

# Wichita, Kansas: The Air Capital of the World

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A World War II-era biplane comes in for a landing outside Stearman Field Bar & Grill, in Wichita, Kansas.  
Katherine Rodeghier photos.

## The Roots of U.S. Aviation Go deep in Wichita, the Heart of Kansas

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By Katherine Rodeghier

As you're finishing your eggs in the **Do-Dah Diner** you might look up to see a familiar face across the room. Is it? Could it be?

Yes, it's Harrison Ford, who often does the Do-Dah when he flies into Wichita, Kan., for maintenance on his plane.

Celebrities, jet setters, corporate moguls long have known Wichita for big-boy aviation toys. 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 on her ill-fated flight around the world. So did Lucky Lindy after flying solo across the Atlantic.

### **Sixteen Airplane Builders**

In its heyday, 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 aircraft produced in the U.S. continues to come from Kansas built by companies such as Bombardier, Airbus Americas, and Spirit Aerosystems, the most recent incarnations of familiar brands Beechcraft, Cessna, and Stearman.



Volunteer Mike Madewell leads tours at the Kansas Aviation Museum.



Exhibits extolling Wichita's status as "Air Capital of the World" can be found inside the terminal of Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport.

About 80 percent of all the planes in the sky have some component tied to Wichita.



The Kansas Aviation Museum occupies the Art Deco terminal of the former Wichita Municipal Airport. A bas-relief of Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis appears above the entrance.

The birthplace of flight might have been in North Carolina, but aviation grew up in Wichita where a handful of venues celebrate its glory days. At **Wichita's science museum**, you can get a hands-on feel for how airplanes are built. Or learn the backstory of Kansas aviation at its history museum and from displays inside the new terminal of its airport.

Wrap your hands around a burger while you watch take-offs on a private landing strip. Feeling adventurous? Put down that burger and book a ride in a World War II biplane.

## Why Wichita?

After the Wright brothers proved man could fly at Kitty Hawk, N.C., 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 created entrepreneurs eager to invest in 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 in the 1920s. "They were all good drinking buddies" who later formed their own companies, said Mike Madewell, volunteer at the Kansas Aviation Museum.

World War II ramped up production with military aircraft. The population of the local county increased five-fold and beds at boarding houses were rented to one worker in the morning, another at night. By 1944, Wichita Airport had a take-off or landing every 90 seconds.



An exhibit on Wichita's aviation history occupies a corner inside the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum.

### Kansas Aviation Hall of Fame

That airport operated from 1935 to 1954 and now houses the museum's 25 planes and the Kansas Aviation Hall of Fame. Charles Lindbergh consulted on the airport's Art Deco design. His famous aircraft, **Spirit of St. Louis**, appears in a bas-relief over the entrance.



The Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum occupies Wichita's old City Hall building.

Inside, a volunteer spent more than eight years restoring the Art Deco stenciled ceiling of the atrium where Fred Astaire danced for fellow passengers while waiting for his flight.



Biplanes sit outside Stearman Field Bar & Grill after taking visitors up for a flight.

Aircraft on display indoors span the decades: a replica of a 1921 Laird Swallow, first aircraft made for sale to civilians; a 1930 Watkins Skylark open cockpit monoplane; a 1931 Stearman Model 4D found in pieces in an Arizona salvage yard; 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.



The airport control tower has been restored and a new exhibit is devoted to Amelia Earhart with photos and her FAA registration cards. In the museum's learning center kids play on flight simulators and sit in a Cessna 210 cabin.

### Taking wing

Children and adults both can go hands-on at the **“Design Build Fly”** exhibit at **Exploration Place science center**. <https://exploration.org/>

Step into a theater made from the fuselage of a Southwest Airlines jet, paint and decorate your own aircraft, make a paper airplane to fly it into a wind tunnel, and see the inner workings of a Hawker 4000 jet.

Try lifting a 14-pound emergency exit hatch for a better understanding of what's expected when you sit in an exit row.



Stearman Field Bar & Grill in Wichita has an aviation theme and overlooks a runway of a private airport.

If you want to see small aircraft in action—and you're hungry—travel 20 miles northwest of Wichita to Benton, Kansas. Stearman Field Bar & Grill. This place sits on the grounds of a private airport that was a hog farm with a sod runway until paved to shoot the 1969 film “Gypsy Moth” starring Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr.





Visitors learn how aircraft are built at the “Design-Build Fly” exhibit at Exploration Place science center.

From the restaurant’s covered patio, you can enjoy a meal while watching take-offs and landings 20 yards away. Want a ride? Stearman Sky Tours can put you in the open cockpit of a 1943 Boeing Stearman biplane used to train pilots during World War II. [website](#)



Pilot Randy Hardy, left, prepares to take visitor David Hoekman for a ride in a 1943 Boeing Stearman biplane outside Stearman Field Bar & Grill.

In downtown Wichita, aviation history unfolds at the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum occupying the old city hall building. [website](#).

A film shows how Charles Lindbergh tilted his celebrity spotlight toward Wichita to promote air travel here.

Flying into Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport? Allow plenty of time to check out an exhibit on the terminal’s second floor with panels containing nuggets of local aviation lore.

On your way to or from the airport stop by the nearby B-29 Doc Hangar & Education Center. It houses Doc, a restored B-29 made in Wichita, one of only two in the U.S. still airworthy.

Find out more or plan your visit at **Visit Wichita**, 800-288-9424, [visitwichita.com](http://visitwichita.com)

*This article was researched while the author attended a writers' conference sponsored by Visit Wichita, but the opinions are her own.*

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