

# The Equestrian Hotel

**A luxe property in the middle of Florida horse country is a surprising find for equine enthusiasts.**

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Photography by Ethan Tweed

**When you picture a sojourn in horse country, your thoughts probably turn to Kentucky—or maybe Virginia. But Ocala, home to more than 400 thoroughbred farms and training centers, is actually considered the “Horse Capital of the World.” A new hotel right in the heart of it is bringing equine-inspired luxury to northern Florida, and it’s a must-stay if you’re a rider, trainer, or even just an aficionado of these majestic creatures.**



**Opened in 2021, The Equestrian Hotel is a site to behold. The property is situated on the grounds of the World Equestrian Center (WEC), the largest equestrian complex in the U.S. (The center is owned by the Roberts family, who maintain a similar facility in Ohio.) Currently spread out over 378 acres, with 16 outdoor competition rings, indoor arenas, 25 stables and stalls for up to 3,000 horses, WEC's future expansion plans include more training facilities and another hotel.**

Stepping into the hotel's grand lobby is the first sign of the opulence you'll encounter during your stay. Twenty-foot ceilings, stately columns, and crown molding are joined by mahogany leather and zebra skin wingback chairs and sofas, Swarovski crystal chandeliers, Italian marble floors, and a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace; gilded-framed portraits of dogs hang on all four walls.

There are clever equestrian touches throughout, including in the 248 accommodations, which are awash in stark white and neutral tones and feature original equine artwork, pillows with leather bridle buckles, and do not disturb signs announcing "riders at rest." Many rooms face the Grand Arena, giving guests a front-row seat daily for riders tackling the jumping course. Luxe touches include European linens, marble bathrooms with frameless showers, and a separate living and dining area.

Dining concepts also give a nod to the hotel's location. Stirrups is the hotel's fine dining restaurant, where columns, high ceilings, and canine artwork reflect that of the grand lobby, and tables and white leather wingback chairs face the Grand Arena. The menu is a mélange of prime steaks, Floridian seafood, and Southern specialties. Sip a High Horse, which shakes gin with lemon, cherry liqueur, and Crème de Violette, while slurping a platter of chilled oysters with pineapple-ginger mignonette and roe-topped smoked trout dip spread on Appalachian fry bread.



Sharing pan-seared snapper with duck fat potato pavé and chow-chow along with a bone-in ribeye is the perfect way to sample the kitchen's surf and turf; creative sauce options including black garlic Bourbon butter and whiskey peppercorn will make you want to spoon all of them onto your plate. Sommelier Roland Micu deftly helps navigate the wine list, a deep dive of global favorites, coveted cult bottles, and rare finds, including 26 options by the glass. Ending the night with caramel-drizzled warm bread pudding with vanilla ice cream is a non-negotiable, especially since it arrives with an unexpected dollop of sour cream to lend a pleasing tanginess; pairing it with a flight of tawny Port or Madeira is perfection.

The Yellow Pony Pub has a more casual vibe, with a spacious outdoor patio and horseshoe-shaped bar complete with saddle seat barstools, mahogany trim, and riding crops hanging on the walls; you may see guests jodhpur-clad riders on break lunching on the gastropub fare. Though the atmosphere may be more casual, the menu is pretty serious, starting with crafty libations like a clarified milk punch that takes two days to prepare, a strawberry julep, and the Palomino, an apple-spiced whiskey sour with Maker's Mark Bourbon specifically produced for the WEC.

Ahi tuna bao buns with kimchi and togarashi are a fun shareable starter, and the succulent lobster roll eschews mayo for brown butter, served on homemade bread with cucumber-fennel slaw. Honey-dipped fried chicken is a perennial favorite, and tart kumquats are a surprising addition to citrus and berry crumble.

Adjacent to the lobby, Emma's Patisserie is overseen by executive pastry chef (and Food Network star) Yohann Le Bescond. Ridiculously flaky croissants, yeast donuts and muffins are the perfect start to the day, the delicate macarons and intricate petits gateaux precious take-home treats.

Though guests can't partake in any riding lessons or trail rides on the property since it's a training facility designed for athletes, there are plenty of other diversions to pass the time, like a 1,900-square-foot twenty-four-hour fitness center and 7,000-square-foot Calluna Spa. The bar at the zero-entry pool is fittingly called Horse to Water and serves refreshing tipples like the Rosemary Lavender Smash.



You can shop for fetching pieces of jewelry at Lugano Diamonds, or teddy bears, Breyer Horses, and private-label toys at Mr. Pickles & Sailor Bear Toy Shoppe. The Debonair Collection houses luxury brands like Cartier, Gucci, and Bottega Veneta, while A Sudden Impulse sells WEC-branded clothing and merchandise and competition apparel. Guests can also rent golf carts to explore the other boutiques and restaurants on the sprawling complex.

Time your stay on the weekend to coincide with the weekly Saturday night dinner-and-a-show Grand Prix Dining Experience, with a coveted table on Stirrups' terrace overlooking the Grand Arena. During a three-course dinner, you can sip Champagne while watching world-class athletes and graceful thoroughbreds navigate a series of challenging jumps; this Florida hotel truly immerses visitors in the equestrian lifestyle like none other.