

# TRAVEL

## The Trainspotting Vacation

Towns cater to rail nostalgia with covered platforms, train-themed gift shops; Georgia's 'Iron Triangle'

By DANIEL MACHALABA  
Folkston, Ga.

STUART AND Mary Beth Lodge sit back in their chairs on an outdoor viewing platform and wait for the show to begin. Suddenly, they hear the blast of a horn, followed by the roar of diesel locomotives. A mile-long freight train races by 70 feet in front of them.

For the Lodges, the trains are what bring them to this small town in southern Georgia. "I love the power, the force and the strength of trains," says Ms. Lodge, a personal life coach from Atlanta.

It's been more than 50 years since the end of the railroads' glamour days, when

Hollywood stars still traveled on fast streamliners to the coast and powerful steam locomotives symbolized the country's industrial might. These days, when even plane travel is passé, trains evoke a passion in some people the way baseball or food might in others. They recall a bygone era when life was simpler and when small towns still thrived before the suburbs took hold.

Now, Folkston is figuring out how to profit from that passion. Officials are turning what many local residents here have considered a major annoyance—the gritty, noisy railroad tracks through the center of town—



On Track: A CSX train passes through Folkston, Ga.

into a tourist attraction. Several years ago this town near the Florida border built a covered wooden platform next to CSX's busy mainline tracks and outfitted it with chairs, lights, ceiling fans and other amenities. Thousands of train lovers now flock to the platform each year to watch the 70 CSX freight and Amtrak passenger trains that come through town every 24 hours.

Long before I started writing about trucks, ships and railroads for *The Wall Street*  
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## MASTERPIECE

### It Was 40 Years Ago Today

With 'Sgt. Pepper,' the Beatles indulged their whims—and changed rock forever

By RUSS SMITH

IT'S POSSIBLE for two reasonable adults, probably older than 45, to argue for hours about the most significant pop music event of the 1960s. My own vote would be cast in favor of the Beatles' first appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show" in February 1964, but a very close second is the release of their "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," the majestic album that will be 40 years old in early June. It's not that  
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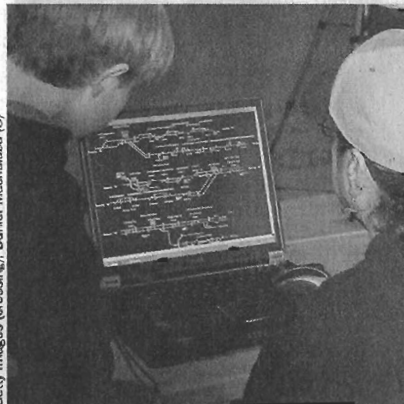
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Journal in late 1983, I had an attachment to trains. Since my early years growing up a half block from an elevated train line in Queens, N.Y., I have enjoyed watching and listening to them. In my late teens and 20s I'd go to country areas with busy freight tracks, sometimes camping with friends near tracks in northeast Pennsylvania. There was the quiet and solitude, then the amazing rush of energy and noise when a huge train broke the silence. Then the silence returned, and the anticipation built up for the next rush.

There are all kinds of train buffs, just as there are fresh water and salt water fishermen, says Danny Harmon, a television producer from Tampa, Fla., one of the people gathered on the Folkston platform on a recent day. "Some of us like locomotives, some of us like to listen to operations on the radio and others just enjoy being in the outdoors and watching the trains go by."

Whatever our reason for being drawn to the tracks, we all share a respect for these trains that have helped shape the history of this country. At platforms like the one in Folkston, buffs swap stories, at times exhibiting an almost encyclopedic knowledge of trains, routes, railroad history and schedules. There's even one-upmanship. I find that extreme sector a bit annoying. What should be a relaxing pursuit becomes another ego-driven activity. But it's not long before there's a horn and a long train drowns out such talk.

**H**ERE IN southern Georgia, train lovers are fueling something of a rail renaissance. It's now possible to take what a CSX spokesman calls an Iron Triangle tour of Georgia, visiting the triad of viewing platforms that have emerged in the state. One of these is in Jesup, about 60 miles north of here, a town that has less than half the trains of Folkston. Manchester, 60 miles southwest of Atlanta, is an old railroad town and mountain retreat of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Its platform, built behind the downtown shops, overlooks a junction of CSX lines



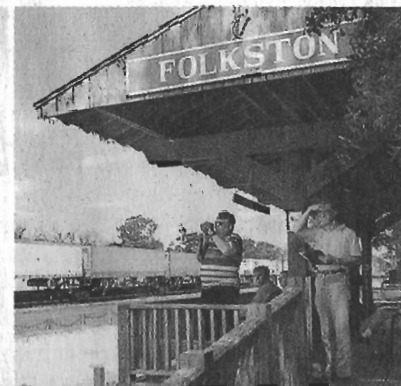
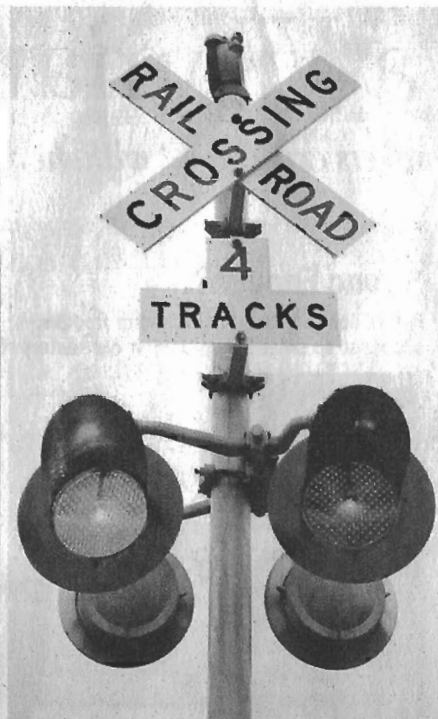
**Rail Fans:** Clockwise, top left, Izaak Walton Inn, Essex, Mont.; rail-crossing signal; the Folkston platform; Folkston House B&B; Amelia Island, Fla., a short trip from Folkston; at the Folkston platform, buffs look at CSX track charts to help search for oncoming trains.

Since last fall, two new gift shops have opened in Folkston, Whistlin' Dixie and the Wild Caboose, selling railroad-theme merchandise. The town's two bed and breakfasts—the Inn at Folkston and the Folkston House—which for years catered mainly to eco-tourists visiting Okefenokee Swamp, are reaching out to rail tourists with train maps, memorabilia and hints about train watching.

Still, Folkston faces challenges as it tries to broaden its appeal to families and the spouses of train lovers. For one thing, it has a small supply of high-end accommodations. Innkeepers and merchants also say it can be difficult to keep non-buff family members entertained.

ing shirts and caps with the names and logos of their favorite railroads fill the platform and the grounds next to the tracks. John Parker, a line-haul driver for United Parcel Service, wears a dark blue shirt with white lettering: "I spent most of my time and money on trains. The rest I just wasted."

**T**HERE'S A sense of nervous anticipation among the rail buffs. Although they have a rough idea of what trains come through each day, they never know exactly what the next train will be. They hunt for clues, such as a signal turning to green from red to alert them to an approaching train.



## 10 Towns for Rail Buffs

### Altoona, Pa.

The famous Horseshoe Curve is five miles west of town and hosts dozens of Norfolk Southern Corp. freight trains each day. Visitors can watch from a park next to the tracks the spectacle of as many as three trains at once looping around.

### Folkston, Ga.

This small town in southeastern Georgia hosts about 70 freight and passenger trains every 24 hours. Rail buffs watch from the platform day and night.

### Tehachapi, Calif.

Trains of two railroads loop around to gain altitude climbing Tehachapi Pass. The spot, 30 miles southeast of Bakersfield, has an overlook on a back road off Freeway 58.

### North Platte, Neb.

More than 125 freight trains a day go through this Union Pacific hub on Interstate 80 in western Nebraska, home to the world's largest freight yard. Visitors can watch trains in the center of town; a large observation deck tower is also being built.

### Hinsdale, Ill.

This vibrant suburb 15 miles west of Chicago is on the city's busiest commuter train route. The three-track Burlington Northern Santa Fe "Raceway" also hosts Amtrak long-distance passenger trains and more than 50 freight trains a day. Visitors

### Rochelle, Ill.

This town 75 miles west of Chicago has built a train-watching park with a platform and gift shop at the crossing of two major freight-train routes.

### Essex, Mont.

The Izaak Walton Inn, an old railroad hotel, is close to the busy tracks of Burlington Northern Santa Fe's Chicago-Seattle route near the Continental Divide along the border of Glacier National Park. Mountain goats, bear and other wildlife romp in the area.

### Princeton Junction, N.J.

You can take one of the frequent commuter trains to the Princeton Junction station along Amtrak's busy Northeast Corridor and watch one of the busiest passenger routes in the U.S. Acela Express

Getty Images (crossing); Daniel Machalaba (3)

from Atlanta and Birmingham, Ala.

What sets Folkston apart though is the sheer number of trains that pass through. Buffs call Folkston the Funnel because trains pour in from both the Midwest and East Coast on their way to Florida. The town has created a grassy train-watching park that stretches along the tracks for two blocks from the town's restored depot to the platform.

When Folkston's town fathers spent \$30,000 of state money to build the platform, they had diehard train fanatics in mind. But along with well-heeled buffs from all over the country and the world, who set up expensive cameras and video gear next to the track, officials have been surprised to find that the platform is also drawing families. This is spawning a tiny but growing cottage industry of hotels, restaurants and gift shops. It's not just happening in Folkston, but in towns in Pennsylvania and Illinois.

"It's not your usual going to the beach or the mountains, and we're learning how to capitalize on it," says Claudia Burkhart, executive director of the Okefenokee Chamber of Commerce in Folkston. She estimates that more than 20,000 people visit the platform each year, pumping about \$1.2 million into the local economy.

Folkston wasn't the first town to build a train-watching platform. Rochelle, Ill., for instance, put one up in 1998 as a result of train lovers making regular visits to the crossing of two busy freight lines. In the past few years, after decades of decline, railroads have experienced a resurgence, in part, as higher fuel prices hurt the trucking industry. For train watchers, it's a "non-stop show," says Jim Wrinn, editor of *Trains*, a magazine for enthusiasts.

At the annual Rail Watch Weekend in late March, men and women wear-

They listen to the radio scanner at the platform for train communications and mechanized voice announcements that a train has passed a track detector in the area and there are no equipment defects. The latest craze is to use Wi-Fi at the platform to download track diagrams and train positions from rail Web sites to laptops to help pinpoint oncoming trains.

Most bring cameras and a few meticulously log every train, writing down locomotive numbers or the number of freight cars. When a train carrying chemicals, lumber and scrap metal rushes through town, onlookers take aim with their cameras. Some of the biggest attractions are Amtrak trains, particularly the Auto Train, which hauls passengers and automobiles, and the Tropicana orange juice train, with its distinctive orange or white refrigerated cars.

Some buffs will fortify themselves

trains race through at 135 miles an hour.

#### **Winslow, Ariz.**

This stop on Burlington Northern Santa Fe's Transcon route between Los Angeles and Chicago sees more than 100 freight trains a day. The courtyard of La Posada, an upscale, restored hotel and restaurant, is adjacent to the Amtrak train station.

with snacks and settle in for hours—sometimes returning day after day. The Tropicana train usually passes through Folkston five nights a week, but on my recent visit the Friday-night one heading to New York from Florida didn't arrive when expected. Some returned Saturday. Finally, at 8:50 p.m., a headlight appeared to the south. A few watchers rushed over to a fence closer to the tracks, kneeling down to take photos.

Gail Compton, a corporate communications manager from Port Richie, Fla.,

can watch the trains from a landscaped commuter train station near restaurants.

#### **Deshler, Ohio.**

A small city park provides a safe, sanctioned area to watch trains on two busy CSX routes that cross near its downtown 40 miles south of Toledo.

—*Daniel Machalaba*

says she can't understand why her husband and son love trains so much. "I just don't get it," says Ms. Compton, who keeps busy for hours while at the platform with her family by reading magazines and newspapers.

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**ONLINE TODAY:** WSJ.com subscribers can see video footage of rail buffs and photos from Daniel Machalaba's trip to Georgia at [WSJ.com/OnlineToday](http://WSJ.com/OnlineToday).