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THE MUSEUM IN THE DESERT

The city of Tucson in southern Arizona is a true centre of aviation (not surprisingly, with 350 sunny days a year). The city lies on a plain, surrounded by mountains on all sides. All around are numerous civil, military and sporting airfields. Tucson is also the venue for the world's most important annual competition for F3M-class models: the flying giants.

For those who love to see aircraft on the ground, Tucson offers the Pima Air and Space Museum - a museum of aviation and space exploration situated in the south of the town, where on 26 hectares of ground fans of flying machines can see vast numbers of unique and historic craft standing in the open air and roasting in the Arizona sun. Leading exhibits include President Kennedy's Air Force One and the more valuable airplanes from the World War II era, lovingly maintained in five large original military hangars (covering almost 10 000 square metres). The aircraft collections found here are among the largest in the world. Many of them are rarities, and some are not to be found anywhere else. The museum has gained an international reputation as one of the best of its type anywhere in the world.

The Air Museum in Pima County had very modest beginnings. The idea was born in 1966, and a year later an Air Museum Foundation was registered in Tucson, as a non-profit educational organization responsible for the running of the museum. Ten years later, on 8 May 1976, during the official celebrations of the United States Bicentenary, the museum was finally opened to the public. The huge effort which went into the setting up of the museum came solely from volunteers - a group of military and civilian enthusiasts.

The museum does not receive any government subsidies, and exists solely on entrance fees, souvenir store sales, membership fees and voluntary donations.

The volunteers - the retired pilots of the aircraft - recount lovingly the details about flying and the air battles they took part in, and everyone who goes into a hangar has to have a short chat with them - you can probably guess on what subject.

With the entrance fee kept at a very reasonable rate - just \$5 - the museum is visited by close to 200 000 enthusiasts every year.

We begin our tour of the museum in Hangar 1, with the faithful replica of the 1903 Wright Flyer aircraft, which gave the Wright brothers their place in aviation history. This hangar also contains other early craft, such as Waco RNF, Fleet Model 2 and Focke-Wulf Fw-44J Stieglitz. There are also many thematic exhibitions, very popular among visitors of all ages. These include presentations on such subjects as "Women in Aviation" and "African-Americans in Aviation".

The building next door houses the Space Gallery and the Air Pantheon of the state of Arizona. You will find here a full-scale model of the X-15, an experimental rocket-powered plane which was the first to fly above the earth's atmosphere.

On leaving the Space Gallery, we pass the world's fastest jet, the SR-71 Blackbird, and approach Hangar 3. This contains a B-24 Liberator, one of only 12 surviving examples of this type of bomber anywhere in the world, as well as examples of B-25s, A-26s, TG-6s and other World War II aircraft. Just south of this building is Hangar 4, where exhibits include examples of B-29s and C-46s.

The Memorial Museum is situated in the middle part of the land occupied by the museum buildings, and contains a B-17 aircraft. A detailed presentation is given here of the operations performed by that craft during World War II in the European military theatre, when it formed part of the Eighth Air Force. This is therefore a kind of museum within a museum.

Whew! and this is only a fraction of what there is to see. With such a large exhibition space, a comfortable pair of shoes is an absolute must. A walk around the museum site takes about three hours, but you can easily spend a whole day here, and the ticket offices are so cleverly located within the souvenir store that those entering hesitate between starting their tour or first visiting the store, with its amazing quantity and variety of stickers, sew-ons, medals, T-shirts, aviation clothing, model aircraft, posters and books on flying. The only thing we missed was a bar where could get a nice cup of coffee and a piece of cake.

I left the museum greatly enriched, with new knowledge about aviation, several dozen pictures and two bags of shopping - thus aiding the Tucson Air Museum Foundation.