

Selecting America's Premier Rail Trails: A Comprehensive Guide



Rail-Trail Hall of Fame: A Selection of America's Premier Rail-Trails by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

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Rail trails, also known as rail-to-trails or greenways, offer a unique and captivating way to explore America's natural beauty while embracing the legacy of its railroading past. These repurposed railway corridors provide a fantastic opportunity for cycling, hiking, and other outdoor activities, catering to adventurers of all ages and abilities. With a vast network of rail trails spanning the country, selecting the most suitable one for your next excursion can be a daunting task.

This comprehensive guide will delve into the top 10 rail trails in the United States, each offering a distinct blend of scenery, accessibility, and historical significance. Whether you're a seasoned cyclist seeking a challenging ride or a nature lover looking for a peaceful stroll, this article will provide you with the necessary insights and recommendations to plan an unforgettable rail-riding adventure.

1. Great Allegheny Passage

Location: Maryland, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia

Length: 150 miles

Highlights: The Great Allegheny Passage is a crown jewel among rail trails, stretching from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Cumberland, Maryland. This predominantly flat trail follows the historic Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, offering a leisurely ride through picturesque landscapes. Cyclists and hikers can marvel at stunning riverfront views, traverse tunnels carved through mountains, and enjoy charming small towns along the way.



2. Iron Horse Trail

Location: Washington State

Length: 120 miles

Highlights: The Iron Horse Trail is a testament to the grandeur of the Pacific Northwest. Winding through the Cascade Mountains, this trail showcases breathtaking scenery at every turn. From the lush forests of the Snoqualmie Valley to the arid plains of eastern Washington, cyclists and hikers can experience a diverse range of landscapes. The trail's gentle grades make it suitable for riders of all levels.



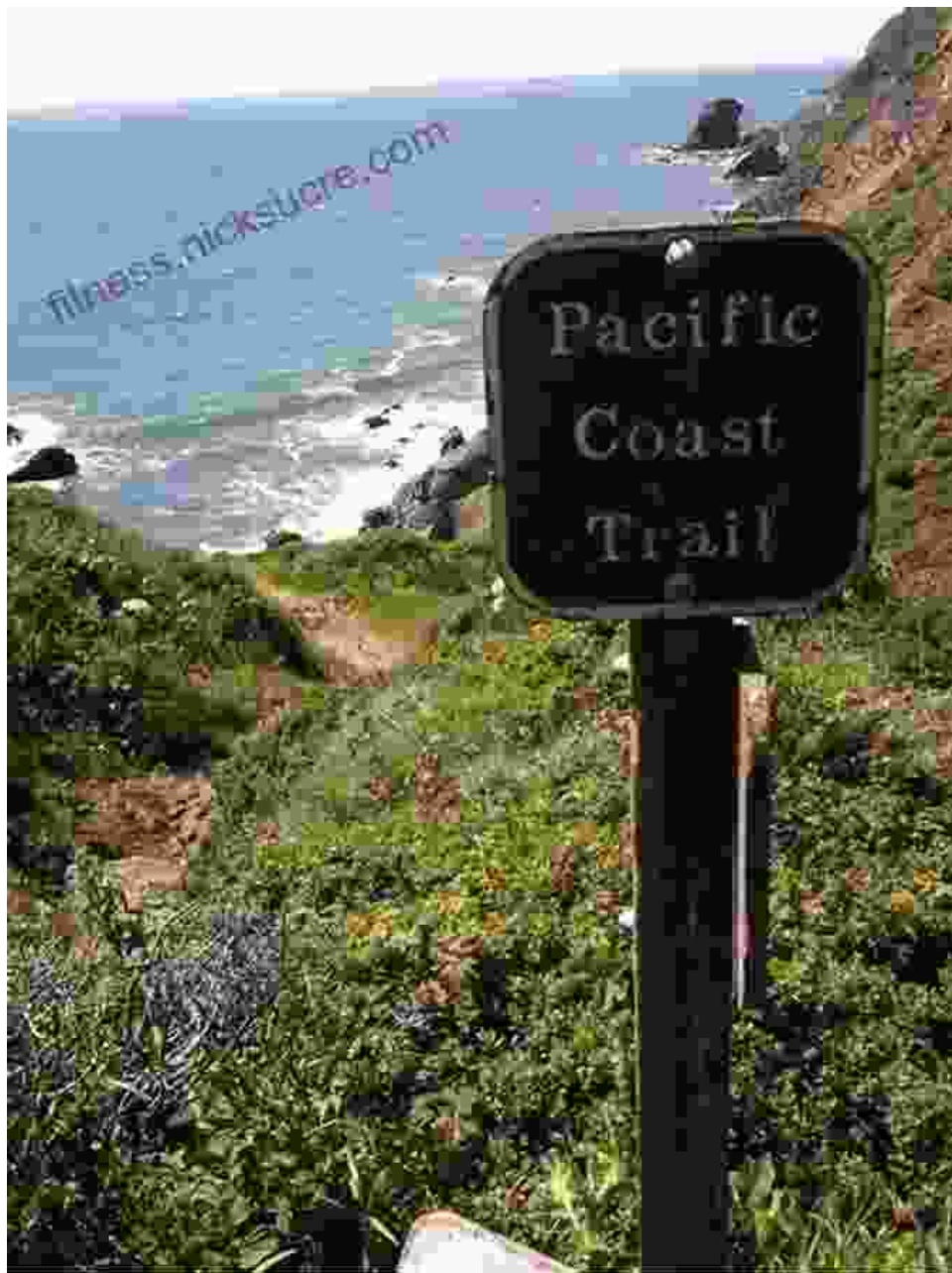
3. Pacific Coast Trail

Location: California, Oregon, and Washington

Length: 2,650 miles

Highlights: The Pacific Coast Trail is a legendary hiking trail that follows the rugged coastline of the Pacific Ocean. While not strictly a rail trail, it incorporates several former railroad grades, offering hikers a unique perspective on the region's natural beauty. Hikers can traverse majestic

redwood forests, navigate towering mountains, and witness dramatic ocean views along this epic adventure.



4. Transcontinental Trail

Location: New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Montana

Length: 2,750 miles

Highlights: The Transcontinental Trail is an ambitious project that aims to create an off-road trail spanning the entire width of the contiguous United States. While sections of this trail utilize former rail lines, it also incorporates other paths and roads. Adventurers can traverse diverse landscapes, from the vast prairies of the Midwest to the soaring peaks of the Rocky Mountains.



5. Blue Ridge Parkway

Location: North Carolina and Virginia

Length: 469 miles

Highlights: The Blue Ridge Parkway is a scenic highway that follows the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains, offering breathtaking panoramic views. While not exclusively a rail trail, it incorporates several former railroad grades, allowing visitors to enjoy a unique blend of driving and hiking

experiences. Along the parkway, visitors can explore lush forests, cascading waterfalls, and charming mountain towns.



Factors to Consider When Selecting a Rail Trail

1. **Length and Difficulty:** Rail trails vary in length and difficulty, catering to different levels of fitness and experience. Consider the distance you're comfortable cycling or hiking and choose a trail that matches your abilities.
2. **Scenery and Landscape:** Rail trails offer a diverse range of landscapes, from tranquil countryside to rugged mountains. Choose a trail that aligns with your preferences and interests, whether you prefer coastal views, forest trails, or historic landmarks.
3. **Accessibility:** Consider the accessibility of the trail, including trailheads, parking, and public transportation options. Ensure that the trail is easily accessible from your starting point and that you have the necessary equipment and support.

4. **Amenities and Accommodations:** Some rail trails offer amenities such as rest areas, picnic spots, and camping grounds. If you plan on spending multiple days on the trail, research the availability of amenities and accommodations along the route.
5. **Safety:** Rail trails are generally safe for outdoor enthusiasts. However, it's always advisable to follow basic safety precautions, such as informing someone about your itinerary, carrying a whistle or other noisemaking device, and being aware of your surroundings.

Selecting the right rail trail for your adventure is key to maximizing your enjoyment and safety. By considering the factors highlighted in this guide and exploring the top rail trails in America, you can embark on an unforgettable journey filled with breathtaking scenery, historical discoveries, and a profound appreciation for the natural and cultural heritage of the United States.

Whether you're an experienced cyclist, a nature enthusiast, or simply seeking a unique way to explore America's landscapes, rail trails offer a perfect blend of adventure, history, and natural beauty. Embrace the spirit of the open road and create lasting memories along these iconic trails.



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