The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America
RICK'S ROADS
Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What

BLOG POST: 2025.10.15
Churchill Downs, Louisville KY



This visit far exceeded expectations. I highly recommend taking a couple of tours. Here's how the day went, using my usually Pad journal entries to steer the tale:

9:15 - Arrived at the Kentucky Derby Museum in Louisville. Gorgeous day.
Checked in and set about touring the museum. It's pretty cool. For a casual fan like me, it was quite interesting. People who are really into the sport might find it a bit on the basic side, but screw 'em.





Secretariat is one of my favorite all-time athletes, so I spent extra time in the extensive exhibit dedicated to him.

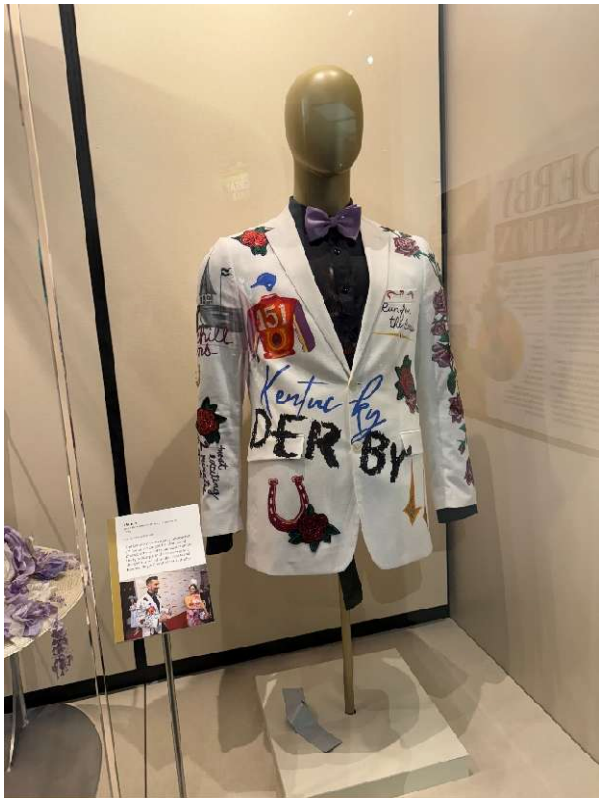
His track record here still stands, as do the ones he set at the Preakness and at the Belmont Stakes in his Triple Crown season.







After he died, medical examiners discovered that Secretariat's heart weighed 22 pounds, about 150% more than a typical thoroughbred heart would weigh. Imagine the boost to the cardiovascular system, pumping 2.5 times as much oxygen through those formidable muscles. This horse was absolutely amazing.





And, of course, there was another good-sized exhibit about the outrageous fashion at the Kentucky Derby.

10:10 movie: “The Greatest Race” (18:00). A 360° immersive movie taking us briefly through the birth and upbringing of thoroughbreds, then leaping forward to the Derby in their 3rd year.

I liked the movie a lot. They played up the Derby quite well: both its spectacle and its competition. They finished it with Sovereignty winning the ‘25 race. I imagine they change those last few minutes each year.







11:30 - “Barns & Backsides Tour” (1 hour+). Steve was our (7 of us) guide, in a loud, 4-seat “golf” cart. In the tunnels, it sounded like a WW1 tank. As Steve said, “We’re not sneaking up on anybody.”

We stopped at the area where the official starting gate is kept. Steve took my picture standing in Gate 17, which is the gate number that no horse has ever won the Derby from (above).



Then he took us out to the “backside” where the barns and stables and workers’ quarters are. When you think about the Kentucky Derby, you might think of glitz and glamour, but this area is anything but.

The horse stalls are about 12’ x 14’, with concrete walls. Boring and bare-bones. The owners pay just $7.50 a day to house their animals there. No AC in summer, no heat in the colder months. (No horses are kept on property during the actual winter months.)

We got to see a farrier finishing a shoe job on a horse, and then Steve walked over to a trainer named Eric if he would bring “him” out. In a few minutes, we were introduced to Mystik Dan, the 2024 Derby winner!

We could pet him, feed him candy, and just generally dig his awesomeness. He loves people and loves mugging for the camera, right down to the cocked ankle pose. He was excellent!



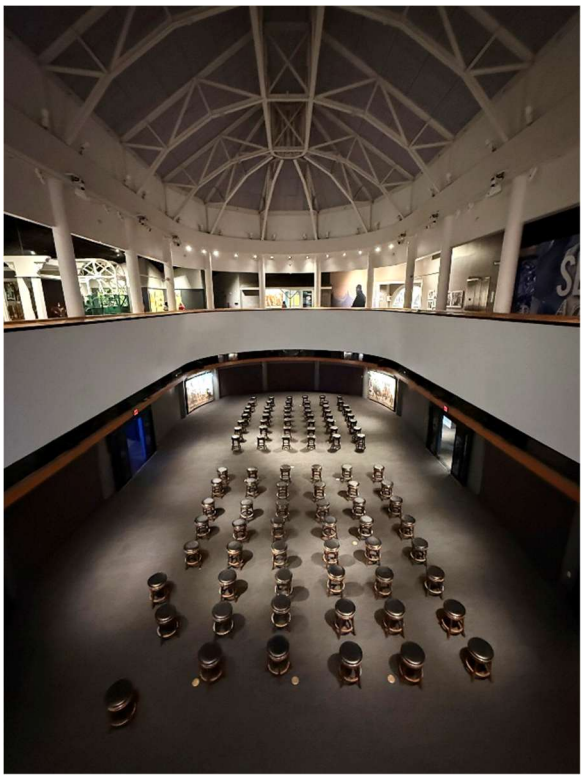
And he lives in one of those crappy bare-bones cells (#17, ironically). The Derby Champ!

And Eric lives in the upstairs attic. Dayummm, no luxury in this Backside world.

We got great views of the far side of the track — both dirt and turf — including the long straightaway for certain distances.

One very fortuitous thing for Churchill Downs was pointed out to us. The property sits on top of a large aquifer. They pour and spray 100,000 gallons of water per day on that track (which, I was told later, goes 25-40 feet deep), and it seeps through all that sand/silt/clay mixture and back down into the aquifer. It is a self-refilling cycle. How handy is that??

When the tour was over, I went back up to the Great Hall to see if I could get a wide angle shot of the theater before the movie started playing at 1:10. From the upstairs balcony, the rows of stools looked too messy for my liking, so I went down to tidy the place up a bit. Anything for a better pic, right?



I straightened out the few rogues so the picture would look better, and I was getting ready to walk back upstairs, when the screen came on and the credits and the opening display of winners names. I was the only one in the theater. I thought that was pretty cool, and then all the doors shut. I was getting a private show! How about that??

Like I said, I liked the movie, so I was happy to see it again.





2:00 - “Superstars Tour” (90 minutes). Our young guide, Douglass Churchill Friday (a UK grad with a degree in History) took us through inner areas of Churchill Downs, some public, some more exclusive.

He took us through the Paddock (above), where the horses are paraded before being led out onto the track.

Then Doug took us inside the facility. The place is huge, but on Derby Day, it would be packed in here. There were souvenir stores (of course) and various food and drink booths, all of which were named after past Derby winners: “Spend A Buck” and “I’ll Have Another” both sold beer and booze.

Then we got to see the huge murals.



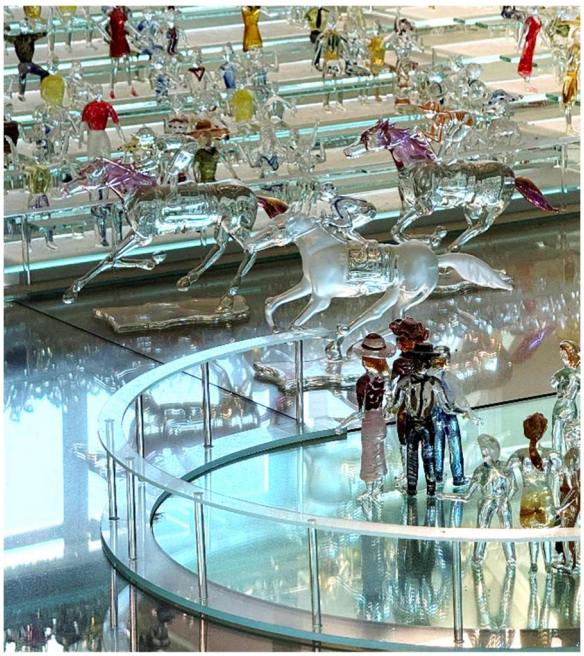
Framed and spanning at least 30 feet in width, they depicted famous people, horses, and moments in Kentucky Derby history.

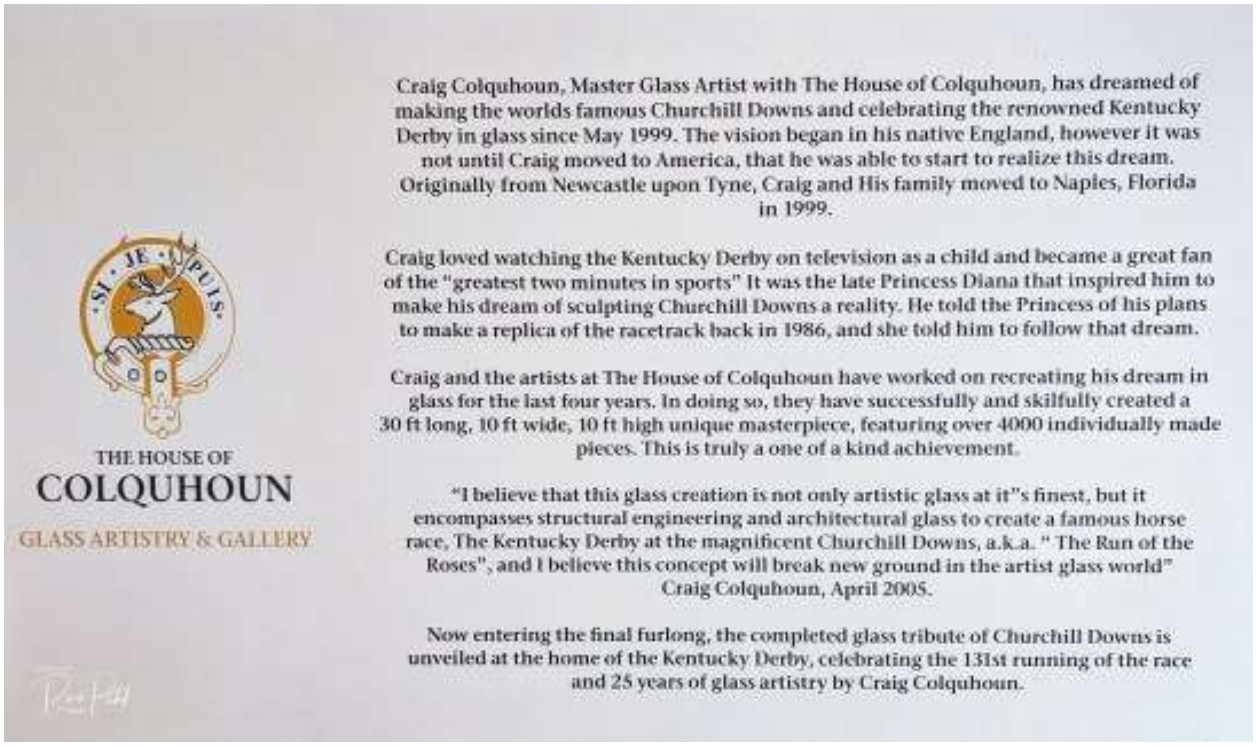


Doug took us up the elevator to the suite level. The first sight that we saw was the glass model. This thing was nuts!









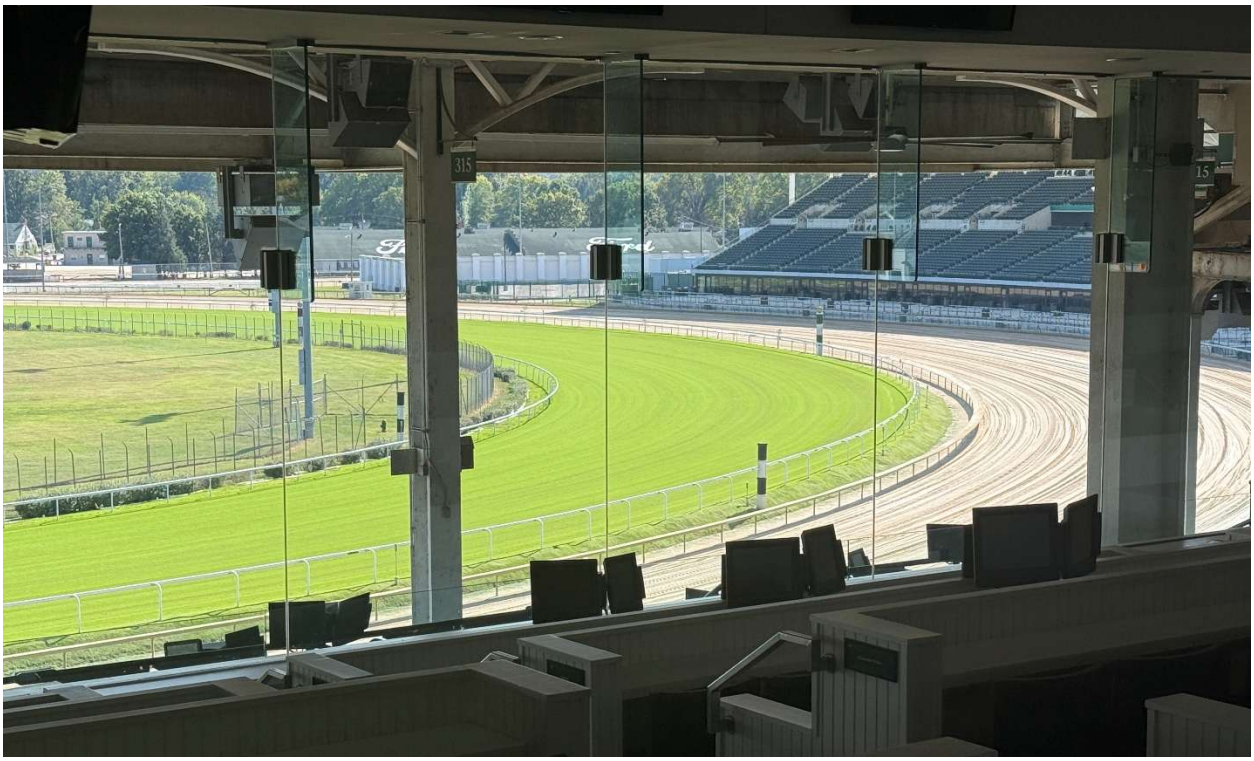
I can see why they don't leave this masterpiece downstairs where the rabble and riff-raff could cause it harm.



Next stop were the lounges, where the well-to-do get to hang out and mingle. Of all the famous people who frequent the Derby, the one whose name was dropped by three different guides/employees was Tom Brady.

Really? I know he's the GOAT and all, but it was just weird hearing a guide say, "And this was where Tom Brady watched the race from."

It was surprising how little of the track one could actually see from these lounges (which are restaurants and bars as well). There's no way to see the backstretch, or most of the final turn. I'll bet Tom Brady just watched the TVs.

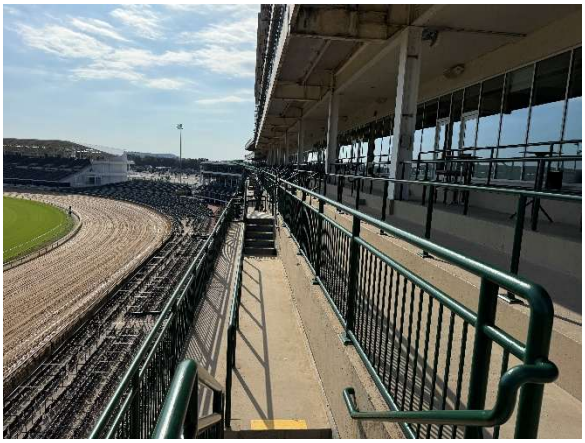




We did not get to see the most famous and lavish of these hangouts, called Millionaire's Row, because some "private event" was being set up. This rankled most of us some, but overall, it was a good tour.

We ended by going out onto the outdoor balconies. Now, here is where you go if you want to see the maximum amount of the race. Inside, if you're along the glass, you'll see about the same, but even just a few feet back, that view diminishes by a lot.



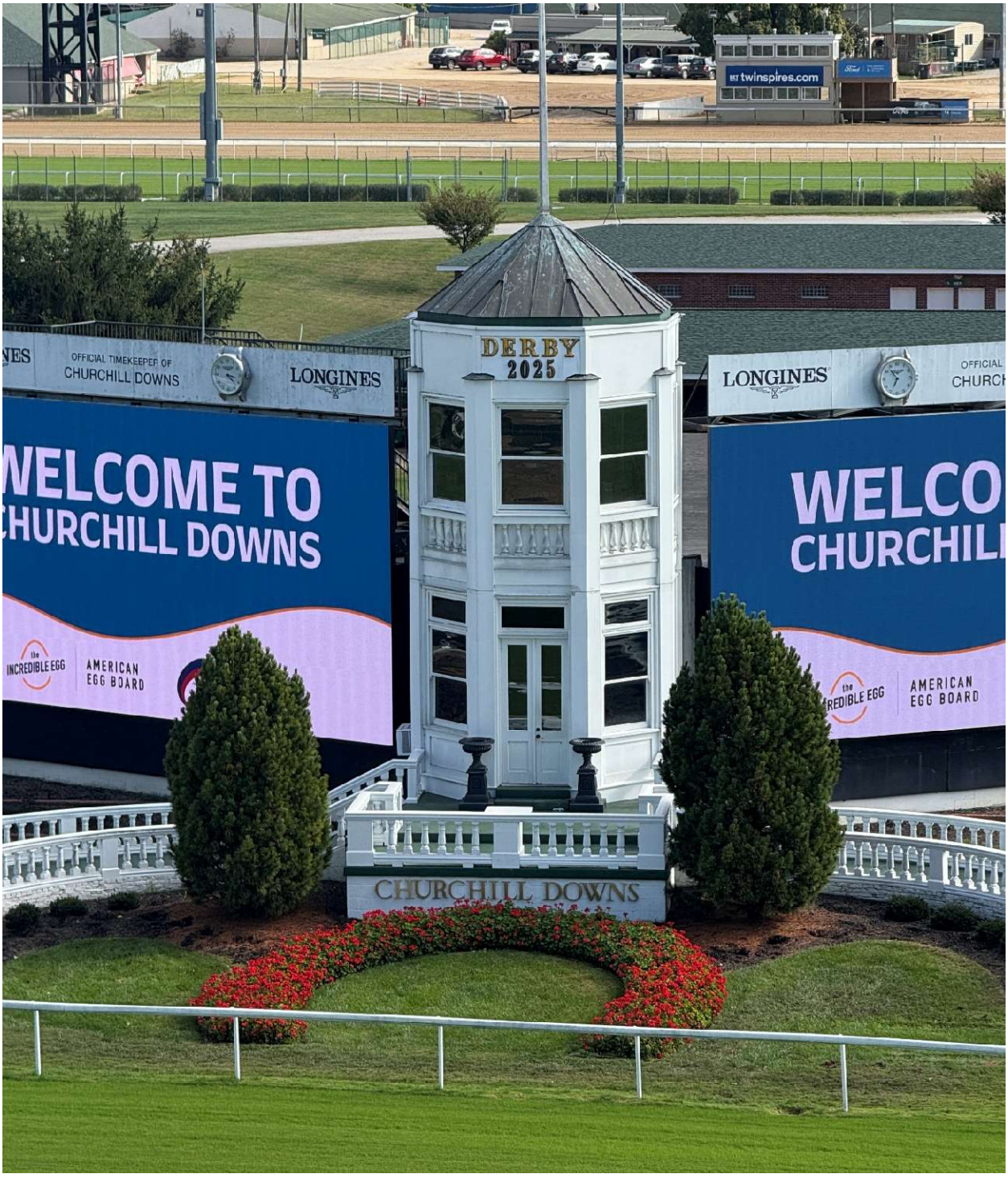


Out here in the fresh air, there are no posts or people blocking your view, but it's standees only, no seats, and I have to imagine the spots are first-grab-first-have.

We also got excellent views of the two iconic Twin Spires that crown the roof of the grandstand. The spires are 12 feet wide, 134 feet from center to center and rise 55 feet from the grandstand's roofline to the top of the adorning king posts.



The tours turned a $68 entry fee into a $98 day, but they were well worth it. If you go, don't cheat yourself.





And, yes, that is a grass racing track inside the classic dirt oval.