Discovering Saratoga Springs, New York

Saratoga Race Course is the oldest horse racing track in the U.S

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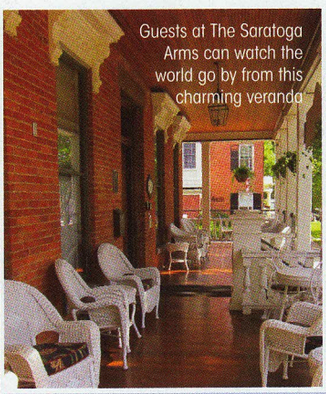
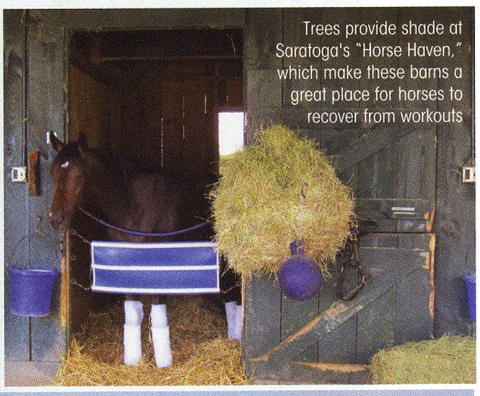
"You absolutely must spend a couple of days in Saratoga Springs," my former college roommate implored. "It's just so wonderful. We drive over from Rochester a couple times a year." Jacque continued, "I promise. You'll love it."

I might have ignored this suggestion, but this is the same person who saved my skin (literally) many years ago when she recommended I use sunscreen during spring break in Florida. Ever since then I've regarded her as somewhat of a sage.

Located 30 miles north of Albany, Saratoga is a small city in upstate New York best known as the home of the Saratoga Race Course — America's oldest horse racing track. Like Del Mar, the racing season here means party time and fancy hats for about six weeks

Elegant parlors are the hallmark of The Saratoga Arms


Guests at The Saratoga Arms can watch the world go by from this charming veranda


Trees provide shade at Saratoga's "Horse Haven," which make these barns a great place for horses to recover from workouts

Saratoga Race Course, "the other great summer track," has a capacity of 80,000 people

in the summer. The Travers Stakes — Saratoga's marquee event — is the nation's oldest three-year old thoroughbred race. Unlike Del Mar, many fans walk to the track past beautiful 19th-century homes facing leafy tree-lined streets. *(www.saratoga.com/race-track)*

In fact, I was so taken with Saratoga's charm that I hardly minded that the races weren't on during my stay. I did, however, spend some time at the National Museum of Racing across the street from the track. Their racing simulator, a mechanical horse synchronized to move with jockey-cam videos, gave me a taste of the heart-pounding thrill experienced by pro riders. *(www.racingmuseum.org)*

It was water, not horses, that attracted Saratoga's first summer visitors. The healing powers of the natural mineral springs were established in the early 19th century, making this America's first authentic spa. In 1935, Governor Franklin Roosevelt presided over the dedication of the Roosevelt Bath House.

Today the Roosevelt Baths & Spa retains its historic appearance and continues to provide natural mineral water for drinking and soaking, while offering state-of-the-art treatments and therapies. I wasn't surprised to learn that up to 200 people a day enjoy services and soaks in the spa's 42 treatment rooms. *(www.rooseveltbathsandspa.com)*

Also located in Spa State Park, the Saratoga Performing Arts Center is the cultural hub of upstate New York and surrounding area. SPAC presents chamber music, opera, and jazz, rock and pop concerts and is the summer home of the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New York City Ballet. *(www.spac.org)*

What else did I love about this destination? The Saratoga Arms, a boutique hotel where I lingered over breakfast and chatted with owner Kathleen Smith. Her immaculate red brick inn with a picturesque veranda dates from 1870 and includes elegant parlors as well as 31 spacious guest rooms. I coveted the adorable teapots she purchased at a flea market in New Hampshire and appreciated the period furnishings, downtown location, and friendliness of the staff. *(www.saratogaarms.com)*

Before leaving Saratoga Springs, I took a final walk around town — stopping just long enough to call Jacque and thank her for her sage advice. ELIZABETH HANSEN

Beautiful 19th-century mansions line the streets of Saratoga Springs, New York

www.ranchandcoast.com

The two best summer thoroughbred racetracks in America?

That's easy — Saratoga and Del Mar. Ah, but the "best" summer thoroughbred racetrack in America? Now that's hard. Both tracks have wonderful, high-line racing with some of the best horses, jockeys, and trainers in the world strutting their stuff. Both are gorgeous escapes — to the mountains or the shore — from the year-round grinds of the big cities of New York and Los Angeles. Both offer short-season "boutique" meets that automatically make them special. And both have tried-and-true traditions that flow perfectly with who — and where — they are.

But let's be Solomonesque and try to provide an answer to the question:

If you like horse racing, nothing but horse racing — we're talking blinkers-on, early-in-the-morning-'til-late-at-night, can't get enough, 12 races a day are good, if we can't have seven-days-a-week we'll take six — then Saratoga is your place.

Hey, no surprise, they're New Yorkers.

However, if you love horse racing, but you've also got other things that tickle your fancy — like lawn chairs and tank tops trackside, a late first post so you can get in a round on the links or an extra snore in the sack, handicapping to the sounds of the surf breaking, a little boogie with the band after the last race, taking off a couple of days for other kinds of horsing around — then Del Mar is where you want to hang.

Hey, no surprise, they're Californians.

So the best summer thoroughbred racetrack in America is obviously obvious. And we're willing to bet YOU know which one it is.

MAC MCBRIDE, DEL MAR THOROUGHBRED CLUB