

A fam trip to Ascot Racecourse 26th January 2009.

Ascot is of course most famous for the Royal Ascot race meeting in June but it actually has 25 race days per year. For the rest of the time the beautiful site and buildings are available for conferences and trade shows as well as filming.

In 2004 the course closed for nearly two years with race meetings, including Royal Ascot moving to York Race Course (though 'Royal York' doesn't have quite the same ring about it!) and a £185 million pound re-build and refurbishment of the facilities took place including the re-building of the main grandstand. Although the resulting new building has come in for some criticism for not providing as much raised seating as the original grandstand that it replaced, the result looks stunning.

Parking in one of the many car parks that service the site, we walked across to the security point to be checked in and receive our visitor's badges before making our way to the main grandstand building and the conference space where we were to meet. The walk affords a fine view of the exterior of the grandstand, which stands on a slight rise along the finishing straight of the course.

After a quick meal of curry and a coffee, we met with our hosts and split into groups to explore the site and the possible filming areas. We started with the main areas of the grandstand, which include numerous bars and small restaurant areas (there are over 300 meeting and dining rooms) as well as a number of conference and meeting spaces. The grandstand is some 27m high with hi-tech escalators that start working as one approaches them (an excellent, modern energy saving device). The interior of the grandstand is modern with a predominant steel and grey palette which worked well in the dull winter light during our visit. The furnishings and finishes are all to a very high standard. I imagine that during an actual meeting the colour would be provided by the racegoers, particularly on the days of Royal Ascot. One advantage is that there is only a limited amount of corporate branding in view within the grandstand, so the space could easily be re-dressed as, say, an airport terminal building.

We moved from the grandstand to areas underneath where the 'backstage' areas are. These are all serviced from one roadway that runs the entire length of the grandstand with numerous access points onto the working floors via goods lifts. We also saw the kitchen areas, small Jockey's Hospital area and the press area. Some of these areas could easily be re-dressed to create other locations for small scenes that might need to be included on the filming day.

From here we moved to the racecourse side of the grandstand where there are good views of both the course itself and the stands and from here up to one of the private boxes which are in the upper tiers of the stand. There are both small and larger boxes here with seating for approx 12 to 70 persons. On a non-filming day, a scene could easily be recorded in these areas with the minimum of trouble.

From the grandstand we visited the Pavilion with its huge ballroom complex that makes up part of the older buildings on the site and the turnstile entrance hall and exhibition hall, underneath. These areas could also be used for crowd changing for a large-scale scene.



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P O Box 58010 • London • W10 6UZ
www.golm.org.uk • info@golm.org.uk

Finally we had a quick look at the pedestrian tunnel that runs underneath the course and which provides access to the common land area in the centre of the course, and then the parade rings at the front of the grandstand where the horses are paraded before the race starts and the winners are feted on their return.

Filming at Ascot is relatively straightforward on non race-days when the site is basically empty and there is plenty of space for both technical vehicles and a sizeable Unit Base on-site. Filming on an actual race-day would be more complicated and difficult and would require detailed negotiation on a case-by-case basis. It would most likely only be agreed with a very small, 2nd Unit crew.

Contact Details are:

Ascot Racecourse
Ascot
Berkshire SL5 7JX

Tel: 0870 727 8765
email: businessandevents@ascot.co.uk

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