

IMPULSIVE TRAVELER

In Kentucky, a chance to get eye-to-eye with a legend

BY PENNY LOEB

Racing's American Horse of the Year in 2014, the horse with a half-dozen Facebook pages, stood politely as three dozen fans petted, hugged and kissed him. I took my turn, not quite believing I was actually allowed to touch the famous California Chrome.

What a way to begin our three-hour visit to Taylor Made farm, south of Lexington, Ky. As we gathered around the walking circle, chief executive Duncan Taylor, the oldest of the four Taylor brothers, spoke of how his father's genius with racehorses, the family mantra of hard work, a focus on the well-being of the horse, and treating people right all added up to make a breeding and sales dynasty. We finished with a luxury bus ride to visit the mares, foals and yearlings around more than 1,100 acres, and we were always free to touch them.

We were experiencing the dawn of a new age of tourism for the storied horse farms of central Kentucky. The Taylors, who acquired minority ownership of California Chrome last summer, were allowing him to receive visitors for three "California Chrome Fan Days" in September 2015 — and they sold out of the nearly 500 tickets within a few hours. Clearly, fans want access.

While bluegrass country farms have always welcomed a few visitors, most of the public felt shut out. That changed last year when some of the largest farms, with advice from the Disney Institute, created Horse Country, a non-profit central office for promotion and ticket sales. In the first five months of 2016, Horse Country sold 10,000 tickets (\$20 for adults and \$11 for children under 12, for tours lasting about 90 minutes). The destinations include a dozen farms, two veterinary clinics and a feed store. Ten percent of the proceeds support thoroughbred aftercare — retraining and caring for horses

after their racing careers end. Each place designs its own daily tour; most farms bring out one or two stallions for about 10 minutes of pets and selfies.

Even tourists who know little about horses can't help but enjoy seeing how they live, the dedication of caretakers and the big business of raising thoroughbreds. Best of all are the funny and heartwarming stories that horse folks love to tell.

Second trip

Inspired by my Taylor Made experience and a Kentucky meet-up of the Equine Photographers Network, I came back to Lexington in April, for three days. I got tickets to four horse country destinations, and then, with help of the Bluegrass Country Driving Tour map, plotted a route to some of the region's many other horse-related destinations.

On the first day, dawn found me at the rail at Keeneland Racecourse, which holds races in April and October but is open year-round for morning workouts and horse sales. I was close enough to touch the horses that galloped by — and the bay colt with "Team O'Neill" on his black saddle pad was Nyquist, destined to win the Kentucky Derby weeks later. It was a good beginning.

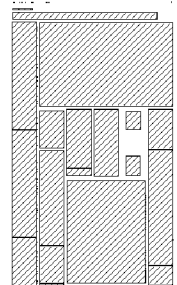
After breakfast at Keeneland's Track Kitchen — scrambled eggs, home fries and a huge cup of coffee for \$3.60 — I joined four members of the network for a tour of Hagyard Equine Medical Institute, one of the largest and oldest such practices in the world. In its McGee Medicine Center were two mares with sick foals. A 2-day-old, breathing from an oxygen line, was standing up — which was a good sign, because it had been flat out the day before. Nearby was a hyperbaric chamber large enough for a horse, where pressurized pure oxygen aids in the treatment of a long list of ailments, from intestinal diseases to horrific wounds.

Our guide, Sarah Smith, told us this story: Her husband, a Hagyard veterinarian, is also the farm vet for nearby Summer Wind, home to Littleprincessemma, American Pharoah's dam. Summer Wind's owner, the Lyon family, had rescued a pony from slaughter and turned her into a winning show pony. On the day the Smiths' daughter turned 7, she was led to an amazing birthday present: the pony, Tessa, adorned with a giant pink bow. All the Lyon family asked in return was that Blair shower the pony with treats and allow her to live out her life at Summer Wind.

Next I visited [Kentucky Horse Park](#), which has 1,200 acres of museums, exhibitions, breed-and-discipline associations, show rings and race-and-event courses. Camping is available, as are trail rides and a kids' barn where children can interact with ponies.

A number of equine stars are permanent residents here — some living, including two Kentucky Derby winners, and some laid to their final rest. I said "hello" to 2003 Derby winner Funny Cide and also met Western Dreamer, the 1997 Triple Crown champion in pacing (in which the horse pulls a two-wheeled cart). I paid my respects at the grave of the famously cantankerous John Henry, who was Horse of the Year in both 1981 and 1984. Delight in meeting horses abounded at the park's Breeds Barn, where visitors can learn about some of the many kinds of horses. A fellow visitor, photographer Korrina Rae Glenn, told me that she can't afford a horse of her own — but here, she got to smooch a black Arabian.

On the second day, vivid murals and rainbow-colored stall fronts greeted me at Our Mims Retirement Haven, a former tobacco barn that is now home mostly to aged mares. It was founded by Jeanne Mirabito, who, as a horse-crazy teenager in the 1970s, fell in love with Our Mims, then a champion 3-year-



old filly. Years later, Mirabito rescued Our Mims from the cattle farm where she'd been "pensioned" after her career as a broodmare was over. After the mare's death in 2003, Mirabito created the haven, now home to nine mares — plus Elmhurst, Our Mims's grandson, who won the 1997 Breeders' Cup Sprint.

I continued on to the legendary Claiborne Farm, founded in 1910 and still owned by the Hancock family. Tour leader Kevin Lay told us that six of the 12 Triple Crown winners were sired by Claiborne stallions, 22 Kentucky Derbies have been won by Claiborne stallions or their progeny, and on and on.

One empty stall is still awaiting the horse that can live up to its former occupants, one of which was the legendary Secretariat. Lay led out 2013 Kentucky Derby winner Orb (born at Claiborne) and \$200,000-a-mare stallion War Front for pats, hugs and photos, rewarding them with their favorite treat of Starlight mint candies. ("We should own stock," he joked.)

As we ended at the farm's graveyard, we heard yet another story: Every month for the past three years, a dozen roses have been delivered for placement on Secretariat's grave, with a card mysteriously reading, "Secretariat, you know why?"

The Pharaoh's temple

Visitors flock to Coolmore America's Ashford Stud farm for a single reason: Triple Crown-winner American Pharoah. Tickets had sold out quickly, but horse country was still able to offer a few special tours.

Our guide immediately took our throng to his barn, where American Pharoah stood patiently for many photos. I had seen him win the Belmont Stakes, but looked forward to seeing up close what so many had described as his unusually gentle and intelligent eyes. With the air of a kindly pastor, he paid us full attention.

Late in the afternoon, I followed the tour map, enveloped by the ancient trees, stone walls, traditional black-stained wooden

fences — and tranquility.

After a stop at Wallace Station Deli and Bakery for sumptuous bourbon-and-honey ice cream, I settled in at my Victorian-style lodging in Versailles, with the unlikely name of "ca 1911 Montgomery Inn BnB." The next morning, I sampled the homemade granola: It was just right, not too sweet, not too crunchy.

After a 35-minute drive, I walked into the gift store at Old Friends, a thoroughbred retirement farm, just as a horrified tourist was asking, "Ferdinand was slaughtered?" Yes, the 1986 Kentucky Derby winner was sold abroad and met that fate in 2002. It triggered an outpouring of rescue activism — including the founding of Old Friends in 2003. Today, 155 rescued and retired horses live here and at two smaller satellites, including Kentucky Derby winners Silver Charm and War Emblem.

We were one of several groups that Lisa Wood, carrying a bucket of carrots (some of the 13,000 pounds of carrots a year that visitors are given to feed horses) took around the fields to meet famous residents: Silver Charm, 1996 Breeders' Cup Classic winner Alphabet Soup and three-time Santa Anita Handicap winner Game On Dude. We also met Popcorn Deelites, who played Seabiscuit in the 2003 movie.

Concluding at the pasture that is home to retired stud Genuine Reward, we hear another story: Old Friends's phone lit up the evening that fans of his mom, Genuine Risk (one of only three female Kentucky Derby winners) spotted him for sale on Craigslist. Laura Hillenbrand, author of "Seabiscuit: An American Legend," helped finance his trip from Wyoming.

I ended my three-day bluegrass visit back at Taylor Made, where I found Laura Donnell, farm photographer and tour coordinator, shipping off California Chrome souvenirs. "The track is just one part of a horse's life," she said. "Our goal is to showcase what an awesome animal the horse is, and to open up these beautiful farms

with so much history and tradition, and let people experience it truly for what it is."

Then she asked if I'd like to see California Chrome again.

Of course!

travel@washpost.com

Penny Loeb is a freelance writer who lives on a farm with retired thoroughbreds in Loudoun County.

If you go

WHERE TO STAY

ca 1911 Montgomery Inn BnB

270 Montgomery Ave., Versailles
859-251-4103

montgomeryinnbnb.com

Seven minutes from Keeneland and an easy trip to the [Kentucky Horse Park](#). Rooms from \$139.

WHERE TO EAT

Wallace Station Deli and Bakery

3854 Old Frankfort Pike, Versailles
859-846-5161

wallacestation.com

In the midst of horse farms, one of the soon-to-be-a-half-dozen innovative destinations by celebrity chef Ouita Michel. Open Sunday-Saturday, 8 a.m.-8 p.m. Dinners start at \$10.99, sandwiches at \$7.99.

Track Kitchen at Keeneland

4201 Versailles Rd., Lexington
859-280-4785

keeneland.com/discover/track-kitchen

Abundant and affordable, you may sit next to a famous trainer, jockey or owner. Breakfast special is \$5, which includes scrambled eggs, home fries, bacon or sausage, bread and grits. Open Monday-Friday 6:30 a.m.-2 p.m., Saturday-Sunday 6:30 a.m.-11 a.m.

WHAT TO DO

Our Mims

2810 Millersburg Ruddles Mill Rd., Paris
859-227-6304

ourmims.org

Learn about the retirement lives of mares. Schedule an appointment on the website. Free to visit, but donations are welcome.

Visit washingtonpost.com/travel

Old Friends

1841 Paynes Depot Rd.
Georgetown

502-863-1775

oldfriendsequine.org

Meet many famous retired racehorses. Call ahead to reserve a tour, \$10 for adults, free for 12 and younger.

— P.L.



TIM MEKO/THE WASHINGTON POST



PHOTOS BY PENNY LOEB FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

A foal investigates the grounds at a farm near Versailles, Ky., in the heart of horse country. While many facilities have been slow to offer access to the public, times are changing.

**Foals and mares
parade by at Taylor
Made farm in
Nicholasville, Ky.
At nearby
Keeneland
Racecourse,
bottom, a
thoroughbred gets
an early-morning
workout.**

