

Weekend Travel

Stop and nest awhile in peaceful Henderson

Kentucky Home of John James Audubon shows why he had a passion for birds, nature

By [VICKI STOUT](#)

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Norris Priest, innkeeper at L&N Bed & Breakfast behind him, rides his power scooter to visit his mother, who lives just a few blocks away in the quaint little hamlet of Henderson, Ky.

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Off the beaten path, on banks rising high above the wide Ohio River is a quaint and charming, and largely undiscovered little town, Henderson. Founded in 1796, it was once the richest per capita town in the United States.

At the close of the 19th century, Henderson was a thriving port, exporting rich dark tobacco all over the world. Residents were affluent; they built beautiful homes along exceptionally wide tree-lined streets.

It's a front porch kind of town. Last Sunday morning residents of handsome homes sat in white rockers and dark green wicker, sipping coffee and reading newspapers before church bells tolled from a hefty handful of handsome houses of worship.

Downtown streets bear simple names, Main, First, Second, Third. They're lined with antique shops, a fabric store, a shoe shop with a shoemaker's

bench in its dusty plate glass window, a gift shop chock full of treasures and a florist offering fresh cut stems.

In the mix is Alles Brothers Furniture whose founder, Jacob Alles, is credited with

inventing the rolltop desk in the 1870's. The store is in good company in this historic hamlet.

Accommodations range from standard hotel chains to a few charming B&B's. We chose L&N, just a block from the Ohio River and right next to a train track. It was quite the find.

Innkeepers Mary Elizabeth and Norris Priest are salt-of-the-earth folks. She provided more tourist information than any Chamber of Commerce could. The inn is listed on the National Register.

It is spotless from stem to stern. The Priests live next door, so guests in the four bedrooms have the run of the place. Victorian furniture fills the parlor and dining room. Bedrooms offer antiques, some with ceiling fans, and most have a stained glass transom over the door.

The heavy oak staircase is lovely, as are the dark hardwoods that run throughout the house.

And just outside our windows, trains ran all night. Far from disturbing, they were a peaceful clacking, transporting us back to simpler times and places.

Also running with the wind are thoroughbreds at the nearby Ellis Park Race Course where horse racing has been conducted continuously since 1925. The 8,500-seat grandstand offers live racing from early June through Labor Day and inter-track wagering in the off season.

Since 1991 Henderson has hosted an annual W.C. Handy Blues and Barbecue Festival the second week in June. Some 20,000 fans come to hear the music of the fields, the river and the docks Handy made famous.

The festival offers Zydeco, red beans and rice on Thursday night each year, and then there's two days of "nothin' but the blues".

The year-round piece de resistance in Henderson is John James Audubon State Park, 700 acres of natural beauty. The park preserves the peaceful woods where Audubon walked and painted.

The first artist or ornithologist to depict life size birds and animals in their natural surroundings, Audubon lived in Henderson for several years. Born in Les Cayes, Santo Domingo, he grew up in the lush Caribbean before moving to France and ultimately to the States.

His unquenchable passion for nature led him to be a prolific painter of birds and animals of North America. Many of his original oils and watercolors hang in the park's John James Audubon Museum & Nature Center.

The center is fascinating with its four galleries which interpret Audubon's life through his original works, personal effects and a world event timeline. Life-sized folio editions of his masterpiece, "Birds of America", are among the treasures. The Museum houses the most extensive collection of Audubon memorabilia in the world.

Family photos, family silver and the tale of a man who strove to achieve is woven through the brilliantly composed galleries. An original copper plate, one of only 17 remaining in this country, is a recent addition to the museum.

In addition to the history and the art the galleries provide, an observatory features huge sparkling glass windows looking into the world of nature he loved and painted. Bird feeders, stations for squirrels and a small pond are just on the other side of the glass.

Binoculars are provided for visitors' use. With them, a cardinal is inches away. A finch flutters. A morning dove alights. Squirrels frolic and a pair of woodchucks, cute enough to pet, scamper about their feeding area. A hummingbird stares back through the glass, poised in mid-air. Monarchs flit effortlessly by as though propelled by gentle breezes.

Also in the beautiful French chateau-like structure is a discovery center for young minds and hands to enjoy as they learn of bird feeding, habitat and behavior. And there's a gift shop, a treasure trove of all things Audubon, but also gardening gifts, jewelry and handmade Kentucky creations from soap to syrup.

The sprawling park offers miles of hiking trails. We chose the Wilderness Lake trail which wound through quiet woods, marsh land and the perimeter of a small lake where frogs jumped and turtles sunned.

Overhead, a bird's wings stirred the quiet early morn.

The pristine park offers camping, a nine-hole golf course, fishing, a beach, pedal boats, tennis and six rustic cabins. Five offer one bedroom; one wheelchair accessible cottage has two bedrooms. All have a fireplace, fully equipped kitchen and a back porch that overlooks a quiet lake.

The park makes for a fantastic day or weekend. Family activities abound.

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### ***Getting there***

***It's about a two and one-half to three hour drive. Take I-24 West to the US 11-Alt. Exit, number 85, towards Pennyryle Parkway/Ft. Campbell and Hopkinsville. Merge onto US-41 Alternate North. Take the Pennyryle Parkway towards Henderson. You'll pass exits for Hopkinsville and Madisonville before reaching Henderson.***

**How long?**

**An overnight or weekend.**

**How much?**

**L&N B&B is \$75 per night, based on double occupancy.**

**Audubon State Park has no admission price. The Museum is \$4 per person.**

**Park cabins range in price from \$72 to \$118 based on the season.**

**Contact information**

**L&N Bed and Breakfast: (270) 831-1100; Web site [www.lnbbky.com](http://www.lnbbky.com); E mail [info@lnbbky.com](mailto:info@lnbbky.com).**

**Ellis Park Race Course: (800) 333-8110**

**W.C. Handy Blues and Barbecue Festival: (270) 826-3128; web site [www.handyblues.org](http://www.handyblues.org)**

**John James Audubon state park: (270) 826-2247**

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Contact [VickiStout@aol.com](mailto:VickiStout@aol.com) with comments or travel suggestions.