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**opposite, right:** A mare watches over her foal at one of Lexington's legendary thoroughbred horse farms. James Archambeault, Courtesy Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau

**opposite, bottom:** To prepare for the film *Lincoln*, actress Sally Field visited the dining room and other rooms within Mary Todd Lincoln House. Michele Peterson



# LEGENDARY LEXINGTON

## PROUD TRADITIONS, OLD AND NEW

BY MICHELE PETERSON

“IF YOU WANT A GREAT HORSE PHOTO, TRY MAKING A MATING SOUND,” SUGGESTED MY TOUR COMPANION WHO HAD MANAGED TO CATCH THE ATTENTION OF BIG BROWN, A CHAMPION BREEDING STALLION GRAZING IN THE PADDOCK AT THREE CHIMNEYS FARM.

**I** was in Lexington, Kentucky, camera in hand, peering over a plank fence at the glossy manes of some of the world's most valuable thoroughbred horses. Surrounded by emerald-green pasture, azure skies and barns that could have been plucked from a storybook, it was easy to understand how a person could become a horse lover.

Known as the “horse capital of the world,” Lexington is home to 450 horse farms and a place where everything equine is woven into the fabric of local culture. And as I found out, there is no better time to soak up the region's tradition—from racing to bourbon—than springtime when the thoroughbred horseracing season begins and its legendary landscape is at its peak.

### SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

Further along my driving tour of Lexington's countryside, I discover the lush landscape is dotted with more than just grazing horses. The limestone-filtered water that's said to give horses an edge at the racetrack also infuses bourbon, the “lifeblood” of Kentucky, with its characteristic flavour. Bourbon distilleries abound. Just a short drive from Lexington overlooking the Kentucky River is Wild Turkey, a distillery that's been in operation since the 1800s.

Inside the Tasting Room I sample the bold taste of Wild Turkey 101, the distillery's high-proof signature bourbon as well as Wild Turkey American Honey, a liqueur that's a smooth blend of pure honey and bourbon. Master Distiller Jimmy Russell explains the special alchemy of

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grain, pure water, yeast and aging needed to create premium Kentucky straight bourbon. In 2014, a new US\$4-million Visitor Centre will open offering expanded facilities for whisky fans to learn the time-honoured process of making bourbon from grain to barrel.

To taste even more southern hospitality, I head to Windy Corner Market and Restaurant in the heart of horse country. The creation of Ouita Michel, one of the South's top chefs, this laid-back diner draws horsemen who come to enjoy a home-style menu featuring locally-sourced foods. I tuck into a Po-Boy, a sandwich of crusty bread stuffed with meat and slathered with a special sauce that's a southern institution. This one's made of Kentucky-raised, grass-finished chuck roast, slow-cooked and pulled with red wine barbecue pan gravy and comes with old-fashioned creamy slaw. I listen in as locals chat about bluegrass music and then pick up some fragrant Kentucky honey to go.

### RICH HISTORY

To understand more of Lexington's roots, I spend an afternoon at Ashland, the gracious estate of Henry Clay, a brilliant lawyer and orator who was prominent in the 1800s and is still considered by many to be America's most influential statesman. The designated National Historic Landmark, once part of a 240-hectare plantation, is a majestic 18-room mansion brimming with antiques, memorabilia and exhibits with important documents such as early horse-breeding records (bloodlines from Clay's thoroughbreds can be traced to today's Kentucky Derby winners) as well as poignant records from the slavery period. As I stroll the shade-dappled grounds, it's hard to imagine a bloody Civil War battle took place here in 1862.

Even more history of the South is revealed during a walking tour of downtown Lexington. In the 1800s the city was the centre of Kentucky's slave trade. During a self-guided Lincoln's Lexington Walking Tour, I stop at sombre sites such as the Public Square, where a Slave Auction Block once stood, Robard's Slave Jail and Mary Todd Lincoln House. The once dilapidated childhood home of the First Lady has been restored to period and offers insights into her divided loyalties as the wife of Union president Abraham Lincoln and to her slave-holding family who supported the Confederacy.



### POMP, PAGEANTRY AND PEDIGREE

I wrap up my visit to Lexington with a day at Keeneland Race Course, where history merges with modern sportsmanship. Founded as a private racing facility by thoroughbred racer Jack Keene, it hosted its first race in 1936 and has since become one of North America's most beloved destinations. The clubhouse, quarried from native Kentucky limestone, is a National Historic Landmark that's especially pretty in spring surrounded by blooming forsythia and cherry trees.

But equally striking are the spectators in their finery. Race day fashion—known as “Keeneland style”—includes everything from bow ties to pastel seersucker suits. Despite the posh atmosphere, Keeneland remains accessible to the general public who can rub shoulders with the elite of the horseracing world in the paddock area, watch morning workouts or enjoy a tailgate party. Other race-day rituals include sipping mint juleps, tucking into a bowl of burgoo Kentucky stew or indulging in Keeneland's famous bourbon-infused bread pudding.

Wagering is also part of the fun so I stop one of the roaming “betologists,” a trained expert who is happy to teach me the basics of win, place and show betting. Other patrons are busy placing wagers on mobile devices such as smart phones. Ticket in hand, I head to the grandstand to watch the racehorses come around the track. I cheer as my horse “He's So Fine” thunders past. Although my one-dollar bet isn't a winner, just standing alongside veteran racegoers it's easy to catch the excitement of horse fever.

By the end of my visit, although I never do attempt the horse-mating call I heard at Three Chimneys Farm, there's no doubt I've become a fan of Lexington's winning combination of hospitality, horsemanship and history. ■



### travel planner

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For more information on attractions, visit:

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Keeneland Racetrack: [keeneland.com](http://keeneland.com)

Mary Todd Lincoln House: [mtlhouse.org](http://mtlhouse.org)

Three Chimneys Farm: [threechimneys.com](http://threechimneys.com)

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