

Travel

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SUNDAY
EYES ON ISTANBUL ...
The crossroads of
Europe and Asia



Steed stud a cash cow

Visit Kentucky farm to witness the big business of horse breeding

MICHELE PETERSON
Special to the Sun

The big fellow has had sex three times already today and it's not even noon. You'd think he'd be in a better mood. But far from basking in the afterglow, he's spitting mad.

I'm on a tour of Ashford Stud, a 650 hectare horse farm located near Versailles just west of Lexington, Ky. Established in the 1850s, the farm is now a subsidiary of Coolmore Stud Farms of Ireland, the global leader in horse racing and breeding. Its stallions have sired winners of over 100 group races worldwide since 1995.

The vista of rolling green hills that surrounds the farm is a pastoral scene that belies the heavy and often sweaty business of breeding stallions that goes on within the nearby breeding shed. Before me, standing 16.1 hands tall—one hand equals 4 inches or 10.16 cm—is Giant's Causeway, the farm's most valuable thoroughbred. His handler, and my guide, is Jerry Sheridan, an Irish groomsmen who is responsible for making sure that the stud delivers the goods.

Not much worry there. In a world of stud services where delivery is everything, Giant's Causeway is the Ron Jeremy of stallions. His services command \$300,000 a performance and, at four appearances a day, that adds up to \$1.2 million dollars a day. With only six weeks off a year, that adds up to a lot of dough not to mention action.

But it's Giant's Causeway's stellar pedigree that makes him a star, not his stamina. He was



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHFORD STUD

Ashford Stud horse farm, above, provides the services of Giant's Causeway, top right, a stud of stellar pedigree that commands \$300,000 per performance — four times a day.

the Horse of the Year in 2000 and the sire of 2005 Kentucky Derby contender Noble Causeway and of Alim, who scored on his debut in Australia in 2006. His mother, Mariah's Storm, was the inspiration for the 2005 hit film *Dreamer*, starring Kurt Russell and Dakota Fanning, the story of a plucky racehorse that overcame incredible odds. Giant's Causeway himself even had a role in the film. As a stud, of course.

But breeding is hard work even for horse experts like

Sheridan. The spitting spirit that got Giant's Causeway across the finish line ahead of his competitor also makes him tough to handle.

"It takes one lad to lead him in, one lad to hold the tail and another to hold down the mare," he explains. And those are just a few of the six member breeding team.

But just in case a visitor might harbour preconceptions of equine love a la Black Beauty meets Sea Biscuit in a meadow of wildflowers, that notion is

shattered after one look inside our next stop, the breeding shed. Far from being a love den, this stall has got padded walls, a rubberized floor covered with shredded tires and chains on the wall. It looks like a scene for a WWE fight, not romance. There isn't even any privacy—a two storey glass-enclosed viewing window lets anyone watch the action.

"What happens if the stud's not in the mood?" I ask.

"We just take him out to the barn to meet another mare and



MICHELE PETERSON PHOTO

then bring him back in once he's changed his mind," says Sheridan. It's a case of love the one you're with—stallion style.

No chance of equine romance here. It's all computerized dating. Mating plans ensure that bloodlines can be tracked. With millions of dollars at stake, this is a serious business. We head to another barn, where there's a lot of snorting and hay-kicking going on. The other stallions have noticed Giant's Causeway's Viagra-worthy lightness of step. Although he's the lollapalooza of studs, there are 20 other stallions here. They also have a grueling schedule of sex, premium food and exercise—even those like Hold That Tiger, who commands a meager \$12,500 a shot.

For horse lovers not into learning the dirty details of breeding, there are many opportunities to play horse-whisperer nearby. The Bluegrass Region is the heart of horse country and includes venues such as Keeneland Race Course in Lexington and the Kentucky Horse Park with over 50 breeds of horses to meet. A short jaunt away in Louisville is Churchill Downs where the legendary Kentucky Derby is held the first Saturday in May.

But few stud farms allow visitors and even Ashford Stud is by appointment only.

Interest in horse racing is booming so this means there's

no rest for the weary. These stallions are jet-setters, frequently shutting off to deliver the thoroughbred goods in Dubai, Australia or Japan when the breeding season ends here in July.

But even if you catch one of them performing while in town, despite the promise of sex and excitement, there's no predicting the show. The actual act can be as short as 15 seconds.

Proving that, in the world of stallions at least, it is the meat not the motion.

BOTTOMLINE

ASHFORD STUD

Located off Hwy. 60 near Versailles. Free tours are conducted at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. by appointment. Maximum size for groups is 10 people. Visit: coolmore.com.

KENTUCKY HORSE PARK

Open Daily from March 15 to Oct. 31 and limited hours for the rest of the year. Located at 4089 Iron Works Parkway in Lexington. Visit: kyhorsepark.com.

CHURCHILL DOWNS

The historic Kentucky Derby racetrack is located at 700 Central Ave., Louisville. Visit: kentuckyderby.com.

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