

# WEG expectations

Equestrian toy town:  
Tryon International  
Equestrian Center will host  
this September's World  
Equestrian Games

**"M**ONEY no object" would be an apt motto for this autumn's FEI World Equestrian Games (WEG, 11-23 September) at Tryon International Equestrian Center, North Carolina. Flying over the great expanse of rural North Carolina in a helicopter (how else would the tycoon behind this year's Games Mark Bellissimo expect us to be

introduced to the area?), we are on the cusp of "fall": great swathes of forest are turning a golden colour.

At last we hover above Tryon Equestrian Center: it's something of a scar on this otherwise idyllic landscape — but a toy town for horse lovers.

"We want people to leave here saying it's the best WEG that's ever occurred," says Mark, with that distinctive American gusto. "We want this to be a Disney-like experience."

Indeed, with wooden cabins littering the vast 1,600-acre site, a merry-go-round, a diner lit up in neon lights and restaurants serving up food from around the globe, that's looking like a probable outcome.

And with preparations ramping up with intimidating efficiency, it's unlikely that the 865 horses, 850 competitors and 500,000 spectators who will descend on the venue for the event — which is only the second WEG outside Europe — will leave disappointed.



Teamwork: Mark Bellissimo with his wife Katherine

## THE MAN BEHIND THE GAMES

THE American business tycoon and father of four, Mark Bellissimo, bought the site at Tryon with his wife Katherine and five other families back in January 2014.

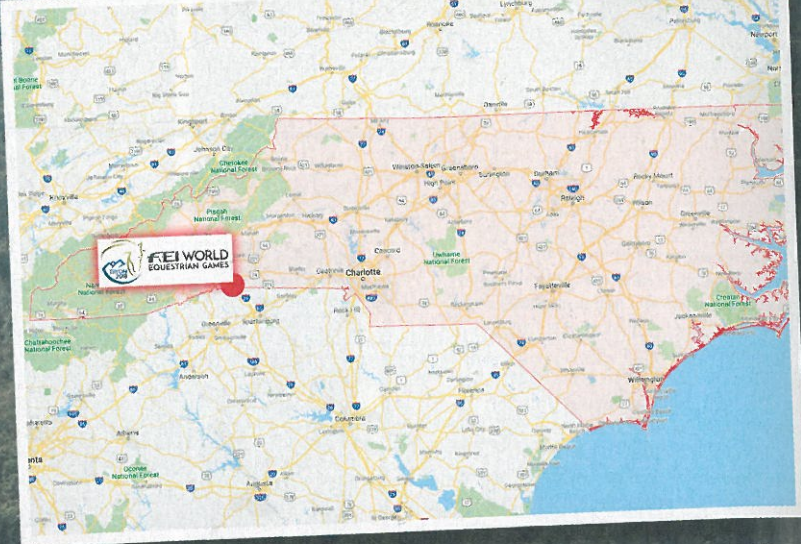
In just 18 months, he had turned what was a bankrupt golf course and rolling hills into a burgeoning equestrian centre. And with Tryon winning the bid to host WEG only in November 2016, Mark's plans have been somewhat accelerated to fit the timescale of the games. His seemingly bottomless pockets look to be ensuring that his vision for an "equestrian lifestyle destination" — first sketched out on the back of a piece of paper — are fulfilled.

"There are all kinds of mythology out there that my wife and I are taking wheelbarrows of cash out of this, but we haven't taken a dime out yet. We've invested heavily because we believe in the future of equestrian sport," he says. "Most people who've hosted WEG have relied on state and public funding — but this will be a privately run WEG."

Tryon is just a slither of his and his group's equestrian empire, which also features Palm Beach International Equestrian Center in Wellington, Florida (home of the Winter Equestrian Festival), The Colorado Horse Park (a 200-acre competition venue near Denver), *The Chronicle of the Horse* magazine, Central Park Horse Show in New York and, most recently, the International Polo Club Palm Beach.



With the countdown now on for this September's World Equestrian Games, *Madeleine Silver* visits the North Carolina venue to find out what's in store



The existing George Morris arena will host the para dressage and eventing dressage

## THE SET-UP

WHERE Mark Bellissimo is concerned, "moving mountains" is a feasible possibility. He did just that when he came to Tryon and moved three million square-foot of earth to get the ball rolling. And sizeable mining trucks are now in action to achieve his vision of creating a 50-acre "town" at Tryon — including a new overpass and underpass to ease the flow of traffic come September. And to speed things up, a portable concrete machine has been brought on site.

A 70x100m all-weather arena is being built to host the showjumping, dressage and eventing jumping with seating for 20,000. The para dressage and eventing dressage will take place in the existing 20x60m all-weather George Morris arena, which will have the capacity for 6,000-seated spectators. And overlooking both of these will be the three-storey hospitality and media building.

The current indoor arena is being tripled in size ("bigger is better" has never rung so true) to create a 50x100m space to host the reining and vaulting, with seating for 5,000.

Outside, the driving will take place in a 40x100m grass arena, with seating for 3,000.

And a short walk away down a picturesque trail following a creek, the eventing cross-

country (to be designed by Captain Mark Phillips) and the marathon driving will take place on the now defunct golf course, with immaculate footing that might be better associated with its former use.

Hospitality guests will be given the best view of this undulating terrain from an on-course viewing tower. The endurance will take place across the Tryon Estate and surrounding land.

When it comes to stabling, the plan is to have no temporary stabling for the Games. There are currently 1,200 stables spread across seven barns, with plans to build 400 more, each with fans, easy access to water and tack rooms.

And Mark's secret weapon? The purchase of a nearby factory and 20 robots where the structures can all be preassembled. "So you don't worry about rain or people not showing up," says Mark. "You can put it on a schedule — it's an assembly line."



First class digs: the aim for the Games is to have no temporary stabling



## THE LOGISTICS

EIGHT disciplines running over two weeks could be considered something of a logistical nightmare. This is where the experienced Michael Stone, who will be heading up the sport, and Eric Straus, who will oversee the technical operations, including all - quarantine for the 865 horses arriving at Tryon, come into play.

"I wouldn't move it from challenge to nightmare yet, but unlike a regular competition, you have so many more details to deal with and each detail has ripple effects," says Eric. "But this is a chance for Tryon to showcase itself as a venue — it's about sport for the future."

## BEYOND THE COMPETITION

MARK'S vision for the Games isn't confined to the eight official disciplines. He has plans for the World Equine Expo to run alongside the event with the theme of the "Celebration of the Horse", giving spectators a glimpse of what else the equestrian world has to offer.

At the centre of this will be Mark's brainchild, "Gladiator polo", a hyped-up and star-studded version of arena polo, which aims to attract the best players in the sport to battle it out on an all-weather surface.

"The name Gladiator was intentionally provocative," says Mark. "What we want to do is capture the spirit of the horse and the athleticism of them. The aim is to make both the players and the horses stars."

## Sleeping and eating



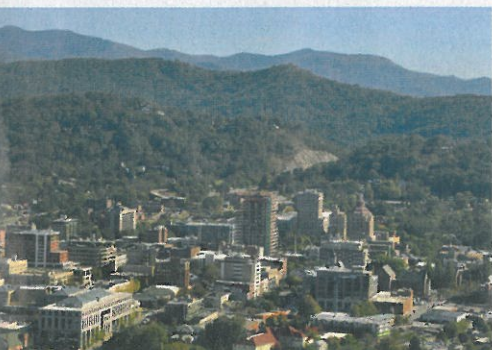
Take your pick of places to refuel and recharge with an array of accommodation and places to eat and drink — from the diner (top), to the Silo Bar (below)

LUXURIOUS one-, three- and five-bedroom cabins are already in situ, as well as the Stable House Inn, just a one-minute drive or golf-cart ride up the road from the showground. But it's still not clear exactly how much accommodation will be ready on site for spectators and riders by the autumn. Three-, four- and five-star hotels are in the making — the latter complete with an infinity pool, spa and ballroom. And 360 units for grooms are being built, all complete with air-conditioning.

On the food front, you can currently take your pick from sushi, Italian, Mexican and American favourites, from the array of on-site restaurants, with more to come to cater for the influx of visitors.



## What else to see and do



**Head to Asheville to get your fill of local beer and check out the array of restaurants**

THE flight time from London Heathrow to Charlotte Douglas International Airport, North Carolina, is a hefty 9hr 25min, so look beyond the confines of the Games to make the most of your trip.

### HIT THE ROAD

MARVEL at the Blue Ridge Mountains by taking a road trip on the Blue Ridge Parkway, which travels 252 miles along the ridge of the mountains. Stop along the way to go hiking or cycling, and don't miss crossing the Linn Cove Viaduct — an engineering wonder seemingly suspended in mid-air along the southern face of Grandfather Mountain.

### PULL A PINT

THERE are more than 230 breweries and brewpubs in North Carolina — the largest

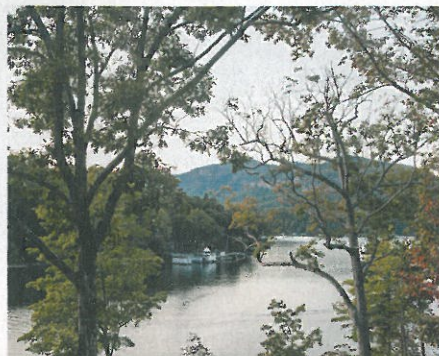
number of craft breweries in the American South. And what better way to calm your nerves after the adrenalin of the Games than by paying one a visit? A 40-minute drive from Tryon is the Sierra Nevada Brewery ([sierranevada.com](http://sierranevada.com)), where you can take a behind-the-scenes tour following the hops-to-brews process — crucially with a generous tasting at the end.

### FOODIE HEAVEN IN ASHEVILLE

REFUEL in picturesque Asheville, perched in the scenic Blue Ridge Mountains. Not only does it boast more breweries per capita than anywhere else in the States, but it is fast garnering a reputation as a haven for foodies, going well beyond its southern cooking roots. Head downtown for a vibrant mix of food, from organic, hormone-free beef to mountain-trout caviar and sweet potato salad.

### GET YOUR ADRENALIN FIX

JUST 20 minutes from Tryon in the tiny town of Saluda is The Gorge ([thegorgezipline.com](http://thegorgezipline.com)) — which claims to be the steepest and fastest zip line canopy tour in the States. Get a



different take on the surrounding countryside as you reach speeds of 40mph and descend a total of 1,100 vertical feet through the forest.

### DON YOUR BREECHES (OR JEANS...)

HAVEN'T had your sufficient fill of equestrianism? Get ready to lengthen your stirrups and sit back in a Western saddle to explore the North Carolinian mountains from horseback. Located on a secluded ranch minutes north of Asheville is Sandy Bottom Trail Rides ([sandybottomtrailrides.net](http://sandybottomtrailrides.net)), where you can head off through the high country, scenic mountain meadows and wooded areas of Madison County. It caters for all abilities, so your non-horsey family members needn't be left behind for the trip. **H&H**

### GET YOUR TICKETS

- The full Games pass (access to all of the competition sessions during the full weeks of competition): \$1,380 (£1,020)
- All Games pass for week one: \$750
- All Games pass for week two: \$675
- All session weekend one pass (15-16 September): \$430
- All session weekend two pass (22-23 September): \$305
- All session dressage pass: \$345
- All session eventing pass: \$225
- All session showjumping pass: \$375
- All session para-dressage pass: \$110
- All session driving pass: \$82
- All session reining pass: \$193
- All session vaulting pass: \$105

Visit [tryon2018.com](http://tryon2018.com) for the latest ticket information and for details about passes for specific days of competition, including the endurance, some of which have now sold out.

Explore the postcard-perfect countryside