

Winging It



These Wichita attractions focus on the city's rich aviation history.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

A

As you're finishing your eggs in the Doo-Dah Diner, you might look up to see a familiar face across the room. Could it be? Yes, it's Harrison Ford, who often eats at the Doo-Dah when he flies into Wichita, Kansas, for maintenance on his planes.

For many years, celebrities, jet setters, and corporate moguls have homed their aircraft in Wichita. Frank Sinatra's Learjet, the one he loaned to Elvis for his honeymoon, rolled out of a hangar here. Kansas native Amelia Earhart dropped by prior to her ill-fated flight around the world. Charles Lindbergh, who was a consultant for the Wichita Municipal Airport, promoted the city to aviators.

In the late 1920s, Wichita had 16 aircraft manufacturers, 11 airports, and a dozen flying schools. The chamber of commerce dubbed the city "Air Capital of the World" and the name stuck. Today, more than half the general aviation parts and aircraft produced in the U.S. come from companies such as Bombardier, Airbus Americas, and Spirit AeroSystems, all with locations in Kansas.

"The birthplace of flight might have been in North Carolina, but it grew up here," said Tim Norton, executive director of the Kansas Aviation Museum, one of a handful of Wichita venues celebrating aviation's glory days.

After the Wright brothers proved man could fly at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, the focus of aircraft manufacturing shifted to Wichita's clear skies and flat prairie suitable for runways. Tinkerers skilled in problem-solving on Kansas farms and factories became aircraft mechanics. Oil money backed entrepreneurs eager to invest in



FREEPIK.COM



Left: Stearman Field Bar & Grill has an aviation theme.

Opposite: The "Design Build Fly" section at Exploration Place.

aviation. Wichita's central location in the U.S. made it a natural stop on coast-to-coast flights to refuel or fix a busted wing or propeller.

Travel Air Manufacturing Co., with Clyde Cessna, Walter Beech, and Lloyd Stearman at the controls, dominated aircraft production from 1925-29. Mike Madewell, a volunteer at the Kansas Aviation Museum, said the men were good drinking buddies who later formed their own companies.

World War II ramped up production of military aircraft. Area population exploded, and beds at boarding houses were rented to one worker in the morning, another at night. By 1944, Wichita Municipal Airport had a take-off or landing every 90 seconds. Here, Fred Astaire once danced for fellow passengers while waiting for his flight.

That airport operated from 1935 to 1954 and now houses the Kansas Aviation Museum's 25 planes and the Kansas Aviation Hall of Fame. Aircraft on display indoors span the decades: a replica of a 1921 Laird Swallow, a 1930 Watkins Skylark open cockpit monoplane, a 1931 Stearman Model 4D found in pieces in an Arizona salvage yard, and a 1944 Beechcraft Staggerwing biplane. On the outdoor ramp sits the sixth Learjet made and a Boeing B-52 bomber that saw action in Vietnam.

Last September, the restored airport control tower opened with an exhibit devoted to Amelia Earhart launched with photos and her FAA registration cards. Children can play on flight simulators and sit in a Cessna 210 cabin in the museum's learning center.

Children and adults both can go hands-on at "Design Build Fly" inside Wichita's Exploration Place science center. Step into a theater made from a jet fuselage, paint and decorate a virtual aircraft, and launch your own paper airplane into a wind tunnel. Try lifting a 14-pound emergency exit hatch for a better understanding of what's expected when you sit in an exit row.

If you want to see small aircraft fly — and you're hungry — head over to Stearman Field Bar & Grill on the grounds of a private airport in nearby Benton, Kansas. From a covered patio, you can enjoy a meal while watching take-offs and landings 20 yards away. Stearman Sky Tours, also in Benton, can put you in the open cockpit of a 1943 Boeing Stearman biplane used to train World War II pilots.

Travelers flying into Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport will want to view panels containing nuggets of local aviation lore on the second floor of the new terminal. Nearby, the B-29 Doc Hangar & Education Center houses Doc, a restored B-29. This airworthy bomber can be seen in its airport hangar on select days when it's not on tour.

Present-day celebrities aside, Wichita visitors will be impressed with its preservation of aviation history. • *Katherine Rodeghier is a contributor from Western Springs, Illinois.*

>>>>
Read about more Midwest museums on the next page.

FOR MORE INFO Visit Wichita, (800) 288-9424 or visitwichita.com. Your AAA Travel professional can help you plan a trip to Wichita. Turn to page 8 for a list of offices to serve you.



Aviation museums scattered across the Midwest tell the story of flight

For folks who can't make it to Wichita, there are plenty of aviation museums around the Midwest to enjoy.

EAA Aviation Museum, Oshkosh, Wisconsin. More than 100,000 annual visitors view more than 100 aircraft including World War II planes, full-size reproductions of the Wright brothers' Flyer, Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis, and 1930s and '40s racing aircraft staged in formation. Astronaut Frank Borman donated artifacts from his days as Gemini 7 and Apollo 8 mission commander. Biplane rides are offered from a replica 1930s aerodrome. More than half a million aviation enthusiasts attend the annual EAA Air Venture, which will be July 20–26. (800) 564-6322 or eaa.org

International Women's Air & Space Museum, Cleveland, Ohio. Displays inside Burke Lakefront Airport preserve the history of women in aviation and aerospace. They include NASA and Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) exhibits and stories of women astronauts and aviators such as Amelia Earhart and Bessie Coleman. (216) 623-1111 or iwasm.org

Airline History Museum, Kansas City, Missouri. The col-

lection at Charles B. Wheeler Downtown Airport features a Lockheed Super "G" Constellation featured on television and in films, a Douglas DC-3, a model of a TWA Moonliner II rocket, uniforms, gallery items, and flight simulators from the propeller to jet age. (816) 421-3401 or airlinehistory.org

Nicholas-Beazley Aviation Museum, Marshall, Missouri. Exhibits showcase Marshall's aviation pioneers R.B. Nicholas and Howard Beazley, founders of a 1920s and '30s aircraft company. In addition, the museum has exhibits on both world wars and the Marshall Flying School, as well as an interactive area for Young Aviators. (660) 886-2630 or nicholasbeazley.org

The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation, Dearborn, Michigan. The "Heroes of the Sky" multisensory exhibit explores the development of flight from 1903 to 1939. It showcases a replica of the Wright brothers' Flyer, aircraft used in polar explorations, a Laird biplane, and exhibits on barnstormers and wing walkers. (313) 982-6001 or thehenryford.org

— Katherine Rodeghier



BEST WESTERN® HOTELS & RESORTS NOW OFFERS MANY UNIQUE BRANDS TO WELCOME AAA MEMBERS.

Today's Best Western offers more options in more locations for every travel need. Join the AAA PreferredSM Best Western Rewards[®] Program to earn bonus points with every stay.



Breakfast Available*



FREE Wi-Fi



FREE Night Faster With +10% Bonus Points



Save Up To 15% Every Day!



Points Never Expire



DISCOUNTS REWARDS

AAA.com/BestWestern

PREFERRED HOTELS



Restrictions apply. Visit bestwestern.com/AAA for program terms and conditions. *Amenities and extras may be available only in North America. Each Best Western® branded hotel is independently owned and operated. AAA and the AAA marks are service marks or registered service marks of the American Automobile Association. Best Western and the Best Western marks are service marks or registered service marks of Best Western International, Inc. ©2020 Best Western International, Inc. All rights reserved.

KOHLER Walk-In Bath

Your walk-in bath can be installed in as little as one day.
TheKohlerBath.com



\$1,000 OFF

your KOHLER Walk-In Bath purchase

+ **FREE SET OF TURKISH BATH LINENS**

After your quote*

Indulge in a New Bathing Experience.

Enjoy the best in safety and comfort with the KOHLER[®] Walk-In Bath, featuring the industry's lowest step-in and hydrotherapy jets that relax and soothe sore muscles.



Call Today for your FREE in-home quote!

(800) 253-7113



*Financing available to qualified purchasers. Contact your local dealer for financing details. Limited time offer. Valid through May 31, 2020, at participating dealers only. Not available in AK; HI; Nassau Cty, NY; Suffolk Cty, NY; Westchester Cty, NY; and Buffalo Cty, NY. Also may not be available in other areas. \$1,000 off average price of KOHLER walk-in bath. Dealer sets all prices and is responsible for full amount of discount. Dealer will provide customer with certificate for free KOHLER Turkish Bath Linens (Tatami Weave) including one bath towel, one hand towel, and one washcloth upon completion of in-home quote. No certificate will be provided for in-home quotes that are scheduled but not completed. Certificate for free product to be redeemed directly from Kohler-certified dealer. Cannot be combined with any other advertised offer. Limit (1) redemption per household. Allow 4-6 weeks for redemption processing.