

USA TODAY Classifieds: [cars.com](#) | [careerbuilder.com](#) | [eHarmony.com](#) | [Marketplace](#) | [Real estate](#)

Home | **News** | **Travel** | **Money** | **Sports** | **Life** | **Tech** | **Weather**

Search Travel: _____ and/or _____

SMARTER TRIPS START HERE [TRAVEL HOME](#) [DESTINATIONS](#) [HOTELS](#) [FLIGHTS](#) [DEALS](#)

▪ [E-MAIL THIS](#) ▪ [PRINT THIS](#) ▪ [SAVE THIS](#) ▪ [MOST POPULAR](#) ▪ [SUBSCRIBE](#)

Posted 5/4/2006 7:50 PM Updated 5/4/2006 7:41 PM

powered by **YAHOO!**

- Travel**
- [Travel home](#)
- [Travel briefs](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Special features](#)
- [Wi-Fi hotspots](#)
- [Site index](#)
- Destinations**
- [Destinations home](#)
- [City Guides](#)
- [10 Great](#)
- [Country Guides](#)
- [Photo galleries](#)
- Hotels**
- [Hotels home](#)
- [Find a hotel](#)
- [Hotel reviews](#)
- [Hotel Hotsheet](#)
- [Hotels with Wi-Fi](#)
- Flights**
- [Flights home](#)
- [Airfare Search](#)
- [Today in the Sky](#)
- [Flight Tracker](#)
- [Managing Miles](#)
- [Airports with Wi-Fi](#)
- Specials & Deals**
- [Deals home](#)
- [Air Deals](#)
- [Hotel Deals](#)
- [Car Deals](#)
- [Package Deals](#)
- [Cruise Deals](#)
- [Top 25 Deals](#)
- Marketplace**
- [Real estate](#)
- [Arcade](#)
- [Tickets](#)
- [Shopping](#)

Louisville is off to the races

By Ron Schoolmeester, special for USA TODAY

LOUISVILLE — Tradition just isn't what it used to be.



The Louisville skyline as seen from Churchill Downs, site of the Kentucky Derby.

The Courier-Journal

Even in this sentimental old river city that on Saturday, for the 132nd time, hosts the legendary Kentucky Derby, the past is getting a run for its money.

Oh, sure, there'll still be all those ladies in their wide-brimmed spring hats and all those gents with one too many juleps under their belts — not to mention 150,000 or so fans going all weepy as the strains of Stephen Foster's *My Old Kentucky Home* waft across Churchill Downs.

FEW TICKETS LEFT IN HOMESTRETCH

Very few good seats for the Kentucky Derby are available to the general public (reserved seats for this year are long gone), so here are some options:

- Join the multitude milling on the infield (\$40 admission), but don't expect to see the race.
- A better bet is to go to Churchill Downs at another time. The spring racing season this year extends through July 16; the fall meet is Oct. 29-Nov. 25. General admission tickets are \$2, with first-level clubhouse seats being first-come, first-served. Details: churchilldowns.com
- It's a long shot, but try for Derby tickets next year from Premium Seating Dept., Churchill Downs, 700 Central Ave., Louisville, KY 40208.
- The Greater Louisville

But beyond the track and the traditions, something transformational is occurring here on the south banks of the Ohio. Something that has some of the locals going, well, almost loco.

"Louisville is secretly hip!" exclaims Lynn Winter, a fast-talking, self-described "happiness coach" given to occasional hyperbole but better known in these parts as a colorful, wildly successful restaurateur.

What she's talking about — or at least what she seems to be talking about — is a blossoming cultural arts scene and a downtown that appears, finally, to be making a turnaround.

Today's Top Travel Stories

- ['So much of my life, well, drowned'](#) - 9:52 AM
- [Namibia is gaining star status](#) - 1:13 PM
- [Didgeridoos and Tyler too: Getting dirty in the race through Australia](#) - 10:46 AM
- [Four seasons of Yosemite](#) - 10:45 AM
- [Luxurious surroundings easy to come by](#) - 12:56 PM

• [Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds](#) [XML](#)

E-Mail Newsletters

Sign up to receive our free **Travel e-newsletter** and get the best travel news, deals & features in your inbox.

E-mail:

Select one: HTML Text

USA TODAY TOP TRAVEL DEALS

powered by [ShermansTravel.com](#)



\$399+: 7-nt Carnival CARIBBEAN cruise this fall (\$599+ oceanview)
7 Blue Seas



\$99 pp/nt: Upscale all-incl. PUNTA CANA beach resort thru 6/30
Riu Palace Punta Cana



\$299+: Huge 5-star Celebrity Cruises sale w/Mexico, Bermuda, more
Travelocity

Sign up for our **Top 25 newsletter!** [GO](#)
ShermansTravel.com - travel deals AND advice

[International
Business Index](#)

[Newspaper
Classifieds](#)

Convention & Visitors Bureau (888-568-4784) has limited hotel packages that include Derby tickets; calls accepted starting Dec. 1 for the following year.

The push for change is coming from a most unlikely source: a middle-aged man who grew up in small-town Kentucky and a whiskey heiress from one of Louisville's oldest, most prominent families.

Husband-and-wife developers Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown have just opened 21c (for 21st century), a boutique hotel/contemporary art museum in what was once five forlorn downtown buildings. The hotel boasts a multimillion-dollar art collection and includes such cutting-edge room amenities as 42-inch plasma-screen TVs and personal iPods programmed precisely to each guest's musical tastes.

And now Wilson and Brown are setting their sights even higher. If all goes according to plan, they will break ground next year on Museum Plaza, a \$380 million, 61-story, multi-modular, multi-use skyscraper that itself resembles a gigantic piece of contemporary art and could threaten the twin spires of Churchill Downs as the city's most recognizable landmark.

"The idea," Wilson says, "is to provoke ideas."

Adds Brown: "There's a saying around here that Louisville has tradition for tradition. But this project will change that perception."

The 21c and Museum Plaza are part of the West Main Street Area, which the city is trying mightily to convert into a visitor magnet that will attract more than the once-a-year, first-Saturday-in-May crowd.

There also is the new Muhammad Ali Center, an innovative museum that focuses more on the ideals of the former heavyweight champ than on the memorabilia of his boxing career. (Ali, then known as Cassius Clay, was born and grew up in Louisville.)

If baseball is more to your liking, the Louisville Slugger Museum and factory tour is just down the street. (You can't miss it: It's the building with the 120-foot-high baseball bat out front.) Nearby, too, is the new Frazier Historical Arms Museum, which, thanks to a unique agreement with the Royal Armouries of Britain, tracks the historic role of weaponry in the creation and rise of the USA.

Outside West Main, but within easy walking distance, are Waterfront Park along the Ohio River (hiking/biking trails, playgrounds) and Fourth Street Live!, a new entertainment district that attracts twenty- and thirty-somethings.

Yet, despite all this activity, Louisville still suffers from a bit of an identity crisis — a city too far north, really, to be Southern but not really Midwestern, either. Locals can't even agree on how to pronounce the name of the place. Most seem to prefer the more Southern, drawlish *Luhvuhl*, but the more nationally accepted *Loeeyville* also has its adherents (and probably makes more sense since the city was named for France's King Louis XVI, in gratitude for his help during the Revolutionary War).

If, indeed, Louisville is a Southern destination, it has always been a Plain Jane kind of place compared with, say, Charleston (prettier) or pre-hurricane New Orleans (better personality).

Still, Louisville is not without its charms.

Maybe it doesn't have the antebellum ambience of Charleston, but a 45-square-block neighborhood known as Old Louisville has more than 1,400 Victorian homes and is a preservationist's dream.

IF YOU GO . . .

You want personality? Step right into the parlor of Jane Harris, who moved to Old Louisville with her husband, Ron, just two years ago from Brooklyn, N.Y. Both were actors (*Law & Order: Criminal Intent*), but, says Jane, "After 9/11, it (New York) just wasn't the same." So they packed up and came here, near where Ron grew up,

● **Getting there:** Most major airlines serve Louisville's International Airport (Standiford Field), which is about 7 miles from downtown.

● **Where to stay:** The hotel-of-the-moment, with all its high-tech amenities and contemporary art collection, is the 91-room **21c** (502-217- 6300; 21cmuseumhotel.com). Rates start at \$209. For something more traditional downtown, the grand old **Seelbach** (800-333- 3399; seelbachhilton.com) and **Brown** (888-888-5252; brownhotel.com) hold their own. Weekday rates at both start at \$179. Biggest surprise: The once gaudy **Galt House** (800-843-4258; galthouse.com) is getting a total makeover and offers great river views. Standard rates start at \$145.

● **Where to eat:** The **Oakroom** in the Seelbach Hotel (three-course, à la carte menu, \$60/\$80 with wine; five-course, \$80/\$110) is Kentucky's only AAA five diamond restaurant. But **Proof on Main** at the new 21c hotel is the talk of the town with an eclectic menu (entrees, \$12 to \$26). The Hot Brown (\$11.50), an open-face turkey sandwich with bacon, pimento and mornay sauce, is celebrating its 80th anniversary at **J. Graham's Café & Bar** in the Brown Hotel. Outside downtown, Bardstown Road is known as Restaurant Row, and it's there that **Seviche** is making a splash with its Nuevo Latino cuisine (entrees, \$13 to \$34). At **Lynn's Paradise Café**, you'll get lots of kitsch with your grits, but it's the place for breakfast (\$4.95 and up). For before or after dinner, stop at **Maker's Mark Bourbon House and Lounge** in the Fourth Street Live! entertainment district and choose among 72 brands of bourbon or try a Warm Bourbon Fudge Brownie.

● **Information:** Greater Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau, 888-568-4784 or gotolouisville.com.

and started restoring an old 1894 Victorian.

"We still have 37 windows that need to be repaired," she says in her best Brooklynese. "Why do you think we started the company upstairs?"

The company she's talking about, up on the third floor of their manse, is the Old Louisville Candy Co., makers of Happy Balls, hand-dipped, chocolate-covered bourbon balls with a pecan on top. ("I like to say we are the little company with the bigger balls," she once chortled to the local *Courier-Journal* newspaper.)

Then there's the aforementioned Lynn Winter. Not even New Orleans has ever had anything quite like Lynn's Paradise Café. Inside: all Formica tables and ugly lamps. (Lynn sponsors an Ugly Lamps Contest at the Kentucky State Fair each year.) Outside: 9-foot coffeepot sculpture and brightly painted concrete animals, for starters.

"I have never been able to pin it down," she says when asked how to characterize the place.

The same might be said of Winter herself. Aside from being a restaurant proprietress and "happiness coach" (seriously — 800 clients and counting), she's now also into the fashion business. Her latest brainstorm: Lynn's Magic Pants, gym-to-boardroom attire.

"See," she says, standing up to model, "you can throw a jacket on over these and go right from the gym to the boardroom. And, besides, they make your (butt) look really great. They're *truly* magic!"

And she "lo-o-v-v-v-es" what Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown are doing downtown. "You can be rich and sit on your money. Or you can be entrepreneurial and bring a city alive. That's what they're doing — and God bless 'em for it!"

Not that Steve and Laura Lee aren't without quirks of their own.

Louisville's "It" couple doesn't even live in Louisville, but about 20 miles outside on a 1,000-acre farm that, because of its location, would presumably raise horses.

"Oh, no," Brown says. "That would be far too traditional for us.

"We raise bison."

Bison? In Kentucky?

"Well," she explains, trying to keep a straight face, "we didn't want to do pigs. And we looked at ostriches, but they're too ugly. So ... bison.

"Something unexpected, a little different."

Sort of like Louisville nowadays.

Subscribe Today: Home Delivery of USA TODAY - Save 25%

USATODAY.com partners: [USA Weekend](#) • [Sports Weekly](#) • [Education](#) • [Space.com](#)

[Home](#) • [Travel](#) • [News](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

Resources: [Mobile news](#) • [Site map](#) • [FAQ](#) • [Contact us](#) • [E-mail news](#)
[Jobs with us](#) • [Internships](#) • [Terms of service](#) • [Privacy policy](#) • [Media kit](#) • [Press room](#)
[Electronic print edition](#) • [Reprints and Permissions](#)

Hotel Reservation Services: [Terms & conditions](#) • [Reservation questions?](#)

[Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds](#) 

© Copyright 2006 USA TODAY, a division of [Gannett Co. Inc.](#)