laura Moss**

Duke Farms: An Abundance of Riches

More than **1,000** acres open for the public to explore... **12** miles of biking paths... **6** miles of hiking trails... **7** waterfalls and **9** lakes... **23** species of dragonflies and damselflies... **44** species of butterflies... **300** species of plants, trees and shrubs... **230** species of birds... **25** species of mammals... **400** community organic-garden plots.



DORIS DUKE, CIRCA 1953

AFTER MORE THAN FIVE YEARS of planning and implementation, Duke Farms, the magnificent wildlife and nature preserve, opens to the public this month. Rest assured, no one will be disappointed. Located in Hillsborough, abutting the Raritan River, Duke Farms is nearly 3,000 acres of farmland, woodland and grassland. It's an abundance of riches—larger than New York City's Central Park. The site has been for some 100 years largely off limits to the public. But now, following a massive renovation, the property—childhood home of the heiress Doris Duke—is about to become a center for recreation and education, as well as a model of environmental stewardship, welcoming visitors year-round.

THE HISTORY

The backstory is familiar: Doris Duke's father, James Buchanan "Buck" Duke, a fabulously wealthy tobacco tycoon, died in 1924 when Doris was just 12, leaving her the vast majority of his \$50 million estate. Dubbed "the world's richest girl," Doris spent much of her life trying to avoid the spotlight, dividing her time between several homes, including Duke Farms. Despite her jet-setting lifestyle, she took a keen interest in horticulture, wildlife and environmental conservation; in fact, one of her first philanthropic endeavors was to create a public display of the gardens at Duke Farms in 1958.

Despite two short-lived marriages, Doris never had children (although she famously adopted, then un-adopted, a grown woman in the 1980s). When Doris died in 1993, the Doris Duke Foundation was valued at \$1.2 billion. After years of legal wrangling, the estate was settled and the Doris Duke Foundation developed the Duke Farms Foundation, which spearheaded the latest transformation of Duke Farms in tribute to Doris's commitment to the environment.

WHY VISIT?

There's plenty to do at Duke Farms. "We're committed to educating and inspiring the public about the importance of maintaining our environment," says program director Nora Wagner. The buzz phrase is "environmental stewardship," and visitors are reminded of this wherever they turn.

Guests drive through the stone gates off Route 206 and park at the only parking lot, landscaped with rain-friendly plantings to avoid flooding. There, visitors will discover the Farm Barn; once a horse and dairy barn, it now houses the orientation center, classrooms and café. The orientation center has interactive touch screens, continuous-loop videos, property maps and a hydration station to fill water bottles. "It's the best place to start your visit," says Wagner. From there, walk, bike (bring your own or rent on *(Continued on page 68)*)

NATURE'S SPLENDOR: "Our goal is to have people come and take it all in at any pace," says Duke Farms program director Nora Wagner. "Guests can join tours, make their own, ride bikes, hike, walk or take the tram." Ample signage throughout makes self-guided tours a breeze; guests can access some 40 audio tours on their cell phones. Activity options include biking through the remains of the century-old Hay Barn, above left.

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