

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/travel/chi-0704111065apr15,0,4606684.story>

# Loo-UH-vul or Loo--EE-ville?

By Phil Vettel

Advertisement

Tribune staff reporter

April 15, 2007

LOUISVILLE -- This definitely is no one-horse town. It's not even a one horse-race town.

They run a full season of racing in Churchill Downs, although the one race everybody knows about is the Kentucky Derby, especially this time of year (you have a better chance of picking the perfecta than you do of finding a hotel room during the first weekend in May).

But Louisville is much more than beautiful horses and fast women, as the joke goes. It's a town with a rapidly gentrifying downtown, a beautiful riverfront park, a vibrant restaurant scene and some really cool, one-of-a-kind museums.

The town is extraordinarily visitor-friendly, clustering many of its charms into a compact, easily navigated downtown. You can't walk to everything, but you can take in a lot on foot.

And the folks here are so laid back and friendly, they don't mind if you mispronounce the town's name. Within limits.

"It's really Loo-UH-vul," the remarkably cheerful woman at the Visitor's Center told me, putting just the slightest emphasis on the first syllable while softening the oo. "But it's OK to say Loo-EE-ville. After all, the city was named after King Louis, and that's how his name is pronounced.

"The only thing that's really wrong is LOO-is-ville," she added. "I have relatives in New Jersey, and they always pronounce the 'S'."

(Note to the nice lady in the Visitor's Center: Your relatives are annoying you deliberately.)

I visited with my wife and two friends over a four-day weekend last September, and the weather was horrible, serving up a steady stream of driving rain, flash floods and colder-than-average temperatures.

Yet on the last morning, while wolfing down excellent pancakes at the irresistibly quirky Lynn's Paradise Cafe, I looked at my fellow travelers and declared, "I could live here."

Why? Pretty country, a lively and growing downtown, and a long list of outdoor festivals, for starters.

The good-sized stock of German Catholics resonated with at least part of my heritage. (This might explain why, earlier this year, Louisville-based KFC petitioned the Vatican for a papal blessing on its Lent-friendly KFC Fish Snacker sandwich; Lent came and went without a Vatican response.)

There's major-college sports, courtesy of the University of Louisville Cardinals. The Actors Theatre of Louisville is a nationally known resident theater. The Kentucky Center provides a steady stream of opera, ballet, orchestra and Broadway-tour performances. Just about all the top touring musical acts stop here; indeed, the thing that had the town buzzing the weekend of our visit was the pending arrival of the Rolling Stones, who performed the first-ever major concert at Churchill Downs. (That event was such a success that Churchill Downs booked another rock band this year -- The Police will play on July 14.)

Ninety percent of this country's disco balls are produced in Louisville. What more do you need?

And you gotta love a town that urges support for its independent businesses with the slogan, "Keep Louisville weird."

We did our best.

## LOUISVILLE SLUGGER MUSEUM & FACTORY

You can't miss this tourist attraction, not with a 120-foot replica baseball bat leaning against (and rising above) the building. There are a few interesting interactive exhibits -- my friend Jeff and I took turns humiliating ourselves in the batting cage -- and displays of historical bats going back to the century before last. But you can't pass up the factory tour (\$9), where you can watch bats being made and receive an 18-inch mini-bat (which is \$4 without the tour) to take home.

If you want a more imposing bit of lumber, stop at the Bat Store and order your very own Louisville Slugger, engraved with your signature. Order the bat as soon as you arrive and it might be ready when you leave. Or pick it up the next day, or have it shipped home. (Note: The factory doesn't operate on Sundays, though the museum remains open.)

The museum has a couple of Chicago references that I enjoyed. One area, dolled up to resemble a ballpark, uses a photo mural of Wrigley Field as its backdrop. And during the tour, our guide deciphered the bat-model coding.

"This model number is C271, which means the model was ordered by the 271st player whose name begins with C," he said. "In this case, Jose Cardenal."

Well, it took me back.

Louisville Slugger Museum Factory, 800 W. Main St.; 877-7-SLUGGER; [www.sluggermuseum.org](http://www.sluggermuseum.org)

## MUHAMMAD ALI CENTER

Muhammad Ali was born in Louisville (as Cassius Clay), has a downtown street named after him and is the focus of this spiffy museum, which opened in November 2005.

Though the museum doesn't shy away from Ali's most polarizing moments, including some of the harshest things he said after his conversion to Islam, the focus is more on the man's accomplishments, from his stellar boxing career to his decades of humanitarian and civil-rights work.

The five-story museum (a sixth level is for private functions) offers clips of Ali's TV interviews and boxing matches, some nice analytical bits from people who observed the man at close range, and displays of Ali's poetry and drawings. There's an interactive "train with Ali" station, and several exhibits, aimed at youngsters, that preach core values such as respect, spirituality, confidence and conviction, with parallels drawn to a man many believe embodies all these virtues.

Muhammad Ali Center, 144 N. 6th St., 502-584-9254; [www.alicenter.org](http://www.alicenter.org)

## FOURTH STREET LIVE!

Louisville's glitziest tourist attraction is probably my least favorite. It's a fine idea, covering a two-block stretch of 4th Street with a soaring steel-and-glass canopy and turning the area into a somewhat-weather-protected outdoor entertainment mall, boasting bars, restaurants, a pool hall, bowling alley, retail shop and food court. Only pedestrians are permitted here on weekend evenings, and the whole place turns into one huge block party.

But. The dining, retail and entertainment options are dominated by chains (Hard Rock Cafe, T.G.I. Friday's, Border's, Howl at the Moon, Lucky Strike Lanes), which robs the area of any real sense of place. It's fun, no question; my wife and I listened to a very good country band playing in a bar called Saddle Ridge. But we could have been anywhere in the world.

Fourth Street Live, 4th Street between Liberty Street and Muhammad Ali Boulevard; 812-282-LIVE; [www.4thstlive.com](http://www.4thstlive.com)

## CHURCHILL DOWNS

My next horse race will be my first (discounting TV), but anybody can appreciate the majesty of Churchill Downs, the oldest continually operating racetrack in the United States (it opened in 1875). Even in the absence of British rockers on the infield.

The track was closed to racing when we visited (the Spring Meet runs late-April through mid-July; Fall Meet runs late-October to late-November), but if you visit during the racing season, admission is a mere \$2 (it's 20 times higher than that on Derby Day -- May 5 this year -- but don't worry, you'll never get tickets anyway).

However, the Kentucky Derby Museum, located by Gate One, is open just about every day of the year (excepting Christmas, Thanksgiving, Derby Day and the day before Derby Day).

Here, for \$10, you can see a 360-degree video dedicated to Derby Day (even I got goose bumps), try to ride like a jockey (the better your form, the faster your horse will "move"), and see various static and interactive exhibits.

For an extra \$10 you can take the Backside Track Tour, a guided walking tour of the grounds and a bus tour of the stables. This is highly recommended, provided it's not raining. The light rain that accompanied our walking tour was no inconvenience, but by the time we boarded the bus, the skies had opened formidably, so our view of the stabled horses was through rain-lashed windows. I could make out brown horses, reddish-brown horses and some reddish-brown horses with white spots on their foreheads, while the tour driver babbled happily about the various steeds' personalities. If you say so.

Churchill Downs and Kentucky Derby Museum, 700 Central Ave.; 502-636-4400 (track) or 502-637-7097 (museum) ; [www.churchilldowns.com](http://www.churchilldowns.com) and [www.derbymuseum.org](http://www.derbymuseum.org)

## OTHER ATTRACTIONS

The Belle of Louisville, a 92-year-old steamboat and a National Historic Landmark, still conducts cruises along the Ohio River (along with its sister boat, the Spirit of Jefferson), embarking from the 4th Street Wharf. Prices range from \$15 for excursion cruises to \$35 for dinner and dance cruises. 502-574-2992, [www.belleoflouisville.org](http://www.belleoflouisville.org)

Two areas to visit are Bards- town Road and Frankfort Avenue, two multiblock districts packed with funky retail shops, coffee shops and very good restaurants. On the last Friday of the month, TARC (Transit Authority of River City) operates a free motorized trolley along Frankfort Avenue.

Old Louisville is a neighborhood containing Louisville's oldest and largest homes, and one of the largest concentrations of Victorian homes in the country. The Visitors Center for Historic Old Louisville is at 218 W. Oak St., where you'll find maps for walking tours and information on bus tours. You also can find walking-tour maps at [www.oldlouisville.com](http://www.oldlouisville.com).

The Bourbon Trail is a collection of seven independent bourbon distilleries, all within an hour's drive of Louisville. Most offer complimentary distillery tours and sample tastes (Woodford Reserve charges \$5 admission; Maker's Mark doesn't offer free tastings). Find details on six of the distilleries at [www.kybourbon.com](http://www.kybourbon.com) ; for information on Woodford Reserve Distillery visit [www.woodfordreserve.com](http://www.woodfordreserve.com) (or see my recent story at [chicagotribune.com/bourbontrail](http://chicagotribune.com/bourbontrail)). If you don't feel like driving, most good-sized bars in Louisville boast impressive stockpiles of America's Spirit, and bartenders are happy to chat about their favorites.

I stuck my head into a few other places.

The Louisville Science Center (727 W. Main St.; 800-591-2203; [www.louisvillescience.org](http://www.louisvillescience.org) ) is a 40,000-

square-foot facility full of hands-on exhibits and a four-story IMAX theater.

Glassworks (815 W. Market St.; 502-584-4510; [www.louisville.glassworks.com](http://www.louisville.glassworks.com)) has glass-blowing classes and workshops and a gallery full of serious glass art I wished I could afford.

The Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft (715 W. Main St.; 502-589-0102; [www.kentuckyarts.org](http://www.kentuckyarts.org)) is a free museum dedicated to local arts and crafts, and has a really neat gift shop.

And the Jazz Factory (815 W. Market St.; 502-992-3242; [www.jazzfactory.us](http://www.jazzfactory.us)) is a performance and dining space, open Tuesday-Saturday, that held great appeal for my jazz-loving buddies. We showed up on Jam Session night, but I guess attendance had been very sparse, because the place had already closed when we arrived at 10 p.m. In retrospect, the open parking spot by the front door should have been a tipoff.

-----  
pvettel@tribune.com

- - -  
  
IF YOU GO

## GETTING THERE

Louisville is approximately 270 miles from Chicago, or about a four-hour drive (plus you lose an hour; Louisville is on Eastern time). American Airlines and United Airlines (with a code-share with US Airways) operate non-stop flights between O'Hare and Louisville; Southwest operates non-stops between Midway and Louisville. I found round-trip fares as low as \$127 on American and United; Southwest has an Internet-only fare of \$49 each way.

## LODGING

I stayed at three properties on my visit. The Brown Hotel dates back to 1923 but doesn't look it; from the gorgeous lobby with its ornate ceiling work to the rehabbed and updated guest rooms (wireless Internet throughout the property), everything looks fresh and polished. I paid \$199 for a double-occupancy room, and on check-in was upgraded to the hotel's concierge level (the hotel was not heavily occupied this night). In addition to a spacious room (oversized rooms are one of the hotel's selling points), with large bath, a terrific bed and all the pillows one could ever require, my room included admission to the 13th floor Camberley Club, where I (and guests!) could enjoy drinks and munchies at the extended happy hour and the better-than-it-had-to-be breakfast buffet. Service was exemplary; I checked out with regret. 335 W. Broadway; 502-583-1234; [www.brownhotel.com](http://www.brownhotel.com)

The Seelbach Hilton Hotel is steps away from Fourth Street Live, a block or so from the convention center and basically in the heart of Louisville's downtown. At the lobby bar, my wife and I met a woman who was having her wedding reception in the hotel the next night. She gushed about her lifelong love of

Louisville in general and the Seelbach in particular, then invited us to her wedding. People are like that here. The hotel's dining room, the Oakroom, is a legendary restaurant. Our room in the Seelbach was very nicely appointed and very, very compact; two people could not co-exist in the bathroom, and the very comfortable king bed took up most of the main room. Maneuverability aside, it was a nice room. 500 S. 4th St.; 502-585-3200; [www.seelbachhilton.com](http://www.seelbachhilton.com).

The 21C Museum Hotel is a one-year old boutique hotel (just 91 rooms) on Main Street, within three blocks of the Muhammad Ali Center, the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory and other points of interest. Owned by two Louisville investors and art collectors, the hotel's lobby level is a de facto free contemporary-art museum whose exhibits change every few months. There's more art on the upstairs floors, and even the guest-room TVs offer one channel that displays a multimedia art exhibit. My room (\$239) had a king bed with super-luxurious 500-thread-count Egyptian-cotton sheets, a sleek bath with Malin + Goetz bath products, a blue-glass-topped desk with a Herman Miller Eames chair and an iPod-docking clock radio -- complete with iPod programmed with your musical preferences (the hotel called me a couple of days before my scheduled arrival) and an audio tour of the downstairs art installations. Way cool. 700 W. Main St.; 877-217-6400; [www.21cmuseumhotel.com](http://www.21cmuseumhotel.com).

## DINING

Louisville is a very sophisticated restaurant town. But the one thing you must eat is a Hot Brown, a sandwich that was invented in Louisville in 1926. It's an open-faced sandwich of turkey and bacon drenched in mornay sauce and broiled until the cheese browns up.

I tried about four Hot Browns on my trip, and the best of the bunch -- easily -- was the version served at the Brown Hotel, which fittingly is where the sandwich was born. The Brown uses a thick slab of turkey breast -- not a few thin slices, which I encountered elsewhere -- topped with three strips of bacon and smothered in a rich, butter mornay sauce and grated Parmesan cheese. It's hell on the arteries, but oh, so good.

Proof on Main is the dining room in the 21C Hotel, and like the hotel, it's a year-old. But already it's being touted as one of the city's finest restaurants. Chef Michael Paley makes much use of the family farms in the area, and the dining room boasts a lot of local influence as well; the glass-art votives on the table, for instance, are from the nearby Glassworks gallery. The restaurant is managed by Myriad Restaurant Group, the Drew Nieporent group that operates Tribeca Grill, Nobu and Montrachet in New York, among other restaurants.

But for all its sophistication and low-key glitz, Proof on Main remains very affordable; excepting the \$12 Proof Burger, entrees range from \$18-\$28, and include such stellar efforts as a country-ham-wrapped pork chop with pickled peach marmalade and grilled skirt steak with oyster mushrooms and salsa verde. I liked the appetizer bison tartare, with frisee and a poached egg, as well. 702 W. Main St.; 502-217-6360; [www.proofonmain.com](http://www.proofonmain.com)

Lilly's is a colorful and very personal restaurant in the Bardstown Road district, where yellow walls meet bright-red door trim and chef Kathy Cary's regional menu calls its appetizers "Kentucky tapas," which

include novel spring rolls stuffed with Kentucky Lake catfish and served with a sweet-hot Asian dipping sauce, and fried green tomatoes topped with Cadiz bacon (Cadiz is a small town in Eastern Kentucky) and melted asiago cheese. Among main courses, seared duck breast and leg confit is served over grilled polenta; slow-braised lamb shank is served over grits with olives and garden tomatoes, a kind of Kentucky-on-the-Mediterranean concept. Entrees start around \$18 and scale up to \$34, but my friend Kelly ordered the \$14 grilled lobster tail with fried shrimp ravioli, nominally a salad, and pronounced herself full. 1147 Bardstown Rd.; 502-451-0447; [www.lillyslapeche.com](http://www.lillyslapeche.com).

We stumbled onto Seviche while walking around looking for something else. Lucky us. This is a lively, colorful and very popular pan-Latin operation in which chef/owner Anthony Lamas cranks out intriguing items such as "chino-latino" ceviche that gives first-rate tuna the ceviche treatment, then serves it with a wasabi-lime mustard. Main courses run from \$18 to \$29 and include an Angus skirt-steak churrasco with garlicky chimichurri and excellent conchinito (slow-braised suckling pig) with corn-masa dumplings and salsa verde. The bar makes excellent caipirinhas and pisco sours too. 1538 Bardstown Rd.; 502-473-8560; [www.sevicherestaurant.com](http://www.sevicherestaurant.com).

If the colorful, outsized statuary out front doesn't tip you off, the waiting customers milling by the door will confirm that you've reached Lynn's Paradise Cafe, a Louisville fixture since 1991, renowned for its funky decor and Lynn Winter's great, unpretentious home cooking, especially at breakfast. The front door opens into a retail shop with silly toys and games, the kind of stuff you didn't realize anybody still made. Then it's on to the dining room, a riot of color and kitsch dominated by a huge artificial tree in the center of the room, plastic flowers and tinsel hanging from its branches. Sit at Formica-topped tables with heavy mugs of strong coffee and await the arrival of dishes such as the Greek Scramble, containing marinated artichoke hearts, sun-dried tomatoes and feta cheese, or fluffy buttermilk biscuits in a sea of sausage gravy. It's possible to eat sensibly, say with multigrain "Crunchcakes" stuffed with homemade granola, but you're more likely to succumb to such indulgences as the bourbon French toast, which will fill you up until next Tuesday. 984 Barret Ave.; 502-583-3447; [www.lynnsparisecafe.com](http://www.lynnsparisecafe.com).

BEST TIME TO VISIT (for some)

Louisville abounds with summertime riverfront concerts, but from May 24-28, the city will be home to "Abbey Road on the River," sponsored by the Courier-Journal and billed as the biggest Beatles Tribute festival in the world. Five days, eight stages and 75 bands will be scattered about Belvedere Festival Park (at 5th and Main Streets) and the Galt House Hotel and Suites (4th and Main). General admission tickets are as low as \$15, and an "Ultimate Ticket to Ride" pass that includes all sorts of goodies is \$199.95. For information, tickets and links to hotel accommodations, visit [www.abbeyroadontheriver.com](http://www.abbeyroadontheriver.com)

## INFORMATION

Contact the Greater Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau at 502-584-2121; 888-568-4784; [www.gotolouisville.com](http://www.gotolouisville.com).

-- Phil Vettel

Copyright © 2007, [Chicago Tribune](http://www.chicagotribune.com)