

New York

**STORY AND PHOTOS
BY BEN KEENE**

WALKWAY OVER THE HUDSON & HUDSON VALLEY RAIL TRAIL

Making your way across the railroad trestle at Walkway Over the Hudson State Historic Park in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., you can almost hear the rumble of the locomotives that once crossed the river here. Nearly 125 years after carrying the first Pennsylvania coal train over the Hudson River, the bridge reopened in October 2009 as a recreation destination for walkers and cyclists. More than 800,000 people have come to the park to experience the extraordinary view of the river valley, the technological wonder of the bridge and the past that comes to life. Indeed, the site is historic in many ways. The world's longest elevated park—6,678 feet—and the nation's sole surviving cantilever truss bridge, the great steel structure was literally created from the ashes of a New York landmark.

Looking south from atop the Walkway Over the Hudson, with the Mid-Hudson Bridge in the distance.

After serving as the first and only all-rail route over the Hudson south of Albany, the Poughkeepsie-Highland Railroad Bridge caught fire in 1974. It burned for hours, twisting tracks and warping girders before firefighters finally extinguished the flames. Left as a charred remain for decades, the bridge's severely damaged decking was removed in 1981. Then, in the 1990s, the nonprofit organization Walkway Over the Hudson bought the steel superstructure for a dollar and raised the funds to convert it to a multi-use trail.

Starting at the eastern entrance to the park off Gifford Avenue in Poughkeepsie and taking in a short stretch on the newly expanded Hudson Valley Rail Trail in Highland, you can complete an easy, five-mile out-and-back trip. It's also one of the best places to appreciate the river valley's colorful fall transformation, when scarlet and saffron foliage cloaks Illinois Mountain—your destination to the west.

The initial section of the park in Poughkeepsie runs through Mount Carmel historic district and roughly parallels Fallkill Creek, a narrow waterway that flows south from the town of Hyde Park. Several hundred yards into the



Sunshine breaks through an October New York sky, brightening the Mid-Hudson Bridge to the south of the Walkway.

trip, you'll bid farewell to the historic district. Crossing onto the walkway's 24-foot-wide concrete deck from the former railroad bed on the eastern side, the bridge passes above Mount Carmel Church. During the second World War, soldiers on their way to the European front sometimes dropped letters from trains at this spot, trusting they would be sent on to loved ones.

As you move from the park's approach out over the river, the noise of the busy town below recedes, replaced by the squeak of sneakers, the whirr of bicycle tires, the sweet chirping of the common yellowthroat, and perhaps the raucous cry of a ring-billed gull.

Without any shelter from the sun's rays, the walkway, even in autumn, can be quite warm. You might decide to pause near the middle of the Hudson to soak up the views and take advantage of

the breeze. From this location 212 feet above the water, it's possible to see for miles up and down the river. Watch cars move back and forth across the Mid-Hudson Bridge half a mile to the south, or count the powerboats and barges that pass under the walkway.

The trailhead for the 3.5-mile Hudson Valley Rail Trail isn't far now. As you cover the walkway's remaining distance, weaving around joggers and inline skaters, you continue past the western gate to join this trail.

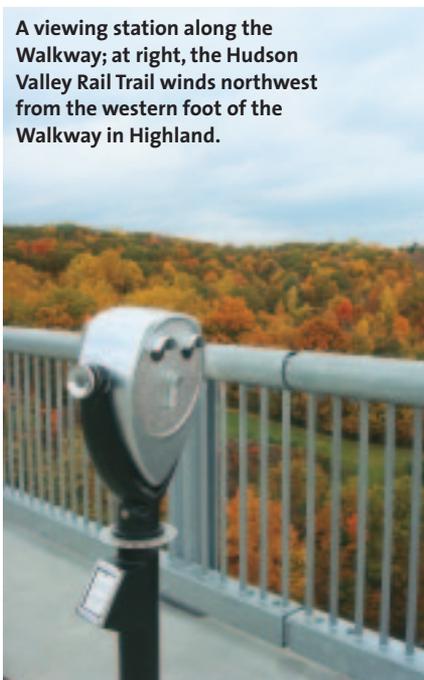
Paved and generally flat, the Hudson Valley Rail Trail curves north toward Highland. You'll pass an old caboose that shines with a fresh coat of red paint, then enter the first of several rock cuts that the New York, New Haven and Hartford line blasted in the sandstone cliffs. It's possible to follow this greenway for close to three more miles, but turn back just beyond the Vineyard Avenue bridge when you spot the signal tower rusting to the right of the trail.

The last section of the Hudson Valley Rail Trail is expected to be finished in 2012. Once open, it will connect with the Dutchess Rail Trail via the walkway, eventually completing a longer route from the edge of New Paltz to East Fishkill, N.Y.

An impressive example of architectural reclamation and an ideal place to observe the Hudson Valley's colorful autumn along the riverbanks, the walkway ultimately owes its popularity to its simplicity of purpose: Encourage people to exercise and engage with the environment.

Ben Keene is the author of *Best Hikes Near New York City*. His work has appeared in *DRAFT Magazine*, *Time Out New York*, *Wend*, *The Village Voice* and *Travel + Leisure Southeast Asia*. He wrote about the Cape Cod Rail Trail in the Fall 2010 *Rails to Trails*.

A viewing station along the Walkway; at right, the Hudson Valley Rail Trail winds northwest from the western foot of the Walkway in Highland.



GETTING THERE: To reach the eastern entrance of the park from New York City, take the Sprain Brook Parkway/Taconic State Parkway north to Billings, then follow Route 55 East/Manchester Road to Washington Street in Poughkeepsie. Turn right and continue about half a mile north to 9G/Parker Avenue. Turn right again and look for a sign on the left at the park entrance. Parking is available here as well as off Haviland Road at the western entrance, across the river.

Walkway Over the Hudson can also be accessed by train from the Amtrak and Metro North station in Poughkeepsie. Daily service from Manhattan's Grand Central Station delivers passengers within four blocks of the park.

RENTALS: Just south of Poughkeepsie, Bikeway (www.bikeway.com; 845.463.7433) rents Cannondale hybrids for \$20 a day. But be prepared for an additional eight or nine miles each way if you plan to ride from Bikeway's shop on Route 376. In New Paltz on the west side of the Hudson, the Bicycle Depot (www.bicycledepot.com; 845.255.3859) advertises full- and half-day rentals of Specialized Rockhoppers. Reservations are recommended for weekends. Again, the Hudson Valley Rail Trail is several miles from the shop's location on Main Street.

WHERE TO STAY: With Vassar College, Marist College and The Culinary Institute of America all nearby, Poughkeepsie doesn't lack for accommodations. Dutchess County Tourism (<http://dutchesstourism.com>; 800.445.3131) lists a dozen area hotels. On the other side of the river in Highland, Stonegate Bed & Breakfast (www.stonegatebb.com; 845.834.3183) and the Inn at Twaalfskill (<http://innattwaalfskill.com>; 845-691-3605) offer rooms to weary walkers and bikers.

FOR MORE: Learn more about the Walkway Over the Hudson and the Hudson Valley Rail Trail online at www.walkway.org and www.hudsonvalleyrailtrail.net. You'll find maps, directions and parking information. Visit the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation website at www.nysparks.com/parks/178/details.aspx or call 845.834.2867 for additional information about the walkway. Also, for a detailed geographic information system (GIS) map of the Walkway Over the Hudson or the Hudson Valley Rail Trail, including more images, user reviews and other useful trip-planning tools, visit www.traillink.com, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's free trail-finder website.



Walkway Over the Hudson

Trail length: 1.25 miles
Trail surface: Asphalt

Hudson Valley Rail Trail

Trail length: 3.57 miles
Trail surface: Asphalt

- Trailhead
- Parking
- Restrooms

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLEMARKS.COM

Map for reference only. Not for navigation.

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