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A DECADE LATER, MIDWAY MUSEUM IS STILL SEEWORTHY

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Happy birthday to us. In 2004, the decommissioned aircraft carrier Midway moved into San Diego Bay to begin its new life as a floating naval museum. Ten years later, attendance at the museum has broken 8 million, and the USS Midway Museum is celebrating its decade as a must-see tourist attraction by giving locals a birthday bonus.

For the next few months, San Diegans can board the Midway for \$10, a 50 percent discount off the regular adult admission fee and a nice price break for students and seniors as well. What does that buy you, besides another addition to your hometown bragging list? An aerobically challenging history lesson is just the beginning.

Survival tips: If your budget allows, spring for the \$10 parking lot next to the museum. Most of the nearby meters have a two-hour limit, which is not enough time to do the Midway justice. Also, you will be jelly-legged at the end of the day, so the closer the better.

About 60 percent of the exhibits are wheelchair accessible, but if you are hoofing it, you will be climbing steep ladders, negotiating narrow staircases, cramming yourself into tiny cockpits and putting in some serious walking time. Make sure your shoes are comfortable, your baggage is minimal and your flip-flops are at home where they belong.

"You can skip the gym today!" a docent said heartily as he watched me huffing up the stairs to the flight deck. I also took the liberty of skipping the gym the following day, too. My glutes salute you, Midway.

Midway must-see: Your first order of business should be the free guided tour of the captain's bridge and control tower, located atop the flight deck. The docent-led adventure puts you inside the Midway's cramped nerve centers, where tall people will get a crash course in ducking and everyone gets lessons in celestial navigation and takeoff and landing protocol. The view from the control tower is astounding and worth every sweaty step it takes to get there. The tour line can close as early as 3:30 p.m. on busy days, so schedule accordingly.

Listen up!: Admission buys you access to a first-rate, self-guided audio tour, which feeds you sound bites about everything from the workings of the bomb elevator to the temperature of the steam in the engine room.

Make sure your wanderings take you to the second, third and fourth decks, where the 4,500 crew members slept, ate, sent their mail and got their teeth cleaned. Highlights include a re-creation of the chow line (complete with plastic French toast); a cookbook open to the famous chipped beef recipe; and the sprawling sick bay, where you can peek into an operating room and take a selfie while perched on an examining table.

"This is the real deal," said Jamie McNeal, who was visiting from Phoenix with her husband and their two children. "People lived here. People were in the chapel praying for their families and praying for their fellow sailors. When do you ever get to do something like this? It's awesome."

Fun on deck: In addition to being home to the awesome captain's bridge and control tower, the flight deck is the place where the carrier action is. Most popular photo opportunity? You giving a thumbs up from the cockpit of the T-2 Buckeye. Best "Top Gun" moment? When you stand next to the F-14 Tomcat and hum "Danger Zone" to yourself. Most daring view? The one from the flight deck's "horns," two fenced-in ramps that jut out directly over the bay. Your "Titanic" moment is now.

Show and Tell of a lifetime? That would be the docents' blow-by-blow accounts of how one launches and lands aircraft on an aircraft carrier.

"There is nothing pretty about it," former naval flight officer Tim Verhoef told the visitors who gathered around for his dramatic landing talk, one of the many that are held throughout the day. "You could call it a controlled crash."

Most valuable historians: No matter where you are on the Midway, there is a docent ready to share a memory, explain how an ejection seat works or plan your entire day for you. They are knowledgeable, enthusiastic and happy to talk to anyone about anything. They were at our service then, and they are at our service now.

“I just love meeting people and talking about my experiences and answering their questions,” said George Stout, a former machinist mate doing docent duty in the Midway’s engine room. “And if I don’t know the answer, I can make up a good story.”

The verdict: You don’t have to be a history buff or plane enthusiast to appreciate the Midway, but if you need an endorsement from a man who knows his military stuff, 90-year-old Robert Kellogg is happy to oblige.

“I’ve never been on an aircraft carrier before, and I’m extremely impressed,” said the former Navy signalman, who was visiting from Costa Mesa and having no trouble with the Midway’s stairs and ladders. “This is really something to see.”

If you go: The Midway is at 910 N. Harbor Drive. It is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., except for Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. Last admission is 4 p.m. Call (619) 544-9600 for info.

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