

ADVENTURES IN
TRAVEL AND CULTURE

The South



LONG WEEKEND

The Allure of Louisville

Three days in search of new
surprises in Kentucky's Derby City

BY VALERIE RAINS

Skyline Vistas
Wander the Big Four
Bridge and Waterfront
Park for unbeatable
views of Louisville.

Local Eats

(From left) Don't miss Barn8 restaurant at Hermitage Farm in Goshen or the Smoked Trout Board with eggs and grains at Gralehaus in Louisville.



Getting Set Up

When I learned that downtown Louisville has one of the country's largest collections of 19th-century cast-iron facades—like a slice of New York City's SoHo dropped alongside the Ohio River—I knew where we'd book our room. About a year old, The Grady Hotel is set in a former apothecary building dating to 1883. It has soaring ceilings, a luxe-library vibe, and a cozy fireplace in the lobby. We could walk to the KMAC Museum, the Muhammad Ali Center, big-name distilleries, and the 120-foot-tall Louisville Slugger bat replica that leans against the museum and factory. With so much to explore, the appeal of the roaring fire couldn't hold us for long.

DISCOVERY 1

The Best Food Might Be Found in a Bar—or Even a Barn

We hadn't planned on spending our first evening in town

I **KNEW ABOUT** the horses and the hats. I had heard about the bourbon. Baseball bats were mentioned, almost without fail, whenever plans for an autumn trip to Louisville, Kentucky, came up in conversation. But I'd also listened as friends with no interest in any of the above gushed about their love for the Bluegrass State's largest city, and I wanted to see what all that fuss was about: the food scene that punches above its weight, the abundance of art and historic architecture, the Olmsted-designed parks and distinctive neighborhoods bursting with character, and the complex culture that's difficult to sum up in a sound bite. I

set out to do more than scratch the surface and confirm for myself that—if I'm allowed a groan-worthy pun—Louisville is no one-trick pony. Judging by visitor numbers, I'm not the only one whose curiosity has been piqued. The city set new tourism records in 2019 and has been steadily building momentum in the post-peak-pandemic reopening, even as entrepreneurs and developers have taken advantage of the downtime to reboot, refocus, and reimagine their next chapters. So, with a lengthy list of leads and a long weekend to fill, I made arrangements to meet up with my mom in Derby City and see what else it has to offer first-time visitors in 2022. Here's what we uncovered.

Artful Experiences

(From left) An evening here might include the Overboard cheese-and-charcuterie plate and Aperol Spritz from Cultured cheese shop or a visit to the revamped Galehaus.



going out of town for dinner. But the forecast for our visit was wet, and we wanted to experience Barn8 (the eatery at Hermitage Farm in nearby Goshen) while the skies were clear. The nearly 700-acre site is the latest passion project and preservation play of 21c Museum Hotels founders and native Kentuckians Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown. They bought the centuries-old horse farm, which was slated to be developed for housing, and set about converting it into a destination for local organic dining with a changing menu that has an adventurous range and Southern flair.

Mom and I arrived in time for a premeal tour, which began with nibbling our way through the ornamental edible garden, popping sweet yellow ground cherries out of their papery husks and into our mouths and then ogling limequats and grapefruit-size Ponderosa lemons in the high-

tech greenhouse. Positioned next to the red-trimmed black barn that houses the dining room, it looked for all the world like its glimmering, translucent twin—a kind of inverse shadow. Next we paid a visit to Hermitage Farm's horse barn. (Equine encounter: Check!) We knew it was time to head in for dinner when slanting late-afternoon sunlight turned a pyramid of pumpkins on the brick patio into a sundial. Once inside, I tried to temper my envy of the folks seated at tables tucked in the two rows of preserved horse stalls that have been transformed into intimate

dining rooms. Our meal soon made me forget my jealousy. From the crumbly sorghum cornbread to the grilled carrots (seasoned with dill, curry oil, and candied walnuts) to the peppery, plate-size pork chop (all chased with a snifter of sharp Copper & Kings apple brandy), each mouthful was a marvel.

Barn8 may be a bit of an outlier (both in terms of scope and geography), but it's still part of a larger local movement. While Louisville has its share of white-tablecloth places with old-fashioned service (and menu offerings to match), the energy in its

increasingly eclectic culinary scene has begun to shift into unexpected places. Case in point is the casual corner bar in the laid-back Germantown neighborhood where industry veteran Chris Williams opened his lauded barbecue joint, Four Pegs Smokehouse & Bar, in 2019, parlaying the popularity of his Café 502 food truck into a thriving brick-and-mortar base. "Louisville has a ton of talent in our kitchens and one of the most vibrant food scenes in the country," says Williams. "Things are finally returning to pre-pandemic levels. We've got lots of new places opening



up—all of this despite the toughest staffing market I’ve seen in my 23 years in restaurants.” If there was a shortage of hands on deck at Four Pegs when we visited, we didn’t notice. By 7 p.m. on a drizzly Friday night, the place was buzzing, and every seat was occupied by a hungry regular looking for a plate of smoked wings (seasoned with their signature dry rub), a steaming bowl of chili, or a pork belly burnt ends sandwich. Mom and I split the tender brisket sandwich and a plate of pulled chicken, tearing off hunks of warm soft pretzel to dip in hot beer cheese for both our appetizer and our dessert.

The next night, we visited Gravely Brewing Co., a music-themed brewery, bar, and venue that flips the script on the food truck-to-full-service story. It’s the exclusive home of Mayan Street Food—a part-

nership with chef Bruce Ucán of Mayan Cafe. We may not have had access to the full array of Ucán’s creative takes on traditional Mayan cooking, but as we retrieved our hot salbutes (“puffy tacos” made with fresh masa, generously piled with slow-roasted pork and served with a little tub of fiery jalapeño sauce) from a truck on Gravely’s lower patio and devoured them with a view of the twinkling city skyline, neither of us could imagine asking for more.

DISCOVERY 2

Beer Is Giving Bourbon a Run for Its Money

“Beer can be explored through the lens of history, culture, science, craft, design, economics, philosophy, and so

on, providing a rich opportunity for a lifetime of learning and community building,” says Lori Beck, co-owner and beverage director of an expanding mini empire of slow-lifestyle-centric businesses known collectively as The Grales. That outlook bodes well for Beck and her partner, Tyler Trotter, who between them have logged almost 40 years in the beer industry and whose passion for potables is embodied in their selection of an old Unitarian church as the home for their flagship temple of beer. Both their bar, Holy Grale, and a backyard-adjacent cafe/bed-and-breakfast, Gralehaus, are fresh off renovations by Kentucky interiors powerhouse Journey + Jacobs. The food menus were revamped by

executive chef Jonathan Searle (formerly of Proof on Main in downtown’s 21c Museum Hotel). But why stop there? Grale Goods, a natural-wine bar and mercantile, is due to open by year’s end. “We are lucky to have adventurous customers who support such a specialized beer program,” Beck says. No doubt, the feeling is mutual.

Another stroke of luck for Louisville beer lovers is the passage of a 2021 bill allowing microbreweries to bypass distributors and sell their products directly to retail shops and restaurants, giving creative small-batch brewers a fighting chance to flourish in competition with the big names and providing people easier access to unique, niche offerings made right in their backyards. The momentum it’s joining is real—nearly a dozen new taprooms have opened in the Louisville area in the past two years, along with the debut of the first Louisville Ale Trail. Two noteworthy newcomers in this homegrown renaissance are Ten20 Craft Brewery (which cut the ribbon on a space in the Butchertown area in late 2020) and Shippingport Brewing Company and Sally Forth Taproom (opened in 2021 by former Against the Grain head brewer Amelia Pillow). The experimental production, led by Pillow along with head brewer Suzanne Franklin, yields beers infused with flavors like roses and hibiscus or saffras root and turkey tail mushrooms. Collaborations with other area breweries are part of their DNA, and the results consistently push the envelope (one



Autumn Colors

(From left) See the leaves turn around the St. James Court Fountain in Old Louisville or at Hermitage Farm alongside owners Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown.





Inspired Shops

(From left) Browse Louisville boutique Hazel + Hunt for design-forward gifts and apparel printed in Kentucky. Stop by Mahonia for an unparalleled array of plants, pots, and other garden goods.



example, *Bière de Printemps* created with Monnik Beer Co., features foraged magnolia flowers and wild grapevines).

For all that headiness, however, Louisville's beer culture is still friendly and welcoming. Sally Forth's affordable lunch menus and trivia nights are designed to engage the whole community. Back at Gravely, as I sampled a funky, vaguely weedy West Coast IPA called Kick Drum, the clientele even included at least one snoozing preschooler. If she could hang out with the beer-geek crowd, we were confident that we could too.

DISCOVERY 3

Art Is Everywhere

About halfway through our trip, I had the realization that,

without ever setting foot in a traditional museum or gallery space, Mom and I had still managed to take in dozens of world-class works—from sculptures and video art to multimedia installations and paintings galore, including many skillfully applied to the sides of buildings and alleyway walls. Even our hotel had carved out a small gallery space just beyond the lobby. No doubt, the 21c Museum Hotel, with its robust on-site contemporary art collection and in-your-face, 30-foot gilded *David* (inspired by *Michelangelo*) by Serkan Ozkaya keeping watch over the corner of West Main and Seventh Streets, deserves a bit of the credit for the creative atmosphere. Mom and I ducked into the hotel during a morning downpour and found

ourselves entranced by the “What Lies Beneath” exhibition presented in association with the 2021 Louisville Photo Biennial. At Rabbit Hole distillery in hip NuLu (aka The East Market District), an impressive assortment of activist-minded works by visionary artists like Glenn Kaino, Jeremy Dean, and Keltie Ferris brings a layer of complexity to the typical distillery tour and helps draw links between maker communities across media, from the studio to the still. The more hands—

on aspect of art is highlighted around the corner at houseplant hub Mahonia, where a curated selection of beautiful yet functional items like clay vessels and screen printed textiles builds bridges between design and the everyday. In the back of the shop, a DIY terrarium bar with a wall-spanning array of crystals, feathers, seashells, mosses, gravels, and sands in every color of the rainbow provides a low-stakes opportunity for shoppers to nurture their own creative instincts.

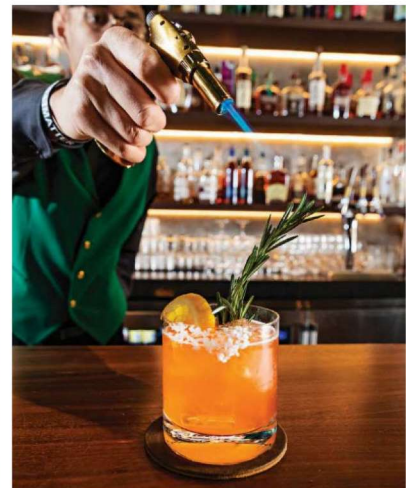
DISCOVERY 4**The Spirits Scene Is Always Reinventing Itself Here**

Fact: There are few (if any) better ways to spend a crisp fall afternoon in Louisville than meandering through one of the city's several bourbon distilleries, trailing behind

your guide like an obedient duckling, absorbing stray facts about the production process. Breathing in the yeasty, hot-apple-cider smell of the fermentation tanks as vast vats of distillers' beer—the mixture used to make spirits—bubble around you is a surprisingly cozy experience. All of this is heightened

by the toasty temperature that the spaces create. Fortunately, there is a distillery for practically every taste here, whether we're talking about specific brands of bourbon or the entertaining extras (like watching an empty bourbon barrel be set aflame to season it at Old Forester or the chocolate

pairings at Angel's Envy's tastings). And as interest grows, the industry does, too, with smaller labels, like the family-run Brough Brothers Distillery in Park Hill—the first Black-owned microdistillery in Kentucky—entering the arena and older brands expanding their offerings to cater to the demand for experiential bourbon tourism. Our favorite in-town option was at Rabbit Hole, thanks to the sleekly modern facility, a specialty cocktail (our tour had an old-fashioned) served on arrival, and the beginner-friendly tasting sessions, which are conducted at the Overlook, Rabbit Hole's chic penthouse-level tasting room with floor-to-ceiling windows providing views of the neighborhood's rooftops and church spires. (Plus, the gift shop has design-forward merchandise ranging from ceramic flasks to art books alongside branded

**Seasonal Sights**

(From left) Admire the horses on a visit to Hermitage Farm. Then relax with a cocktail at The Wild Swann, the restaurant and bar at The Grady Hotel. Check out the historic homes of Old Louisville.



T-shirts and beanies.) By next spring, the vistas should include the Hotel Genevieve, a 122-room property from the Bunkhouse Group that will share an art garden with the distillery.

“The bourbon-tourism industry is booming, pure and simple,” notes Nicole Stipp, cofounder of both Louisville’s whiskey-focused Trouble Bar and Matson & Gilman, a concierge service for creative tours, events, and excursions within Louisville and along the larger Kentucky Bourbon Trail. “Every distillery is selling out tours, and if you haven’t booked your visit two to three months ahead of time, it’s a toss-up whether you’ll be able to see what you want,” Stipp says. Not scheduling that far out? Don’t worry. Persistence can pay off, and cancellations can open up at previously sold-out venues, as I discovered in a spontaneous midnight booking spree in the middle of our trip. Plus, that demand helps foster an industry tone that is more convivial than cutthroat. “Our favorite thing about working in bourbon and bourbon tourism is the sense of family in the business community,” explains Kaitlyn Soligan, cofounder (with Stipp) of both Trouble Bar and Matson & Gilman. “For such a huge industry, it’s a small town. Everyone knows everyone else and supports them in a way that people often say is unusual for a space you would think would be more competitive.”

WORTHWHILE DETOURS

Have more than a long weekend to spend? Work in a day trip (or more) to one of these nearby spots

Earlier this year, **Castle & Key** added its first bottled in bond bourbon (after the requisite four-year wait) to its list of distinctive seasonal gins and ryes. Make the drive to Frankfort to roam the romantically aging grounds that once housed the Old Taylor Distillery—it’s part Disney castle and part 19th-century industrial relic. castleandkey.com

Bardstown’s **The Bar at Willett** raises the standard for on-site dining (historically in short supply for Kentucky Bourbon Trail distilleries) with its local cheeses, elegant small plates, and a pork chop made with sun-dried tomato and fennel pollen—reservations are required. thebaratwillett.com

The Jim Beam campus in Clermont just added The Kitchen Table restaurant and bar, along with the renewable energy-powered, innovation-focused Fred B. Noe Distillery. Book a tour, tasting, and mixology class to make a whole day of it. jimbeam.com

Featuring an on-site bed-and-breakfast, 47 & Poplar restaurant (opening soon), walking trails, and an outdoor event venue (the Amp), the family-run Dant Crossing in Gethsemane aims to be a destination for **Log Still Distillery** tours and quite a bit more. logstilldistillery.com or dantcrossing.com


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Spirits and Brews

(From top) Explore Kentucky bourbons at Angel’s Envy distillery. Don’t forget to try the flavorful tangerine sour on tap at Louisville’s Gravely Brewing Co.

No matter your plans, the chance to try some of the best bourbons around is open to all, thanks to a wealth of whiskey spots offering curated tasting flights. (Trouble Bar’s menu has options arranged by themes like baking notes, with bourbons selected by a prominent pastry pro, and another list handpicked by female distillers and distillery owners.) Speakeasy-style establishments feature inventive cocktail menus and impressive bottle lists.

On our final evening in Louisville,

Mom and I made our way to Hell or High Water, an underground space that can be accessed via a long staircase behind an unmarked door on a nondescript downtown side street. Nestled in our book-lined nook, I slowly sipped a complex bourbon drink tinged with cardamom and lemon and reflected on how this golden pleasure had first found its way into a bottle and then into my glass. We relaxed in our chairs, listening to a three-piece jazz band and picking out our favorites from the faded titles that surrounded us on the shelves.

When we finally journeyed back up the stairs and emerged into the quiet of the night, we were giggling like a couple of kids who had just cut school or made off with a stolen treasure map. Did we unearth every layer of Louisville’s unsung attributes in our too-short time in the city? Certainly not. But we did find just what we were looking for.

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