

TimeOut

I went on Rail Explorers for a cool pedal-powered experience in New England

Expect beautiful views and big fun at this accessible experience with locations across the U.S.

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Photograph: Rossilynne Skena Culgan for Time Out

I didn't expect to feel emotional during a pedal-powered experience called [Rail Explorers](#). But alas, I quickly learned that this unique activity isn't just about seeing scenic views while getting a bit of a workout. Instead, it's about accessibility, inclusivity, and the fulfillment of its founder's dream.

Rail Explorers turns railroad tracks into spaces for recreation with rail bikes where you can sit back, relax, and enjoy the scenery while chatting with your group. Unlike a typical bicycle, which can be difficult or impossible for many, these machines welcome all ages and abilities. Rail Explorers' founder, Mary Joy Lu, recounted stories of grandparents using the railbikes with their grandkids and saying they felt empowered by being able to enjoy an active experience with their family.

I tried out the experience in Rhode Island with a group of journalists of all ages from around the country, and we all had a blast. While our group was all adults, I noticed several families with kids trying out the experience and beaming as they took off down the rails.



Photograph: Courtesy of Rail Explorers

Here's how it works: Rail Explorers works closely with railroad companies to share the rails, getting the green light to run railbikes when trains are not operating. The railbikes look kind of like stripped-down, open-air go-karts. There are four steel wheels at the bottom, brakes, and seats with pedals. Each seat is adjustable to your height, and there's even a basket to hold purses and other belongings. You'll have to pedal to get the vehicle moving, but it's very easy to get momentum on your side.

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"The magic of steel wheels on steel rails makes the experience very different from riding a regular bicycle," Rail Explorers explains. "There is no need to carefully watch the road ahead, there is no need to steer, and riding is hands-free—making it easy to take photographs and video as you roll along."

Indeed, I snapped photos and videos of the coastal woodlands of Aquidneck Island and water views over Narragansett Bay as I cruised along with my group. I visited in the fall, and colorful leaves cascaded down from the trees as my feet turned the pedals over and over again. Sometimes, I chatted with my group, and other times, I enjoyed the peaceful click-clacking of the wheels on the rails. I couldn't help but smile as I watched beautiful vistas come into focus around each bend.

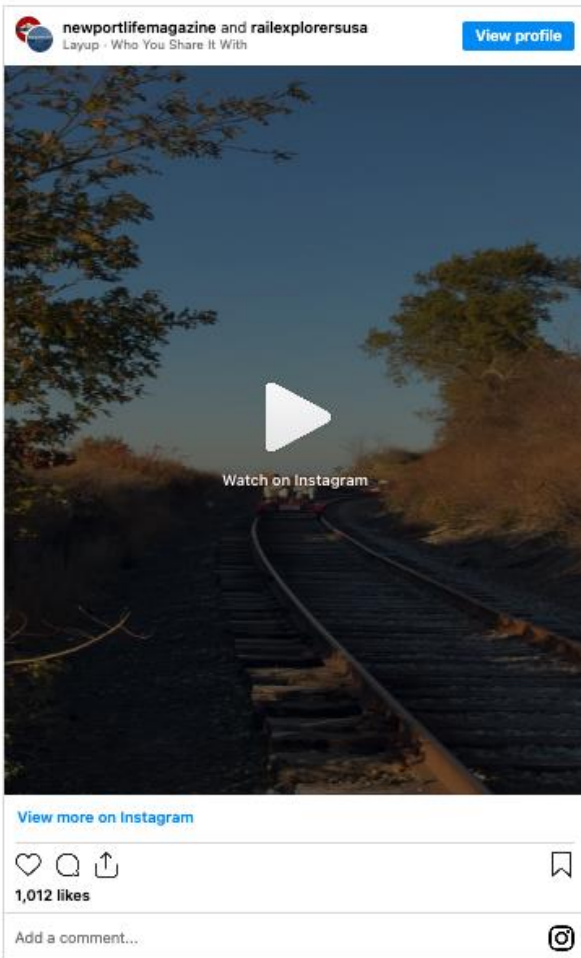


Photograph: By Rossilynne Skena Culkan for Time Out New York

In all, the experience was about a six-mile trip (three miles out, then a break, then three miles back) over 90 minutes. With a tour guide in the lead car and another tour guide in the last explorer, I felt able to relax and enjoy the freedom of the outdoors, even though this was my first time trying anything quite like this.

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Even the company's founder, Mary Joy Lu, had never tried anything like this until a scene in a Korean soap opera caught her attention. As she watched one of her favorite K-Dramas back in 2012, she noticed a curious contraption being pedaled along the railroad tracks. Within 10 days, she was on a plane to South Korea to meet with the designer and manufacturer of the bikes. Within just a few years, she founded Rail Explorers with her husband, Alex Catchpoole, and brought a fleet of rail explorers to the United States—the first time these rail bikes had been seen anywhere in the world outside of South Korea.



Rail Explorers opened in 2015 in New York's Adirondacks and then expanded to locations across the nation, including Amador, California; Bluegrass, Kentucky; Elk River, West Virginia; Boone, Iowa; and Rhode Island. More than 600,000 people have tried Rail Explorers since then. I can tell you, after being among those half-million people, that this experience is truly worth trying. Prices vary per location but range between \$40 and \$50/person.

Interestingly, though railbikes are a modern invention today, these machines have a long history. The concept dates back to the 1850s, when maintenance workers used handcars and similar railbikes to travel along the tracks. They were used to transport crew and materials for track inspection and repairs. Today, we're lucky enough to use these cool contraptions for fun rather than work—and what fun it is for all.