

The Joy of Visiting Horse Country

By Tracy D. Dowson

It's not a vacation, it's a pilgrimage. It's a trip every horse owner needs to make in their lifetime. It's Kentucky! There is no other place as welcoming and inspirational in the world for those of us who love our horses. It's mid-October and very rainy as I wait for my flight home. We were supposed to show at the U.S. National Arabian/Half Arabian horse show, but Ventricular Stomatitis (VS) made it impossible, so we just flew in to watch and because of our late booking, we were forced to stay a few extra days, fortunately there are many things to see and do in Kentucky.

In the past few days we have seen beautiful show horses and some really great rides. This show is in October and rotates between Louisville, KY and Albuquerque, NM every other year. In 2005 the U.S. National Arabian and Half Arabian show will be in NM, followed in 2006 with the show's last year under contract in Louisville, KY. Arabian Horse Association just announced that the US National Horse show will move to Expo Square in Tulsa, OK, beginning with the 2008 show and continuing with 2009 and 2010 with an option for 2011 and 2012. Better footing more area to work horses and a more central location were noted for the change.

The 2003 numbers report that there were 3,300 entries with 100,000 people watching over the ten day period. This is an open and amateur show only. The Arabian and Half Arabian Youth National Show is held in July in Albuquerque. Everything from fancy halter horses to working cow horses, hunters, western pleasure horses to English and park horses. Many of the horses are featured in the publications, Arabian Horse Times and Arabian Horse World. The results can be found on an Internet site named, www.arabianresults.com by subscription and at www.arabianhorses.org for the official Arabian Horse Association's official site.

During the final two evenings of the Arab show, the arena footing is covered with green shavings and emotions run high. Between the green arena floor and the blanket of roses, careers are launched and an entire industry could be shaped by the winning horses and their prodigy. It may start with a passion to breed great horses, but there is so much more. The hours are not quite like any other professional sport in the world. Trail riders may set their alarms for midnight, just to set poles and work in the arena without disrupting the rail working population.

It takes a certain type of person to do this, but an even more special horse, who does his or her job to the best of their ability, cheerfully and when needed. Trainers and owners do everything they can to produce winners. Not just knowledge and work, but the best shoes, veterinarians, chiropractors, and massage therapists are on call for these horses. It's a mixture of bloodlines, science, art, discipline and maybe even luck or karma. Performance horses lead the best life and the most difficult life - all at the same time. I truly believe that the cream rises to the top. These horses, trainers, riders and grooms have dedicated their lives to horse showing and the development of the breed.

This is the place to buy or sell horses and to view stallions, their show records and see their get. After one stallion manager takes the time to show us what his stallion is producing, and the horses could be called, 'happy and well-adjusted', I'm extremely impressed. You know you're sold when you are already envisioning the foal in your barn under your mare.

Culinary note: the best dessert found of the fairgrounds is the cheesecake on a stick dunked in chocolate. The best full-services restaurant is the Fifth Quarter Steak House across the highway and the best sports bar near the fairgrounds is The Cardinal café out of gate 4. I've never seen a sports bar totally dedicated to a college team before and it's done so well.

Make no mistake about it; showing at this level is an expensive endeavor. Trainer fees, hauling and stabling are very expensive. Knowing what stall space is worth; you will get a new appreciation for those with gracious entertainment and reception areas in front of their stalls. Rented sofas, bar sections and pool tables welcome future customers to view sales and stallion tapes. Many farms have the suites, fully catered, for the comfort of their clients and to entertain prospects. Sales are unknown for months, but the larger farms keep investing thousands of dollars on these marketing efforts.

These large equestrian events usually have great shopping, important contacts and friends. At the beginning of the show many vendors complain that they have not reaped the benefits of being at such a high profile show, but during the last few days are hectic and sales are brisk. This is the time to purchase new bits or have expensive tailored show clothing ordered and fitted. "Can you have this ready by Scottsdale?" is heard. This show will incite rivalry and comradery that may span a lifetime. And then sometimes there's the thrill of winning - roses, trophies and tears.

After the last class, for those barns who have not packed-up, there are social times and time to finish business. The show is over. Even the winners may be feeling a little melancholy. It's the worst job of all, packing up to go home. Leaving friends and some unfulfilled dreams and even selling a horse or two. Most showmen have a long drive in front of them.

Since we are not showing at this show and have some time before we could get a flight out, we head off for the Kentucky Horse Park in nearby Lexington. Home of retired show and race horses and a wide variety of educational programs. John Henry is among the favorites for his Neapolitan personality. Cigar is admired for his conformation. Every person who sees the cross country course dreams. The arenas are home to many regional competitions, but today we just tour the Saddlebred Museum and gift shop. This is also the home of the USA Equestrian Association. This is the heart of the equestrian industry and the veins are the farms that stretch out in every direction with brown or white fencing, barns with steeples and horses happily grazing in the bluegrass.

Since it's mid-October we're off to Keeneland to watch a few races. As we drive into the parking lot I'm surprised by the large number of people who choose to spend this crisp, sunny day at the races. The entire facility is stately and accommodates the masses and the horses in a grand Kentucky manner. We watch, we bet, and we shop. Now, that I'm a few bucks ahead it's time to drive back to Louisville for dinner.

After asking a carriage driver in downtown Louisville for recommendations, we try the new Marker's Mark eatery on Fourth Street. Hors d'oeuvres style food and an amazing selection of bourbon. Don't be too surprised to find bourbon in the chef's creations! But, it's all good.

Before heading for the airport our trip wouldn't be complete without a visit to Churchill Downs. Early risers can watch workouts. The rest will have to settle for a trip through the most extensive racing museum in the states. (Maybe even in the world.) The Kentucky Derby Museum has a theater in the round, interactive trivia games, fiberglass race horses to climb on and so much more. There is education and entertainment for all ages. Not to mention the gift shop and café overlooking a retired race horse and its mini horse companion.

For those who are horse weary, Louisville boasts a fine zoo and even the Louisville Slugger Bat factory and museum.

For any horse loving person the trip to Kentucky is a pilgrimage of a lifetime you owe to yourself.