

#6 Cities with the Lowest Startup Costs, SmartAsset • #42 Best Place for Business and Careers, Forbes • #14 Cities That Must Be Seen in 2019, Viewfinder by Expedia • #2 Most Affordable Cities to Live and Work, WhereToRetire • Mac Conway Award for Excellence in Economic Development, Site Selection Magazine • Top 10 Best Cities for Startups • #8 Best City to Live in America, Money • #18 Best City for Veterans to Live, Veterans United • #10 Best Large Real-Estate Market, WalletHub • #28 America's Best Small Cities, Business Insider



LEXINGTON'S



National publications increasingly identify Lexington as one of the country's best places to live for quality of life, jobs, culture, and affordability

By Vickie Mitchell

#40 Best Cities for Gamers, WalletHub • #14 Most Scenic Towns in North America, CarRentals.com by Expedia • #10 Best Places to Retire, BusinessStudent.com • Top 10 Best Main Street Towns, WhereToRetire • 100 Best Places to Retire, The Penny Hoarder • #18 Best of the Midwest: Startup Cities, Midwestern • #1 Most Affordable Cities for an Early Retirement, SmartAsset • #6 Best City to Be a Game Developer or Designer, BestCities • #24 Best Cities for Young Professionals, Thrillist • #10 Most Affordable College Towns for Renters, The Penny Hoarder



ALLURE



COURTESY OF BLUEGRASS COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

LEXINGTON'S ALLURE

Not long after Bob Quick arrived in Lexington 19 years ago, the Commerce Lexington president and CEO spoke to community leaders about Lexington's strengths. Quick, then a newcomer, ticked off four or five national rankings the city had earned. Eyes lifted; the audience took note. "I could tell I was connecting," he recalled.

Afterward, an audience member approached. "She said, 'Please don't get me wrong; I'm not calling you a liar. But I have lived here all my life and didn't know we were that well-ranked,' " said Quick.

A lot of Lexington residents don't realize how highly ranked Lexington is for categories as wide-ranging as start-up business costs and retirement living to safety and scenery.

Even those who are well informed might have trouble keeping up with the latest national recognitions. Twenty years ago Lexington's national rankings could be counted on one hand; for the past several years it's earned national recognitions at a rate of two to three dozen per year.



From distillery tours to horse sales, Lexington and environs offer plenty to see.

Publicizing Lexington's accolades

Of course, those who pick up a city guide at VisitLex's visitors center or visit Commerce Lexington's Locate in Lexington website (See sidebar) are quickly reminded of just where the city stands among its peers. Both organizations generously pepper their publications and websites with rankings and ratings that emphasize Lexington's strengths.

Commerce Lexington has taken the way it spreads the word a step further. Quick's early encounter with the uninformed local lady made him realize the chamber of commerce could do more to publicize good news. It turned its gleaming glass office building, situated

LEXINGTON'S ALLURE



GLINTSTUDIOS, COURTESY OF VISITLEX

The Lexington Farmers' Market adds to the appeal of downtown.

at the corner of Main and Rose streets, into a billboard of sorts, placing five window-cling banners touting significant achievements on its Main Street side. One banner alerts drivers "You're in a Top Ranked City," as others sum up ratings such as Lexington's #3 rank in CNN Money Magazine's Best Places to Retire or Forbes' #7 ranking for its list of Best Mid-size Cities for Jobs, rankings achieved in 2013.

New kudos arrive with the new year

As 2019 began, Commerce Lexington was preparing to replace those window banners with new ones that tout more recent rankings. Meanwhile, VisitLex, the city's convention and visitors bureau, was getting the word out about new accolades like "One of 19 Cities That Must Be Seen in 2019" from Expedia and Lexington's inclusion on Luxury Travel Magazine's Top Destinations Across the World for a Nature Immersion Getaway in 2019. On the business side, SmartAsset.com ranked Lexington sixth among "Cities With Best Work-Life Balance."

Of course, the rise of online media, with its penchant for lists and slideshows, is one reason Lexington and other cities ap-



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Horse Country has given 100,000 tours of Thoroughbred farms and equine businesses.



MATTHEA KELLEY

The Land Rover Kentucky Three-Day Event brings tens of thousands to the Kentucky Horse Park.

pear in more rankings these days.

"Lists are very in vogue. That might speak to a shorter attention span. They are easy to digest," said Mary Quinn Ramer, president of VisitLex.

Still, there's a lot of behind-the-scenes work that goes on too, especially by Quick's and Ramer's organizations, to

bring writers and other influences to the city so they can experience Lexington firsthand, and, hopefully, write about it.

According to VisitLex's year-end statistical report, Lexington garnered more than 1.6 billion media impressions in 2018 from top national publications such as The New York Times and Town & Country. VisitLex also met with 64 journalists.

"On the visitors' side of things, we have been diligent with our public relations and marketing strategy to tell the story of Lexington any and every way we can," said Ramer. "We've seen tremendous success over the last couple of years getting Lexington on lists that measure a wide range of metrics."

Such efforts have helped bring more visitors to the area in recent years. For example, 2018 visitation was up 6.7 percent over 2017 at the downtown visitors center, according to VisitLex's year-end statistics. In February the Kentucky Bourbon Trail and its associated Kentucky Craft Bourbon Trail reported a record 1.4 million visitors in 2018. Horse Country, whose Thoroughbred horse farm and equine business members offer public

WHERE LEXINGTON RANKS

Rankings compiled by Commerce Lexington, the city's chamber of commerce, leave little doubt that Lexington has received a lot of attention from national sources, especially since 2014. The number of rankings has steadily climbed, from 21 in 2014 to 36 in 2018. Commerce Lexington uses only rankings drawn from bona fide data in its lists, according to president and CEO Bob Quick. A number of other rankings, including those aimed more at tourists and visitors, are drawn from more subjective factors.

Here are the rankings Commerce Lexington compiled for 2018.

2018

- #6** Cities with the Lowest Startup Costs, SmartAsset
- #42** Best Place for Business and Careers, Forbes
- #40** Best Cities for Gamers, WalletHub
- #14** Most Scenic Towns in North America, CarRentals.com by Expedia
- #14** Cities That Must Be Seen in 2019, Viewfinder by Expedia
- #2** Most Affordable Cities to Live and Work, BusinessStudent.com
- Top 10** Best Main Street Towns, WhereToRetire
- 100** Best Places to Retire, WhereToRetire
- Mac Conway Award for Excellence** in Economic Development, Site Selection Magazine
- Top 10** Best Cities for Entrepreneurs, The Penny Hoarder
- #18** Best of the Midwest: Startup Cities, Midwest Startups



Lexington's scenic byways are hard to beat.

- #8** Best City to Live in America, Money
- #18** Best City for Veterans to Live, Veterans United
- #1** Most Affordable Cities for an Early Retirement, SmartAsset
- #6** Best City to Be a Game Developer or Designer, ValueGamers
- #10** Best Large Real-Estate Market, WalletHub
- #28** America's Best Small Cities, BestCities
- #24** Best Cities for Young Professionals, Thrillist
- #10** Most Affordable College Towns for Renters, Apartment Guide
- #12** Beautiful Biking Destinations You'll Want to Add to Your Bucket List, Self.com
- #6** State with the Best Community-College System, WalletHub

- #3** Best Cities to Raise a Family, Zumper
- #3** Safest City in America, SafeWise
- #31** Most Educated Cities in America, WalletHub
- #9** City with the Most Diverse Industries, Business Facilities
- #6** Economic Growth Potential of Mid-Sized Cities, Business Facilities
- #9** Best Cities for Remote Workers, moveBuddha
- #4** Best-Run City in America, WalletHub

- #21** Best Places to Live in America, U.S. News & World Report

- #6** City with the Best Work-Life Balance, SmartAsset

University of Kentucky Top School for LGBTQ Students, Campus Pride Index

- #3** Best City with the Highest Salaries and Lowest Costs of Living, GoBankingRates
- #8** Best U.S. Destination, Lonely Planet

Top 12 Global Destinations to Visit in 2018, Newsday

Top 9 Destinations to Visit in 2018, Vogue

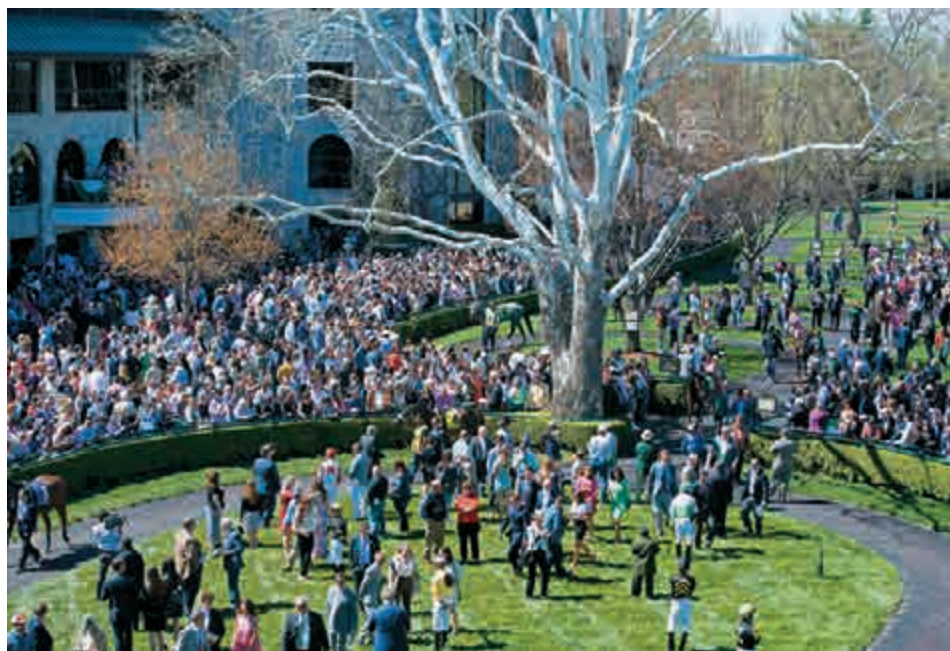
- #10** Top Destination on the Rise, TripAdvisor
- #2** Best Midsized City for New Grads, OnlineDegrees

For more, visit www.locateinlexington.com/BluegrassRankings.aspx

tours, has given 100,000 tours since it launched in spring 2016, according to executive director Anne Sabatino Hardy.

In Horse Country's first few years many who booked tours described themselves in post-tour surveys as horse enthusiasts or said they frequently attended equine events. Now, more say they rarely or have never attended a horse-related event, an indication that they are the leisure travelers the region has worked so hard to draw. "Horse Country is a beneficiary of the work the city, the region, VisitLex, and others have done," said Hardy.

Commerce Lexington teams with other organizations in the city to drive similar messages. For example, it worked diligently with the University of Kentucky to call attention to the city's tech sector.



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Over the years Keeneland Race Course has drawn thousands of visitors to Lexington, some for the first time.



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LEXINGTON'S ALLURE



Kentucky bourbon has become a global brand and the Kentucky Bourbon Trail a major attraction.

In 2013 it finally got the attention of The Atlantic Cities, which ranked Lexington 17th among America's Top 25 High-Tech Hotspots.

A ranking like that not only tells the world more about Lexington but makes believers out of those already in the city, Quick pointed out.

"When we cracked that, you should have seen the confidence it brought," he said.

Quality of life factors are key

Executives in search of a city to build a headquarters look closely at rankings for cost of living, cultural opportunities, education systems, unemployment, and crime rates, realizing that a good quality of life is a key to attracting employees.

But even seemingly minute factors, such as average commute time, can sway people's decisions. John Groft, past president of the Lexington Board of Realtors, recently worked with a couple from Colorado who were excited about how much shorter their drive time would be in Lexington, where the average commute is 21 minutes.

And, not all rankings are rooted in statistics; in fact, a number are based on more subjective, even sensory experi-



Lexington's Distillery District with its eateries, breweries, and drinking spots appeals to a youthful audience.

“

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— MARY QUINN RAMER,
PRESIDENT OF VISITLEX

ences. Groft's clients are often motivated to move to Lexington because they can live in the city but be a 15-minute drive from the countryside, or vice versa.

"We haven't seen so much development that all we are is a concrete city," said Groft. "We still have personality."

Global brands bring attention

No one would dismiss the impact that hosting two international equine events in the last 10 years has had on Lexington's standings. The 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games and the 2015 Breeders' Cup World Championships at Keeneland brought thousands to the Bluegrass, some for the first time.

And, in addition to the continuing impact of the equine industry and the longstanding reputation of the UK men's basketball team, there are new attention getters, such as bourbon.

"We are really fortunate to have multiple global brands — equine, bourbon, and basketball," said Quick. "No matter where I go, people talk Big Blue Nation."

The New York Times and others have compared the Bluegrass to Napa Valley in the early days.

"What we are realizing," said Ramer, "is that we have become a super region. If you want that elevated bourbon expe-

LEXINGTON'S ALLURE



The University of Kentucky Wildcats are known to sports fans the world over. Right, the Night Market is a vibrant monthly addition to downtown Lexington.



rience, you have no other option than to plan a trip to Kentucky. It is fantastic, and I don't see that slowing down any time soon."

Bourbon is increasingly paired with local foods, which is bringing more high-profile attention. In addition to the trip "Top Chef" made to Kentucky, Lexington was named a top foodie city in the South by The Daily Meal, a culinary website. "The food story is one we can continue to really enhance here," said Ramer.

Fit for foodies

Chef-driven restaurants such as Cole's in Lexington and Heirloom in Midway were among the pleasures Amy Tremper and her husband enjoyed during the year they lived in Lexington.

The couple arrived in May 2017 after retiring as managers of a Quarter Horse ranch in New Mexico. The 12-month stay was a chance for Amy to indulge her love of Thoroughbreds. She'd first visited Lexington to attend the 2015 Breeders' Cup



Lexington has several museums, including one dedicated to the American Saddlebred horse.

and was smitten with the green pastures and gray stone walls, such a contrast to the American Southwest.

Enjoying history, urban life, and horse country

Wanting an authentic experience, the couple did their research and determined they wanted to live in Ashland Park, which paired a historic personality with proximity to the urban core. They lucked into an apartment in a 1904 home there. Their upstairs neighbors were retirees from California who were in temporary housing until a house they bought nearby could be remodeled.

The couple visited Keeneland so often that, at her husband's suggestion, Tremper got a job there during race meets as one of the track's "Green Coats," hosts, often retirees, who serve a number of roles from ushering to wayfinding. Amy monitored visitor access to the paddock. She also worked at two horse farms, including Three Chimneys, where the experienced horsewoman helped with broodmares during foaling season.

When the year ended in May 2018, the couple headed to Tubac, Arizona. They'd

LEXINGTON'S ALLURE



Clockwise from left, Lexington has become known as a foodie destination because of its many high-quality restaurants. Part of the fabric of life, horses are commemorated in bronze at Thoroughbred Park. Downtown Lexington quickly gives way to unforgettable countryside.

never planned to make this a permanent move, and the Southwest's warm weather beckoned.

But they left many new friends and an abiding affection for their temporary home. Realizing she missed Lexington so, Tremper's husband urged her to return to work the Keeneland meet, and she did, in the fall 2018. She knows she is welcome back any time.

If you could measure visitor experience in tears shed, Lexington would be very highly rated, at least in Tremper's eyes.

"We had a wonderful time; it was such a perfect spot for us to be," she said. "I cried and cried and cried when we left." **KM**

