

1001 Inventions: Discover the Golden Age of Muslim Civilization

at the National Geographic Museum until Feb. 3, 2013M

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by Amy Alipio

National Geographic Museum

1145 17th St. NW

Washington, DC

202.857.7700

This multimedia, interactive exhibition at the National Geographic Museum reveals how modern-day objects such as airplanes, cameras, surgical scalpels, and double-glazed windows had their origins in the Muslim world of the medieval ages (seventh to 17th centuries).

Buy your ticket at the box office at the National Geographic entrance on 17th Street, and then head left and around the outside of the building to the exhibit entrance. Behind the ticket taker is a reception area. Swinging, arched doors lead to a small theater screening an introductory film. You can choose to wait in the reception area until the film starts again or you can go in if you don't mind coming in halfway.

The 13-minute movie, "1001 Inventions and the Library of Secrets," stars actor Ben Kingsley as 12th-century engineer Al-Jazari who introduces three school kids (along the lines of Harry, Ron, and Hermione) to some of the pioneering scientists and engineers from the history of Muslim civilization. It's well-done and has some Potter-esque magic to it, but my two kids (ages six and three) were impatient to get to the main exhibit. It's probably best suited for older kids.

The main exhibit room is divided into seven zones covering contributions in education, medicine, everyday life, the universe, industry, mapping/exploration, and architecture. Each zone features panel text, interactive games, and a video of a historic figure (played by an actor) who beckons to visitors to come over and listen to their accomplishments. They intimidated my six-year-old, though, who well-schooled in the "Don't talk to strangers" rule, at first wanted nothing to do with them.

The centerpiece of the exhibit is an 800-year-old, 23-foot-high, automatic elephant clock, designed by Al-Jazari using water technology. It's interesting to reflect on how old and how ingenious it is.

My kids' favorite activity was a game using Kinect technology where visitors flap their arms in an attempt to keep the ninth-century inventor Abbas ibn Firnas, the first documented person to attempt flying, soaring on screen. Look up to see a replica of Firnas in his glider.

Another fun video game, that involved a bit more joystick dexterity than my three-year-old could manage, involved navigating rooms of a modern home and collecting objects that had their origins in the medieval Muslim world (perfume and chess - who knew?).

A Stars game in the "Universe" section tests how well you know your constellations. You pick a constellation, then, using your extended finger, point to where it belongs on a large star map. The technology is cool, but sensitive - best suited once again to kids older than my six-year-old who had a bit of trouble getting the pointer to do what she wanted it to.

But there are easier interactives too, where a kid can just push a button to launch a rocket in an animated medieval illustration or push a plunger to demonstrate how syringes work.

Bottom Line

Even though school-age kids would get the most out of this eye-opening exhibit, even preschoolers will enjoy trying their hand at some of the games.

National Geographic is also presenting a series of free family workshops tied in to the exhibit. We attended one titled "Palaces of the Ancient World" that had my kids building a geodesic dome out of gumdrops and toothpicks, designing motifs for architectural arches, and creating a cardboard-box palace and garden. Both kids enjoyed the workshop a lot. Other family workshops explore different themes and take place on Nov. 24, Dec. 22, and Jan. 19. They are free but require registration. Email NatGeoMuseum@ngs.org.

Admission and Hours

Pricing is \$8 for adults; \$6 for Nat Geo members, seniors, and military; \$4 for children ages 5-12. The exhibit is free for school and youth groups. The museum is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Depending on when you visit, finding street parking may be tricky. There are parking garages nearby. The closest Metro stations are Farragut North (red line) and Farragut West (blue/orange).

Have you been to the exhibit **1001 Inventions: Discover the Golden Age of Muslim Civilization**? What's your opinion? Just drop us a [note](#) and Our Kids will add your comments to this review.



Photo courtesy of the National Geographic Museum