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Bring the Kids and See Railroad History Come Alive at Several CT Rail Museums: Cameron on Transportation

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Categories : [Opinion](#), [Parents & Kids](#), [Transportation](#)

Tagged as : [Cameron on Transportation](#), [Cameron on Transportation 2017](#), [Jim Cameron 2017](#), [Jim Cameron's Transportation Column](#)

Date : September 10, 2017

If you're looking for family fun before the summer ends, consider visiting one of Connecticut's many museums celebrating our state's rail heritage.

— *Darienite.com editor's notes on current museum days of operation are in italics and within brackets below.*

The [Shore Line Trolley Museum](#) in East Haven was founded in 1945 and now boasts more than 100 trolley cars in its collection. It's on the National Registry and is the oldest continuously operating trolley line in the U.S., still running excursion trolleys for three miles on tracks once used by the Connecticut Co. for its "F Line" from New Haven to Branford.

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You can also walk through the car barns and watch volunteers painstakingly restoring the old cars. There's also a small museum exhibit and gift shop.

[*"In September, the museum returns to weekend operations," according to the [museum's website](#). "From October through December, the museum is open weekends for Halloween and Holiday special events (please see schedule for details)."*]

The [Connecticut Trolley Museum](#) in East Windsor began in 1940, making it the oldest trolley museum in the country. It too was started on an existing right-of-way, the Rockville branch of the Hartford & Springfield Street Railway Co.

You can ride a couple of different trolleys a few miles into the woods and back, perhaps disembarking to tour their collection of streetcars, elevated and inter-urbans in the museum's sheds and barns.

[*The museum is open weekends through Oct. 1, then on select days in October, [according to the website](#).*]

If you're looking for a day-trip, especially for kids, I highly recommend either trolley museum. But if you're looking for real trains, you're also in luck.

The [Danbury Railroad Museum](#) is walking distance from the Metro-North station in the Hat City, making this potentially a full-day, all-rail adventure.

They are open five days a week [*closed Mondays and Tuesdays through May 31, when they're open seven days a week, according to the [museum website](#).*] and offer train rides on weekends.

For a premium, you can even ride in the caboose or the engine. They have a great collection of old rail cars and a well-stocked gift shop.

For nostalgia fans, [The Essex Steam Train](#) offers daily rides on a classic steam train as well as connecting riverboat rides up to the vicinity of Gillette Castle and back. In addition to coach seating, you can ride on an open-air car or in a plush first-class coach. There's also a great dinner-train, The Essex Clipper, which offers a 2½ hour, four-course meal and a cash bar.

[*Open mostly weekends in September and October, including leaf-peeping trips, but [see the website for details](#).*]

In downtown South Norwalk, you can visit what once was a busy railroad switch tower, now the [SoNo Switch Tower Museum](#). Admission is free (donations welcome). The museum is open weekends from noon to 5 p.m.

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The [Connecticut Eastern Railroad Museum](#) in Willimantic is also only open on weekends. In addition to guided tours, visitors can operate a replica 1850's-style pump car along a section of rail that once was part of the New Haven Railroad's "Air Line."

The [Railroad Museum of New England](#) in Thomaston offers rail trips on Saturdays, Sundays and Tuesdays [*and some other days in October*] along the scenic Naugatuck River in addition to a large collection of restored engines and passenger cars, including a last-of-its-kind 1929 New Haven Railroad first class "smoker," complete with leather bucket seats.

All of these museums are run by volunteers who will appreciate your patronage and support. They love working to preserve our state's great railroad heritage and will tell you why if you express even the slightest interest in their passion. Bring your kids and let them see railroading history come alive.

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Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com

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