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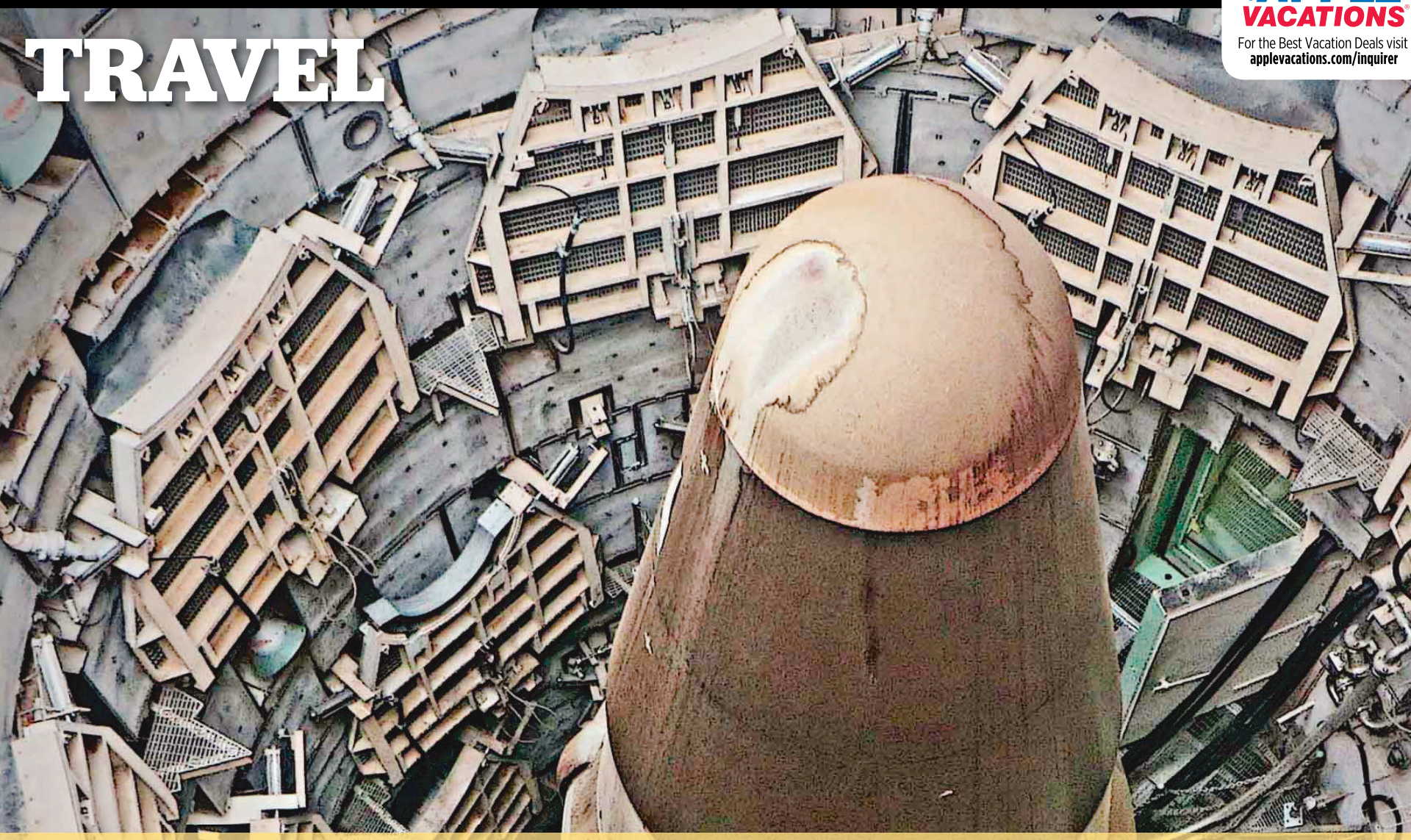


ECHOES OF THE COLD WAR

With guides leading the way, reminders of a scarier time in history are evident in the Arizona desert.

TOP: A Titan missile at the Launch Complex 571-7 at the Titan Missile Museum in Sahuarita, Ariz., 12 miles outside Tucson.
ABOVE: Radiation suits are part of the exhibits giving the site a 1960s feel. LARISSA MILNE

By Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

TUCSON, Ariz. — The Sonoran Desert surrounding Tucson is a hauntingly beautiful place. Majestic saguaro cactus forests rise from a landscape that reveals an unexpected array of plant and animal life. For years, visitors and new residents have been drawn to its sweeping vistas. This desert, though, is about not only nature, but also human nature — at its most maleficent.

Burrowed in a bunker deep beneath the scrub and the scurrying lizards, I prepared to turn the launch key for a Titan missile. I couldn't believe how nervous I felt. After all, the missile was topped with a dummy warhead and was no longer programmed to wipe out an undisclosed location in the former Soviet Union. So, really, what could go wrong? Still, it's easy to imagine the thoughts of the men and women who had trained for such a day, a simple twist of the wrist hurling an apocalyptic weapon skyward.

The Cold War may have ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but remnants of it are visible in the Arizona desert, which became

See **TUCSON** on N4

The Boneyard — the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group (AMARG), which can be toured at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tuscon, Ariz. LARISSA MILNE

Where Cold War sites are still hot

TUCSON from N1

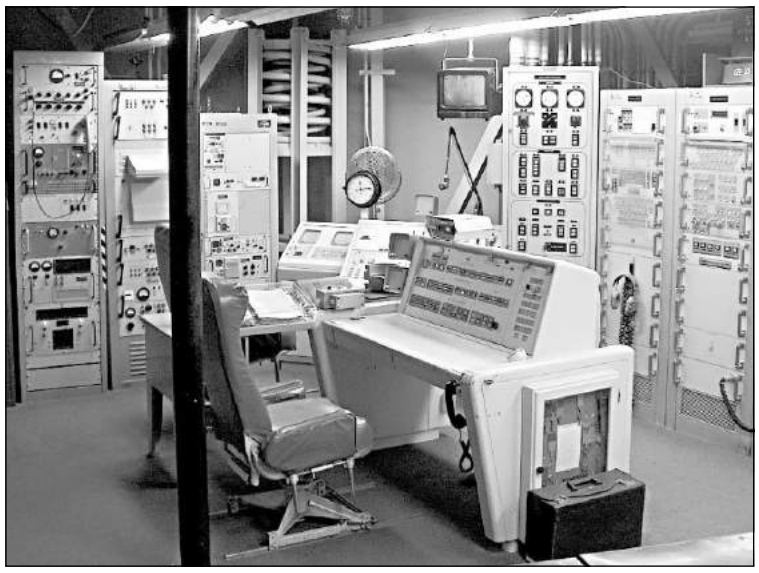
a strategic setting. When the United States and the Soviet Union regularly engaged in saber-rattling, Tucson played a key role as a deterrent to conflict. During the era when MAD (mutual assured destruction) was the normal course of business between the two superpowers, 54 Titan II missile sites were on active alert across America; 18 of those encircled Tucson.

Launch Complex 571-7 of the Titan Missile Museum, in Sahuarita, 12 miles south of the city, is a sobering reminder of how close the country came to pulling the nuclear trigger. Visitors start their tour by descending a set of metal steps more than 100 feet deep into the bunker, protected behind a set of hardened blast doors. As if to show that danger isn't delivered only from the sky, the entrance is clearly marked by a sign warning, "Watch out for rattlesnakes."

The guides are former Air Force personnel, many of whom were missile crew members who worked and lived underground during the Cold War. In addition to the daily tours, a monthly Director's Tour is led by Yvonne Morris, head of the museum and a former Titan II Missile Combat Crew commander herself. She takes visitors into the launch control center, which, with its vast array of blinking mainframe computers and rotary dial phones, feels like a time tunnel to 1963, or perhaps something out of a cheesy science-fiction film. In fact, the museum was a setting in the 1996 film *Star Trek: First Contact*; in its cameo role, the missile was transformed into a warp drive spaceship.

Across the room, a standard government-issue metal file cabinet painted bright red held the top-secret launch codes that the crew would have used to send the missile skyward.

Tunnels lit by sputtering fluorescent lights turn off at right angles, giving the space the look of an oddly illuminated ant colony. Signs throughout indicate "No Lone Zone. Two Man Policy Mandatory" — an extra security measure designed to prevent a rogue crew member from tinkering with the equipment. At the end of one tunnel, the actual Titan missile looms overhead, still poised to reach supersonic speed in seconds. Visitors also access the crew's cramped living quarters, a spartan arrangement they likened to a "Motel 2." The four-member crew worked in 24-hour shifts, trained for a job it hoped never to carry out.



The style of the Launch Control Center, above, betrays its creation in the era of the original "Star Trek" series. The launch key, below, is inserted in the crew commander's console. Titan Missile Museum

Another sign of the Cold War's military buildup is the world's largest military aviation salvage yard — nicknamed "the Boneyard" — adjacent to the nearby Pima Air and Space Museum. More than 4,000 military planes mothballed for spare parts and potential future uses lie stretched out to the horizon across the desert. The Air Force sent them here because Tucson's dry climate makes it the perfect location to store things outside, without worries about rust.

The aircraft are lined up in rows, stacked so closely together and with such precision that, from above, their wings appear to be holding hands — a sharp contrast to their former roles. It's a starkly beautiful setting, as the silver fuselages reflect the Rincon Mountains to the east, displaying the colors of a box of earth-tone crayons run amok.

The Boneyard — the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group (AMARG), as it's officially known — is still part of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, so admission is restricted. Bus tours are offered by the museum, whose grounds are adjacent to the base.

The amount of hardware on display is striking, evidence wrought in metal of the massive outlays on weaponry over the last half-century. Some of the planes look ready to take off; others are partially salvaged, as if the turkey vultures soaring overhead have been picking them clean.

Upon approach, the rows of angular F-14 fighter planes emerge like giant metal scorpions lying in wait on the desert floor. Security around them is strict, since this particular model is still flown by the Iranian air force, which is desperate for spare parts to maintain its fleet. The tour bus ambles by ranks of abandoned bombers, propeller-driven cargo planes, and fighter jets, while the guide explains their former uses. In an odd twist, new C-27 Spartan cargo planes were delivered directly to the Boneyard. Although recent military budget cuts prevent their use, production didn't stop.

A sign that the military possesses its own brand of humor is evident in a lone pilot's ladder hovering over a set of landing gear and ... nothing else. A sign in front of it identifies it as an F-117 stealth fighter. The grizzled tour guide's day is made when groups of schoolchildren exclaim, "Wow! You really can't see it!"

Despite its moniker, the Boneyard is not a place merely to stockpile airplanes. In February, a B-52 bomber old enough to qualify for AARP membership was restored and returned to flying condition. Though the Cold War may have ended, the men and women deployed at the Boneyard are on constant alert for any future chill in superpower relations.

SECRETS OF THE SONORAN DESERT

▶ **The Titan Missile Museum** is in Sahuarita, Ariz., south of downtown Tucson. For more information: *www.titanmissilemuseum.org.*

▶ **The airplane "Boneyard"** is on the grounds of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson. Access is via a tour that starts at the Pima Air and Space Museum: *www.pimaair.org/tour-boneyard.* Since the tour takes place on a military installation, a government-issued ID such as a driver's license or passport is required.

▶ **For more about Tucson attractions:** *www.visittucson.org.*

Philadelphia natives Michael and Larissa Milne have been traveling the world full time since 2011. Get more travel tips on their blog, www.ChangesInLongitude.com. Their first book, "Philadelphia Liberty Trail," takes a revolutionary approach to visiting the historic district.