

CT Has Plenty of Railroad Museums, and This Summer They're Free for Kids

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If you're looking for family fun this summer, consider visiting one of this state's many living museums celebrating our state's rail heritage. And remember — [kids get in free](#) at Connecticut museums this summer!

The Shore Line Trolley Museum

[This 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 suburban trolley line in the U.S.

The museum is still running excursion trolleys for a three-mile run on tracks once used by The Connecticut Company for its "F Line" from New Haven to Branford. 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.

Connecticut Trolley Museum

Located in East Windsor, [the museum](#) 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 trolley museum. But if you're looking for real trains, you're also in luck.

The Danbury Railroad Museum

[This 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 seven days a week; 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.

Essex Steam Train

For nostalgia fans, the [Essex Steam Train](#) offers not only daily rides on a classic steam train, but also connecting riverboat rides up to the vicinity of Gillette Castle and back.

There's also a great dinner-train, "[The Essex Clipper](#)" which offers a 2½ hour, four-course meal and a cash bar.

Really Close By: SoNo Switch Tower Museum

In downtown South Norwalk you can visit what once was [a busy railroad switch tower](#). Admission is free (donations welcome) weekends from 12 noon to 5 p.m.

Connecticut Eastern Railroad Museum

Also open only on weekends, [this railroad museum](#) in Willimantic not only gives guided tours, but visitors also can operate a replica 1850s-style pump car along a section of rail that once was part of the New Haven Railroad's "[Air Line](#)."

Railroad Museum of New England

[This museum](#) in Thomaston offers rail trips on Saturdays, Sundays and Tuesdays along the scenic Naugatuck River. The museum also has 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.

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Among their special excursions: a Whisky Train, Ice Cream Train and a Chocolate Decadence Tour.

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.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.