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Forging a new business path

Mint Julep Tours offers trips on Kentucky's Bourbon Trail

By Alex Davis

alexdavis@courier-journal.com

If you're thirsty for a taste of Kentucky bourbon, Lisa Higgins has a deal for you: Check out as many of the state's distilleries as you want, and leave the driving to her.

Higgins and her husband, Sean, are hoping to tap into the popularity of bourbon tourism with their startup company, Mint Julep Tours.

Based at the Galt House Hotel & Suites, the company offers tourists a smooth ride in a customized bus to out-of-the-way places such as Loretto, the home of Maker's Mark, and Clermont, where Jim Beam is made. Passengers can bring drinks in coolers and listen to their driver offer bits of whiskey history and trivia.

"We've tried to make the journey as special as the destination," Lisa Higgins said.

Since tours started in March, the company is logging between 15 and 75 people a week. Far greater numbers are expected Sept. 16-21, when the Ryder Cup is held at Valhalla Golf Club, and the annual Kentucky Bourbon Festival takes place in Bardstown.

Mint Julep Tours also has an exclusive arrangement with Louisville-based Brown-Forman Corp. to offer tours of the Bluegrass Cooperage, off Crittenden Drive. Workers at the plant make barrels used for aging Jack Daniel's, Old Forester, Early Times and Woodford Reserve. Brown-Forman started using the facility in 1946, but it's never been open to the public for regular tours.

The cooperage tours will begin later this year, possibly as soon as October. Chris Morris, the master distiller for whiskeys at Brown-Forman, said bourbon enthusiasts want to learn about the entire production cycle of the spirit, not just what happens at distilleries.

Brown-Forman also is opening its offices at 626 W. Main St. to visitors, with historical exhibits and a close-up look at the street known as "whiskey row," where dozens of distilleries once operated.

Most of the state's distilleries charge no more than a few dollars for tours. At Maker's Mark, where more than 70,000 people take tours annually, President Bill Samuels Jr. said he wasn't aware of any other companies doing work like Mint Julep.

Samuels said almost all of the Maker's Mark visitors arrive in their own vehicles or in rented cars, but he predicted the driving tours will boost the popularity of the state's signature spirit.

"These are the kind of activities that are emerging up out of the communities of Bardstown, Louisville and Lexington at the corners of the bourbon trail," he said. "They'll help it go beyond what the distillers are able to provide."

Mint Julep Tours offers trips to all seven distilleries on the Kentucky Bourbon Trail, and the Tom Moore Distillery in Bardstown will be added when it joins the trail in October.

Mint Julep also makes trips to area horse farms and to various sites around Louisville, such as Churchill Downs. Another local tour follows the "Urban Bourbon Trail," a collection of restaurants and bars in Louisville. Brown-Forman's cooerage and its corporate offices will officially be added to the Urban Bourbon Trail today.

The local tours start at \$49 per person. A "single barrel" tour of one distillery is around \$79, and visits to multiple distilleries with lunch provided cost up to \$169.

Other companies have offered bourbon trips in the past, but Stacy Yates of the Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau said Mint Julep's marketing and customized options take the idea a step further.

Sean Higgins is a graduate of Trinity High School and a former sales manager for Cisco Systems. He said he and his wife frequently visited the Napa Valley's wine country when they lived in California. They moved back to Louisville in 1993.

Although he admitted the couple didn't do "a tremendous amount of market research," Sean Higgins said he's confident there will be a strong demand for the tours.

"We wanted to do something together," he said, "and do what we enjoy, which is entertaining and spending more time with the culture and people in the bourbon industry."

Reporter Alex Davis can be reached at (502) 582-4644.



Courtesy of Brown-Forman Corp.

Mint Julep Tours also offers tours of the Bluegrass Cooperage. The plant makes barrels for aging various Brown-Forman brands.

Mint Julep Tours

- Daily tours depart from the Galt House, RIVUE Tower, third floor, (Fourth Street and River Road) and follow the Kentucky Bourbon Trail through horse country and Louisville.
- Bourbon tours going east may stop at Buffalo Trace, Four Roses, Wild Turkey and Woodford Reserve.
- Bourbon tours going south may stop at Maker's Mark, Jim Beam and Heaven Hill. Full-day and half-day tours available.
- Horse country tours include a visit to private working thoroughbred farms.
- Urban Bourbon Trail leaves Fridays and Saturdays, 7 p.m.-midnight. For reservations and more information: (502) 445-2858 or (866) 986-8779; online at Mintjuleptours.com



By Kylee Lloyd, The Courier-Journal

Lisa Higgins, who started Mint Julep Tours with husband Sean, posed on the company's "bourbon bus." Bourbon enthusiasts on the company's tours can enjoy alcoholic beverages and not worry about having to drive. The business has its offices at the Galt House.