

# Horsing Around

## Enjoying old-school horsepower in South Boston

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*Alice Coppa photos; Molasses Grill courtesy Karen Schopen*

South Boston, Virginia, is known for auto racing, but my friend Alice and I were captivated by the original kind of horsepower when we moseyed on over to **Shangrila Equestrian Retreat** (434-517-0888 or shangrilaretreat.us), a family-run, outdoorsy destination that offers trail riding by day and campfires by night, not to mention the entertainment provided by owners Gary and Julie Holmes' adorable 1-year-old son, Dillon. Alice and I had some trepidation about riding horses for the first time in decades, but Gary and his friendly assistant, Jaime, saddled us on two fabulous Tennessee Walking Horses and escorted us on an invigorating ride through part of their massive trail network.

## Stay

Alice and I had the **Old Home Place**, a quaint farmhouse, to ourselves for our overnight stay. Built in 1801 and crisply painted with a sweet front porch, the three-bedroom, one-bath house boasts a kitchen, a washing machine and a dryer, handy for longer stays. It overlooks pastures near the duck pond and barns. Other overnight options include an adorable log cabin nestled in the woods that's furnished with a queen bed and twin beds in the loft. For larger groups, renovations are under way at the Packhouse to sleep a crowd dormitory-style in addition to the



completed efficiency with kitchenette. The Holmes family couldn't be more friendly, and they'll cater to just about anyone's needs — with more than 500 acres, they even let some groups camp on the property.



## Eat

If you're staying at Shangrila, meals are eaten at the rustic **Packhouse** — in our case, wine, steaks, salad and baked potatoes for dinner, with cheesecake for dessert. Small groups, including me and Alice, are sometimes treated to a full Southern breakfast at Julie and Gary's lovely log home, a short walk from our digs. If the timing of your visit allows it, stopping for lunch on the way in as we did

in nearby Halifax at **Molasses Grill** (434-476-6265 or molassesgrill.com) fortifies you for the riding to come. It's not typical given the relaxed vibe and all-inclusive nature of Shangrila, but one could sneak out to **Bistro 1888** (434-572-1888 or bistro1888.com) in South Boston for an upscale dinner or drinks and dessert.

## Discover

The area is known for its speedways, with **Virginia International Raceway** (434-822-7700 or virclub.com) 20 miles away and **South Boston Speedway** (434-572-4947 or southbostonspeedway.com) right there, so motorsports enthusiasts can catch the action on weekends. Not being racing fans, Alice and I swung by **The Prizery** (434-572-8339 or prizery.com), a former tobacco warehouse that is the region's cultural center, with a theater, art exhibitions and wacky tidbits about South



Boston in its heyday, back when tobacco was king and tobacco-leaf skirts were all the rage. Then we drove over to **Berry Hill Resort** (434-517-7000 or berryhillonline.com). It's a stunning piece of Greek revival architecture in the middle of nowhere. Driving up the long entrance, we felt like we were in a scene from *Gone With the Wind*.



## Experience

Alice had no trouble rambling along the narrow, winding paths on Mountain Man. I, on the other hand, breathed easier when we emerged from the woods onto wider wagon trails, since I kept forgetting that I was in charge of my horse, BC (Before Crutches?), who liked to bump my knees into trees to avoid stepping in mud. I was amazed at how real our riding was — the horses didn't just follow the one ahead blindly — and in the afterglow of our success, Gary drove us to one of his

neighboring farms to put our horses out to pasture. The terrain was beautiful, rolling hills edged by woods. Seeing so many impressive Percherons and quarter horses gallop towards us to investigate and nuzzle was both thrilling and sweet.



## Don't Miss

Forget the speedways; you've seen cars before, but you have never seen as compelling a compilation of bizarre sculpture and normal farm animals as you will at **Bob Cage's Sculpture Farm** (just off Route 360 at Shanti Road and Cage Trail). Painted and welded stairways, farm equipment, creepy dummies, and more sprout haphazardly in a fenced field amid the nonplussed goats. Sometimes the finished product approaches art; other times it's recycling gone awry.