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Travel

More than 1,500 ways to celebrate Museum Day on Sept. 2

By [Andrea Sachs](#)

September 12

Sept. 21 is a festive day. Celebrations that fall on the third Saturday of the month include International Red Panda Day and Oktoberfest, which starts in September despite its name. However, if you're seeking a bit more culture than a pint with a ginger-haired tree climber, consider penciling in [Museum Day](#).

The special event, which Smithsonian magazine started 15 years ago, provides free admission at more than 1,500 museums and cultural centers in all 50 states and the District. Participants can choose among eight categories including history, art, science, air and space, and zoos and gardens.

"This event is important as it highlights the culture, history, science, art and nature that each state has to offer," said Amy Wilkins, chief revenue officer at Smithsonian Media. "Museum Day celebrates the extraordinary power of museums to provide visitors with insight and inspiration, and represents a national commitment to access, equity and inclusion."

To acquire a ticket for two, you must reserve online. Be sure to print out your confirmation in case the institution does not accept virtual tickets. Only one ticket per email address is allowed.

Several stalwarts are participating in Museum Day, such as the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and, of course, the members of the Smithsonian family. However, many of the options have a lower profile and a close connection to their hometown or region. Here are 10 uncommon picks to consider.

- **Ava Gardner Museum** in Smithfield, N.C.: The Hollywood star and North Carolina native apparently once quipped, "I never understood why I was so famous." The museum, which a former Columbia Pictures publicist originally opened in Gardner's childhood home, explains why through costumes, movie posters and her personal effects, including china, jewelry, clothing and artwork. While in town, pay respects to the leading lady at Sunset Memorial Park.

- **Abbe Museum** in Bar Harbor, Maine: The first and only Smithsonian Affiliate in Maine honors the culture, art and traditions of the Wabanaki, the confederation of four nations who have deep roots in central Maine and parts of eastern Canada. The main exhibit, “People of the First Light,” provides a comprehensive overview of 12,000 years of history. For a moment of contemplation, grab a seat in the Circle of the Four Directions and listen to the creation story of Koluskap and the Ash Tree as told in the languages of the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy/Maliseet and Micmac people.

- **Antique Boat Museum** in Clayton, N.Y.: Set in the Thousand Islands on the St. Lawrence River, the museum taps into the local sport and pastime of boating. The attraction houses more than 300 vessels dating from the mid-19th century onward and touches on all modes of water transportation, including skiffs, canoes, motorboats and a 106-foot houseboat. If you are itching to get on the water, hitch a ride on the Miss 1000 Islands II, a 30-foot triple-cockpit Hacker-Craft, or watch the sun drop aboard a 1953 Chris-Craft cruiser.

- **Old Idaho Penitentiary** in Boise, Idaho: The jail, which opened in 1872, held what the site describes as “some of the West’s most desperate criminals.” Guests can explore 30 historical buildings and special exhibits including “Faces of the Idaho State Penitentiary,” a who’s who of inmates; “Marked Men,” which delves into the art and practice of prison tattooing; and “Crafty Cons,” about the Etsy-esque hobbies of the prisoners.

- **USS Hornet Sea, Air and Space Museum** in Alameda, Calif.: The aircraft carrier racked up the awards, earning nine Battle Stars for Pacific service in World War II. Now in retirement, she shares her war stories with visitors who, at least for the engine room tour, must be at least 48 inches tall. Guests can also poke around more than 15 historical aircraft, many of which departed from the Hornet. In addition, the museum ship hosts sleepovers that might involve some bumps in the night. Waves — or ghosts?

- **Dr. Willella Howe-Waffle House and Medical Museum** in Santa Ana, Calif: The restored Queen Anne Victorian home doesn’t serve breakfast but its costumed docents do dish out plenty of tales about one of Orange County’s first female doctors. Howe started practicing medicine in the late 1800s and, over a nearly 40-year career, delivered more than 1,000 babies. As for the Waffle: That was her second husband’s last name.

- **Birds of Vermont Museum** in Huntington, Vt.: If the birds seem a little wooden, that’s because they are. Hundreds of avian models

fill air and shelf space, plus two dioramas starring shore and wetland species. Museum founder Bob Spear contributed hundreds of his carvings, including a wild turkey that took him 1,300 hours to complete and a bald eagle that required 400 hours of effort. Look for real feathered friends along forested trails and in pollinator-friendly gardens.

- **Connections Museum** in Seattle: Ring, ring. Ring, ring. Answer the call and learn about the phone before the “i” took over the telecommunications industry. See the telephone’s inner workings, including switchboards, poles, cables and splicing equipment, as well as examples of the endangered species called the landline. The museum is open only on Sundays and will celebrate Museum Day on Sept. 22.
- **Burlesque Hall of Fame** in Las Vegas: The world’s only burlesque museum gives a wink and a shimmy to the oft-saucy theatrical art form. The repository contains costumes, props, photos and such celeb artifacts as Gypsy Rose Lee’s pin cushion and Dita Von Teese’s giant martini glass. The exhibits aren’t just eye candy; they feed the brain, too. To wit, “Dancing the Revolution: Feminism in Burlesque History.” Inspired guests can sharpen their own burlesque skills in the Bawdy Shop Studio.
- **West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center** in Brownsville, Tenn: Squeeze the most out of Museum Day with four museums, one home (the final residence of Blues great “Sleepy” John Adam Estes) and hundreds of pieces of Lincoln memorabilia housed in the heritage center. Highlights include a collection of cotton-picking baskets at the West Cotton Tennessee Museum, outfits worn by Elvis at the West Tennessee Music Museum, a trio of aquariums at the Hatchie River Museum and the high school yearbook of Anna Mae Bullock, the Queen of Rock and Roll who headlines the Tina Turner Museum at Flagg Grove School, her childhood schoolhouse.

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Andrea Sachs has written for Travel since 2000. She has reported from nearby places such as Ellicott City, Md., and the Jersey Shore, and from far-flung locations, including Burma, Namibia and Russia. Follow 

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