

Happy Trails

Former railroad lines experience a rebirth as recreational trails. Join us on an exhilarating coast-to-coast tour of the nation's best rail-trails.

by IRENE RAWLINGS

Across the country, more than 1,700 abandoned railroad right-of-ways have been "recycled" into 20,000-plus miles of multi-use trails called Rails to Trails. Some cross remote wilderness, while others offer easy escapes for city dwellers, but all have helped to preserve the history of railroads and provide boundless opportunities for relaxation, exercise and good old-fashioned fun. >



Photo: Jennifer Healy



Photo: Jake Lynch/Rails-to-Trails Conservancy/Longleaf Trace



Photo: Courtesy Rails-to-Trails Conservancy/Island Line

Longleaf Trace 40.25 miles

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

The Longleaf Trace follows and is built on the old railroad bed that runs from Hattiesburg to Prentiss, Mississippi. Start your trip at the Trace gateway on the Southern Miss campus, where Welcome Center staff can offer advice and provide maps. The paved, gently rolling trail goes through tunnels and over bridges into quintessentially Southern landscapes: piney woods, wetlands and small farming towns. Well-shaded and always close to services, the trail is designed for all skill levels. In Prentiss, stop at Cowboy Jim's Riverside Restaurant for fried catfish, hushpuppies and homemade ice cream. If you start at Prentiss and end in Hattiesburg, rent a canoe and paddle down the slow, lazy Black Creek, a federally designated "Wild and Scenic River."

Cape Cod Rail-Trail 22 miles

Dennis to Wellfleet, Massachusetts

The Cape Cod Rail-Trail follows the former Old Colony Railroad Company's right-of-way for 22 miles starting in Dennis (a classic, white steepled-church village) and winding through Harwich (stop to swim in Long Pond), Brewster (yummy sandwiches at the no-frills Box Lunch), Orleans, Eastham and Wellfleet (slurp a famous Wellfleet oyster at Mac's Shack near the harbor). The paved trail passes through postcard-perfect New England towns, tall pine forests, cranberry bogs, salt marshes and an Audubon bird sanctuary. Stand on a bluff at the National Seashore to see humpback whales swimming and spouting in the distance. If you have time, take the easy hike on the Atlantic White Cedar Swamp Trail off the Marconi Beach parking lot in Wellfleet.

Island Line Rail-Trail 14 miles

Burlington, Vermont

This rail-trail uses a section of the Rutland-Canadian Railroad roadbed that runs along the northern shore of Lake Champlain with spectacular views of the Adirondacks. Start from historic Union Station in Burlington, a city known for live music, microbrews and locally roasted coffee. The maple and sumac-lined trail, spectacular this time of year, is mostly asphalt and mostly flat. It passes through bogs, woods and city parks. Swim at North Beach; there's a foot shower to wash the sand off before putting your cycling shoes back on. Linger on the white marble, three-mile-long causeway arching out across the lake. This is a huge birding area, so keep an eye out for warblers, kingfishers and ospreys. Stay for sunset, in magical pinks and purples, reflected in the enormous lake's inky waters.

Medicine Bow Rail-Trail 21 miles

Laramie, Wyoming

This backcountry trail passes through rugged National Forest land—large stands of lodgepole pine and spruce forests, along wildflower-filled meadows and numerous fast-moving mountain streams. Along the way, you'll spot mule deer, elk and moose, as well as remains of old mining communities and tie-hack cabins. The trail is gravel on a gentle grade, but at high altitude (8,770 to 9,030 feet). Come prepared with water and mosquito repellent; there are no services. The Lake Owen (a trout fishing and boating reservoir) section of the trail is the most popular and this is where you'll likely see other riders. Otherwise, you'll have the trail to yourself; it's a beautiful and quiet ride. ▷



Photo: Cavan Images/Getty Images



Cyclist and photographer, David Rocco photographed and archived the transformation of the Hudson Valley Trail in New York.

Caprock Canyons State Park Trailway

64 miles

South Plains, Texas

This trail is classic Texas: big, rough and out there. On an abandoned Fort Worth and Denver Railway right-of-way, this crushed-rock trail crosses over 46 bridges and through one of the last railroad tunnels in the Lone Star State. Stop at the city of Quitaque (pronounced Kitty-Kay) for really memorable chile rellenos. On the 12-mile Grundy Canyon segment, you'll have incredible views of the caprock escarpment and the Red River Valley. It looks like a set from a Western movie. The 10-mile Plains Junction segment is the best area to spot wildlife: You'll see herds of pronghorn antelope and Texas bison as well as deer, coyotes, bobcats, foxes and golden eagles. Pack plenty of water, food, a cell phone (yes, there's service) and a tire-repair kit.

Washington's Burke-Gilman Trail

17 miles

Seattle, Washington

The wide, paved and mostly level 17-mile trail starts in Ballard, winds east through the artsy neighborhood of Fremont (stop at the Theo Chocolate factory for organic Fair Trade chocolates sold temptingly close to the trail), curves north along the shores of Lake Washington (great views of downtown) and ends in Kenmore. Hook up with the Sammamish River Trail at the end and you can peddle to the more than 30 wineries around Woodinville. Along the way, you'll have great views of the river, the broad Sammamish River Valley, the Cascade foothills and Mount Rainier. On the way back, cross over the arched wooden bridge at the Park at Bothell Landing to take advantage of the facilities: water fountains, flushies, picnic tables and a historic schoolhouse.

Wallkill Valley Rail-Trail 15.2 miles

Hudson Valley Rail-Trail 2.5 miles

New Paltz, New York

Make the historic Mohonk Mountain House, a 266-room resort set on a rocky cliff rising above a crystal blue glacial lake, your base of operations. After cycling the rail-trails, enjoy an arnica oil massage in the eco-friendly spa. The gravel-and-packed-dirt Wallkill Valley trail passes through bucolic countryside and in New Paltz the trail runs adjacent to Huguenot Street, a National Historic Landmark District. Stop for a pasta lunch at La Stazione Italian Restaurant in the old train station. Port your bike across the New York State Thruway and head toward the hamlet of Lloyd, where you can pick up the Hudson Valley Rail-Trail (asphalt) which passes through rock outcroppings and cool, shaded glens as it heads toward the Hudson River. Picnic at Black Creek Wetlands, where you'll see beaver, deer and scads of marsh birds. Don't miss the Walkway over the Hudson—a 1.3-mile, 212-foot high trestle bridge with views of treetops, water and sky. >



Illinois Prairie Path

61 miles

Wheaton, Illinois

Originally part of the Chicago, Aurora and Elgin Railroad (CA&E), the Illinois Prairie Path is North America's first successful rails-to-trails conversion. Five legs of this rail-trail branch out in Wheaton (just west of Chicago) in three different directions. The crushed-stone and asphalt trail passes over waterways and through forested neighborhoods, marshes, wetlands and true remnants of tall-grass prairie. IPP is a full-service trail with bathrooms or port-a-potties, drinking fountains, benches and interpretive signs. In South Elgin, visit the Fox River Valley Trolley Museum to see the old train and trolley cars that once rode the Chicago rails. Stop for a pint of Prairie Path Ale at Two Brothers Brewing Company in Warrenville.

Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes and the Route of the Hiawatha Rail-Trail

73 miles total;

15 miles if only the Hiawatha portion

Plummer, Idaho

These two Idaho routes offer the most distinct and memorable rail-trail experiences in the country. The paved Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes begins in Plummer, Idaho, a few miles shy of the Washington border, and heads northeast along Lake Coeur d'Alene and along the Coeur d'Alene River. The Route of the Hiawatha (named for the trail that once serviced this route) features panoramic views of the Bitterroot Mountains, winds through tunnels and over high trestles, including one of the highest (230 feet) in the country. The St. Paul Pass, or "Taft" Tunnel, burrows for 1.6 miles under the Idaho/Montana state line. Bring a flashlight.

California's Bizz Johnson National Recreation Trail

25.4 miles

Susanville, California

On a former Southern Pacific Railroad bed, the longest rail-trail in California passes through tunnels, over bridges, past a waterfall and several inviting swimming holes on a well-maintained gravel trail (best suited for fat tires and soft saddles). You'll be traveling in remote backcountry, so bring what food and water you'll need. Take the trail from west (Mason Station) to east (Susanville Depot) to enjoy a downhill grade all the way. No other town has embraced its rail-trail quite as completely as Susanville, which celebrates with an annual Rails to Trails Festival in September, with live music, a chili cook-off and even old-fashioned handcar rides on a section of preserved track.

For More Information

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (railstotrails.org) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to create a nationwide network of trails from former rail lines. Become a RTC member (\$18 or more) and receive the quarterly Rails to Trails magazine.

For rail fans, the Library of Congress has early railroad history and maps available online. Visit memory.loc.gov, click on "maps," then on "railroads." ♦

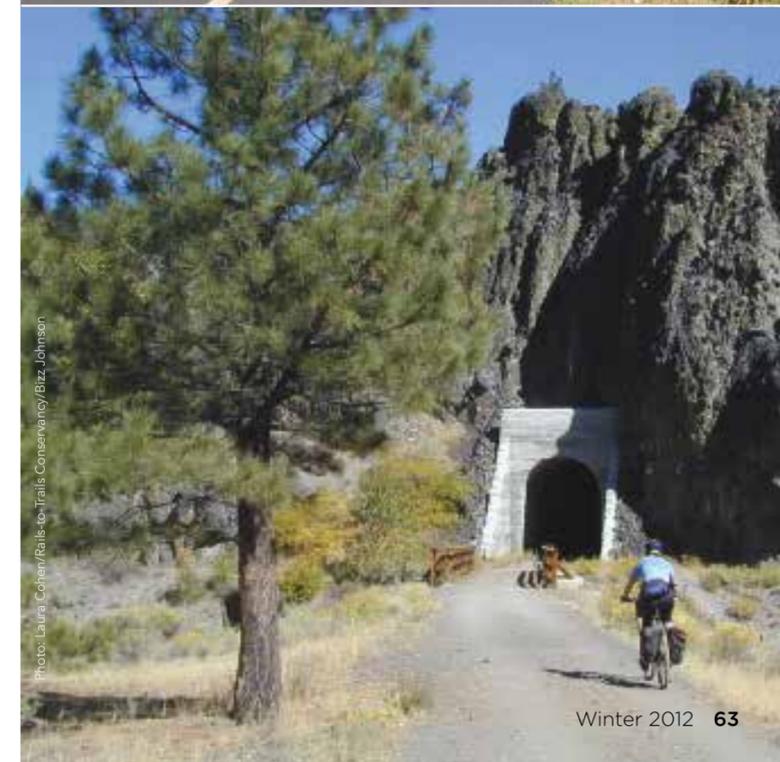


Photo: Courtesy Rails-to-Trails Conservancy/Hiawatha

Photo: Jennifer Fahay

Photo: Laura Cohen/Rails-to-Trails Conservancy/Bizz Johnson

Bikes for the Trail



by IRENE RAWLINGS

Road bikes are lightweight, sturdy and built to travel at higher speeds on paved roads.
High: Blue AC1 SL Aero \$8,000
Low: Specialized Allez Sport Compact \$1,000

Cruisers are designed for comfort, not speed, have upright seating and oversized balloon tires.
High: Globe Live 3 \$1,600
Low: Linus Roadster Classic \$650

Mountain bikes have knobby tires designed for off-roading, rugged construction and front and/or rear suspension.
High: Cannondale Scalpel 29'er Carbon \$8,000
Low: Felt Nine Sport \$1,000

Racing bikes are extremely lightweight and aerodynamic, with stiff frames and narrow, smooth tires.
High: Colnago C59 Italia \$9,000
Low: Blue Axino AL \$1,500

Touring bikes are a hybrid-cross between a road bike and a mixed-terrain bike. Features include a comfortable saddle, a long wheelbase for ride comfort, a frame that favors flexibility, control and durability, heavy-duty wheels for load capacity, luggage racks and a wider gear range for use on a variety of road surfaces.
High: Koga-Miyata 26" WorldTraveller \$3,800
Low: Surly Long Haul Trucker \$1,000

City/Commute bikes are durable, comfortable and reliable in all weather conditions.
High: Trek 7.9 FX \$2,500
Low: Breezer Uptown EX \$500

Kids' bikes are strong, durable and adjust for the inevitable growth spurt.
High: Specialized Hotrock A1 FS 24" \$500
Low: Trek MT 220 \$350

Dream bikes. Build your own. High: Pegoretti \$4,500. Custom-built stainless-steel frame and fork. Must travel to Caldonazzo, Italy, for fitting. Low: Strong frames starting at \$2,500, steel, carbon or titanium forks, built to your specifications.

Wood bikes are some of the smoothest and quietest bikes you will ever ride. Created from wood and laminated bamboo, they are as much a work of art as a functional object.

Electronic shifting is used mostly on racing and very high-end bikes. The advantage: The bike shifts quickly and more reliably. The disadvantage: There is no manual override if you lose power. ♦