



[EXPERIENCES]

WHERE THE GRASS IS BLUER

Bourbon, bluegrass, beer and... a Bible-inspired theme park? There are some things you may already know about Kentucky and there are some you may not, but prepare to be dazzled by an old-school state that's full of surprises

11 HRS

Flight time to Louisville from London

157,000

People attend the Kentucky Derby annually

5.6 MILLION

Barrels of bourbon ageing in the state

THIS KENTUCKY TRAVEL story could easily have been about horse racing and bourbon. As home to the Kentucky Derby and maker of 95% of the world's bourbon, these are its two major exports and two major reasons to visit. However, a recent trip to Kentucky threw me a curveball, seducing me with its nostalgic small towns, unique attractions, hip restaurants and legendary music scene. So this is the story of another Kentucky – a quirky state that offers up proper, old-time Americana in spades.

Until recently, the idea of a holiday to Kentucky may have raised a few eyebrows. >

Words by
ZOEY GOTO

Sean Pavone/Alamy

BIG HITTER:
Louisville, the largest city in Kentucky and birthplace of Muhammad Ali. Put his eponymous museum on your must-visit list





> The image was of industrial towns and rural farming, and it lacked the kudos of being one of America's big-ticket states.

But as luck would have it, Kentucky's resistance to modernisation has become its USP. The state now boasts a flourishing tourism industry worth over \$15bn annually, attracting visitors interested in discovering a more authentic version of Americana culture.

As a lover of all things Americana and an amateur banjo player, I dusted off my country and western shirts and headed over to the Bluegrass State, travelling by road from its largest city **Louisville** up into the north of Kentucky, before finishing in

Owensboro to the west, a land that's sacred for bluegrass music lovers.

When I arrive in Kentucky, it greets me with a slightly bizarre handshake. On our first morning I find myself sat on a disgruntled camel behind a life-sized replica of Noah's Ark, while people zip-wire overhead. This is not a surreal, jet-lagged hallucination – I am at the Ark Encounter, which at 510ft long is the world's largest timber-frame structure. The camel

There's plenty to see in this city if you've got time to spare – from the Kentucky Science Center to the Louisville Slugger Museum, where they make the iconic baseball bats.

AMUSEMENT ARK: [above] The jaw-dropping main attraction at Kentucky's Ark Encounter

is part of a small adjoining zoo (with two of each animal, naturally) and the zip-wire is an unexplained add-on for the one million people who visit the Ark each year. This kind of quirky, biblical-themed attraction is exactly the sort of thing you can expect to find in Kentucky, which sits at the top of the American Bible Belt.

Having gratefully dismounted the camel, I head into Louisville to explore the six-storey museum dedicated to the city's most >



KENTUCKY'S RESISTANCE TO MODERNISATION HAS BECOME ITS USP – IT NOW BOASTS A TOURISM INDUSTRY WORTH \$15BN A YEAR

> famous son, the boxing legend Muhammad Ali. Opened in 2005, the museum was co-founded by Ali to preserve his legacy, both inside and outside of the ring. The affection that the local people have towards Ali is palpable. Our tour guide Kathy reminisces fondly of the times she met Ali while growing up in Louisville, and of Ali's natural ability to unite the community, especially during times of racial conflict. Kathy guides us through the vast gallery space, divided into the key principles that shaped Ali's life – confidence, spirituality, dedication, conviction, respect and giving – before ending our tour out on the sidewalk, where in 2016 thousands of fans lined the road, chanting Ali's name as his funeral procession took the symbolic journey from his modest childhood home, right past the distinguished museum that now bears his name.

That afternoon we drive for two hours up to northern Kentucky along a snaking road that hugs the mighty Ohio River. We're greeted by the charming town of Covington, looking like the set for a mid-century technicolor movie. Our hotel for the night is the Hotel Covington, a former department store transformed into a boutique hotel that still retains an aura of bygone glamour. In the evening we wander the streets of the nearby Mainstrasse historic district, lined with strings of lights and murals, past speakeasy-style bars in former townhouses, to find out more about another of the state's principle attractions – its food.

Sandwiched between the Midwest (Ohio and Indiana are above) and the Deep South (Tennessee sits below) Kentucky's cuisine blends Southern classics with influences from its German settlers. A classic Old South dish is fried green tomatoes, fried chicken and grits, washed down with some cool sweet tea, which we devour at Tousey House

Tavern, a restaurant housed in a former federalist-style homestead.

From there, we continue south to Georgetown for a dose of Kentucky's famous horse country. The state became linked with horses over a century ago, when it was one of the few places you could legally bet on a race. The horse is still king of Kentucky, and the region is packed with picket-fenced fields filled with handsome thoroughbreds, all primed for breeding or the next big meet.

We stop off at the picturesque Old Friends Farm for Retired Thoroughbreds. The old horses' home was started by Michael Blowen, a former film critic who was once stablemates with Jack Nicholson, and has now retired alongside his beloved horses.

Strolling through the rolling fields to feed the handsome Kentucky Derby winner Silver Charm, Blowen explains that he is resisting society's notion that one is only valuable while they are earning money. There's something quietly dignified about both Blowen's farm and his outlook.

From retired careers to young entrepreneurs: just down the road we are introduced to Daniel Harrison, co-founder of Country Boy Brewing. The native Kentuckian developed a taste for craft beer while travelling Japan, and returned to Georgetown to set up his own brewery, which in a few short years has become a local hotspot, with a bar out the front that hosts local bands.

Start-ups are making their mark on Kentucky's food and drink scene, with restaurants opening up in disused warehouses and artisan alcohol brewed in farm outbuildings. The state supports many of these young enterprises, adding independents to its [Kentucky Bourbon Trail](#), which has become a major tourist attraction.

The next day we continue our road trip, stopping to admire the vintage signage and street art in Lexington, then on to Bardstown, considered one of America's most beautiful small towns due to its quaint architecture.

In Owensboro, our final destination, we find a mecca for old time music lovers, with

The trail links 36 bourbon distilleries across the state – many of which give tours and tastings. You'll find both new producers and well-known classics like Bulleit Distilling Co.



BBQ AND BLUEGRASS: Kentucky is home to mouthwatering American BBQ and a roaring bourbon industry, which together go perfectly with the state's Bluegrass music scene



NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO

Kentucky's weather tends to be extreme, so go in spring or autumn which are the mildest times. Music lovers should head to Owensboro in June for their Romp Festival, where world-class musicians such as Alison Krauss and Sam Bush play al fresco in the Yellow Creek Park.

WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

FRIED CHICKEN: Forget Colonel Sanders, this national dish has been taken to fine dining standards by many restaurants throughout Kentucky. **BBQ MUTTON:** BBQ is a big deal in Kentucky and it stands apart from the other southern states by using mutton. Head to the Moonlite all-you-can-eat in Owensboro ([moonlite.com](#)) to see why they serve up 10,000lbs of mutton every week to hungry customers, alongside corn muffins and banana salad. **BURGOO:** It's Kentucky's celebrated meaty stew, best eaten down by the track at Keeneland racecourse ([keeneland.com](#)) for a properly authentic Southern experience. **GOETTA:** This German-inspired meat and grain flat sausage was brought over by the early settlers and is a popular dish in northern Kentucky. **MINT JULEP COCKTAIL:** The traditional drink of the Kentucky Derby, a mint julep is a serve made with a big splash of a high rye bourbon like Bulleit, plus mint sprigs, ice and a dash of syrup.

THE AMERICAN DREAM: Dubbed 'the most beautiful small town in America', Bardstown is a pretty little place with plenty of Southern charm

the opening of a new \$15m Bluegrass Hall of Fame and Museum. Bluegrass music has deep roots in Kentucky: Bill Monroe, the genre's founding father, whose sentimental songs and lilting mandolin playing made him a star of the 1940s, was born locally. Much like any other folk art form, bluegrass is now a niche, kept from becoming obsolete by an enthusiastic few and the new bluegrass museum's focus is on making the genre accessible to a new generation. As Chris Joslin, the museum's executive director

notes, "You don't have to be a bluegrass junkie to appreciate this place." Visitors can even test out their banjo skills in the museum's pickin' parlor – but be warned, as locals set the bar intimidatingly high.

For our last stop, we drive out to the boyhood home of Bill Monroe to pay our respects. As we approach the cabin, the local band on the porch struck up a song – Monroe's famous 'Blue Moon of Kentucky'.

With the little wooden house as a backdrop and bluegrass music drifting out into the forest, you'd be hard pressed to find a more perfect Kentucky moment. ♦ *British Airways flies from Heathrow to Louisville via Chicago from £784 return. [britishairways.com](#)*

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