

The Best G.A.-Friendly Aviation Museums



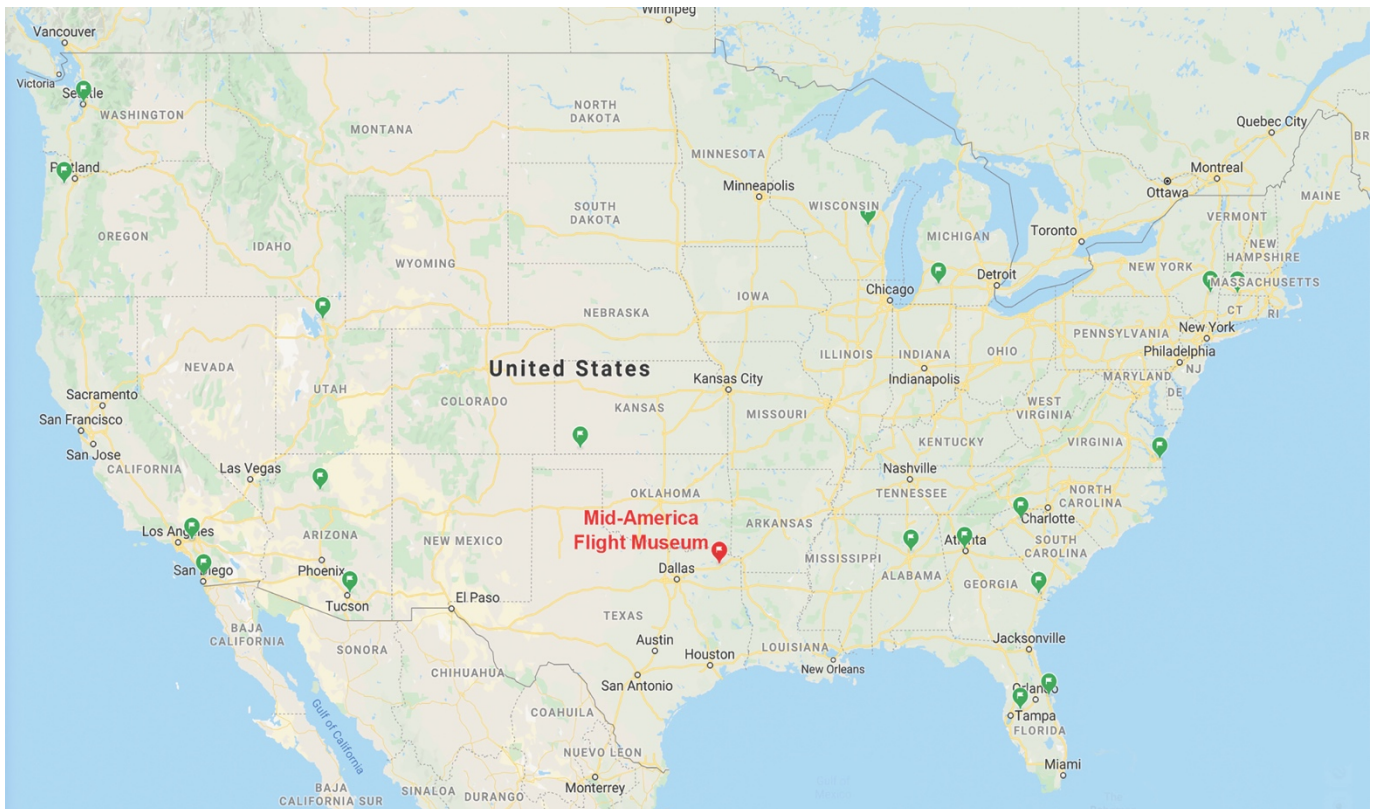
Photo at the Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome.
Courtesy Tom Pawlesh

The Best G.A.-Friendly Aviation Museums

By Mike Jones

Originally published: January 2020

My visit to the Mid-America Flight Museum started me wondering which other aviation destinations I might have missed. After all, as pilots we're always looking for someplace to fly. But can we take our Skylane to the Kennedy Space Center? Or tie-down at Wright-Patterson AFB while visiting the Air Force



If a picture is worth a thousand words, here's a truckload of verbiage in the blink of an eye: twenty aviation museums located on (or very near) GA-friendly airports. At least one must be near you. "Fire up the Skylane, honey, we're on a mission!"

Museum? And I'm 100% sure the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. — with TFRs stacked to the moon — is not exactly GA-friendly.

But all is not lost. A little research indicated I had overflowed or overlooked a host of exciting stops. There are many airplane museums across the country to which we can fly or at least get very close. This information is from my personal experience and public web sites; I urge you to call ahead to confirm general aviation access and hours of operation.

EAA AirVenture Museum — Oshkosh, WI

With more than 200 aircraft and 20,000 artifacts, this Museum is a mandatory stop for anybody interested in things with wings. It is strongest on the category of popular civil aircraft: vintage planes, home-builts, racers and stunt aircraft. Some of the more unusual planes include a Curtiss Pusher, a Bleriot XI, a Curtiss Jenny, a Pitcairn PCA-2 autogyro, a Sikorsky S-38 flying boat, and a Taylor Aerocar flying car. How to get there? A flight plan to Whitman Field (KOSH) is the logical choice.



*The museum at Oshkosh is huge and well-worth the visit. It focuses mostly on civilian aviation. During AirVenture, the Museum also offers brief M*A*S*H style helicopter rides for those patient souls willing to wait a while.*

Triple Tree Aerodrome — Woodruff, SC

This private airport features a small but worthwhile museum of flying aviation, including the one and only surviving (and glistening) Spartan Executive (see photo, below). The museum is at the north end of the 7,000 foot grass runway at Triple Tree (SC00). It is a “must-see” visit for anybody flying up and down the East Coast. Call for prior permission to land unless you are coming to one of their regularly scheduled events.



Military Aviation Museum — Virginia Beach, VA

A private airport, 42VA, is home to this museum. It offers a 5,000 foot grass runway, generally east-west. They claim to have the largest private collection of flyable World War I and World War II aircraft in the world, each fully restored. There is a P-40, a P-51, a huge PBY Catalina, a Corsair, a Skyraider and TBM Avenger along with the unique DeHavilland Dragon Rapide. In twice-yearly major airshows the aircraft fly for the public to see, hear and experience. Call for prior permission to land.

Florida Air Museum — Lakeland, FL

Visit this museum when you pop into Sun-n-Fun this April. It's located at Lakeland Linder International (KLAL). The facility includes one-of-a-kind designs, classics, ultra-lights, antiques and warbirds. The museum also highlights aviation pioneers such as Howard Hughes, the early air racers, and Floridians who have influenced the world of aviation.

Air Zoo — Portage, MI

Grease the landing at Kalamazoo/Battle Creek International Airport (KAZO) and take taxiway B3 to Michigan's Air Zoo. This museum features over a hundred rare airplanes, including a Montgolfier balloon and a Curtiss P-40 Warhawk. The museum is famous for entertaining younger kids with amusement park-style aviation rides, including a Century of Flight Ferris wheel and a Flying Circus bi-plane ride.

National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force — Pooler, GA

Here you will find more than 100 truly historic aircraft. The heart of the exhibits are planes, artifacts, archives and stories about the Eighth Air Force in World War II. The range of exhibits is impressive: from a B-17 and a Messerschmitt Bf 109G to a B-47 Stratojet, a MiG-17, and an F-4 from the Cold War. The museum is on the southwest corner of Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport (KSAV). It's too far to walk but an easy Uber or crew car jaunt.

Mid-America Air Museum, Liberal, KS

This claims to be the fifth-largest airplane museum in the United States. Liberal was a B-24 training base during World War II so it has a deep aviation history. The museum features over one hundred aircraft and 80,000 square feet of exhibits. The museum is at the Liberal Mid-America Regional Airport (KLBL).

The FBO at Lyddon Aero Center gets good reviews and apparently is a very nice facility.

Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome — Rhinebeck, NY



Old Rhinebeck has about sixty antiques on display, and many are flightworthy. The airport simulates life at a WWI airport “someplace in Europe” with vehicles, costumes and airplanes of the times. Absolutely a must-see museum in the summer months. Photo, courtesy Tom Pawlesh.

Starting with six derelict WWI planes, the Aerodrome has become America’s premier flying museum of antique aircraft. The museum’s motto is, “It isn’t an airplane if it doesn’t fly.” This museum flies airplanes you won’t see anywhere else. When I lived in the neighborhood, we would often see an impossibly slow-moving Curtiss JN-4 Jenny flying thrilled but chilled passengers over the Hudson River valley. The museum has about sixty other aircraft from the earliest times of aviation and offers small airshows on a regular basis. Private aircraft are allowed, but by prior permission only because the 2,200-foot long

field is “challenging.” Interested pilots should call ahead to speak to the Chief Pilot at 845-752-3200 for a briefing.

Pima Air & Space Museum — Tucson, AZ

This is the largest private aviation museum in the United States and maybe in the world, so wear comfortable shoes. Located on the south side of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, the spacious and dry Arizona desert makes it easy to display more than 350 dusty aircraft. Exhibits include another SR-71 Blackbird, three B-52s and a flock of exotic cargo planes. One of the most popular attractions is the Davis-Monthan Boneyard with the hulks of 4,000 retired aircraft. You can’t fly into the field, but Tucson International (KTUS) is very close.



At the Pima museum you will see planes not found in many, if any, other museums. Ever hear of the C-133, the piston-powered predecessor to the C-141 and the modern C-17? How about a B-50? Or a stubby C-14? They're all waiting for you in the sunshine just outside of Tucson.

Tico Warbird Air Museum — Titusville, FL

This museum has a growing collection of fifty warbirds, mostly of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam eras. The museum is located at the Titusville Airport (KTIX) which some marketing schmuck has confusingly renamed “Space Coast



The Tico Museum in Titusville, FL has about 50 interesting warbirds in various states of undress. When I was there this F-105, an epic fighter plane if there ever was one, was being prepped for the paint shop.

Regional.” There’s a 30,000-square-foot hangar and a splendid a restoration area, plus a Memorabilia Hall with flight gear, uniforms, weapons and artifacts. The museum features a handsome C-47, an amazing F-105 and a rare flightworthy “Twin Mustang” P-82. There are two FBOs on the field. The museum is just east of the midpoint of Runway 18/36. While you’re there, hop on a bus and visit the Kennedy Space Center. You can’t fly to it but the Vehicle Assembly Building and the “Rocket Garden” are amazing.

Hill Aerospace Museum — Ogden, UT

This facility is home to more than ninety aircraft, munitions and vehicles. Among the displays are the B-17 Flying Fortress, another SR-71C Blackbird (did you ever think you would be bored seeing another SR-71?), the muscular A-10 Thunderbolt and an early F-16. The museum is just off Interstate 15 at the northern end of Hill Air Force Base. You can’t land at Hill AFB without saying hello to some very unhappy military police, but Ogden-Hinckley Airport (OGD) is about two miles to the north so I counted that as “flyable.”

Museum of Flight — Seattle, WA

This superb museum is at the south end of Boeing Field in Seattle (KBFI). Three FBOs serve the airport so it definitely is GA-friendly. Within a hundred yards you can see both the very newest in aviation and some of the very oldest. There is a B-29, an early B-747, the Air Force One used by President Nixon, and enormous static displays in cavernous buildings. Please note this museum is busy, with over 500,000 visitors every year with a massive emphasis on educational programs for kids.



The Boeing Museum of Flight is an enormous facility with exciting displays with aircraft you have never seen before, like an SR-71 pilotless-drone from the 1960s and a Soyuz space capsule all scarred and scorched from the heat of re-entry. My friend Paul Harvey is one of the most experienced and knowledgeable guides at the Museum and he shared some wonderful aviation facts and tales.

Evergreen Aviation Museum — McMinnville, OR

Park your steed at Potcake Aviation at McMinnville Municipal Airport (KMMV) and borrow a crew car to get to the Evergreen Aviation & Space Museum across the street. Among its military and civilian aircraft and spacecraft is the Hughes H-4 Hercules, the largest prop plane ever made and popularly known as the “Spruce Goose.” An IMAX theater opened in 2007, and a second exhibit hall focusing on space technology opened in 2008.

New England Air Museum — Windsor Locks, CT

With three display hangars, the museum houses 66 aircraft and 26 helicopters at Bradley International (KBDL). The museum was badly damaged by a rare tornado in 1979 but has rebounded with new exhibits. The museum’s biggest attraction is the Sikorsky seaplane “Excambian.” Like the “Spruce



Goose” it is the only surviving example and was built by Sikorsky for trans-Atlantic service. Tac Air or Signature are the FBOs at Bradley; borrow a crew car for the five-minute drive along the airport’s perimeter road.

Southern Museum of Flight — Birmingham, AL

This museum houses more than ninety aircraft as well as engines, models, artifacts, photographs, and paintings. Notable aircraft on display include a Wright Flyer, a Curtis Pusher, a Fokker D-VII, an Alexander Eaglerock, a burly F-4 Phantom, F-86 Sabre, still another A-12 Blackbird, and the rusty “Lake Murray” B-25. The diorama honoring Alabama’s famed Tuskegee Airmen is well-worth the visit. The museum is just east of Birmingham International (KBHM), so park at Atlantic Aviation and take a five-minute taxi ride to the museum.

Planes of Fame Air Museum — Chino, CA (and Valle, AZ)

This museum has two facilities and collectively houses more than 150 aircraft, of which at least fifty are flight-worthy. The main facility still is located at the Chino Airport (KCNO), a very GA-friendly airport. The expansion to Valle (40G), near the south rim of the Grand Canyon, helps the museum display and restore still more aircraft. The Valle facility is a fine museum in its own right with more than forty of the museum’s aircraft. There are three FBOs at Chino, so hospitality is no problem. Valle is a lightly-traveled airport so simply request parking near Planes of Fame Air Museum, where they provide tie-downs.

Yanks Air Museum — Chino, CA

Chino must be a special place to host two aviation museums. The Yanks Museum, just down the runway from the Planes of Fame, is another of the world’s great aircraft collections, most of them airworthy. Painstakingly rebuilt, mechanics and craftsmen work sometimes for decades to return craft to their original state. Featured airplanes include a P-40 Warhawk and a F-86 Sabre. Again, KCNO is your destination.

San Diego Air & Space Museum — San Diego, CA

This facility is located in Balboa Park and is home to more than fifty aircraft. They have a Spitfire, a F6F Hellcat, a A-4 Skyhawk and rare aircraft from World War I and the 1920s. You can't fly into Balboa Park but the museum now has an annex at Gillespie Field in El Cajon (KSEE) which has become an integral part of the Museum's restoration program. The annex is on the north side of Gillespie Field where they have three FBOs, so they know how to welcome GA visitors.

Delta Airlines Flight Museum, Atlanta, GA

This airline-centric museum is just outside the main terminal at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport (KATL). Reopened in 2014 after a \$12 million renovation, this museum repurposes two World War II-era hangars and fills them with interesting exhibits about Delta, Pan Am, Northwest and more. Signature will be your FBO but for the more timid (or prudent) Fulton County Airport (KFTY) is about 10 miles by road. Special note: I found several other commercial airports with small museums "inside the fence" at various airports, including Charlotte Douglas (KCLT) and Mitchell Field in Milwaukee (KMKE). These may be worth investigating.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who takes both his Cessna Centurion and his light sport taildragger to grass runways whenever he can find them. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

