

6 Spectacular North American Train Trips

The trains are destinations in themselves, offering a mix of spectacular sightseeing, onboard dining and glorious open-air observation cars.

By Michael Harmon

March 13, 2025

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In the 19th and 20th centuries, railroads revolutionized transportation in North America, permanently accelerating the pace of travel across the continent. Today, many of those railroad tracks host an assortment of historic excursion trains, inviting riders to slow down and enjoy a grand day out.

The trains below are destinations in themselves, offering a mix of spectacular sightseeing, onboard dining and glorious open-air observation cars. They traverse deserts, mountains, forests and canyons, pulled by diesel and steam into parts of nature reachable only by rail. They're rolling lessons in geology and ecology, not to mention history. Most are accessible, none costs more than \$150, and each offers a window into the diverse beauty of this continent.

ONTARIO, CANADA

Agawa Canyon Tour Train



In Canada, the Agawa Canyon Tour Train takes riders on a scenic route that slices through a 1.2-billion-year-old canyon. Getty

One of Canada's most scenic train routes starts in the town of Sault Ste. Marie, just over the Michigan-Ontario border. Initially conceived to transport the area's timber and iron ore, the former Algoma Central Railway slices through the 1.2-billion-year-old Agawa Canyon on a route so picturesque that it's offered some form of recreation-focused passenger service for decades.

Today, it's the Agawa Canyon Tour Train, which offers full-day excursions that give riders ample time to take in the scenery both onboard and on foot. The train leaves at 8 a.m. for a four-hour, 114-mile run through the Canadian Shield wilderness, with

a prerecorded onboard commentary highlighting points of interest along the way. At mile 102, the train descends 500 feet to the canyon floor (accessible only by rail), where passengers can disembark for 90 minutes to explore Agawa Canyon Park's trails, panoramic lookout and waterfalls before the trip home.

The train runs Friday to Monday in August, when tickets cost 150 Canadian dollars (around \$104), and daily during peak foliage season (166 dollars). Riders can preorder food, bring their own, or upgrade to the new Stone Gardner "theater car," with its swivel lounge chairs and a giant rear window (500 dollars, including breakfast, lunch and drinks). Also on offer: Indigenous-led cultural tours of the canyon, plus special train outings with onboard guides from both the Canadian Bushplane Heritage Center and Entomica Insectarium, possibly the world's only aviation-and-entomology-themed train tour.

CALIFORNIA

The Skunk Train



On select nights, the Skunk Train's Glen Blair Junction turns into the Glen Blair Bar, a watering hole hidden among the redwoods with live music, games and s'mores. Brendan McGuigan

In 1885, the California Western Railroad was built to help extract timber from the forests of Mendocino County in Northern California. A century and a half later, the railroad is an accessible and scenic way to view the region's remaining old-growth redwoods, the tallest living things on earth.

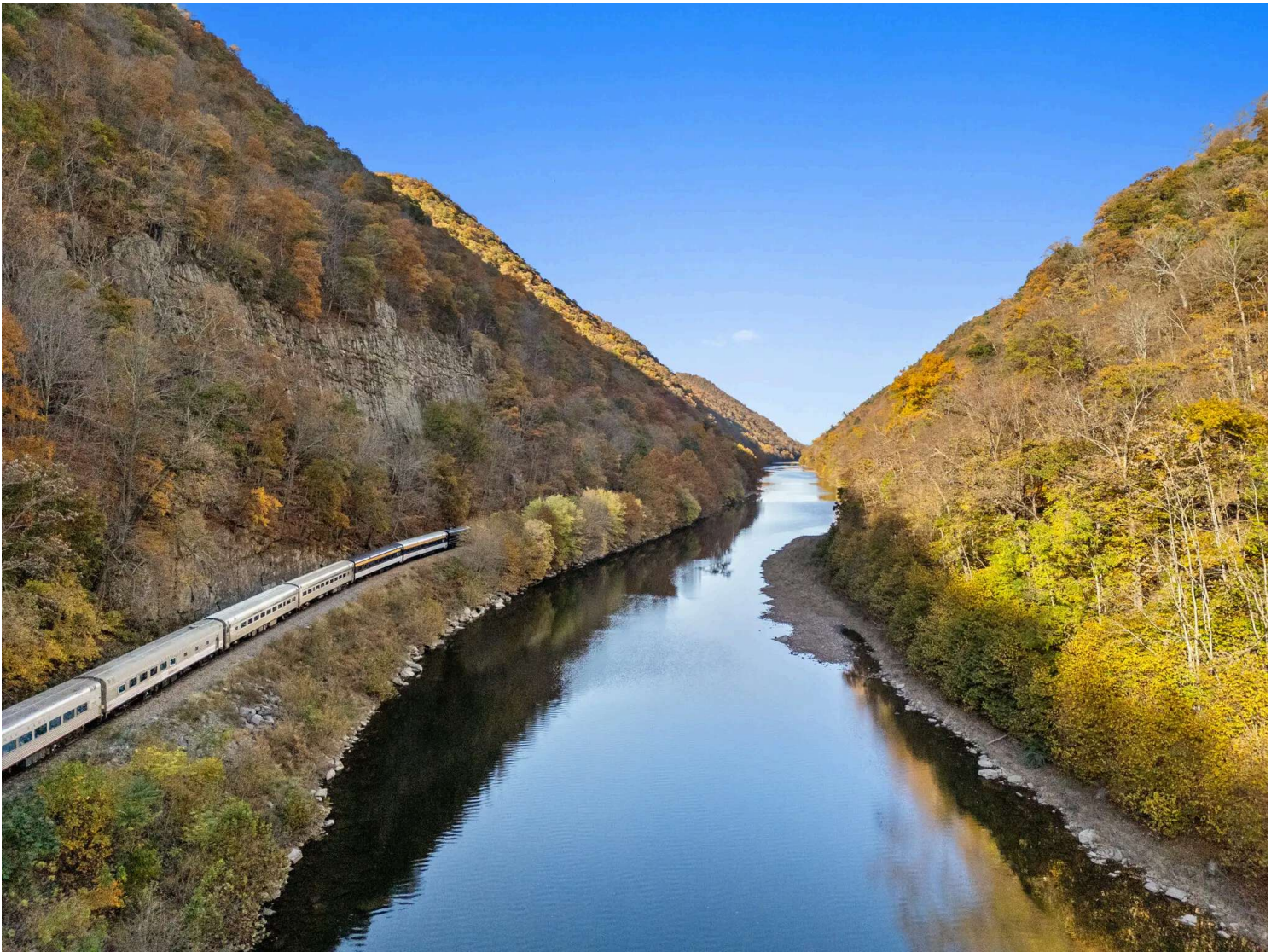
Nicknamed for the pungent gas-powered railcars it adopted in the 1920s, the Skunk Train carries sightseers in (now odorless) vintage passenger coaches — plus a repurposed, open-air freight car — along two scenic routes into Redwood Country, one departing from each end of the line. From Willits, the Wolf Tree Turn excursion offers a two-hour, 16-mile round-trip into the Noyo River Canyon, thick with 1,500-year-old redwoods; at the halfway point, riders can step off and marvel at the

route's eponymous wolf tree, one of the forest's oldest and largest. (Tickets from \$65, March to December, with trains running four to five times a week during summer and fall.)

At the other end of the line, the Pudding Creek Express parallels an estuary on its 3.5-mile run from Fort Bragg to Glen Blair Junction, a trackside clearing in a redwood grove. The return trip is flexible: Catch the same train back after a quick stretch of the legs (a 1.5-hour round-trip), take a later train, or make the return journey on foot along a gravel path (guided walking tours and rail-biking excursions are also available). Trips run year-round (from \$50) on a varied schedule, and are sometimes pulled by the Super Skunk, a restored Baldwin steam locomotive. On select weekend nights, the Junction turns into the Glen Blair Bar, a watering hole hidden among the redwoods with live music, games and s'mores — and only reachable by the Skunk Train.

WEST VIRGINIA

Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad



The South Branch of the Potomac River and the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad run through the Trough in West Virginia. John Paul Binotto

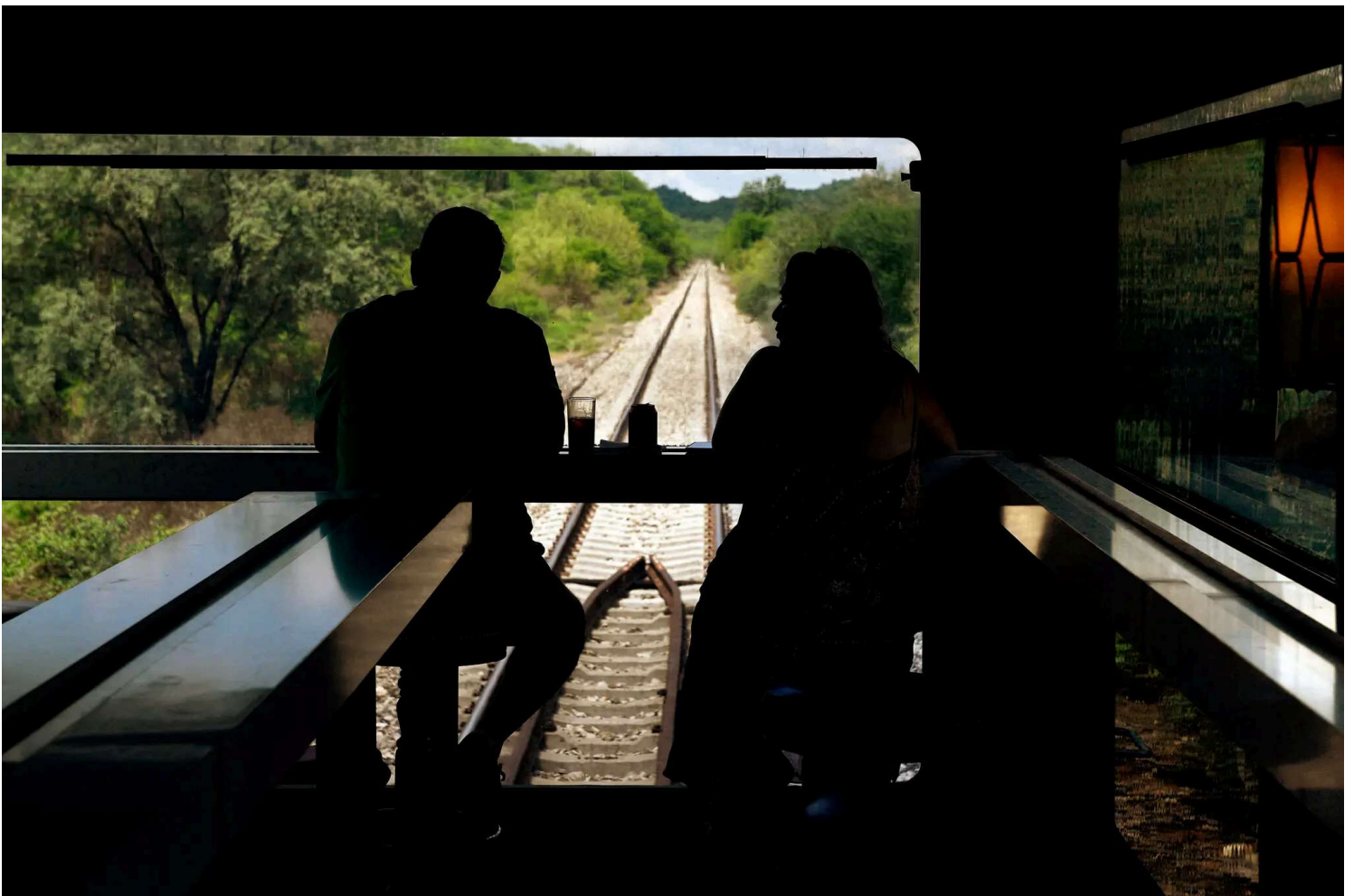
West Virginia is a hotbed of heritage railroading. One mainstay is the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad, which takes sightseers into the Trough, a canyon deep in the Appalachian Forest that's accessible only by rail or on foot. The route packs both a scenic and historic punch: George Washington named the canyon during his 1748 surveying expedition, and its steep ridges are a nesting habitat for bald eagles, which onboard guides help riders spot from the train.

The Potomac Eagle's regular run is a 35-mile round-trip from the town of Romney into the Trough, complete with a scenic bridge crossing. Passengers stay onboard the train, whose five classes of service range from bench-seats-and-B.Y.O.-lunch to four levels of onboard dining, each with its own vintage diner. Two open-air observation cars round out a train set regularly hauled by a restored 1950s diesel wearing the colors of the Baltimore & Ohio, the railroad's onetime operator.

In addition to the standard three-hour Trough trip (adult tickets from \$74, April to November), plus Sunset Trough trips on select summer evenings, the Potomac Eagle runs occasional all-day excursions to Petersburg, where riders can join a tour of the nearby stalactite-streaked Smoke Hole Caverns.

SINALOA & CHIHUAHUA, MEXICO

El Chepe



The El Chepe Express, a deluxe tourist train in Mexico, offers passengers a panoramic-windowed bar car. Claudio Cruz/AFP via Getty Images

Passenger rail is having a moment in Mexico, with the new Tren Maya in the Yucatán and the coast-to-coast Tren Interoceánico kicking off an ambitious plan to revitalize intercity rail across the country. But for a dedicated Mexican sightseeing train excursion, take El Chepe, better known as the Copper Canyon train.

The 390-mile Copper Canyon line opened in 1961 after 60 years of construction, linking the desert city of Chihuahua to Los Mochis on the coast and traversing a canyon system larger and deeper than the Grand Canyon. The railway is an engineering marvel, rising from sea level to a peak elevation of 7,800 feet; in one of its 86 tunnels, the tracks descend 100 feet while making a 180-degree turn inside the canyon's walls.

Until recently, El Chepe (short for Chihuahua al Pacífico), was one of Mexico's few passenger trains, and a regular, no-frills train — El Chepe Regional — still traverses the full length of the line. Since 2018, it's been joined by the El Chepe Express, a deluxe tourist train with a panoramic-windowed bar car (first class gets an open-air terrace bar and preferred access to the domed restaurant car), which runs between Los Mochis and the mountain town of Creel. The full nine-hour, one-way trip starts at 2,900 pesos, or around \$143 (first class is 5,400 pesos), though shorter segments (and multi-night itineraries) are also bookable; El Fuerte to Creel, which includes most of the line's 39 bridges, is the essential scenic stretch.

COLORADO AND NEW MEXICO

Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad



The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad bills itself as the “longest and highest” steam railroad in North America. Shutterstock

Built in 1880 and now a National Historic Landmark, this 64-mile narrow-gauge line — which bills itself as the “longest and highest” steam railroad in North America — runs between Antonito, Colo., and Chama, N.M., crossing the state border 11 times as it traverses aspen forests, high plains and steep canyons. (Fans of “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” might recognize the Cumbres & Toltec from the film’s opening chase scene.)

The train hugs a sheer cliff face as it navigates the line’s two scenic high points, skirting the rim of the 800-foot Toltec Gorge and zigzagging through the 10,015-foot Cumbres Pass, the highest railroad mountain pass in the United States; the alpine meadows at the summit can see snow flurries even in summer.

A variety of excursions depart from each terminus between May to October, most including lunch at the halfway point; a one-way trip along the full route takes seven hours, plus a one-hour return trip by bus (tickets from \$135). There are four classes of service, including the mahogany-paneled parlor car, but all riders can enjoy the open-air gondola car — not to mention a GPS-activated historical guide app and the distinctly analogue thrill of being hauled by one of five restored steam locomotives.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Mount Washington Cog Railway



The Mount Washington Cog Railway in New Hampshire runs year-round, offering winter round-trips partway up the mountain to Waumbek Station, where hot refreshments are provided. Mount Washington Cog Railway

P.T. Barnum called it “the second greatest show on Earth” when it opened in 1869, but the Mount Washington Cog Railway is brimming with superlatives. It’s the second-steepest railway on the planet, as well as the world’s first mountain-climbing cog railway, which uses a rack-and-pinion system to ascend the highest peak in the Northeast. Its summit — a subarctic tundra — has been known to see record weather events, like the highest surface wind ever directly observed (231 miles per hour, in 1934) and temperatures as low as -47 degrees Fahrenheit (before wind chill).

Yet, the “Cog” runs year-round, offering hourlong winter round-trips from Marshfield Base Station (2,700 feet), partway up the mountain to Waumbek Station (3,900 feet), where hot refreshments are provided and firepits are s’mores-ready.

From May to October, trains depart hourly for the summit (6,288 feet), where riders can explore the Tip Top House, the original summit hotel (now a museum). Biodiesel locomotives power most trips, but some are still pushed up the mountain by coal-fired steam engines; tickets range from \$52 in winter to \$99 for a steam-hauled, three-hour round-trip in summer.

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