

November/December 2004

U.S. Space & Rocket Center

by
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Visitors come from around the world to The U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville to see and learn about objects that have traveled farther than our world.



The center, originally called the Alabama Space & Rocket Center, attracts about half a million visitors a year, making it Alabama's top tourist attraction. Between 80-85 percent of these tourists are from out of state, said Al Whitaker, the center's manager of media and public relations.

The idea for the center was launched in the 1960's by Dr. Wernher von Braun, who was then serving as director of Huntsville's Marshall Space Flight Center.

It was only one of the brilliant ideas launched by von Braun, who is often called the architect of America's space program. Before his death in 1977, he and his team designed the Saturn rocket system and was the guiding force behind the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programs. Von Braun proposed a joint NASA-U.S. Army Missile Command museum that would showcase artifacts from the space program. The idea

was approved in 1968, and the center opened in 1970 on land the U.S. Army donated from its Redstone Arsenal complex.

Today the center is a mixture of museum and amusement park.

Those who want to be awed by the history of the space program can look up at the shell of a 363-foot Saturn V rocket that took Americans to the moon or at the nation's only full-scale space shuttle exhibit. Until the middle of May, they can also examine the center's newest exhibit, a full restored V2 rocket. There are even impressive exhibits that didn't journey into outer space, such as the world's fastest jet, the \$200-million SR-71 Blackbird, capable of flying greater than three times the speed of sound. Altogether, the center has more than 1,500 rocket and space artifacts, including many hands-on exhibits.

For those interested in rides of fun rather than exploration, there are numerous amusement park-style rides including Mission to Mars, an enclosed capsule holding up to 30 people, which combines movie effects with actual movement to mimic a space flight.

There's also the Space Shot, a 180-foot tower that allows about a dozen people at a time to experience around a second and a half of weightlessness, a zero gravity ride and an energy depletion zone full of rides for younger children.

But the space center attraction that has really taken off is Space Camp, which will celebrate its 20-year anniversary during Memorial Day weekend. "Space Camp," the 1986 movie which starred Kate Capshaw, Lea Thompson, Tom Skerritt and Kelly Preston, was filmed at Huntsville's Space Camp. It didn't make much of an impression on critics, but it did on the Space Camp attendance. Attendance at the camp, which began with 747 students in 1982, increased to about 12,000 a year after the film.

Today, there have been around 400,000 graduates, and Huntsville's program has led to Space Camp programs being started in Florida and California, as well as Japan, Belgium, Canada, and Turkey. [<http://www.spacecamp.com/>]

