

TRAVEL

Kentucky park pays homage to state's famous horses

By DOUG JOHNSON
STAFF WRITER

Richard III may have been willing to give up his kingdom for a horse before his defeat to the first Tudor king, Henry VII.

But the place where horse is the king is Lexington, Kentucky.

And the highlight of any trip to Bluegrass Country is a visit to the state-owned Kentucky Horse Park, immediately off of I-75 at exit 120. The meticulously maintained facility is 1,000 acres of farmland, paddocks and horse barns.

In today's cyber world, this homage to all breeds of horses is decidedly down-home and low-tech.

Lexington is about five or six hours from Detroit, making this a nice long weekend trip. The Kentucky Horse Park is a great place to start your visit in the heartland of Kentucky. The farm's hands-on nature appeals particularly to kids.

Features include:
 ■ A parade of breeds at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. each day at the breeds arena. There's plenty of seating and the horses you'll see in the breeds parade can be viewed before the show in the barn that surrounds the parade grounds on three sides.

After the show anyone — especially kids — can pet the horses and talk to the costumed riders.

■ A hall of champions presentation. Three times a day the horse park's most famous guests, all "equine millionaires" or top winners, are brought into a small arena where you can get a closeup view — the kind of look a buyer might get — at the best in horse flesh.

■ The current star at KHP is Cigar, a thoroughbred and two-time Horse of the Year who won almost \$10 million before retiring. The Hall of Champions narrator said one-third of all visitors come just to see the great champion.

■ Why is he at the park? The headline in the Lexington paper tells the story: Cigar: All smoke and no sire. Cigar's value as stud

If you go...

■ The Kentucky Web site is kytourism.com; The horse park site is khp.org/khp/; You can see a virtual tour of Lexington at lucg.com/tour/; Kentucky.com leads to many links and guides, including the Lexington Herald-Leader, the local daily paper.

■ The Kentucky Horse Park is open year around but once cold weather sets in in October they close on Monday and Tuesday. Many horse and music events are held at the park throughout the year.

■ This past week, for example, featured a big bluegrass festival. A medieval festival is set for weekends later this month and early July.

■ One popular KHP event is "Southern Nights," a Christmas light festival where cars are allowed to drive through the park. This year the shows start Nov. 17 and end Dec. 31, dusk to 10 p.m.

■ General admission for adults is \$16 (kids are \$11, under 6 free) but that price drops when the China show leaves the museum in August. If you are looking for Churchill Downs, the home of the Derby, it's down the road from Lexington in Louisville on I-64.

in retirement was zero as he produced no offspring; as of May, 1999, he is on indefinite loan to the park by the owners.

■ A mare and foal show is held every day at noontime during the summer, but you can often get a look before Memorial Day by walking through the Big Barn.

The barn is mammoth, one of the largest wooden barns in North America.

■ A short, free trolley tour on wagons pulled by massive draft horses runs every 15 minutes. The draft horse barn houses matched pairs of several of these giant horses, including Clydesdales, Belgians and Shires. The staff is friendly and will willingly give you a 30-minute discourse on why the "beer wagon" horses are really not the largest.

■ Carriage rides, horseback riding tours and 40-minute carriage rides are available for an added fee.

■ Also at the park is the Museum of the Horse, which is currently featuring "Imperial China: The Art of the Horse in Chinese History," an exhibition that includes 300 artifacts highlighted by 13 life-size figures from the terra cotta Army of China's first emperor. The China show is on until Aug. 31.

■ Many southeast Michigan residents call the park inquiring

about campgrounds; the park itself has 260 paved sites with hookups. There's a swimming pool, bathhouses, grocery store and shuttles to the park grounds.

There's plenty to see and do around Lexington, including touring the countryside with its miles of wooden fences and green pastures for horses. Many roads, or pikes, around Lexington are lined with limestone stone fences; beautifully maintained gates and lanes beyond lead to stately homes.

Before making the trip call the free Lexington phone number (800)845-3959 (Web site www.visitlex.com) and ask for their package of information.

You'll get an excellent map listing many of the famous horse farms around Lexington, and a small publication "Horse Farm Tours" which details several



Showing off: The Hall of Champions show is held twice daily.

PHOTO BY DOUG JOHNSON

ways to get to see the private farms around the area: a seat on a regular guided tour, a private guide for a custom tour, a hoof-it-yourself trip arranged by calling individual farms. Surprisingly many famous private farms give a variety of access to the general public; plan ahead and make reservations. No farm will let you just "drop in."

You may want to think about a

trip to Bardstown for a tour of a distillery or a visit to the plantation that inspired Stephen Foster to write "My Old Kentucky Home."

If its scenery you are after, travel on down I-75, exit at London and make a quick jaunt over to Cumberland Falls State Resort Park. They are currently redoing the visitors center but

the park and falls are still perfect for an afternoon visit.

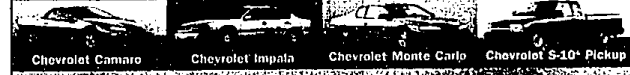
Even with plenty else to see and do, it's the horse that is king here, and the Kentucky Horse Park is Camelot.

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