

# Rolling Out

Connecticut's

# Air Line



(Clockwise from left) John, Francine and Vlad Gintoff make family time on the Air Line trail; Melissa Medich and her dog Luther take a stroll over one of the Air Line's several river crossings; fall's brilliance can be spotted all along the 22-mile trail; Karen Mullaney watches as her children, Danny and Hannah, explore the trail; a trail marker along the path.

By Peter Marteka  
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The locomotive burst through the cut in the rock ledge and thundered over the hillsides of Connecticut on its way from Boston to New York City. Passengers in white painted cars milled about as the conductor pulled out a gold watch, flipped it open and estimated how long it would be before the train pulled into the city limits.

With fog hanging in the valley of the Salmon River, it is easy to imagine the Air Line Railroad "ghost train" racing across the countryside of Eastern Connecticut as it did in the early 1900s. The famous train disappeared long ago, the rails and ties removed and the gravel railbeds replaced by stone dust. But the corridor still is busy. Today's Air Line travelers walk, ride or even ski parts of the 22-mile Air Line South State Park Trail.

From a cranberry bog in East Hampton, through Colchester, Hebron and Lebanon, to a historical railroad bridge in Willimantic, this southern stretch of the Air Line Trail is one of the most scenic former railroad corridors in the Northeast. Equally beautiful, though as yet unfinished, the Air Line North State Park Trail runs another 27 miles from Windham to Putnam.

Most people who travel the Air Line are passionate about it. "It's a wonderful journey into the past," says Stan Malcolm, who lives in Marlborough, a town directly north of the trail. "It's mostly wooded so

nature surrounds you, and there's a pretty good chance you will come back with some memory of the natural world after a visit here."

The Air Line has been created in a sort of domino effect over the years. It began in East Hampton with little funding from state sources. Towns along the way have used whatever funding they could secure, along with the work of town crews and volunteers, to clear and lay stone dust along the trail. This year the trail is celebrating its 10th anniversary and, while most of the southern portion is finished, work continues. Some gaps remain to be surfaced, and a

few bridges need to be decked to get users to Willimantic and the trail's northern section.

"We just keep trying to move down the trail and make progress," says Leslie Lewis, trails and greenways coordinator for the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). "East Hampton, Colchester and Hebron are completed. So you get a critical mass of users reaching Lebanon and people in town starting to wonder, 'Why can't we do this?'"

Over the past decade, the DEP has provided grants and material to the towns to shore up eroded sec-



tions of railbed. Town work crews repair the erosion and put down stone dust. To bridge the deck of an imposing railroad trestle over the Blackledge River in Colchester, the DEP even enlisted the help of cadets from the Coast Guard Academy's civil engineering program and members of the Connecticut Army National Guard's 192nd Engineering Battalion. "It's been a wonderful partnership," Lewis says.

The Air Line Railroad, which cost nearly \$10 million to construct in the 19th century, got its name because, by tracing a straight route through the air, it offered the shortest distance between New York and Boston. Middlefield entrepreneur and farmer David Lyman built the Air Line as a branch of the New Haven, Middletown & Willimantic Railroad. He hired nearly 1,000 workers to construct the line from New Haven to Middletown, opening this section of rail line in 1870 for passengers and freight companies seeking a faster and more direct route to two of the East Coast's biggest cities. After adding a suspension bridge over the

Connecticut River in Middletown, Lyman extended the line to Willimantic in 1873.

The trail actually starts at Route 16 in East Hampton, near a cranberry bog that's often filled with ducks. Although nestled in a residential section of this town famous for bell making, the trail soon slips into forestland and through "Bishop's Cut," a dramatic passageway with 35-foot rock walls on each side. Railroad builders blasted away tons of rock, most notably in East Hampton and Colchester, to make way for the rails. If you look closely at the walls lining the trail you will see indentations where holes for dynamite were drilled.

The Lyman and Rapallo viaducts are hallmarks of the three-mile trail section from the cranberry bog to Bull Hill Road in Colchester. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places, both wrought iron viaducts were built in 1873. The viaducts have been entombed beneath tons of gravel, cinders and sand since the early 1900s, when they were beefed up to carry heavy freight trains. But the iron tops of the viaducts still can



be seen sticking out from the tops of the bank.

Towering more than 100 feet above the surrounding landscape, the viaducts are a huge draw for visitors who come to admire the fall foliage. Atop the viaducts, sightseers enjoy breathtaking views of the surrounding 6,000-acre Salmon River State Forest—a popular fishing and recreational destination and home of the Comstock Bridge, one of only three covered bridges in the state. The trail runs high above the surrounding river valley. Several trail spurs tumble down through the forest from the Air Line,



allowing visitors to explore the crystal clear waters of the Salmon River.

The Air Line is a treasure trove for those who admire architecture, too. It crosses more than a dozen bridges and stone culverts along its scenic route. Start looking for streams flowing underneath the trail just east of the Lyman Viaduct and Bull Hill Road at the four-mile mark. Other bridges are located in Hebron beyond Route 2. It's an easy detour to admire the craftsmanship of railroad builders who constructed the abutments and culverts out of huge pieces of stone 135 years ago without the assistance of modern machinery.

One of the beauties of the Air Line is the access it provides to natural areas—from town parks to state forests—just a few feet from the trail. After passing under Route 2, you



(Clockwise from opposite page) Ariel Barocas Mayer plays on the Air Line Trail; a bicyclist treks across a former railroad bridge; Brad Pearce gets in his run on the leaf-covered trail; fishing the rivers around the Air Line is a common pastime; a whimsical town of pumpkin-people near the trail offers a fun diversion.

trail breaks off from the Air Line and leads to the falls. Just listen for the sound of thundering water.

About a mile east of Grayville Falls is Raymond Brook Marsh, one of the largest inland wetland complexes in Eastern Connecticut. The Air Line streams through the heart of the marsh for about a mile, carrying trail users into an untouched natural area filled with such wildlife as beavers, river otters and great blue herons. Past the edge of the marsh and before the Air Line crosses Route 85, you can take a 3.6-mile spur to Colchester. The former rail spur—now a lovely jaunt past ponds and hemlock forests—once delivered raw materials to the Hayward Rubber Company, where boots, shoes and other products were manufactured for shipment around the country.