

Taking Flight

From the Wright Brothers' 120-foot hop in their flimsy flyer to the mighty rockets that launch astronauts into space, aviation has made incredible strides over the past 100 or so years.

You can marvel at those advances -- and in some cases feel what it's like to fly -- at historic sites, aviation museums and space flight complexes throughout the Southeast.

At the Wright Brothers National Memorial near Kitty Hawk on North Carolina's Outer Banks, you can see full-scale reproductions of the brothers' 1902 glider and their 1903 machine that made the first powered flight.

Then go outside and stand on the windswept ground where the Wrights made their flights. A large granite boulder marks the spot where their plane left the ground for the first time on Dec. 17, 1903.

The flight lasted 12 seconds and covered 120 feet. How far have we come since then? Well, if the Wright flyer took off from the wingtip of a 747 jet, it would land on the other wing with 92 feet to spare. But in its time, that first flight was a remarkable achievement.

For a birds-eye view of the entire area and the seashore to the east, climb 90-foot Kill Devil Hill, the large dune from which the Wright Brothers launched their glider flights. A 60-foot pylon commemorating their achievements stands atop the hill.

The memorial, which also has replicas of the buildings the Wrights used while living and working in the area, is open every day except Christmas.

You can get an up-close look at more modern aircraft at the Robins Air Force Base Museum of Aviation south of Macon in central Georgia. Here you'll find 93 aircraft on display plus hundreds of exhibits and you can't beat the price: admission is free.

Leave plenty of time to explore the museum's buildings, then stroll the grounds to look at the planes parked there. You'll see fighters and bombers dating back to World War II, cargo planes, missiles and the sleek SR-71 spy plane, which could cruise at three times the speed of sound and climb to 85,000 feet.

Exhibits tell the story of the Tuskegee Airmen, Korean war pilots, the U-2 spy plane and the pilots who flew the dangerous "hump" route over the Himalayan Mountains into China during World War II.

Interactive exhibits teach you what happens and why when an aircraft breaks the sound barrier. Find out what makes a helicopter work, then practice what you learned with a helicopter simulation. Creative types can make their own colorful paper airplane.

Wonder what it's like to fly a plane? You can test your skills on a computer flight simulator aboard a Cessna aircraft.

The museum is open daily except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day.

There's also no charge to visit the National Naval Aviation Museum at the Pensacola Naval Air Station on Florida's Panhandle.

The museum promotes its experience as "hands on history." Climb in a flight simulator to see what it was like to fly an F/A-18 mission in Desert Storm. Kids of all ages can experience the thrill of flight in a 15-passenger full motion simulator or in a Top Gun F-14 simulator.

For more thrills, head for the theater and watch an IMAX film on a seven-story high screen. And of course there are airplanes, about 150 in all representing Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard aviation.

If you're at the museum on a Tuesday or Wednesday morning, you might catch the Blue Angels practicing their aerial artistry. Following most Wednesday practices, the Blue Angels pilots gather in the museum to sign autographs.

The museum is closed only on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day.

Ever wonder what it feel like to be rocketed into space? You can find out at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center at Huntsville in northern Alabama.

The Space Shot takes you straight up in 2.5 seconds and subjects you to four Gs of force. You're weightless for two to three seconds, then experience a one G free fall. It's not for the little tykes, though. You have to be at least 54 inches tall to ride.

You also can take a spin -- literally -- on the G-Force Accelerator to experience three times the force of gravity. Be ready because as your speed increases, you actually rise up in your seat.

If you need something a little more tame, climb aboard the Apollo Cockpit Trainer, which simulates what it's like to be in the command module on a trip to the moon.

The center's museum features a large collection of rocket and space memorabilia, allowing visitors to trace the history of space exploration from the beginning of rocketry to today's shuttle system. An IMAX theater shows a variety of films on aviation, space and nature.

Youngsters wanting a more in-depth experience can attend one of the center's many space camps, which range from three to 13 days. There also are three- and six-day adult academies and weekend camps that children can attend with a parent.

Short of venturing beyond the stratosphere yourself, nothing brings space exploration home like watching a launch at the Kennedy Space Center on Florida's east coast.

But even if your visit doesn't coincide with a launch, there's plenty to do at the massive complex just 45 minutes from the Orlando's attractions. If you have the time, set aside a couple of days so you can see as much as possible.

The NASA Up-Close Tour takes you to the Space Shuttle launch pad and the Apollo/Saturn V Center, where you can walk next to an enormous Saturn rocket and find yourself feeling miniscule.

On the Cape Canaveral: Then & Now Tour, you'll relive the launch of America's first satellite. The general Kennedy Space Center Tour, included with your admission, features a visit to the International Space Station Center, where you can climb inside a full-scale mock-up of the station's living quarters and get a glimpse of the facility where NASA prepares the components for the space station.

For something more active, spend a day in the Astronaut Training Experience, which gives you a sampling of how astronauts prepare for a mission. You can do it individually, with your family or as part of a corporate group. If you don't have full day, sign up for "Lunch with an Astronaut."

Week-long summer day camps give youngsters a chance to meet an astronaut, tour the Space Center and experience the thrill spaceflight in motion-based simulators.

Remember, the Kennedy Space Center and Cape Canaveral are working facilities, so some tours might be altered or closed because of ongoing operations. Otherwise, it's open every day except Christmas. To learn about America's quest to understand space, there's no place like it.