

SOUTHERN I-75 CORRIDOR KENTUCKY FACT SHEET

Cultural Tourism

Through the Southern I-75 Corridor, the area's culture is infused with a Scotch-Irish influence that originates back to colonial times. When the Scotch-Irish pioneers moved into the region from Virginia and North Carolina in the late 1700s and early 1800s, they brought with them many of their Old World ways that included weaving, carving, basket-making, blacksmithing and other handicrafts. These were necessary skills on the Kentucky frontier, where each family was basically self-sufficient because, in the isolated enclaves of the hills, settlers had to make do or do without.

In 1893, the president of Berea College, William G. Frost, helped to preserve the handicraft skills in the region and in doing so, established an artisan tradition in Berea that survives today. Frost rode through the mountains of Kentucky, visiting the families of his students who lived in remote settlements. He found a high level of craftsmanship that astounded him. On his return to Berea College, Frost introduced the Fireside Industries in which students could trade handcrafted items for tuition.

Today Berea College is at the center of Kentucky's revitalized craft movement. Now, master craftsmen pass along to students the time-tempered techniques of woodworking, blacksmithing, pottery making and other skills for creative hands. The fine results of these teachings can be found in two stores on campus, the Boone Tavern Gift Shop and the Log House Crafts Gallery. There is much of the same to see in the town of Berea, where over 50 artists and master craftspeople have established studios and shops. Concentrations of craft establishments in town can be found in three areas: Old Town Artisans Village, Chestnut Street and College Square.

A good way to be introduced to the incredible diversity of quality craftsmanship that can be found in Berea as well as the rest of Kentucky is to first visit the Kentucky Artisan Center, a 20,000-square-foot facility that celebrates the works of craftsmen from across the state. The Center is located 2.5 miles from Berea on I-75 at Exit 77.

More fine examples of mountain crafts in the area can be found by following I-75 south out of Berea. In East Bernstadt, Money's Folk Art is a good studio to stop by, as is Theresa's Baskets & Crafts in McKee. Nearby London is home to similar quality craft destinations such as Jim Sams WoodArt, and Red Dog and Company. In addition, the Museum Store at Cumberland College in Williamsburg carries mountain handicrafts from the region.

The simple beginnings of the arts and craft movement in eastern Kentucky are paralleled by the origins of mountain country music. Having few luxuries, colonial settlers had to improvise when it came to music, so songs were usually sung or played on elementary instruments. Harmonicas, guitars, fiddles, mandolins, banjos, dulcimers—these became the signature instruments of the sweet songs from the hills. Many Kentuckians enjoyed this home-grown music in their mountain homes, and today, visitors can also delight in such pleasant music in a place called Renfro Valley.

Renfro Valley's music tradition began in 1939 when John Lair started national radio broadcasts of the "Renfro Valley Barn Dance." The music was mainly old folk ballads and hillbilly music that Lair had remembered listening to and enjoying as a boy in Renfro Valley. Lair built a barn to broadcast from and held live shows, which attracted music lovers from all over the country.

Music is still being made today the old-fashioned way in Renfro Valley. From March through December, Renfro Valley Entertainment Center is home to live music shows each week that feature top-name artists. And the airwaves remain alive with the melodious sounds of mountain music because of the "Renfro Valley Gatherin'," which is heard on over 200 stations. It is a continuation of John Lair's original radio show, making it the third oldest radio broadcast in the country.

Along the Southern I-75 Corridor, life moves at a slower pace, but don't be fooled by the simplicity—the region is rich in tradition and brimming with musicians, artists and master craftsmen. It is a culture fostered in the mountains and still celebrated today in so many creative ways. The artistic skills of the past are an integral part of the present, and, like a fine wine, they have only become better with age.

DESTINATIONS:

- Berea College, Berea: This liberal arts institution has been a catalyst for Kentucky's revitalized Appalachian arts and crafts movement today. 859/985-3018; www.berea.edu
- Kentucky Artisan Center, Berea: A state-run facility established to celebrate Kentucky's artisan heritage. 859/985-5448; www.kentuckyartisancenter.ky.gov
- Renfro Valley Entertainment Center, Renfro Valley: "Kentucky's Country Music Capital" featuring weekly shows, festivals and special events. 1-800-765-7464, www.renfrovalley.com
- Kentucky Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Renfro Valley: A state-of-the-art facility dedicated to the legends of Kentucky country music. 1-877-356-3263; www.kentuckymusicmuseum.com

FESTIVALS:

- Berea Craft Festival, Berea, mid-July: Over 125 artists and craftsmen display their works at this event that was voted a Top 20 Event by the Southeast Tourism Society. 859/986-2818; www.berea.com
- Christmas in Berea. Berea, early November through December: A six-week Appalachian Christmas celebration featuring the best of Berea's arts and crafts. 1-800-598-5263; www.berea.com
- Old Joe Clark Bluegrass Festival, Renfro Valley, early July: A three-day festival featuring Appalachian music at its best. 800-765-7464; www.renfrovalley.com
- Fiddlers' Festival, Renfro Valley, late October: A toe-tapping gathering of fiddlers from across the region. 800-765-7464; www.renfrovalley.com
- Folklife Festival, McKee, first week of October: An Appalachian music festival that also features mountain arts and crafts. 606/287-0600
- NIBROC Festival, Corbin, early August: Four days of arts, crafts, music, food and more food. 800-528-7123, www.corbinkentucky.us
- World Chicken Festival, September 23-26: Four days of fun, music and plenty of fried chicken in tribute to Colonel Harlan Sanders. 800-348-0095, www.chickenfestival.com
- Stringbean Memorial Mountain Music Festival, September 8-11: Four days of mountain and bluegrass music to keep local heritage alive and remember local son, David "Stringbean" Akemon. 606/287-0600, www.geocities.com/stringfest