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[Reno's museums are a good bet](#)

- Connie Emerson

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I don't know about you, but big museums overwhelm me. Too many things to see. Too little time. That's why I like Reno's specialty museums: They're manageable.

But size isn't the only reason. They also contain exhibits worth seeing -- like those at the Wilbur D. May Museum, which tell the story of an inveterate collector.

The tale begins in the pre- Depression months of 1929 when Wilbur, son of the May Department Stores' founder, decided to sell his stocks and travel around the world. More than 30 trips and safaris later, he had accumulated enough trinkets and treasures to fill a museum -- and fortunately for Reno, May had established his home base just south of town in 1936.

Built in 1985, three years after his death, the 10,000-square-foot May Museum in Rancho San Rafael Regional Park holds everything from priceless objets d'art to gimcrack curios. Six galleries (Europa, Oceania, Far East, South Asia, Africa and America) contain artifacts as well as dioramas featuring indigenous stuffed animals. Since May rarely collected just one of anything, cases are crammed with T'ang Dynasty animals and African masks; hundreds of Oriental miniatures, dozens of pistols and rifles. Gobelin tapestries and Navajo rugs are among objects decorating the walls.

Replicas of four rooms at May's Double Diamond Ranch add to the story of his travels and daily life. Animal lovers will abhor the trophy room full of lion, tiger and bear rugs, ivory tusks and furniture made of animal parts from his African safaris. Oils painted by May hang in the living room, while a recording of "Pass a Piece of Pizza Please" (written with comic Jerry Colonna) provides background music. The ranch tack room and May's bedroom are the other re-creations.

Gambling magnate William F. Harrah was a collector, too. His antique auto collection included 1,500 vehicles. When Harrah died in 1978, most of the vehicles were sold, but the Holiday Corp., which had purchased Harrah's, donated 175 vehicles, and a state-of-the-art building was constructed to house them.

The collection's stars -- including the 1907 Thomas Flyer, winner of the 1908 New York to Paris race -- shine in individual displays at the National Automobile Museum: The Harrah Collection. The other vehicles -- most in mint condition -- appear in rotation on the "streets" in



three galleries.

Each street -- complete with storefront facades and period memorabilia -- represents a different era of the 20th century. A classic gray Buick touring car and an early day pump-and-ladder truck may be parked along the plank sidewalks of the Turn-of-the-Century Street.

Highlights of the 1930s Street are its Mobilgas pump with red Pegasus logo, art nouveau marquee of Palace Theatre and cars like the gorgeous blue Packard convertible and cream-colored cab with scarlet trim at the taxi stand. A permanent crowd-pleaser on the '50s Street is the re-creation of a Union 76 service station. On each of the streets, a multimedia time line of events and achievements chronicles the history and progress of the automobile.

Among other don't-miss Reno treasures are the antique slot machines at the Liberty Belle Restaurant and Saloon. They're displayed, along with other coin-operated machines, Tiffany lamps and music boxes, in Barbary Coast surroundings. The centerpiece of the collection, the Liberty Bell, was invented in 1895 in San Francisco by Charles Fey, grandfather of the establishment's proprietors.

Rockhounds are advised to head for the W. M. Keck Museum on the University of Nevada-Reno campus, which displays specimens of minerals that have made mining one of the state's leading industries. The collection was originally endowed by Comstock Lode miner John Mackay, who along with business partner, James Fair, discovered the largest silver deposit on the North American continent.

WILBUR D. MAY MUSEUM, Rancho San Rafael Regional Park, 1595 N. Sierra., Reno. (775) 785-5961, www.maycenter.com. Winter hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wed.-Sat., noon-5 p.m. Sun. Admission fees vary by exhibits.

THE NATIONAL AUTOMOBILE MUSEUM: The Harrah Collection, 10 S. Lake St., Reno. (775) 333-9300, www.automuseum.org. 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Mon.-Sat., 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Sun. \$3-\$9.

W. M. KECK EARTH SCIENCE AND MINERAL ENGINEERING MUSEUM, Mackay School of Mines, University of Nevada-Reno, Center and Ninth streets. (775) 784-4528, mines.unr.edu/museum. 9 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays. Free.

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