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We have clearance, Clarence: Take off to the Museum of Flight

By Sheri Quirt
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Remember the first time your parents put you on a plane by yourself? It was just about the coolest thing ever, wasn't it? And yet, a few hundred thousand frequent flyer miles later, the thrill is gone and you accept the experience of air travel for what it is: red-eyes, center seats, rotgut Chardonnay, and Ben Affleck movies. It only takes one instance of being stuck on a snowed-in runway in Omaha to have all the wonder of the skies sucked out of you.

The [Museum of Flight](#) will restore that sense of marvel. Just south of downtown, this field trip destination hits all the high notes: history, technology, hometown pride, and giant toys.

The Personal Courage Wing focuses on aviation in World Wars I and II. The range and condition of the collection of fighter planes – only a few are reproductions – is incredible; history class has never been such an adrenalinizing experience. The galleries house everything from WAFS (Women in the Air Force) "Girl Pilots of the Ferry Command" paper dolls to machine-gunned, Swastika-embazoned tail fins cut from Nazi plane wreckage. Learn how many kills – sorry, "victories" – it takes to be called an ace, and read up on those unsung heroes: the homing pigeons of the British Royal Air Force.

In the Red Barn (the original Boeing factory), you can follow the emergence of passenger air travel and see where early planes were assembled. Then move onto the Great Gallery to get up close to 100 years of aviation technology: a 1903 Wright Flyer reproduction, a slingshot-shaped Blackbird spy plane, the cartoonish Aerocar, and more. Check out the Apollo 11 spacesuit or hop into a flight simulator (not for the faint of heart, the pregnant, the infirm, the drug- or alcohol-dependent, and the list of restrictions goes on) that made me dizzy just watching from a distance. The nearly 60 aircrafts housed here will stretch your gravity-bound mind to its limits. No matter their size, complexity, or fragility, somehow these machines all get off the ground and stay up.

Across the street from the main museum is the Airpark, where you can board two of the world's most famous flying machines. The hour was late, and I stopped short at the fork in the road: Concorde or Air Force One? Call me shallow, but the choice of treading in Paul McCartney's wake over Ronald Reagan's was a no-brainer. I joined the other rubes in line and waited to gatecrash the grounded luxury liner. Afterwards there was still time for the presidential jet: an Eisenhower-vintage one, as it turned out, perfectly preserved with its 1960 Look magazine in the pocket and rotary phones with the Air Force insignia in the center of the dial. Also here is the first Boeing 747, which you can walk right up to, under, and around – and touch. The thrill is back.

The Museum of Flight is a bargain at \$14 for adults, and a guaranteed smash hit for kids. Go early and plan to spend a full day enjoying another of Seattle's unusual treasures.

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