

Robb Report

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Florida Opened the Largest Equestrian Center in the U.S.—Here's a Look Inside

More than a hotel, this 378-acre pony playground has Disney-sized ambitions.



It's a warm spring Sunday in Florida. The towel racks are stacked with white waffle knits and Jack Johnson coos on the speakers. But the hotel's kidney-shaped pool is completely empty and the bar is closed.

In the distance, faint neighs from the property's more than 2,000 Wi-Fi-enabled, climate-controlled stables signal where the guests are gathered. Welcome to Florida horse country's game changer, dubbed the World Equestrian Center (WEC). With 378 acres, it's now the largest equine facility in the U.S.



For years, scrubby Marion County and Ocala—an hour north of Orlando and 90 minutes west of Daytona Beach—was the backward ranch-hand of Florida tourism: beachless, mouse-free, and lacking the cosmopolitan panache of South Florida.

But this sleepy Central Florida town has recently emerged as the country's premier equestrian hub—over-taking (if just by sheer scope) its glitzier South Florida sibling Wellington. And unlike, say, Lexington, Kentucky, or Cheltenham in the U.K., Ocala's show grounds are multidisciplinary—hunt and jump, dressage, or breed shows, they got it all.

The property, which opened piecemeal beginning in December 2021 with the main arena, debuted a 248-room hotel last year from owner Mary Roberts. With seven restaurants, including the popular Yellow Pony Pub and Filo's Mexican Cantina, and 7,000-square-foot spa, the residence is also a large-scale hospitality endeavor. There are refreshingly no tropical motifs and nary a pelican, flamingo, or piece of wicker in sight. Instead, expect marble floors, oil portraits of dogs, and a big fireplace next to oversized sofas.



Another Florida anomaly: the hotel's European pastry shop, Emma's Patisserie, is the standout eatery.

"[Emma's] is the most profitable section of the entire facility," said Justin Garner, the hotel's director of hospitality.

While many hoteliers might center their properties around a lake or a pool, Roberts gave WEC's top rooms a view of the dirt-floored grand arena, which encompasses a jumping stadium meticulously festooned with ferns, flowers, waterfalls, and ponds.



But that's eye-candy for its peculiar breed of well-heeled guests.

Private jets arrivals rush to the lunging area to chat with leather makers selling custom saddles for \$30,000. Others come for Clydesdale carriage weddings. There are shops for Haala denim and Parlanti boots.

And for the ponies (perhaps the hotel's most pampered guests), there's a veterinary hospital, an in-house chiropractor, a dedicated grass schooling area, turn out paddocks, an RV park, and an arena sponsored by Lugano diamonds, who also run an elegant jewelry boutique inside the hotel.

For equestrian kids, there's Mr. Pickles Toy store where you can stock up on collectible Breyer figurines, plush ponies, and lacquered rocking horses.



Saturday night's mean glamorous jumping contests, where attendees from England, Argentina, and Italy come dressed to the nines to sip gin and Champagne as riders compete for six-figure prizes. Wellington may still be the major polo hub, but Ocala has secured its role as *the* place to watch jumping contests.

Those jumping events run in winter, from January to late March, but the center stays busy all season, with various riding classes and workshops, Kentucky Derby hat parties, food truck Fridays, farmer's markets, 5K races, pancake breakfasts, festivals, expos, and even late night braiding sessions in the stables. The horse world may be nomadic, but the party runs all year long in Ocala.

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But Roberts doesn't seem satisfied with merely being the world's biggest and best. By 2024, the site will be expanded with a second hotel, a hospital for humans, a sixth jumping arena, and the center's very own Whole Foods, not to mention additional restaurants and retail areas.

"Seeing WEC today is a bit like seeing Disney World in 1965," said Garner. "It's only the beginning of a very big thing."