

OUT + ABOUT/CITY ADVENTURES

Beyond the Museum: Kids and Families Learn at America's Car Museum

Classic cars, STEM activities, summer camps and more!

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PUBLISHED ON: JUNE 05, 2024



PHOTO: Get behind the wheel at the LeMay – America's Car Museum. Credit: ACM

Editor's note: This article was sponsored by [America's Automotive Trust](https://www.americasautomotivetrust.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) (https://www.americasautomotivetrust.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content).

The appeal for car enthusiasts is obvious, but even if you're not crazy about cars, LeMay – America's Car Museum (ACM) has something to offer everyone. Filling the four story building, their curated selection of the late Harold LeMay's [record-breaking car collection](https://lemaymarymount.org/) (<https://lemaymarymount.org/>) ensures that behind the cars themselves, there's a lot to learn at America's Car Museum.

"Everyone in the United States, we all have car stories – stories of cars we grew up with, maybe ones we learned how to drive, or we have memories of road trips. We try to feature those relatable cars, and at the same time we try to bring in ones that are exciting," says Kelsey Cross, education manager at ACM.



LeMay – America's Car Museum. Photo: ACM

The 300–350 cars on display at ACM help tell the story of America's love affair with the automobile. Visitors can see early automobiles with designs borrowed from horse-drawn carriages. They can see cars rarely encountered on the streets, such as DeLoreans, made famous in "Back to the Future," or take a picture with the actual car used in the Flintstones movie (it's a golf cart in a costume). The permanent displays are supplemented with rotating themed exhibits such as "Shinka." This exhibition, featuring tiny kei cars designed for narrow Japanese streets and the Subaru Brat, a quirky pickup truck whose design owes as much to tax structures as the needs of the American market, explores the role of Japanese automakers.

"Not everyone is a gearhead, but we still want people to get excited when they come to the car museum so most of our educational program revolves around STEAM – science, technology, engineering, art and math," says Cross.

Sometimes the story of the automobile is literally about steam. Visitors can look under the hood of a 1919 Stanley Steamer (yes, the carpet cleaning company) to see the water drum that generated steam to power the vehicle. ACM hosts a variety of activities and events that further tell the story of the science of cars.

Family STEAM Days

On the third Saturday of each month, families can participate in drop-in STEAM workshops with a different theme each month. Although the activities are designed for elementary and middle schoolers, they are adaptable to all ages and many families end up staying longer than they expected as their teens get deeply absorbed building their own car designs, constructing Rube Goldberg machines, or applying physics principles to build boats or rockets. Participation in workshops is free thanks to Tacoma Creates, and on Family STEAM Days, museum admission is also free for anyone younger than 18.



Getting creative at LeMay – America's Car Museum. Photo: ACM

“If Cars Could Talk” and Little Spark Plugs

Also on third Saturdays, the “If Cars Could Talk” lecture series covers all kinds of topics, from alternative fuels to the rally racing scene in 1980s Tacoma and even the history of hood ornament art.

“The topic can be anything that is automobile-adjacent,” says Cross.

Although the talks are geared to adults, some of the topics – for example, 16-year-old [Emy Kissick's upcoming talk](https://www.americascarmuseum.org/event/if-cars-could-talk-a-16-year-olds-racing-dreams/) (<https://www.americascarmuseum.org/event/if-cars-could-talk-a-16-year-olds-racing-dreams/>), about her journey to become a race car driver – will be as interesting to teens and even tweens as to their parents. But for kids who are too young to listen to lectures, Storytime for Little Spark Plugs is aimed squarely at the pre-K set. Scheduled on first Tuesdays, this free monthly program includes a child-friendly tour of the museum followed by stories and craft time in the classroom. Afterwards, families are free to play in the Family Zone. Since these events take place when the museum is closed to the public, “Our hope is that it gives a better chance not only for the kiddos to explore but for the caregivers to also explore and maybe socialize a little bit with each other,” says Cross.

Family Zone

Outside of scheduled events, the Family Zone provides a hands-on educational experience any time you visit the museum.

“We try to make that space as tactile as possible. I’m a big proponent of learning with your hands and learning through doing. It’s very important that we have those experiences in the museum,” says Cross. The Family Zone contains an art station, a big US map with tracks that very young kids can move cars around on and a chassis with labeled parts.

“Folks can test pinewood derby cars and learn about aerodynamics and what makes a car fast, and a little bit about center of weight and gravity,” says Cross. This is also the only part of the museum that contains cars you can touch and sit inside.

“Powering the Future’ is another hands-on exhibit in the museum,” says Cross. “It has learning modules where folks can learn about the different types of fuels that cars use to get from point A to point B, as well as the environmental and social impacts of those fuels.” Combining the history and science of how cars work, the exhibit encourages families to explore the complexities of energy and transportation infrastructure by showing how gasoline is not the only option, while identifying the challenges in switching to new technology. It even includes a prototype solar-powered car designed by university students.



Engaging in STEM activities at LeMay – America’s Car Museum. Photo: ACM

Summer camp for serious kids who love cars

If your kid is obsessed with cars, you’ve probably already been to the museum. But once a year, there’s a chance for them to go deeper. From July 15–19 ACM’s [Summer STEM Intensive](https://www.americascarmuseum.org/learn/youth-family-programs/summer-camps/) (<https://www.americascarmuseum.org/learn/youth-family-programs/summer-camps/>) day camp gives middle schoolers a chance to build and race pinewood derby cars, go for a ride in some of the museum’s oldest cars, and even learn how to break down and rebuild a small engine.

Whether you are a family of gearheads or devotees of public transportation, a trip to ACM will add to your collection of car stories while your family picks up STEAM.

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