



A HORSEMAN'S BLUEGRASS PARADISE

LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

By Bridget McArdle McKinney

WHETHER YOUR HORSE SPORT IS JUMPING, DRESSAGE, CROSS COUNTRY, REINING, RACING, BUYING, OR BREEDING LEXINGTON IS WHERE IT'S AT. THE HOME OF THE KENTUCKY HORSE PARK, KEENELAND RACE COURSE, THE INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE HORSE, THE THOROUGHBRED CENTER, *NEE ROLEX* 3-DAY EVENT, AND THAT FAMOUS KENTUCKY BLUEGRASS. WE TRAVELED TO LEXINGTON TO SEE FOR OURSELVES WHAT THE "HORSE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD" HAD TO OFFER.



Immediately upon entering the precincts of Lexington you feel that you've arrived in the old South. Gracious colonial mansions, great old oak trees, rolling pastures of that "blue" green seen nowhere else. And, of course, everywhere you look herds of sleek, well-groomed and well-fed stallions, mares and foals, resting, capering or more typically making a meal of that nutritious grass, particularly beautiful in the early spring when we visited.

Waxing oratorical, and a bit hyperbolic, about this unique grass U.S. Senator from 1873 to 1891 John J. Ingalls had this to say: "One grass differs from another grass in glory. One is vulgar and the other patrician. There are grades in its vegetative nobility. But the king of them all, the genuine blue blood, is bluegrass." - R. Gerald Alvey, "Kentucky Bluegrass Country"

What makes this grass special is the water. Deep beneath those pastures, the water that feeds the fields, horses, and people, having been filtered through the region's unique underground limestone shelf, is rich in minerals and is said to produce strong durable horses, tall men, beautiful women and fine bourbon.

Horse Capital of the World

What qualifies Lexington as the "Horse Capital of the World", a pretty boastful claim? Well, here are some convincing facts. There are more than 450 horse farms in Lexington nurturing champion horses of all breeds in the region. The number of horses in Kentucky is estimated at 320,000 head, that is, one horse for every 12 people in Kentucky. Lexington ranks #1 in number of acres dedicated to the equine industry. The estimated economic impact of Kentucky's horse economy is \$4 billion annually. Moreover, according to the Lexington Visitors' Bureau :

1. More money changes hands over the sale of horses in Lexington than any place in the world. Keeneland Sales is the world's largest and most prestigious Thoroughbred auction company.
2. Lexington is home to the 1,200 acre Kentucky Horse Park

which attracts almost a million visitors a year. The Kentucky Horse Park hosts the International Museum of the Horse and the Man O'War Memorial, as well as the legendary CI4* Rolex Kentucky 3-Day.

3. On any given day, you will find around 1,000 horses in residence at The Thoroughbred Center where the champions of tomorrow are in training. An integral part of Kentucky's world-famous Thoroughbred industry, this is where future racing champions come to learn how to behave like a race horse.

4. Keeneland Race Course, minutes from downtown, is arguably the most beautiful race course in the world. Keeneland hosts live race meets in the spring and fall. In 2009, the Horseplayers Association of North America introduced a rating system for 65 Thoroughbred racetracks in North America. Keeneland was ranked #1.

5. Lexington is home to the largest collection of Saddlebred artifacts in the world including trophies, photographs, tack and artwork at the American Saddlebred Museum. There is also a library of over 2,400 volumes used for bloodline and genealogical research. The American Saddlebred is Kentucky's oldest native breed.

6. The National Horse Center is located in Lexington. It is a collection of more than 30 national, regional and state equine associations, commissions and organizations. The Kentucky Thoroughbred Association, The Pyramid Society, the American Hackney Horse Association, the American Hanoverian Society, U.S. Pony Clubs, Inc., and many more. The United States Equestrian Federation is also located in Lexington.

7. Lexington is home to the official registry of all Thoroughbred horses world wide. The American Stud Book kept by The Jockey Club.

8. Lexington has produced the most legendary race horses in the world. One such horse, Man o' War, has a memorial, just outside the Visitors Center at the Kentucky Horse Park (see sidebar).





9. The Rolex Kentucky Three Day Event is held in Lexington. It is one of the top 3 annual equestrian eventing competitions in the world.

10. Lexington is home to the National Reining Championship, held at the Kentucky Horse Park. Another great event that demonstrates that Lexington's not only about Thoroughbreds.

Kentucky Horse Park

We were lucky to arrive in the run-up to the 2017 Rolex Kentucky CCI4* 3-Day event, with trailers, riders, horses, staff all dashing about as we wandered the grounds and barns, absolutely amazed at the magnitude and coordination of this huge event. The stars were there: Michael Jung, who went on to earn an historic third consecutive win with FischerRocana FST; Maxime Livio and Zara Tindall, who were to come in in second and third, respectively; and veteran Phillip Dutton, who took home the Roger Haller Memorial Trophy in fourth place. It is hard to describe the immensity of this beautiful endeavour. But we are sorry to see Rolex relinquish its sponsorship after all these years. Moving on...

Hall of Champions

We also visited the Hall of Champions – not to be missed. It's one thing to be aware of the "greats" in the news or in a race or on TV, but it is another to meet them in the flesh. As they say, "The excitement of the racetrack is brought to life by the elite group of champion horses that reside at the Park's Hall of Champions. Here, Thoroughbred legends Da Hoss, Funny Cide, and Go for Gin, as well as American Quarter Horse Be A Bono, Standardbred Trotter Mr. Muscleman, and Standardbred Pacers Staying Together, Western Dreamer, and Won The West are shown in daily presentations."

Go for Gin was an absolute sweetie! He loves his gums rubbed after a performance. He also likes to play in water buckets, splashing the water out with his nose. **Gin is the oldest living Kentucky Derby winner based in North America.**

Parade of Breeds

I was about done when we decided to stay on for the Parade of Breeds presentation. So glad we did! Have you ever seen an Akhal-Teke in person? Or a Percheron, Friesian,

Gypsy Vanner, or Western Kentucky Pleasure Pony under saddle all in one place? With music, narration and interaction, humankind's six thousand year partnership with the horse is brought to life. From the rare Marwari to the iconic American Quarter Horse, breed representatives perform in hand and under saddle.

Keeneland Race Park

Early next morning we hurried over to the incredible grounds of Keeneland to watch training and to take the tour. A brisk spring morning found us on the rails watching advanced time trials, youth training, group racing exercises, pack technique, and the pros getting ready for the Kentucky Derby, set to take place in less than 2 weeks. We have been to many a track and many a race; it's always the same routine. Assess, bet, and watch for 2 minutes, then cheer or cry. Watching this was like watching a race that never stops and keeps changing. What fun!

The tour took us up to the elite racecourse viewing areas and exclusive restaurants, but then...to the sale barn. No barn it was. It was an exclusive luxury arena. Think Sotheby's, Christie's... The velvet covered seats were personalized! Only twice a year more than 4,000 of the world's best prospects are auctioned. We were told that you must watch out what you do there. Adjusting your glasses might buy you a very expensive horse! Back behind the scenes there is actually a service that will provide trailers in case you are an accidental high bidder...

Bourbon

Lexington is on the Bourbon Trail and is home to five historic bourbon distilleries. As I mentioned earlier this liquor is unique due to the water it is made with. Connoisseurs know their bourbon and their year and the casks the liquor came from! Bourbon's a part of the Kentucky, Lexington, and horse country culture, all great spirits. 

*For more information,
please contact the very helpful:
www.visitlex.com*

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