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Horsing around

Louisville is hot to trot -- even if you can't make the Derby

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LOUISVILLE-- The most exciting two minutes in sports -- the Kentucky Derby -- is less than a month away.

Unless you're extremely lucky, rich or willing to wing it with the masses in Churchill Downs' infield mosh pit, you probably won't be here in person to watch those 3-year-old thoroughbreds storm out of the gate. But you don't have to be sipping a mint julep in the grandstand to tap into the excitement that surrounds the world's greatest horse race.

The Kentucky Derby Festival officially kicks off April 21, two weeks before the Run for the Roses. The festivities start with a literal bang that Saturday at Thunder Over Louisville, said to be the country's largest annual fireworks show. The next 14 days are filled with concerts, a parade, special events at the track and plenty of non-horse races involving hot-air balloons, marathoners and steamboats. Admission is usually free or requires a \$3 pin that can be picked up just about anywhere in town.

Now more than ever, the Derby isn't the only reason to visit this mid-size city across the river from Indiana. Recent changes to the downtown have proven that old-fashioned southern charm can co-exist with hipness -- something Louisville got a big dose of last year with the opening of 21c Museum Hotel.

This sleek, 90-room boutique hotel doubles as a showcase for cutting-edge art exhibits. It seems straight out of SoHo. Yet there it sits on Main Street, just a line drive away from the family-friendly Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory, where you can watch a cylinder of wood get shaved into a Major League bat in 30 seconds.

Visitors can walk down Bardstown Road, browsing the latest art galleries and trendy boutiques. Or stroll along Old Louisville's cobblestone streets, past one of the country's largest collections of restored Victorian homes.

Check out the highly interactive Muhammad Ali Center that debuted downtown late 2005. Or take a cruise on the nation's oldest operating Mississippi-style sternwheeler steamboat.

"There's a good mix here of the old and the new," said Jonathan Swanz, a glass artist who moved to Louisville two years ago to work at Glassworks, a loft that's home to studios, galleries, condos and a funky jazz club downstairs.

"It's a great place to live, and the locals know it," Swanz said. "You see people walking around with the city symbol -- the fleur-de-lis -- tattooed on their arm. Not a lot of cities can say that."

Locals can be especially proud lately of Louisville's culinary scene. Food Network star Bobby Flay came to town last year to challenge Lynn's Paradise Caf  in a breakfast throwdown. Lynn's bourbon French toast and Kentucky scramble sent a defeated Flay packing. Earlier this year, "Iron Chef America" featured the historic Seelbach Hilton Hotel's Todd Richards -- a Chicago native -- doing battle in kitchen stadium.

No matter how good Louisville's food rep gets, the town's signature dish will always be served the first Saturday in May: the Kentucky Derby. If you're determined to taste it for yourself, get to Churchill Downs bright and early on race day. Gates open at 8 a.m., and \$40 gets you access to the infield, where you're guaranteed to see plenty of action -- little of it involving horses.

"I describe it as spring break meets thoroughbred racing," said Tony Terry, Churchill Downs publicity director.

If drunk people tossing around plastic horse poop isn't your idea of a good time, Terry has a tip: Pay your \$40, enter the racetrack at Gate 10 and take an immediate right. That will get you to a grassy knoll at the first turn -- a good vantage point to not only watch the races but to see the horses as they're led between the track and the barn.

It costs nothing to watch Derby contenders get their morning workouts under the famed twin spires during "Dawn at the Downs," held from 7 to 10 a.m. Monday through Thursday before the big race. And \$2 snags you a spot on the infield for a Thursday afternoon concert.

"You don't need to be here on the day of the Derby," Terry said, "to have a good time."

CAN'T MAKE IT TO THE DERBY?

3 other great ways to experience Louisville:

The Muhammad Ali Center

Learn about Louisville's most famous son at this massive museum and cultural center. Interactive exhibits dominate this \$80 million complex that opened in late 2005.

Louisville Slugger Factory and Museum

Watch the world-famous Louisville Slugger bats be made before your eyes. Take a few swings using replicas of Babe Ruth's and Derek Jeter's bats.

21c Museum Hotel

This new museum/hotel hybrid boasts the hippest rooms in town, with an impressive collection of contemporary art to boot. Don't miss the hotel's restaurant, Proof on Main.