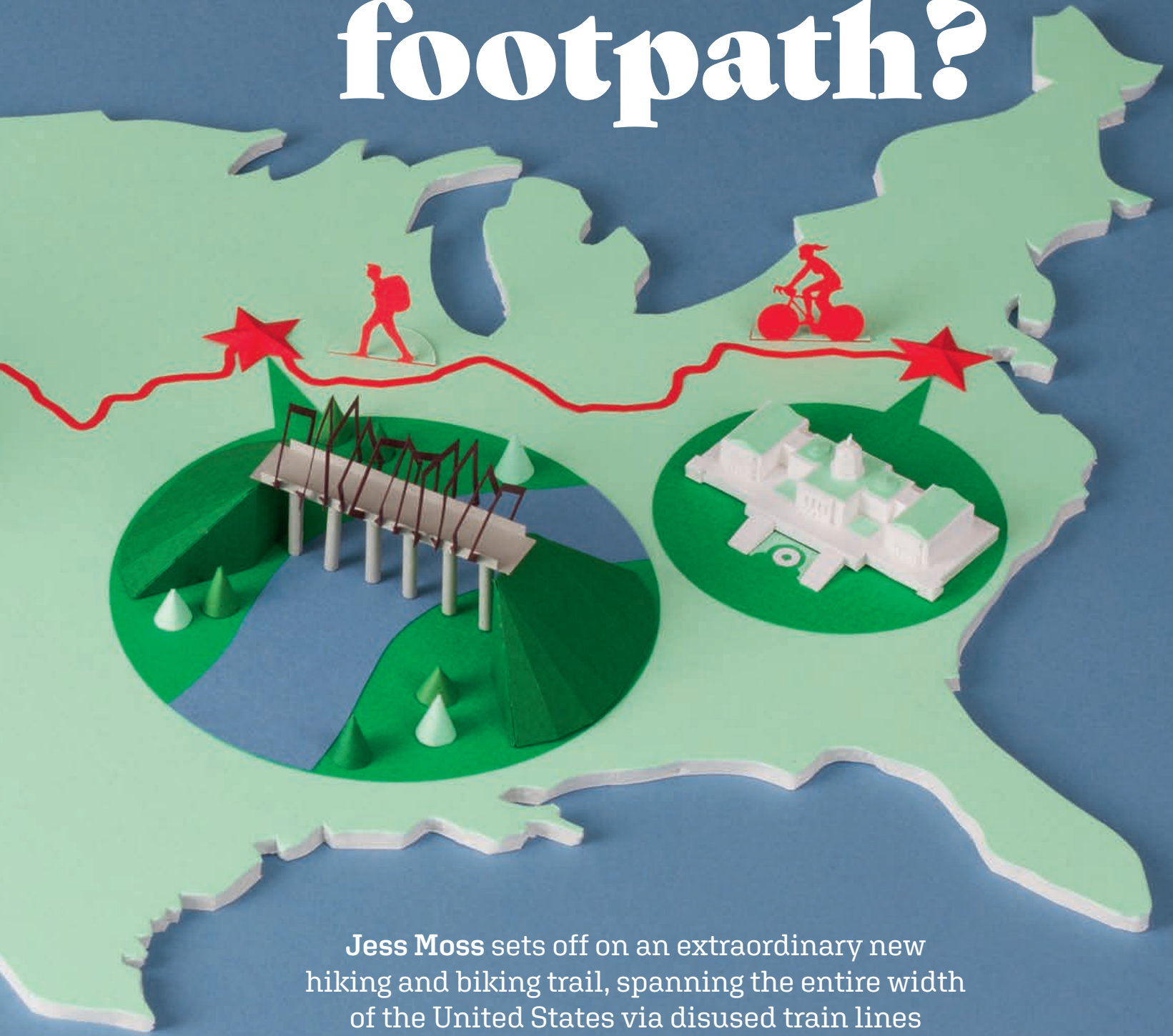


Could you take on America's



most epic footpath?



Jess Moss sets off on an extraordinary new hiking and biking trail, spanning the entire width of the United States via disused train lines

Paper Sculpture **Helen Friel**

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he USA is filled with iconic routes through magnificent scenery just begging to be conquered.

Hundreds of

adventurers each year set off on life-changing treks of self-discovery in the nation's varied terrain. Bucket list-style routes include the Pacific Crest Trail, 4,285km running through western states north to south from the Canadian to Mexican border, and the Appalachian Trail, running 3,516km through the eastern states from north to south from Maine to Georgia. But hikers and cyclists take note – there's another bigger and better trail to set your sights on: the Great American Rail-Trail is set to cross the entire belly of America, from Washington D.C. to Washington State almost 6,000km, across 12 states.

Using abandoned railway lines and existing trails, from the east coast to the west, walkers and cyclists following America's seamless new mega-trail will experience diverse terrains, from high desert and lush forests of Douglas firs, to humbling mountain scenery, and wildlife in abundance. Currently, the Great American Rail-Trail is only 52% complete. It's estimated it will take a couple of decades to be fully open, but those itching to get started can get trotting on already-launched parts of the brand-new route.

If I was going at some serious pace, it would take me three months to bike the whole route. But it's not an all-or-nothing feat, explains Ryan Chao, the president of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. "We're encouraging people to check off each of the pieces and eventually total it up," he says.

I start my first section standing on the steps of the U.S. Capitol building, its

massive white dome glowing in the Washington D.C. sun, but the path has had a humble kick-off, considering how huge this epic endeavour is. The Great American Rail-Trail was unveiled this spring, but isn't yet signposted on Capitol grounds. That's coming in 2020. I'm among the first to walk this pathway in its grander context and now know it's possible to make it all the way to Ohio from D.C., around 644km with minimal gaps in the trail.

As I walk down the marble stairs, my great American journey unfolds. This is a route I know well – a jogging and biking path I've followed for more than a decade. But this time it's different. This time I keep going. On into Maryland ... and, if I want, Pennsylvania after that. At that point, I'd just be getting started.

The difference with the Great American Rail-Trail as opposed to America's other legendary trails is that it is accessible to millions of people of all walking and cycling levels and abilities. "The nature of rail trails is they accommodate lots of uses – biking, hiking, horseback riding, rollerblading, and depending on the time of year, cross-country skiing," explains Chao. The trail is totally safe, free of motor vehicles, and it's entirely flat. Just as people train for the bucket-list trails like the Appalachian and Pacific Crest, adventure-junkies will be drawn to the monumental-distance aspect of the route. →





US CAPITOL BUILDING

The home of the United States Congress is a spectacular start to the trail. Located at the eastern end of the National Mall, the building, designed by William Thornton, was completed in 1800.



“The trail will feature all the best that America has to offer”

“You could aspire to do the whole thing,” says Chao. “Or you can do what you’re doing right now — just pick up pieces at any point in time, and still feel like you’re part of something bigger.”

My instant-escape from the busy city is invigorating, and the highlights just keep coming. In Georgetown, I pick up the Capital Crescent Trail, the next leg of the Great American, which follows the shoreline of the Potomac River. Within a minute I’m surrounded by a tunnel of green. It’s cool and dark, a relief from DC’s summer, which elsewhere is bearing down with all of its muggy might. The city sounds are muted; all I hear is the buzzing chorus of cicadas, and the occasional “on your left” as a cyclist whizzes by. At night, the trees start to twinkle as fireflies hover in the twilight.

About 10km up the trail, at Fletcher’s Boathouse, the Capitol Crescent meets up with the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal Towpath. Here I meet Brandi Horton, a spokesperson for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. Her excitement about the new trail is contagious. “People are already doing the connected portions,” she says. “You can only imagine how that’s just going to continue to spread.” Chao agrees: “The trail will feature all the best that America has to offer.” It’ll pass through tiny towns and bustling cities and take in some of the most iconic landscapes in the United States. “The Great American Rail-Trail will be a national treasure,” Chao adds.

The Great American has been a dream since the 1980s. The early members of

the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy had a wall map with pins for different types of trail. One colour pin was for abandoned or out-of-use rail corridors, another was for railroads that were in the process of converting to trails. And one was for actual trails. They started to see it all connecting. “It was very clear that we could someday make it happen,” says Horton. The organisation set to work, its trail planners mapping new routes based on landscapes and GIS data, while its community organisers mobilised local groups and governments to build and link the route across the country.

And what a route it is. Beyond Maryland it picks up the Great Allegheny Passage, commonly known as the GAP Trail and travels through staggering scenes of rolling mountains until it spits you out in Pittsburgh, for an up-close look at the city’s superb bridges and rivers. Going onto West Virginia and Ohio, the path checks Cincinnati, Columbus, and Dayton along the way.

I plan to come back and extend my journey onto Indiana, then up into the greater Chicago area and across Illinois into Iowa, where the path is flanked by bucolic farmland of silos and corn fields and includes sights like the High Trestle Trail Bridge. Formerly part of the Milwaukee Road railway line, this 13-storey-high river crossing is an incredible feat in engineering – with an eye-catching display of spiralling frames that mimic the structure of an old mine →



**HIGH TRESTLE
TRAIL BRIDGE**

Once a crossing for the Union Pacific Railroad, High Trestle Trail Bridge in Iowa provides striking views of the Des Moines River Valley. The 41 steel frames along the bridge simulate the view through a mine shaft, a nod to the area's history of mining.

PUGET SOUND

Builders are hoping to eventually extend the route to the Puget Sound, an estuary along the northwestern coast of Washington State that's known for its orca sightings



“You just know you’re about to encounter something awesome”

shaft. The variation of terrains continues through big skies, big mountains, and big wildlife country, plus thick national forest. Once it hits Washington State, the Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail wanders through high desert, fir forests, and jaw-dropping mountain scenery.

Remarkably, throughout all that, the trail itself is still flat. Eventually the route will cross the Columbia River and travel into Seattle, and the trail builders plan to eventually extend the pathway over the waterways of Puget Sound to continue all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

Socially and economically, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy predict the eco-route will revive small communities along the trail as tourists spend their money en route. The tiny town of Ohioville had a population of 59 at last count, but it’s become a major destination on the GAP Trail, thanks in part to its spectacular waterfalls and beautiful forests. Likewise, in Iowa, the town of Perry has embraced the trail life. “You pull up to Perry on your bike and all along the trail there are little fix-it stands, and they’re painted,” gushes Horton. “You just know you’re about to encounter something awesome. And then it’s this adorable town, and they’ve got a depot that’s restored. It’s just epic.” And it’s not just people this trail connects, it’s their stories.


With close ties to the railroads that opened up the United States to exploration and trade, the Great American has the country’s history in its DNA. There’s the Old West culture in the Great Plains, and Native

American history at Nebraska’s Fort Robinson State Park – the site where famous Lakota leader ‘Crazy Horse’ died. In Ohio, Dayton commemorates hometown inventors the Wright Brothers, who actually ran a bike shop before they took to the skies.

Even the C&O Canal Towpath that I’m currently using, run by the National Park Service, is a national historical park. This canal transported coal and other goods from Cumberland in the Maryland mountains to the nation’s capital throughout the 1800s and early 1900s.

In Maryland, I stop into Lockhouse number 21, a beautiful home furnished to look like it did in 1916, when a family lived and worked here on the canal. Now, it’s part of the Canal Quarters programme, run by the C&O Canal Trust, which lets visitors rent out historic lock houses. “The goal is to have a hut-to-hut experience,” says Robin Zanotti, president of the C&O Canal Trust. Staying here is more than lodging, it’s an immersive experience, complete with historical artefacts. “People can experience the home the way the lock-keeper would have a century ago,” Zanotti adds.

The grand plans for the trail will take some time. “We think within 10 years, we’re going to be pretty close,” says Horton.

“We already have people calling and saying, ‘How do I do it? I want to do it right now!’,” she continues. “The fact is, people can get out there right now. And the trail will only get greater.” 

For detailed trail routes and descriptions visit trailink.com/great-american

Travel notes



✓ **Where to stay**

Part of the Canal Quarters programme, Lockhouse 10, on the Clara Barton Parkway, has been furnished to evoke the 1930s and is a great spot from which to explore Washington D.C. sights. canaltrust.org

✓ **Where to eat**

Fuel up at the Dabney where they cook flavoursome old recipes using farm-raised meats, fowl and foraged produce on a large wood-burning hearth. Eat it in unfussy rustic surrounds. thedabney.com

✓ **Don't miss...**

Before your trek, wander through the streets on a guided tour of the vibrant and arty NoMa neighbourhood. Here there are more than 30 ever-changing colourful mural pieces to admire. dcmuraltour.com

✓ **Remember to pack...**

Some seriously good walking boots or a lightweight sturdy bike. Plus, sunscreen, a sun hat and lots of snacks and water to get you to the next town.

FR Peut-on traverser l'Amérique à pied?

Jess Moss s'embarque pour une randonnée épique à travers les États-Unis à pied et à vélo, via des lignes de chemin de fer désaffectées

→ Les États-Unis fourmillent d'itinéraires à travers des paysages d'anthologie appelant à l'aventure. Des centaines de conquérants des temps modernes partent chaque année à la découverte d'eux-mêmes par les monts et par les vaux du pays. Parmi les parcours incontournables, les 4 285 km du Pacific Crest Trail. Mais avis aux randonneurs et cyclistes, il existe un sentier de randonnée encore plus grand et plus beau, le Great American Rail Trail qui suit, sur près de 6 000 km et 12 états, la ligne de chance de l'Amérique, de Washington DC à l'État de Washington.

Via des lignes de chemin de fer abandonnées et des chemins déjà existants, de Côte est en Côte

ouest, randonneurs à pied et à vélo rencontreront sur le tracé du nouveau méga-sentier des terrains variés, déserts d'altitude, denses forêts de conifères et impressionnants paysages de montagne, et plus une abondance de faune sauvage. 52 % du Great American Rail Trail est déjà là. Il faudra encore une vingtaine d'années pour l'achever mais les impatients peuvent d'ores et déjà crapahuter sur les sections ouvertes.

Si je tenais un bon rythme, il me faudrait environ trois mois pour marcher sur toute la longueur du parcours. Pourtant, ce n'est pas du tout ou rien, explique Ryan Chao, président de Rails-to-Trails Conservancy : « Nous encourageons les gens à découvrir chaque portion avant de les mettre toutes bout à bout. » Je commence sur les marches du Capitole dont le dôme immaculé étincelle sous le soleil de Washington mais l'inauguration du sentier s'est faite sans fanfare, vu l'ampleur épique du projet. Le Great American Rail Trail a été ouvert ce printemps mais les panneaux de signalisation autour du Capitole manquent encore : c'est pour 2020. Je fais partie

des pionniers de cette route dans son ensemble et sais que je peux atteindre l'Ohio depuis D.C.

Comme je descends les marches de marbre, mon grand voyage américain démarre. La différence entre le Great American Rail Trail et d'autres routes légendaires est son accessibilité à des millions de personnes de tous niveaux de marche. « Les voies ferrées se prêtent à de nombreux usages, vélo, marche, équitation, roller et ski de fond, explique Chao. » La route est sécurisée, sans véhicule à moteur et plane. Les marcheurs pro apprécieront la distance, monumentale, tandis que le reste pourra la parcourir en portions à son niveau, tout en gagnant le droit de proclamer avoir traversé les États-Unis à pied.

« L'idée est de proposer un voyage de refuge en refuge, dit Robin Zanotti, président du C&O Canal Trust. » Il s'agit plus que de simple hébergement, c'est une expérience immersive avec des objets historiques, « les gens découvrent la maison comme l'éclusier y vivait il y a un siècle ». trailink.com/great-american

NL Kunt u Amerika te voet oversteken?

Jess Moss volgt een bijzonder nieuw pad voor fietsers en wandelaars dat via oude treinsporen over de volledige breedte van de Verenigde Staten loopt

→ In de VS kun je heel wat markante routes volgen doorheen prachtige gebieden. Elk jaar trekken honderden avonturiers erop uit om zichzelf te ontdekken in de uiteenlopende streken van het land. Op menige bucketlist staan routes als de Pacific Crest Trail, dat 4285 km van noord naar zuid door de westelijke staten loopt, van de Canadese tot de Mexicaanse grens. Maar er is groot nieuws voor wandelaars en fietsers. Nu kunt u uw zinnen zetten op een route die nog groter en mooier is: de Great American Rail Trail, dwars door het 12 noordelijke staten van de VS, van Washington D.C. in het oosten tot de staat Washington langs de westkust, bijna 6000 km lang.

Via verlaten spoorlijnen en bestaande paden, van de oostkust tot het westen, dwars door

verschillende terreinen, van woestijnen en weelderige bossen met Douglas-sparren tot indrukwekkende berglandschappen en natuurgebieden vol wildlife. Momenteel is de Great American Rail Trail voor 52% voltooid. Het zal naar schatting nog een paar decennia duren voor de route volledig open is, maar wie al staat te trappelen van ongeduld kan de bestaande delen van het gloednieuwe pad nu al verkennen.

Als ik in een serieus tempo zou stappen, zou het me ongeveer drie maanden kosten om de hele route te voet af te leggen. Maar ik hoef niet te kiezen tussen alles of niets, zegt Ryan Chao, de voorzitter van de Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. "We moedigen mensen aan om elk van de stukjes afzonderlijk af te werken", zegt Chao. Ik start op de trappen van het Capitool. De massieve witte koepel van het gebouw glinstert in de zon van Washington DC, maar het pad kende een bescheiden start, als je van deze epische onderneming in ogenschouw neemt. De Great American Rail Trail werd dit voorjaar onthuld, maar staat nog niet aangegeven bij het Capitool. Dat is gepland voor 2020. Ik ben een van de eersten die dit pad bewandelen, in de

wetenschap dat het mogelijk is om vanuit Washington DC naar Ohio te gaan.

Als ik de marmeren trappen afdaal, begint mijn Amerikaanse reis. De Great American Rail Trail is niet zoals andere legendarische paden van Amerika. De route is toegankelijk voor miljoenen mensen, ongeacht hun wandelniveau en -mogelijkheden. "Het leuke van spoorlijnen is dat ze zo veelzijdig zijn: je kunt er fietsen, wandelen, paardrijden, skaten en, afhankelijk van de tijd van het jaar, langlaufen", legt Chao uit. De route is volkomen veilig, verkeersvrij en volledig vlak. Geoefende wandelaars en hikkers zullen genieten van het idee dat dit pad zo indrukwekkend lang is, terwijl anderen de route in beheersbare delen kunnen afleggen en toch nog kunnen zeggen dat ze de hele breedte van de VS hebben gelopen.

"Het doel is om de tocht van hut tot hut af te leggen", zegt Robin Zanotti, voorzitter van de C&O Canal Trust. Hier verblijven is meer dan onderdak, het is een avontuur, compleet met historische artefacten. "Het huis waarin mensen verblijven ziet eruit zoals het was toen de sluiswachter er een eeuw geleden woonde."

trailink.com/great-american