Aiken, SC ₪ An Ideal Equine Community

If you were asked to imagine the ideal equestrian community, you might dream up a place a bit like Aiken, South Carolina. Aiken is a city with a country atmosphere, a quiet place with a cosmopolitan feel, where horses are not just allowed, but welcomed. The street signs sport images of horse heads, life-sized, painted horse statues adorn city sidewalks and plazas and it is not uncommon to see people in riding clothes having lunch at one of the city's outdoor eateries. The historic horse district downtown is even unpaved, keeping the streets horse and hoof friendly!

Horse people discovered Aiken near the end of the 19th century, when the mild winter climate earned the city a reputation for curing tuberculosis. It was not long before healthy Northerners realized that the environment was equally congenial for outdoor sports.

Winters were sunny and temperate, the sandy soil never froze and horses and people alike found the atmosphere invigorating. Members of New York, Boston and Chicago society initially came down in the winter to stay at one of the luxurious hotels that catered to them. Many loved Aiken so much they built their own "cottages" and stables so they could spend an entire season. By the second decade of the 20th century, the Winter Colony was an established Aiken feature.

The Winter Colonists were an active group. They fox hunted, golfed, played polo and enjoyed driving their carriages at great speed down the city's broad, tree-lined boulevards or through narrow, twisting trails in Aiken's vast woods. The city became a winter playground for well-known families with names like Hitchcock, Whitney, Vanderbilt and Clark, and many of the traditions these families started survive today.
For instance, William C. Whitney, who was Secretary of the Navy under Grover Cleveland, donated Whitney Polo Field to the city in 1900. This year, the field celebrates its 125th anniversary and is the oldest polo field in continuous use in the country. In 1916, the Hitchcock family established the annual Aiken Horse Show and started the Aiken Hounds, a drag hunt in the Hitchcock Woods. Both traditions thrive today. A few decades later, Singer Sewing Machine heir Ambrose Clark laid out the Aiken Steeplechase course, now Ford Conger Field. The Aiken Steeplechase Association is going strong, boasting both a spring and a fall meet. The Aiken Training Track (established in 1941) is still the winter training ground for many of America’s future racehorse champions. The heart of Aiken is the Hitchcock Woods, a 2,200-acre nature preserve just blocks from the city’s center. The Woods, owned by the Hitchcock Foundation, are laced with over 65 miles of sandy trails. Walkers, riders and carriages are welcome at all times, but motorized vehicles are only allowed during the Memorial Horse Show and for the annual fund raiser at the Tea Cottage.

Although some might consider the era of the Winter Colony to be Aiken’s Golden Age, the city has been experiencing a spectacular renaissance in the 21st century. This is especially true among members of the equestrian set, who have been happily rediscovering Aiken and all it has to offer.
Horsemen are coming to Aiken to play polo: the area boasts at least eight clubs and over 40 polo fields. They are coming to event: there are five event facilities with regular competitions. Some are coming to hunt: with five area hunts, enthusiasts can go out every day of the week. Others are coming to drive their carriages: the Aiken Driving Club holds numerous outings, and there is even an annual Advanced Level Combined Driving Event. Over and again, horsemen tell the same story. They come to Aiken to compete or to visit, but they love the place so much, they end up buying property and moving in. Aiken has earned such a buzz in the equestrian community that it sometimes seems as if every horse person in the country is hoping to buy property in the county.

Over the last decade, as horse people moved to Aiken in large numbers, those already established in the city worried that the influx of newcomers might damage the charm and character that "makes Aiken, Aiken." Although the community has certainly grown, the growth has been managed in such a way that the area is becoming more, rather than less, horse-friendly. One of the most important reasons that Aiken’s growth has actually improved the equestrian environment is the rise of the equestrian community, a type of development created for horsemen, with their particular needs at heart.

Although not an exclusively Aiken phenomenon, equestrian developments have definitely caught on here. Each equestrian community in Aiken is different, and each has its own particular way of encouraging and facilitating the equestrian lifestyle. Those designed for polo players have their own practice and tournament fields. Those built for event riders have their own event courses, practice areas and shaded, hilly gallops. There are communities built with the dressage rider’s needs at heart, with covered Grand Prix arenas and barns with oversized stalls. Foxhunters and trail riders will find many communities to please them, since most of the developments in Aiken offer miles of trails, many have lovely natural fences in their woods, and several even play host to one or more of Aiken’s hunts.
Aiken’s equestrian developments also cater to all types of horse lovers, from those who have one horse that they enjoy on the weekends to serious professional trainers.

For instance, some developments feature fully staffed community barns, complete with grooms, trainers and lesson programs. Others are created with large lots, where full-time horsemen can design and build their own facilities. Some developments offer extensive property maintenance and supervision, making them ideal for people who come to Aiken just for the winter. Others afford their residents as much privacy and autonomy as they desire. The one thing all the communities have in common is that their goal is to keep Aiken a horse-friendly place. In an equestrian community, horses will always have the right of way, often both literally and figuratively!

In addition to preserving space for horse activities, Aiken’s equestrian developments have also raised the city’s profile in the horse world. A number of Olympic riders spend time in Aiken, and several have bought property in one of Aiken’s developments. These world-class equestrians are attracted to Aiken for the same reasons as other horse lovers: Aiken is a place where horses and horsemen will always feel welcome.

Aiken may very well be a horseman’s paradise, but the city also offers a great deal more. The charming downtown has numerous shops, boutiques and restaurants. There are movies, a thriving arts community, museums, a top-notch hospital and a four-year university. The business community is bustling. State capital Columbia is about an hour’s drive away. If you drive a bit more than two hours, you can visit Atlanta, Charlotte or Charleston. Not that you will want to leave once you are here. Aiken has so much to do and the city itself is so warm and welcoming, there seems little reason to go elsewhere. Aiken has wonderful climate, horses, history, culture and a strong sense of community. Who could ask for more?

Excerpts from feature editorial - farmandranch.com