

## FLORIDA | OCALA



World Equestrian Center

ANDREW RYBACK PHOTOGRAPHY

# Giddyup and Go

Experience equestrian utopia  
in tranquil Ocala

By Lisa A. Beach

**D**UBBED THE HORSE CAPITAL of the world, central Florida's Marion County boasts more horses in residence than any other U.S. county with some 600 thoroughbred farms and one of a handful of thoroughbred centers in the world. Going behind the gates in the county seat of Ocala doesn't mean theme park gates— it means equestrian gates, where you can watch and ride gorgeous horses.

Whether you're a diehard equine aficionado or a casual adorer of horses, here's how you can see these beauties up close:

## HEAD TO THE HORSE LOVERS' MECCA

Immerse yourself in the equestrian lifestyle at the **World Equestrian Center (WEC)**, a stunning, \$800 million world-class facility in Ocala. The property opened in 2021 and sits on 378 acres, making it the largest equestrian complex in the U.S. WEC boasts 15 outdoor rings, including two outdoor arenas — the World Equestrian Center Stadium that seats 7,000 and the Grand Outdoor Arena that seats 1,500. These premiere venues showcase spectacular championship equestrians vying at events such as the annual Winter Spectacular Grand Prix

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Horse Country Carriage Company & Tours



Emma's Patisserie



Kimberden Farm

IF YOU GO



Big Hammock Brewery & Bites

If you love craft brews, pop into this downtown spot for a cold one and a meal. The brewpub dishes up Asian fare (think bao buns and ramen bowls) and pub standards along with a dozen taps featuring a mix of in-house brews and rotating guest craft beers.



Appleton Museum of Art

Add a cultural twist to your trip with a visit to this museum that boasts two stories of creativity to explore. Tip: The museum offers free admission on the first Saturday of the month. Rate is normally \$10 for adults. Children are admitted free.



WEC RV Park

If the elegant accommodations at WEC's The Equestrian Hotel aren't your vibe, you can reserve a spot at the 280-slip RV park, equipped with water, power and sewer hookups, a general store, gas station, shower facilities, dog park, Wi-Fi and laundromat. Don't miss Food Truck Fridays, with rotating themed menus, a beer and wine bar, games and live entertainment.



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that features VIP dining and viewing for an up-close experience. Plus, five indoor, climate-controlled arenas amp up the year-round slate of events ranging from equestrian shows to canine competitions to concerts. Bonus: Equestrian competitions are free to the public. Even if you're not someone who rides, you can enjoy the beauty, tradition and pageantry of the equestrian world, thanks to the expansive amenities at WEC. For starters, **The Equestrian Hotel** provides luxe accommodations, with many of the 248 well-appointed rooms offering spectacular views of the **Grand Outdoor Arena**. (You can actually watch champion riders competing in the arena as you sit on your bed.) The opulent

lobby sets the stage for this elegant hotel, with 20-foot ceilings, crystal chandeliers, larger-than-life gold-framed dog portraits adorning the walls and a floor-to-ceiling fireplace as a welcoming focal point. With eight on-site eateries at WEC — ranging from **Emma's Patisserie** for decadent, grab-and-go breakfast pastries to **Stirrups Restaurant** for a fine dining experience that overlooks the Grand Arena — you don't need to go far for meals, snacks and drinks. When you're ready to relax, the 7,000-square-foot **Calluna Spa** provides all the pampering you need during your stay. Kids will find plenty to do here, too, including splashing in the outdoor swimming pool, indulging in sweet treats at **Miss Tilly's Lollipops** and

visiting the adorable **Mr. Pickles & Sailor Bear Toy Shoppe**. **TAKE A HORSE FARM TOUR** If you want a more interactive, educational experience, get an insider's look at local horse farms. You can tour several working farms through **Farm Tours of Ocala**, which offers three-hour excursions by van and includes three stops. Tour owner Karen Grimes gives you a peek into what it's like behind the scenes at working farms, veterinarian offices and extravagant barns, tapping into her long history as a rider, trainer and competitor. Besides learning local history and equestrian trivia, you might get to feed a carrot to a

retired champion, witness foals getting their footing, pet a glorious stallion or feel horses thunder by on the track as they practice for speed and endurance. Or, for a completely different experience, try a quaint carriage tour of the 56-acre **Kimberden farm**, courtesy of **Horse Country Carriage Company & Tours**. As you tour this hunter and jumper training facility, driver Kimie will keep you entertained with facts, nostalgia, humor — and a little gossip, too. Along the way, you can interact with horses that greet you along the fence lines, perhaps feeding them carrots or peppermint treats. Afterward, stay and watch riders as they practice their skills and train their horses.