

UP CLOSE

AND PERSONAL



Malia Baregi of Wisconsin says hello
to a broodmare at Runnymede Farm.



Horse Country takes visitors beyond the gates of Central Kentucky horse farms

By Liane Crossley / Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt



First-time visitors to Thoroughbred farms know they will see horses, but few expect to get so close to celebrity stallions and frisky foals. They anticipate serene settings but are overwhelmed by the pristine conditions of barns and fields.

Jill Angell of Michigan, her two daughters, and her mother were making numerous stops at farms booked through Horse Country, a non-profit consortium of Central Kentucky farms and equine operations. She was amazed that she could touch and be photographed with Kentucky Derby winner Orb at Claiborne Farm.

Such moments are a bonus because tours are built around horses' schedules and well-being, with farm staff making decisions on showings on a case-by-case basis.

"I can't believe I am here and that we are allowed to get this close to the stallions," Angell said. "This is the first time I touched a Thoroughbred stallion. These horses are amazing and clearly well cared for."

Anne Sabatino Hardy, executive director of Horse Country, is accustomed to the reaction.

"We hear a lot of jokes about wanting to live the way the horses do," she said.

Until recently, the revered facilities were largely off limits to outsiders, but thanks to Internet-based Horse Country, the public is welcome to make appointments to go behind the scenes of more



Claiborne Farm's Doug Carr leads a tour group whose participants get an insightful history into the famous operation and also have the chance to touch Kentucky Derby winner Orb, above right.



A gift shop with souvenirs such as T-shirts and postcards is popular with Claiborne guests.

than 20 farms, equine veterinary clinics, and a feed mill.

Tours are conducted by each location's employees, ranging from the farm owners themselves to stablehands who tell stories about the animals in their care. Hardy said 37,000 tours have been booked since the concept was launched in late 2015. In 2017, 12,000 tickets had been booked through late April.

"We encourage our members to tell their team's stories from the insider perspective," Hardy said. "We know that guests love that kind of authentic experience."

Customers might be casual sightseers satisfying their curiosity, devoted racing fans fulfilling their dreams, Thoroughbred insiders from other regions, or locals seeking knowledge of their hometown.

Claiborne connection

On an early spring visit to the century-old Claiborne Farm, many in the group of 25 had come with flowers to commemorate the March 30 birthdate of the legendary Secretariat, who spent his stallion career at Claiborne and is buried in the farm's

front cemetery. Others were on a sojourn to visit their favorite racehorses now on stud duty at various farms. Highlights of the Claiborne visit that morning included photos with the stallion War Front.

Claiborne Farm is one of the most well-known Thoroughbred operations. Through the decades it has made a policy of welcoming visitors. In turn, its guests have continued the good will by sharing their memories and countless photos of Secretariat and other high-profile horses taken at Claiborne. The modern-day tour is remarkably similar to the original, during which a groom recounted Claiborne's highlights before leading the group to the stallion barns to get close to the equine headliners.

The most notable change since the advent of Horse Country is the addition of a gift shop with restrooms. Before being renovated, the building was used as employee housing. Tours now begin and end there instead of in the parking lot.

"Our best-selling items are postcards with photos of the farm followed by Secretariat-related items, including a stuffed



The famous occupants of this stall, past and present, capture the attention of a visitor.



Malia Baregi pats filly at Runnymede Farm while mother Jill and sister Madison look on.



The 2015 Triple Crown winner draws crowds to Ashford Stud.



The trophy case at Darley impresses tourists.

BILL LUSTER

horse in racing gear like the champion himself and a Secretariat commemorative magazine,” said Claiborne’s communications manager Allison Bishop. “For farm-related apparel, our T-shirts and hats are very popular.”

Joanne Shikitino of Ohio was among the many guests making a repeat visit to Claiborne.

“I like to come to this farm in particular because of Secretariat and all the other great stallions who were here,” she said. “I am a city girl who loves horses. I am always impressed with the great treatment the horses receive here. Claiborne really respects the visitors no matter their walk of life, from casual fan to owner.”

Another returning guest was so well versed that she correctly predicted that War Front would not perk his ears for photographs. Others were encountering the experience for the first time.

KEENELAND TOURS FOR ALL SEASONS

Keeneland offers an assortment of year-round tours ranging from free self-guided walkabouts to premium options that include a day at the races.

Newcomers benefit from the one-hour morning edition highlighted by watching Thoroughbreds exercising on the track. Because every day is different at Keeneland, guests never know what they might see. Guides provide an overview of the track’s history and description of on-track activity in their largely unscripted presentations. Depending on the season, tour routes might include stops at the Keeneland sales pavilion or the all-weather training track.

A two-hour behind-the-scenes tour is a great option for those seeking an insider view that includes a stroll through the stable area and a look at non-public areas such as the jockeys’ quarters. Those seeking a full experience opt for the Backstretch Day at the Races tour that begins trackside and concludes with a presentation by a Keeneland BETologist handicapping expert. Customers then use their pre-purchased vouchers for programs, seating, and food at concessions stands.

“Our guests thoroughly enjoy being shown around Keeneland,” tour coordinator Mary Perkins said. “Our guides are exceptionally knowledgeable because they work here year-round in various departments and their love of Keeneland shines through.”

For information, visit keeneland.com/discover/tours



Some Keeneland tours include a stable visit.

KEENELAND



up close and personal

Fun with foals at Runnymede

Later in the day and six miles away, the scene was different but emotions similar at Runnymede Farm. Brutus Clay told the audience — Wisconsin residents Jill Baregi and her daughters and Clay's friend David Hulett — about the operation that has been in his family since 1867. When he walked them just a few yards away, they became enchanted by two mares and their month-old foals. Standing in lush grass and reaching through the fence, the small hands touched the mares' sleek coats while their fuzzy offspring stood by them.

Sensing that his words had become irrelevant, Clay briefly stepped away before reappearing with a bucket of feed. The girls were delighted to feed the horses a midday treat.

At farms with no stallions such as Runnymede, curious foals and their gentle dams are the featured performers. The Baregi family's stop was part of a multi-day trip planned by 14-year-old Madison, who booked several venues via Horse Country.

"I am most surprised at how generous the facilities have been by letting the common person come in and see these really expensive horses," Jill said.

The family was captivated with the horses as they fed the mares



Stallions such as Darley's Frosted, above, and Bernardini, right, are always popular attractions on Horse Country tours.

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and petted the foals through the fencing. They might have stayed longer, but they had to leave for another horse farm booking the same day. As they extended their thanks to Clay, talk turned to future visits and a possible farm internship when Madison reaches working age.

Hulett had a lunch meeting with Clay, who suggested he arrive early for the Runnymede presentation. As a longtime Lexington resident, Hulett naturally is aware of the area's reputation as Horse Capital of the World, but he had never explored further. He was particularly impressed with Clay's in-depth knowledge of the Thoroughbreds in front of him, including a foal by American Pharoah.

"Brutus knows each horse and its lineage," he said. "From living in Lexington, I knew a little about the farms as a business, but I had no idea there was so much personal touch with the horses."

For the Baregi family, making friends with the American Pharoah offspring was a consolation because meetings at Ashford Stud with the Triple Crown winner were sold out during their time in the Bluegrass.

Opening gates to Horse Country

Horse Country was developed as a not-for-profit organization and members pay fees to join. Ticket sales are shared among touring locations and Horse Country, which then contributes to other nonprofits. Thoroughbred

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The main gate at Darley promotes the farm's affiliation with Horse Country.

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- Tours last approximately one hour and require walking and standing
 - No guarantee that specific horses will be shown
- Horses' well-being is priority; staff chooses which horses will be shown

industry organizations such as Keeneland were instrumental with financial and in-kind support to get the endeavor started.

The Horse Country vision became a reality in late 2015 after several years of brainstorming with farm owners including Runnymede's Clay and Price Bell of his family's Mill Ridge Farm. The timing was fortuitous because it coincided with American Pharoah capping his career with a victory in the Breeders' Cup Classic at Keeneland. His retirement fueled demand for securing tickets via Horse Country to see him.

American Pharoah remains one of the more popular attractions along with other celebrity stallions. Horse Country's Hardy said atypical stops such as farms with foals, the feed mill, the retraining facility, and veterinary clinics have been surprisingly popular. Hardy recommends linking contrasting locations for an all-around experience.

"You can search our website by date, location, category, and area," she said. "If you still have questions about tours or even where to eat, stay, or what else to do, guests can e-mail or call to chat with the Horse Country concierge."

Insiders giving the tours enjoy the sessions as much as those paying for the experience.

"The public is responding in a way that the founders thought they would, or should I say 'dreamt' they would," Runnymede's Clay said. "Some of the farms that were skeptical have embraced the Horse Country mission with as much enthusiasm as any of us."

Sharing the farm experience with guests gives owners and guides a new appreciation of what is literally in their own backyards.

"When you engage people who are so appreciative to hear your story, it is really the best part of the experience," Bell said. "My favorite reaction is watching fans be mesmerized by horses in the field grazing. It is a peace we often drive by and take for granted, but to share that moment with someone for the first time is most rewarding." **KM**



In addition to farms, Horse Country participants can visit veterinary clinics such as Hagyard Equine Medical Institute.