

# Louisville's triple crown

Kentucky city draws sports fans to a trifecta of museums dedicated to horses, boxing and baseball

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As spring comes to the Ohio River Valley, thoughts in Kentucky turn to the biggest event of the year in Louisville. Held on the first Saturday in May, the Kentucky Derby is the oldest continuously held sporting event in the nation and the first jewel in the triple crown of horse racing.

But it only lasts two minutes. What are sports fans to do the rest of the year?

The sporting life in Louisville is more than horses. Three museums devoted to boxing and baseball — as well as horse racing — give visitors an opportunity to enjoy sports year-round.

## Behind the run for the roses

Tour guide Gene Logan smiles when he sees visitors wrinkle their noses as he leads them past horse barns at Churchill Downs. “You know what that smell is?” he asks. “That’s the smell of money.”

Horses and bourbon are the twin engines driving Kentucky’s economy, he says, and you’ll find both at Churchill Downs. The liquor flows in the mint juleps sipped up in the stands and suites. Investments of the equine kind are tended to down here in the barns along the backside, the pungent odor of manure testimony to a \$5 million industry.

Home of the Kentucky Derby since 1875, Churchill Downs is a national historic landmark with stalls for 1,400 horses. If you miss the chance to cheer them on in the Derby you’ll have plenty of other opportunities to see thoroughbreds run on the track. This year, the racing season lasts from April 26 to June 29, Sept. 5-28 and Oct. 26 to Nov. 30.

Tours of Churchill Downs are offered through the Kentucky Derby Museum open every day but the Thanksgiving and Christmas



Visitors watch Louisville Slugger bats being made on factory tours.



A young visitor to the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory looks at the notches Babe Ruth carved in his bat for home runs.

holidays, Derby and Oaks race days. Book an early-morning Barn and Backside tour and you’ll see horses training on the track. As they reach full speed and rocket past you’ll hear their heavy breathing, a deep throaty woof. When they return to the barns you’ll see grooms hose them down, steam rising from their flanks glowing wet with sweat.

Inside the museum, located by Gate 1, two floors of exhibits tell the story of horse racing and follow a foal from birth to the winner’s circle. A 360-degree screen shows the high-definition film “The Greatest Race” while a time machine exhibit has footage of Derbys dating from 1918.

There’s an array of Derby hats, a display of trophies and a smattering of hands-on exhibits. You can try

on a pair of jockey silks, climb on a scale and mount a replica horse to pose for a photo in the starting gates. You can play announcer by attempting to call a race and climb atop a simulated horse to race your friends while a video screen tracks your success on the track.

## Becoming the greatest

It looks like an ordinary bicycle, a red Schwinn standing in an exhibit in the Muhammad Ali Center. But for 12-year-old Cassius Clay Jr., the theft of his prized bike led the Louisville native on a path to greatness.

Outraged that his bike had been stolen, he told police he wanted to be drafted because of his religious beliefs and opposition to the Vietnam War. He lost his license to box

first and took him under his wing. By age 18, Clay took the gold medal at the Olympics in Rome and by age 22 he was the heavyweight champion of the world, beating Sonny Liston. He changed his name to Muhammad Ali after joining the Nation of Islam.

Look closely at the Muhammad Ali Center on the Ohio River in downtown Louisville and you’ll see figures of boxers in the mosaic tiles on its exterior. The roof has a butterfly shape, evoking Ali’s famous “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee” boxing strategy.

Inside, an orientation film traces Ali’s life, including his refusal to be drafted because of his religious beliefs and opposition to the Vietnam War. He lost his license to box

for more than three years until the U.S. Supreme Court overturned his conviction. He made a comeback and won the title twice more.

Exhibits allow visitors to view 15 of Ali’s most famous fights on demand, see the torch he carried in the 1996 Olympics, admire the artwork of children from 141 countries on a 55-foot-long Hope and Dream Wall, work out on punching bags and shadow box with the Champ. Boxing memorabilia surround an atrium where a film of video clips, photos and footage of Ali’s bouts is projected onto a full-size boxing ring one level below.

The building houses much more than a museum dedicated to the boxer nicknamed “The Greatest.” It’s a multicultural center with



Visitors on the Barn and Backside tour at Churchill Downs may see horses warming up on the track if they choose an early morning tour.



Visitors on the Barn and Backside tour at Churchill Downs may see horses being washed down after an early morning workout.

exhibits designed to inspire children and adults to find their own greatness through Ali’s six core principles: confidence in oneself, conviction in finding the courage to stand up for one’s beliefs, dedication to a

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Look closely at the mosaic tiles on the exterior of the Muhammad Ali Center and you’ll see the figures of boxers.

## Louisville

**Getting there:** Louisville is about a five-hour drive from Chicago. United, American and Southwest Airlines have nonstops from Chicago airports to Louisville International Airport. Megabus offers bus service from Chicago to downtown Louisville.

**Where to stay:** Rates are for double occupancy for a weekend in mid-May.

Galt House, 140 N. Fourth St., Louisville, from \$135, (800) 843-4258, galthouse.com

Brown Hotel, 335 W. Broadway, Louisville, from \$219, (888) 888-5252, brownhotel.com

Seelbach Hilton Hotel, 500 S. Fourth St., Louisville, from \$152, (800) 333-3399, seelbachhilton.com

## Where to eat:

Wagner’s Pharmacy, 3133 S. Fourth St., Louisville, (502) 375-3800, wagnerspharmacy.com. Located next to Churchill Downs and a Louisville institution since 1922, it draws jockeys, grooms and racing fans to its old-school lunch counter serving breakfast and lunch.

Bluegrass Brewing Co., 300 W. Main St., Louisville, (502) 562-0007, bbcbrew.com. Craft brewery and casual brew pub near Museum Row and Whiskey Row.

Belle of Louisville, 401 W. River Road, Louisville, (502) 574-2992, belleoflouisville.org. Lunch and dinner cruises on the Ohio River aboard historic paddle wheeler.

Harvest, 624 W. Market St., Louisville, (502) 384-9090, harvestlouisville.com. Acclaimed farm-to-table restaurant in East Market/NuLu neighborhood.

**Kentucky Derby Museum at Churchill Downs:** Gate 1, 704 Central Ave., Louisville, (502) 637-1111, derbymuseum.org, \$14 adults, \$13 seniors, \$11 students, \$6 children. Admission includes 30-minute walking tour of Churchill Downs; longer tours of the grounds range from \$11 to \$15 and should be booked in advance.

**Muhammad Ali Center:** 144 N. Sixth St., Louisville, (502) 584-9254, alicenter.org, \$9 adults, \$8 seniors, \$5 students and military, \$4 children.

**Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory:** 800 W. Main St., Louisville, (877) 775-8443, sluggermuseum.com, \$12 adults, \$7 children. Louisville Slugger Field, 401 E. Main St., Louisville, (855) 228-8429, tickets \$7-\$12.

**For more information:** Louisville Convention and Visitors Bureau, (888) 568-4784, gotolouisville.com

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task, giving without expecting anything in return, respect for oneself and others and spirituality through a reverence for creation or one greater than oneself.

### Batter up

Visitors walking down Louisville's Museum Row, aka West Main Street, often are stopped in their tracks by the sight of a 120-foot-tall wooden baseball bat. A 68,000-pound replica of the timber Babe Ruth once swung with ferocity, it marks the entrance to the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory.

Inside, baseball fans find a treasure trove of trivia and lore. In the Grand Slam Gallery you can hold bats actually used by Mickey Mantle, Cal Ripkin Jr., Johnny Bench and others and see the notches Ruth carved in his bat for every home run he hit in his record-setting 1927 season. In Bud's Batting Cage, named for the man who made the first Louisville Slugger bat in 1884, you can take a few swings with modern bats or replicas of the ones used by big hitters like Ted Williams. Face a 90 mph fastball from Cole Hamels in Gallery 125, have a look at the bat Joe DiMaggio used in his 56-game winning streak and admire lifelike sculptures of Ruth, Williams, Ken Griffey Jr. and Derek Jeter.

On tours of the bat factory, you'll see bats being made for the big leagues as well as sandlot players. About 60 employees turn out 1.83 million wooden bats a year using 40,000 maple and northern white ash trees grown in New York and Pennsylvania forests. The factory can make 8,000 variations of bats, but most players choose from 300. The most popular is the Jose Cardenal Model C271. Everyone who takes the factory tour is given a miniature Louisville Slugger bat, but you can order a personalized bat, with your own signature on the barrel, at the museum store.

Want to see a baseball game? The Louisville Bats, an AAA affiliate of the Cincinnati Reds, play at Louisville Slugger Field on East Main Street.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a writers' conference sponsored by the Louisville Convention and Visitors Bureau.*