



new hampshire

ROCKINGHAM RECREATIONAL TRAIL

If you want to glide along on a smooth strip of paved rail-trail, your mind wandering into a Zen-like state as you pass unwavering terrain—pick a different rail-trail than New Hampshire's Rockingham Recreational Trail. However, if you're keen to engage your mind as well as the shocks on your mountain bike; if you yearn for a mist of grit and mud on your knobby tires and knees, then this 27-mile rough 'n' ready rail-trail is your slice of heaven.

Late summer sunshine
sparkles on trailside
Lake Massabesic.

The Rockingham Recreational Trail—known to many locals as “oh, *that* trail”—is tailor made, or unmade, for bicyclists and hikers looking to get dirty and work up a sweat. The mixed dirt, gravel and sand surface makes for some serious mud-puddles after a rainstorm (which can be a blast to plow through). Time your travels for drier days or embrace your inner five-year-old and a heavy-duty can of mosquito repellent.

Now that you’ve been responsibly warned, hit this trail with gusto. Built on the Portsmouth branch of the former Boston & Maine Railroad that meanders throughout this region, the trail runs from the outskirts of Manchester to the small town of Newfields. Though still some 15 miles from the coast on its eastern end, there’s a brackish tinge to the air that hints at the Atlantic’s proximity. Predominantly tree-lined and shaded, the corridor passes through a mix of wood- and wetlands, backyards and meadows, and one-stop-light hamlets that offer good grub and historical treasures.

The easiest access point is the western trailhead at sparkling Lake Massabesic. This is certainly the most popular section as it follows the shoreline on a well-maintained surface suitable for most uses. Departing from the lakeside, the trail passes through old railroad cuts in the granite hillsides.

Near the five-mile mark, the trail reaches Route 101 for the first of several under-road crossings via shallow culverts. It’s a steep climb on rough gravel to reach the culverts; pass through with your head ducked and then carefully descend back to the trail. Dismounting from bikes is advisable.

Back on the trail, you’re again enveloped in a canopy of oak, birch and pine on your way to the trail’s midpoint. In these long stretches it’s easy to feel considerably isolated, despite the relative closeness of the parallel Route 101. You’ll spot more fellow trail users the closer you are to trailside towns, and some may include equestrians and all-terrain vehicles since most New Hampshire rail-trails allow mixed-use.

If you’ve forgotten in all your play that you’re traipsing along on a bit of history,



(Clockwise) Though rough on bikes, the Rockingham Recreational Trail makes for a relaxing hike; wetlands provide a diverse range of plant life along the trail; and the Raymond Historical Society makes its home in a restored depot at the trail’s midpoint.



the trailside Raymond Historical Society will dutifully remind you. Housed in a former railroad depot, the society has an eclectic collection which includes a dress belonging to Annie Oakley. Restored railroad cars sit out front, open to the public. Also check out the 1855 one-room schoolhouse adjacent to the depot. Raymond has done a fine job of keeping the railroad alive along the rail-trail.

Between Raymond and Epping, the trail surface has longer smooth stretches, though rough patches can still crop up as you skirt backyards and bogs, twice crossing Lamprey River on converted railroad bridges. You can occasionally hear traffic from Route 101, but you’re more likely to focus on the sound of rushing water, bird calls or, if dusk

is approaching, the chirrup of crickets. The scent of smoke from summer cook-out campfires is equally compelling. But with a nearness to the community comes more frequent intersections. The trail crosses several secondary roads along its route, some at sharp angles, so even though traffic is light, look both ways and alert the kiddies.

The final leg of the trail from Epping to Newfields showcases New Hampshire’s near-coastal habitat. Anyone who enjoys wetland flora, whether in a silvery bay or algae-covered cove, will relish the views on this stretch of trail before it reaches its end at another railroad depot in Newfields. Though tougher than your traditional rail-trail, the Rockingham Recreational Trail is certainly a gem in the rough.



GETTING THERE: To reach the Massabesic Lake trailhead from Manchester take I-93 to Route 101 East. Take Exit 1 and make a right onto Route 28 South/Londonderry Turnpike. The entrance for Massabesic Lake Park is on the opposite side of the traffic circle after crossing Candia Road. By plane, fly into Manchester-Boston Regional Airport (www.flymanchester.com). Manchester and Portsmouth are both served by Amtrak (www.amtrak.com).

WHAT TO DO: If you're looking to complement your land travels with some aquatic activity, try your hand at fishing for large and small mouth bass, and white and yellow perch in Lake Massabesic (for a New Hampshire fishing license visit www.wild

life.state.nh.us or call 603.271.3421). Stop in at cheerful and helpful Portsmouth Kayak Adventures (www.portsmouthkayak.com or 603.559.1000) for a group, solo or guided kayak trip in the calmer waters off Piscataqua River—the second swiftest river after the St. Lawrence—for an entirely different perspective on this seaside town. Or simply hit the beach (at turns sandy and craggy) at one of several state parks along the Atlantic Ocean. New Hampshire may have the shortest coastline of any of the states, but it packs a stunning array of views into its 18 miles.



WHERE TO EAT: For tasty and cheap trailside bites, grab a sandwich and old fashioned “frappe” (milkshake) at Sandy’s Variety & Sub Shop (603.669.8382) on Candia Road just beyond the entrance to Massabesic Lake Park; or hit Supreme House of Pizza (603.895.9500) on Main Street a block away from the restored depot in Raymond.

In Manchester, check out Cotton (603. 522. 5488) for its Merrimack River views, blueberry mojitos, pistachio-crustured seared scallops and pistachio gelato. Then take it down a notch a few blocks over at Strange Brew (603.666.4292) with its 55 microbrews on tap and nightly live music. In Portsmouth, stop in at Friendly Toast (603.430.2154) for an eclectic and vegetarian-friendly menu with a funkadelic atmosphere; or hit the bevy restaurants in the historical district. Try quintessential New England clam chowder at The Stockpot (603.431.1851). Snag a deck table overlooking the shipyard.

WHERE TO STAY: Either base yourself in Manchester or Portsmouth, both of which offer myriad lodging opportunities from the main chains to the quaint bed-and-breakfasts. Visit www.visit-newhampshire.com and search the Merrimack Valley (Manchester) and Seacoast (Portsmouth) regions for hotel, inn and camping options.

RENTALS: Papa Wheelies Bicycle Shop (www.papa-wheelies.com or 603.427.2060) in Portsmouth is the best bet for bike rentals. Friendly and knowledgeable staff will get you outfitted for whatever terrain you’re tackling.

FOR MORE: For more on the Rockingham Recreational Trail, visit www.nhtrails.org.

