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Talking Transportation: Take a Daytrip and Ride Connecticut's Rail History

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By JIM CAMERON

If you're looking for family fun this summer, consider visiting one of Connecticut's many living museums celebrating our rail heritage:

The [Shore Line Trolley Museum](#) in East Haven was founded in 1945 and now boasts more than one hundred trolley cars in its collection. It still runs excursion trolleys for a short run on tracks once used by The Connecticut Company for its "F Line" from New Haven to Branford.

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

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

If you're looking for a day-trip, especially for kids, I can highly recommend either museum. But if you're looking for trains, you're also in luck. The [Danbury Railroad Museum](#) is within walking distance from the Metro-North station, making this a potentially full-day, all-rail adventure.

On weekends they offer train rides and 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 not only daily rides on a classic steam train, but 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 2 ½ hour, four-course meal and a cash bar.

In downtown South Norwalk you can visit what once was a busy switch tower, now the [SoNo Switch Tower Museum](#). Admission is free (donations welcome) weekends 12 noon to 5 p.m.

Also open only on weekends is the [Connecticut Eastern Railroad Museum](#) in Willimantic. 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 Sundays and Tuesdays 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 RR 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 on the railroad and will tell you why if you express even the slightest interest in their passion. Try 'em.

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. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com