

# Hey, you, take a hike. Here are N.J.'s 21 best walking/hiking trails.

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Boardwalk, Strawberry Avenue, Commercial

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Yes, gladly, in these unprecedented times. Parks have opened up throughout New Jersey — make sure to keep your social distance! — which means you can get out of the house and get some fresh air, and exercise. New Jersey may be the nation's most densely-populated state, but natural wonders abound — mountains, hills, rivers, streams, lakes and epic expanses of woods (Pine Barrens, anyone?).

Here are the state's 21 best walking/hiking paths/trails.

They're not all tramps through the woods.

There's a bridge, a boardwalk, a lighthouse, even a deserted village, on the list. The walks/hikes range from the mildly strenuous to the downright easy. It's time to get outside, New Jersey, and work off some of the stress and strain of the recent months.

## **Stairway to Heaven**

Better than the Led Zep song, the [Stairway to Heaven](#) is part of a 7.3 mile-long trail from Pochuck Valley to Pinwheel Vista in Wawayanda State Park in northern New Jersey. It starts with an easy 2-mile-long boardwalk/suspension bridge section; the Stairway to Heaven portion is a 2.5-mile-long boulder field leading to one of N.J.'s most stunning vistas. And no bugs or, hopefully, crowds, to deal with.

## **Franklin Parker Preserve, Chatsworth**

The [Franklin Parker Preserve](#) is the New Jersey Conservation Foundation's largest property, 16 square miles in the Pine Barrens. A former cranberry farm bought by the foundation in 2003, it's accessible by a network of sandy roads that wind through pitch pine forest and blueberry fields, and run along cedar swamp. There are four trails totaling nearly 21 miles; some are hikers-only paths, while others are multi-use trails open to bicyclists and horseback riders as well as hikers. A total of 14 tributaries cross the preserve and eventually unite in the Wading River, one of the most popular sites for canoeing in the Pine Barrens. The preserve is a treasure, and a little-known one at that.

## The Bayonne Bridge

Wait, a bridge? Well, I would nominate the Pulaski Skyway for the all-time-great New Jersey bridge walk, but you can't walk across the Skyway, at least legally, and the Bayonne Bridge offers more spectacular views anyway. The original bridge was completed in November 1931, [several months ahead of schedule](#) and \$3 million under budget, believe it or not. The original roadway was demolished and the bridge raised to 215 feet above mean high waters to accommodate enormous Panamax cargo ships; the new span fully opened in June, 2019. Yes, you can walk across it. Estimates of its length are all over the map, so I'll go with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey's number: 7,160 feet.

## Pyramid Mountain Natural Historic Area, Montville

[Pyramid Mountain Natural Historic Area](#) offers 1,675 acres of rugged trails, fields, forests, rock outcroppings and wetlands. The highest point in the park is 934 feet with a magnificent view of the New York City skyline, according to the Morris County Park Commission. For experienced hikers looking for new routes, the Kincaid Access Area provides access to less-frequented, pristine trails. Most photographed feature: Tripod Rock, a 180-ton boulder balanced on three smaller boulders. "Awesome hike at Pyramid Mountain this morning," read a recent hiker's report on Facebook. "Saw a bobcat less than one mile away from the parking lot."

The visitor center is also worth a stop.

## Columbia Trail, Hunterdon, Morris counties

Built along an old railroad bed, the [Columbia Trail](#) is a 15-mile multi-use path that runs from High Bridge in Hunterdon County to the border of Mt. Olive and Washington Township in Morris County. There are several walking/hiking options, including one that hugs the South Branch of the Raritan River through Ken Lockwood Gorge on a one-lane road closed to motor vehicle traffic. The gorge often shows up on lists of the state's most beautiful spots,.



## Wildwood boardwalk

Wait, a boardwalk? It's not just any boardwalk, it's the best boardwalk in New Jersey, which makes it the best boardwalk anywhere.

The Wildwood boardwalk is two miles of food, fun, rides, shops, piers, plus Jersey's only boardwalk sundial and the country's only boardwalk chapel. Essential Jersey Shore experience: a ride a night on the ferris wheel, high above the boardwalk's spectacular neon-lit magnificence. If your feet start to ache on that boardwalk walk, you can always take the easy way out and hop aboard the infamous tram car. You'll probably hear it before you see it: "Watch the Tram Car, Please."

### **Richard W. DeKorte Park, Lyndhurst**

The country's most unlikely urban wilderness, the Meadowlands is home to birds, muskrats, snakes, crabs and maybe Jimmy Hoffa. [Richard W. DeKorte Park](#) in Lyndhurst is a good introduction to its many wonders. It was once slated to be a landfill, but rational minds prevailed. Now it's 3.5 miles of trails, panoramic views of wetlands and waterways, and "birds galore," according to the New Jersey Sports & Exposition Authority. There's the half-mile Marsh Discovery Trail, and the mile-long Saw Mill Creek Trail, among other attractions.



### **Absecon Lighthouse, Atlantic City**

This walk goes straight up. It's 228 steps to the top of [Absecon Lighthouse](#), the state's tallest (171 feet) and the casino city's least-heralded attraction. At the top, you'll be rewarded with a breathtaking 360-degree panorama of beach, ocean and city. You'll be forgiven if your feet wobble a bit once you hit the pavement afterwards.



### **Strawberry Avenue boardwalk, Commercial Township**

It looks like the end of the earth. Drive to the end of Strawberry Avenue, Commercial Township, part of the other, overlooked Jersey Shore, the towns along Delaware Bay. The Strawberry Avenue boardwalk, shown here, takes you past a stark, surreal landscape with stunted trees, a fitful creek, a limitless sea of grass, and Delaware Bay in the shimmering distance. It's a scene guaranteed not to be on any welcome-to-New Jersey postcard. If you really want to get away from it all, this is the place.



### **Deserted Village, Berkeley Heights**

New Jersey's only official deserted village is located, ironically enough, just off one of the state's busiest highways, Route 78. The [Deserted Village](#) is a collection of 10 buildings, all that's left of a long-forgotten quasi-Utopian mill town and, later, a summer resort. Park in the lot at the corner of Cataract Hollow Road and Glenside Avenue and stroll down the winding mile-long trail through a hushed cathedral of trees to the village. It makes for a beautiful walk any time of year.

### **Sourland Mountain Preserve, Hillsborough, Montgomery**

The 4,000-acre [Sourland Mountain Preserve](#) is one of the state's least-appreciated natural areas, with its rolling hills, woods, and trails. There's plenty to satisfy hikers, mountain bikers, bird watchers, and horseback riders. The Ridge Trail is 5.4 miles long, and passes through the boulders of [Devil's Half Acre](#) and the Roaring Rocks, according to [njhiking.com](#). The preserve is administered by the Somerset County Park Commission, which offers this pitch: "Whether you are a person seeking solitude, or someone who is bringing their friends and family for a day of fun, Sourland Mountain Preserve has something for the outdoors person in all of us."

### **Raccoon Ridge, Worthington State Forest, Warren County**

Nearby Mount Tammany and Sunfish Pond get all the publicity, but Raccoon Ridge (also known as Mount Mohican) is no scenic slouch. "Nice hike with amazing 360 degree views of the Delaware Water Gap and western NJ from Raccoon Ridge. Rest of hike has nice varied terrain - streams, ridges, rocks, clearings. Elevation changes mostly gradual," someone reported on [alltrails.com](#), a good hiker's reference.



## Delaware & Raritan Canal

A shady, often-overlooked oasis in the midst of the megalopolis, [Delaware & Raritan State Park](#), 70 miles long, in two sections, is paradise for walkers, hikers, fishermen, canoeists and folks who just want to lose themselves for a while. Beside the paths, there are tender houses, wooden bridges and remnants of locks, a reminder of an age when freight moved by mule teams or steam tugboats. Scenic spots along the way include Washington Crossing, Bull's Island and Griggstown.

## Cooper River Park, Camden County

If people outside the area know [Cooper River Park](#), it's for the prestigious rowing events held there, plus the Cooper River Yacht Club. But the 346-acre park, which runs through Pennsauken, Collingswood, Cherry Hill and Haddon Township, is an urban oasis; a long walk along the river is sure to ease your mind. There are also bike paths, softball fields, picnic areas, volleyball courts, and pavilions. You can also rent paddle boats and kayaks. Or you can just grab a bench and enjoy the view.



## Ramapo Mountain State Park

Skyline Drive, a 5.8-mile drive from Route 287 to Route 511 in Oakland and Ringwood, offers good views from the car, but even better ones if you park and hike — not far — into the woods in Ramapo Mountain State Forest. A walk down any of the trails reveals many places of quiet beauty. One note: watch out for bears. Check out the abandoned water tower near the lower parking lot on Skyline Drive, just off exit 57 of Route 287.

## Hartshorne Woods Park, Middletown

Many Shore-bound visitors dart right past Atlantic Highlands and Highlands on their way to Sea Bright, Long Branch and points south, and it's their loss. Both towns boast lively dining scenes and waterfront settings. But let's talk about [Hartshorne Woods Park](#), maybe the area's most under-the-radar spot. The hilly 791-acre site overlooks the Navesink River, which means great views of Sandy Hook Bay, the Atlantic Ocean and the Manhattan skyline. There are 14 miles of trails, from easy to challenging. The park is named after Richard Hartshorne, an English Quaker who settled here in 1669. Batteries for heavy artillery were built on the site during World War II.

## Musconetcong Gorge Preserve, Holland and Bethlehem townships

Musconetcong River — the Musky — is well-known to New Jersey fishermen. If you're a hiker, put the [Musconetcong Gorge Preserve](#) high on your N.J. outdoors bucket list. Here's a summary from njhiking.com: "Plenty of waterfalls and cascades along a stream running through a scenic gorge, plus a section of the Highlands Trail. Easy to moderate depending on route length. Decent amount of poison ivy along its edges, especially along Pine Run."

## **Garret Mountain Reservation, Woodland Park**

"No love for Garret Mountain?" @brightapollo wondered on Twitter. "Walk the cross country trail there (or run it if you got the legs), then south to Rifle Camp and hit the visitor center. Or start there then when you descend Garret Mountain hike over to the New Corral and get the best chili dogs in Passaic County." There are several miles of walking/running trails in the [568-acre park](#), and spectacular overlooks.



## **Goat Hill Overlook, West Amwell**

This is the easiest walk/hike on the list, but the payoff is unbeatable: a sweeping view of the Delaware River at Lambertville. Both sides in the Revolutionary War used the overlook for scouting purposes. Goat Hill Road is accessible from Pleasant Valley Road, off Route 29, or from Lambertville itself.

## **Tillman Ravine, Stokes State Forest**

[Tillman Ravine](#) is "flat out gorgeous," reports njhiking.com. We like the next part even more: "An easy, short hike with a rushing stream, and plenty of water cascades." Nobody said enjoying the outdoors had to be cruel and unusual punishment.

## **Mercer Meadows, Lawrence**

County parks are one of New Jersey's unheralded treasures, and one of the most glorious, and relatively unknown ones, is [Mercer Meadows](#). It's a combination of three properties - Curlis Lake Woods, Rosedale Park, and the Pole Farm — 1,600 acres in all. There are scenic hiking and biking trails through the meadow and woodlands, and you can fish, too.