Walk the Line

The Great American Rail-Trail mixes backcountry and frontcountry into a unique hiking and backpacking experience.

BY JESSICA BALTZERSEN



▲ *The Great American Rail-Trail through Pennsylvania includes several of the longest individual rail-trails in the country, including the 150-mile Great Allegheny Passage.*

PHOTO: MILO ALLERTON BATEMAN/RAILS TO TRAILS CONSERVANCY

In 1963, when President Kennedy challenged the American public to a 50-mile hike (part of an effort to prioritize the nation's physical fitness), Waldo Nielsen took the call seriously. He decided to find those 50 miles near his home in Rochester, New York, along an abandoned rail corridor strewn with remnants of rusted steel that trains once barreled along. With its gradual grade and distance from the chaotic city traffic, it made a perfect path.

Nielsen accomplished Kennedy's challenge in under 20 hours, but it ignited the potential for something more: a movement to convert abandoned rail lines into public trails. He later published the first national guidebook of abandoned rail corridors—a blueprint used by David Burwell and Peter Harnik when they co-founded the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy in 1986. Now celebrating 40 years, RTC is the nation's largest trails organization, collecting more than 42,000 multiuse trails.

But RTC's most ambitious project emerged in 2019: The Great American Rail-Trail is a roughly 3,700-mile, multiuse route spanning west across 12 states and the District of Columbia from the steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., to the shore of the Pacific Ocean in Washington state.

"This has been on the minds of our founders and our organization for a really long time," said Kevin Belle, project manager of what they call "the Great American."

During a 12-month study published in 2019, the team analyzed more than 34,000 miles of existing trail and met with more than 200 trail partners and over 50 state agencies to identify a safe, preferred route that is completely walkable and bikeable. Today, more than 55% of the trail is complete—including long, backpackable sections—with local entities working to close the more than 1,600 miles of remaining gaps that are scattered across the country.

For backpackers, it offers a unique route that explores just as much backcountry (it'll pass through the Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail in Nebraska, the Great Allegheny Passage in Pennsylvania and Maryland, and the Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail in Washington) as it does populated regions. "I think there are a lot of ways to make an incredible hiking or backpacking trip happen [on the Great American]," Belle said. "You just have to do the work to make sure you've got a good plan."

That mix allows hikers to carry lighter packs and more frequently resupply before slipping back into stretches of shaded canopy, open prairies, and fog-cloaked mountains. It links major cities like Pittsburgh and Seattle to small towns embedded in the nation's interior.

"There are few other outdoor recreation activities where you can connect with people and places in as intimate a way as you can on a rail-trail," Belle said. "It builds so much awareness and respect for the different ways of life that exist in our country— you get a glimpse of American culture you can't get anywhere else."