

POLO MATCHES & EQUINE HISTORY: AIKEN

Known For Its Devotion To Horses And Its High Involvement In Almost Every Equine Activity Known In The Horse Industry



Aiken, nestled between the Edisto and the Savannah rivers in the midlands of [South Carolina](#), may seem at first glance to be another sleepy Southern town drowsing beneath its spreading canopy of live oaks. But come a little closer. You'll discover that Aiken is devoted to, and designed for, horses.

In Aiken, stop signs are likely to say "Whoa!" and roads are left unpaved, to keep equine feet and legs healthy. A huge swath of land, just south of downtown Aiken, is dedicated to horses.

"In the Historic Horse District, just east of the museum, all the roads are still dirt," Lisa Hall, coordinator of the Aiken Thoroughbred Racing Hall of Fame and Museum, says. "The speed limit is 10 mph and the law says cars have to pull over to let horses pass. The horses have the right of way, and people really respect it. It's like stepping back into a different time. It's so quiet, so private. You'd never guess it was there."

Located in the Historic Horse District are four facilities each catering to a different variety of equine sport. The Aiken Training Track, celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2017, is a favorite with trainers of flat racers and has produced many champions. The Whitney Polo Fields are even older, hosting polo matches since 1882 every spring and fall. McGhee's Mile is a harness racing track where standardbreds train. The newest

facility, Bruce's Field at the Aiken Horse Park, hosts steeplechase and dressage events and training.

And that's just the tip of the horse industry in Aiken. "There's a little bit of every kind of equine activity, so no matter what kind of horses you like, you'll find them here," Lisa says. "Besides the polo, steeplechase, flat and harness racing, we have fox hunting, carriage driving, three-day eventing, even rodeos."



Aiken even has its own version of a Triple Crown, although one horse could never win this one. Every March, three different events - the Aiken Trials, the Aiken Spring Steeplechase and the annual Harness Racing meeting - showcase the wide variety of equine talent in the region.

To the west of the Racing Hall of Fame is another area dedicated to horses. "Hitchcock Woods is huge area of old growth longleaf pine," Lisa says. "Only horses and pedestrians are allowed on the trails. It's unusual to have such a large urban forest in the middle of a town." In fact, Hitchcock Woods covers an area more than twice as large as New York City's Central Park.

Lisa says that the Woods are used for drag hunts by several fox hunting groups that operate in Aiken. The sturdy timber fences found in the park are the legacy of Thomas Hitchcock, considered the father of American steeplechasing. The venerable Aiken Horse Show, celebrating its 101st year in 2017, is held at the Hitchcock show ring every spring.

Though Aiken began its history as a summer getaway for Charleston planters, after the Civil War became a winter refuge for wealthy families seeking a milder climate. "We call them the Winter Colony," Lisa says. "They built mansions, which they called cottages, most of which are still occupied over in the Historic Horse District."

The Racing Hall of Fame occupies the carriage house of one of those estates, set in the midst Hopelands Gardens, 15 serene acres of live oaks with a labyrinth, fountains and ponds filled with giant carp gifted to the city by international socialite Hope Iselin. Inside, the museum honors 40 champion flat and steeplechase horses that trained here in Aiken.



“They all were Eclipse Award winners,” Lisa says. “We have an exhibit on each one, as well as exhibits on some of the local trainers and riders that made a mark. There are also exhibits of some of our prominent local stables, including Dogwood, where Palace Malice, the winner of the 2013 Belmont Stakes, was trained, and a whole room of racing trophies from Craigwood Stables. One of our newer exhibits is what we call the Courtyard of Champions. We have the silks from each of the 40 champions on the stable doors... it’s open all the time, so even if people come when the museum itself is closed, they can get a taste of what we offer.”

Probably the best-known horse in the Aiken Hall of Fame is Kelso. “He was the most famous horse to ever train in Aiken,” Lisa says. “Kelso was named Horse of the Year for five years in a row... that just doesn’t happen anymore.”

Recently, the racing museum has teamed up with the Aiken Training Track a couple of blocks away to offer visitors up-close experiences with the local racing scene. Lisa Hall leads groups on tours of historic stables and barns where champions such as Swale, Pleasant Colony, Tom Fool and, of course, Kelso were trained. Brad Stauffer, president of Aiken Training Track and the head trainer at Legacy Stable, treats groups to a Backstretch Experience, taking them to watch his string of charges at their morning training, then explaining everything from what a racehorse eats to how a horse is handicapped.

“I even bring out one of our ponies and explain horse confirmation,” Stauffer says, “how a horse is made and how it got that way. Then I hand ‘em a horseshoe on their way out.”

Aiken has plenty of stalls available for visiting horses, Lisa says. “And the town is dotted with stables where you can take a lesson or sign up for a guided ride through the Historic Horse District or Hitchcock Woods, if you don’t have a horse of your own.”

Whether you just want to watch or get into the saddle yourself, Aiken is a great stop for horse lovers as well as those looking for some old-style Southern hospitality. Lisa Hall has lived here all her life. “It’s a great place to grow up,” she says. “And a great place to visit.”



Renee Wright

A graduate of Franconia College in Social Psychology, Renee has worked as Travel Editor for Charlotte Magazine and has written three travel guidebooks for Countryman Press among other writing assignments. She enjoys food and camping.



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