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LIFESTYLE | TRAVEL

'It's Pretty Horrific but Fascinating Nonetheless.' Inside the New Wave of Atomic Tourism.

As two major movies about the atomic era hit screens, Americans curious about a controversial time are flocking to 1950s nuclear test sites, paying $425 to sleep in decommissioned missile silos and ordering 'B-Reactor Brownies'

By Bob Davis Follow

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THERE ARE LOTS of reasons to go to Las Vegas. Atomic tourism might be the most unusual.

Three times a month, thanks to free tours offered by the U.S. Department of Energy—their seats snapped up within hours—a busload of tourists heads to a Nevada desert test site 65 miles away, where they marvel at the lake-sized Sedan Crater created in 1962 by the below-ground explosion of a 104-kiloton hydrogen bomb. They see trenches where 1950s U.S. soldiers sat as an atomic bomb exploded overhead—a way to gauge how troops would perform on a nuclear battlefield.

"It's pretty horrific but fascinating nonetheless," said Ryan Tardi, a 43-year-old Canadian aviation buff, who planned a Vegas visit for this tour of the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS).

That same fascination is driving other popular attractions, like the Titan Missile Museum in Green Valley, Ariz., where ticket sales are double pandemic lows. Traffic is also up at the Atomic Museum, near the Las Vegas Strip, that has expanded its hours of operation after 10 straight months of visitor growth. Visitors pore over Cold-War-era comic books and toys like an "Atomic Disintegrator" gun in the Atomic Pop Culture exhibit.

Luxury travelers are also tapping into the trend, booking a weekend at a missile-silo-turned-modernized-retreat in Vilonia, Ark., or heading to the posh Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia to tour its Cold War-era secret bunkers, built to hold both Houses of Congress in the event of a nuclear emergency.

GATED COMMUNITY The entrance of the Nevada National Security Site. PHOTO: NEVADA NATIONAL SECURITY SITE

Across the U.S., both the curious and the zealous can find dozens more markers of the atomic age, such as the Manhattan Project National Historical Park, which opened in 2015 and ties together sites in New Mexico, Tennessee and Washington state crucial to the World War II push to build nuclear weapons. The N.M.-based White Sands Missile Range Museum, where the first atomic bomb was tested, reopened in May to a record turnout. Attendance is also up postpandemic, according to manager Niki Nicholas, at the Oak Ridge, Tenn., site, which has a whole new slate of summer events including hikes, lectures and dancing at local tennis courts—inspired by the public dances held there during the Manhattan Project's heyday, said Oak Ridge historian D. Ray Smith.

Atomic tourism is nearly as old as the nuclear age, and some of its favorite vintage haunts are still open. In the 1950s, Las Vegas casinos hosted "atomic parties" on their rooftops so revelers could see the dawn sky light up from an explosion and held "Miss Atomic Bomb" pageants. Atomic Liquors, a downtown Vegas fixture since 1952, continues to serve its rum Nevada Test Shots ($7).

In the same spirit, the menu at the Atomic Ale Brewpub & Eatery near Hanford, Wash., where workers constructed the world's first nuclear production reactors that produced the plutonium used in the Trinity Test, includes a B-Reactor Brownie ($7) and Atomic Grinder sandwich ($12).

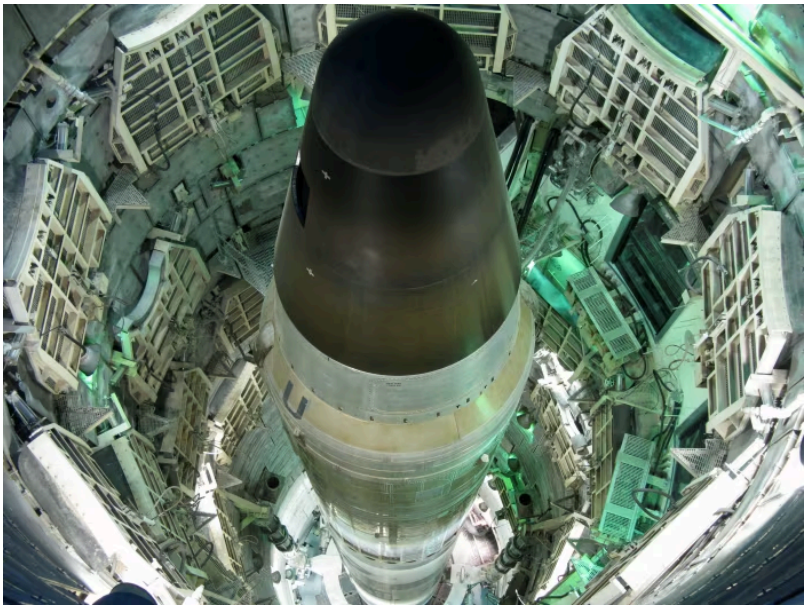
Tourists visit the Trinity Site on April 1, 2023 at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. A steel casing, similar to the one used for the Fatman atomic bomb, is on display.

ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

And while Russian President Vladimir Putin’s threats against Ukraine offer sober reminders that nuclear weapons are hardly remote vestiges of the past, two new Hollywood movies spotlight their historical (and deeply nostalgic) significance. The first, Wes Anderson’s “Asteroid City,” its trailer showing an A-bomb exploding, opens June 16. The second, Christopher Nolan’s “Oppenheimer,” about J. Robert Oppenheimer, the key Manhattan Project figure, follows on July 21. (Read more in “Summer Bombs or Blockbusters?”)

“Whenever there is talk about nuking, people get interested in the atomic bomb,” said Michael Wiescher, a nuclear physicist at the University of Notre Dame who sees enrollment go up in his “Nuclear War” course when it’s in the news. His colleague Ani Aprahamian finds atomic tourism a curious phenomenon. “I’m a nuclear physicist and would find going to a test site fascinating in any case,” she said, “but perhaps it’s nostalgia or a desire to understand that drives others.”

Today, atomic tourism draws travelers who like to see the way things work. Polly Roberts, an interior designer, and her husband Rex Swain, a software developer, visited the Titan Missile Museum on a trip to Tucson, Ariz. The couple, who live in Washington, Conn., routinely include tours of infrastructure monoliths like the Hoover Dam on a trip, “to see the scale and engineering of things that go into it,” said Roberts.



At the Titan Missile Museum, visitors can look down into the nine-story launch duct to see the Titan II standing 103 feet tall. PHOTO: TITAN MISSILE MUSEUM

Taking the 45-minute tour, which involves a simulated nuclear missile launch, “was a great illustration of the military industrial complex and the staggering amount of money spent on it,” said Swain. During the Cold War, 54 missile silos were built and never used, which their tour guide described as “a success story,” missiles being an incentive against the “mutually assured destruction” of an atomic bomb.

Those who nab seats on the NNSS bus tour confront, in a sense, the level of destruction a nuclear bomb wreaks. Test-site veterans serve as vivid guides and, since cellphones are barred, take photos of the groups. These secretive measures add to the Cold War vibe, as did a Predator drone that flew alongside the NNSS bus tour as it passed Creech Air Force Base, a training center for drone pilots. “Kind of cool,” said Chandler Pohl, a Las Vegas attorney.

Parts of the NNSS test site seem frozen in time. There are faux neighborhoods of houses packed with appliances, food and mannequins created so scientists could study the impact of detonations on materials. From 1951 to 1962, the U.S. exploded 100 nuclear devices above this site, and another 828 under the earth until 1992, producing craters that pockmark the landscape. The largest, the Sedan Crater, was created by a blast designed to show nuclear bombs could be used for excavation, including for a new Panama canal.

Though yellow signs reading “Caution Radioactive Material” still mark where bombs exploded, guides assure visitors they aren’t in danger and needn’t wear radiation-exposure badges.

Reflecting on his trips to two of the Manhattan Project sites, Zach Crouch, 30, a former portfolio manager, said it comes down to his interest in “things off the beaten path. Plus, the development of nuclear weapons changed the whole fabric of how society exists.”

ILLUSTRATION: ILLUSTRATION: MAX-O-MATIC; GETTY IMAGES (FALLOUT SIGN, ALAMOGORDO, CAKE); US DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY/HANFORD HISTORY PROJECT (MANHATTAN PROJECT NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK)

5 Tourist-Friendly Atomic Locales to Visit

Our curiosity about the Cold War era has only grown with once-secret weapons and bunkers now on display. Where to go:

The ‘Pop Culture’ exhibit at the Atomic Museum in Nevada. PHOTO: ATOMIC MUSEUM

1. Pop Culture Club

Not far from the Las Vegas Strip, the Smithsonian-affiliated Atomic Museum lays out the history of the Nevada Test Site, augmented with displays of serious and silly artifacts such as the Davy Crockett XM-388 “atomic watermelon” weapon or the “Atomic Disintegrator” toy gun. *$29 per person, AtomicMuseum.Vegas*

2. Mad for Missiles

Launch complex 571-7 in Green Valley, Ariz., was one of 54 Cold War-era Titan Missile II bases capable of launching nine megaton thermonuclear warheads to targets over 6,000 miles away. Now, the Titan Missile Museum lets you peer down the 146-foot silo and go underground for a simulated launch and peek at a decommissioned Titan II missile. *$16.50 per person, TitanMissileMuseum.org*

3. Snooze Control

Missileers were so well known for getting comfy on their long subterranean shifts that uniform patches were created bearing the motto "Death Wears Bunny Slippers." Titan Ranch, a decommissioned base in Vilonia, Ark., was converted into a luxe, 3,500-square-foot Airbnb you can rent overnight. Don't forget your bunny slippers. *From $425 per night, or book a one-hour tour, TitanRanch.com*

The Greenbrier's bunk beds for members of Congress.

4. Bunker Down

In the late '50s, a 153-room bunker was built underground at the fancy Greenbrier Resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., to accommodate both Houses of Congress in the event of a nuclear attack. A secret until 1992, it is now open for tours. *$40 per person, Greenbrier.com*

5. History In the Making

Sites in three states make up the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. Stephen Ambrose Historical Tours, established by the late "Band of Brothers" author, offers a nine-day cross-country tour hitting them all with insights from historians and local experts in October 2024. *From $4,490, StephenAmbroseTours.com*

—Matthew Kronsberg

Summer Bombs or Blockbusters?

We asked two nuclear physicists for their perspective on new Hollywood films that touch upon atomic themes

Set during the dawn of the nuclear age., Wes Anderson's 'Asteroid City' has a Necco-Wafer-hued nostalgia for the era PHOTO: POP. 87 PRODUCTIONS/FOCUS FEATURES

Summer blockbuster season will venture beyond wisecracking superheroes this year with two movies involving the atomic bomb: "Asteroid City" (June 16) is Wes Anderson's cinematic jaunt into a desert town hosting "Asteroid Day" during the Cold War era; "Oppenheimer" (July 21) by Christopher Nolan centers on physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Manhattan Project scientists at the Los Alamos National Laboratory who developed the atom bomb in the early 1940s.

Michael Wiescher, for one, isn't surprised by Hollywood's interest. The nuclear physicist, who has taught a course on nuclear war at the University of Notre Dame since the 1990s, has seen interest grow periodically, from the post-9/11 war in Afghanistan and the talk of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq to the recent threat by Vladimir Putin to use nuclear weapons in the war with Ukraine. "People see the sign of the times," said Wiescher, who is curious about Nolan's film, having read "American Prometheus," the 2005 book on which it is based.

Cillian Murphy in 'Oppenheimer' PHOTO: UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

In his lectures, Wiescher uses movies to illustrate principles, screening James Cameron's "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" (1991), for example, for its depiction of an atomic bomb blast. "It's a dream sequence and you see the three different velocities associated with an explosion: the flash of light, the sound, and the heat wave coming and people burning," he said. "It's pretty realistic."

Other movies, such as low-budget ’50s films driven by the paranoia about radiation’s effects on nature (see the giant ants in 1954’s “Them!” or 1958’s “The Attack of the 50 Foot Woman”) reflect how the bomb became fodder for mass entertainment. “The movies are as B-class as it gets,” he said.

As for the current crop of films, Sydney-based physicist Chris Ferrie, co-author of “Nuclear Physics for Babies,” argues that “the midcentury era, with its iconic aesthetics, societal changes and technological leaps” is experiencing a renaissance in pop culture. “We face challenges mirroring those in the atomic era,” said Ferrie. “It’s a cultural trend rather than a niche interest, which filmmakers are capitalizing on.”

—Donna Bulseco

Corrections & Amplifications

The Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia gives tours of secret bunkers built in the 1950s to hold both Houses of Congress in the event of a nuclear emergency. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the bunkers are from the World War II era. (Corrected on June 5)

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