

Destinations & Diversions

Travel

10 great places to watch Thoroughbreds gallop by

To horse-racing fans, the first Saturday in May means one thing: the running of the Kentucky Derby at Louisville's Churchill Downs. Of course, horse racing is a year-round sport, and there's nothing quite like experiencing the thunder of charging Thoroughbreds live and up-close.

Marlene Smith-Baranzini, co-author of *Horse Racing Coast to Coast: A Traveler's Guide to the Sport of Kings*, shares a list of her favorite racing venues with **Tim Smight** for USA TODAY.

Churchill Downs

Louisville

"The Kentucky Derby is the biggest mint-julep-and-elegant-hat party of the year. The whole city of Louisville goes all-out, with a fireworks festival, theater and music events and plenty more," Smith-Baranzini says. Churchill Downs, redesigned and upgraded in recent years, still sports the iconic twin spires that rise atop the grandstand. Racing at the legendary track starts one week before the Derby and continues into early July. A fall meet runs from late October through Thanksgiving weekend. 502-636-4400; churchilldowns.com

Saratoga Race Course

Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

Located in upstate New York, Saratoga Springs is a charming historic cultural arts enclave known for its curative hot springs. For six weeks each summer — from late July through Labor Day — it is also one of the nation's premier horse-racing venues. "The track and its famous striped-umbrella picnic grounds sprawl within walking distance of tony eateries, Victorian inns and historic Revolutionary War landmarks," Smith-Baranzini says. 718-641-4700; nyra.com/index_saratoga.html

Lone Star Park

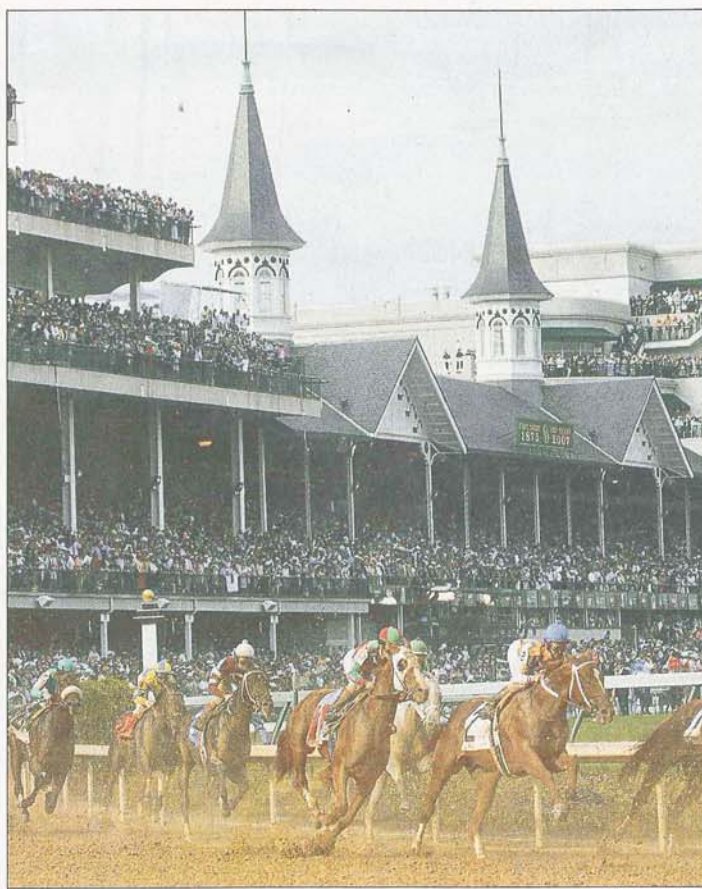
Grand Prairie, Texas

"Lone Star Park delivers big, Texas-style racing entertainment in this vast, relatively new facility west of Dallas," Smith-Baranzini says. "Along with live racing and a 1,200-seat simulcast center, Lone Star also serves up top musical events during night racing." This year's seasons run from April 10 to July 27 and Sept. 26 to Nov. 29. 972-263-7669; lonestarpark.com

Santa Anita Park

Arcadia, Calif.

Located just north of Los Angeles, 320-acre Santa Anita Park's oval has a backdrop of palm trees, red-tiled homes and the San Gabriel Mountains. "It's quintessential Southern California — right down to the lush paddock gardens that overflow with spectators before every race," Smith-Baranzini says. Racing opens each Dec. 26 and continues through late April. A fall meet runs from late September to early November. 626-574-7223; santaanita.com



At Churchill Downs: Street Sense, third from left, rounds the first turn at last year's Kentucky Derby. The horse won but was denied a shot at the Triple Crown when he lost at Pimlico two weeks later.

Arlington Park

Arlington Heights, Ill.

"Less than an hour northwest of Chicago by car, Arlington Park offers patrons a range of lovely interior and terrace dining facilities, as well as lively cabana-party areas and outdoor concerts on its grassy track-side lawns," Smith-Baranzini says. "Toss in the race-track's grand central stairway and its signature white fences, and Arlington Park stacks up as a handsome and sophisticated racing destination." This year's season starts today and runs through Sept. 21. 847-385-7500; arlingtonpark.com

Keeneland

Lexington, Ky.

In the heart of bluegrass country, Keeneland spells high tradition unlike any other racetrack in the USA. "Its impeccably kept grounds, with ivy-covered stone buildings and handsome spectator areas, are set among beautiful groves of oak and sycamore," Smith-Baranzini says. "The surrounding countryside is checked with some of the most prestigious horse farms in the country." Racing seasons are each April and October. 800-456-3412; keeneland.com



By Gary Hershorn, Reuters

At Pimlico: Curlin, left, crosses the finish line just ahead of Street Sense at last year's Preakness Stakes.

Pimlico Race Course

Baltimore

With Derby excitement still reverberating, the winning horse and jockey will have settled in at Pimlico to prepare for the Preakness Stakes (May 17), the second leg of the Triple Crown. "Pimlico, opened in 1870, is the second-oldest racetrack in America," Smith-Baranzini says. "It's a truly prestigious sporting facility with a storied history." One unique claim to fame: The U.S. House of Representatives adjourned one day in 1877 so members could attend a race. This year's season runs through June 7. 410-542-9400; pimlico.com

Gulfstream Park

Hallandale, Fla.

"Combine South Florida's warm winter climate, beaches, boutiques and nightlife with Gulfstream Park's Mediterranean-styled racetrack, and the tourist appeal borders on the endless," Smith-Baranzini says. Gulfstream, about 10 miles north of Miami Beach, hosts a winter meet (early January to mid-April). "The road to the Kentucky Derby often starts right here." 954-454-7000; gulfstreampark.com

Del Mar Thoroughbred Club

Del Mar, Calif.

"Just a mile inland from the ocean, the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club epitomizes the California dreamer's perfect race park," Smith-Baranzini says. "It's a lush, romantic, Spanish-styled paradise, vibrant with tropical flowers and soft pastel archways. The summer meet (July 16 to Sept. 3) is always a draw for big Hollywood names." Several appealing beach towns are located nearby, including La Jolla, San Clemente and Del Mar. "And of course, San Diego with all its attractions is right next door." 858-755-1141; dmtc.com

Oaklawn Park

Hot Springs, Ark.

With a season running from January into mid-April, Oaklawn offers plenty of Kentucky Derby-qualifying action. "Area residents stay and socialize over Oaklawn's popular dinner fare, now a track institution," Smith-Baranzini says. "The Hot Springs region boasts a vibrant arts community, restored Victorian resort hotels, scenic mountains and numerous lakes for fishing and boating." 800-625-5296; oaklawnpark.com



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