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PENNSYLVANIA

The East's Haute Route

[EPIC MADE EASY] The 70-mile Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail links the wild whitewater of the Youghiogheny River with the thousand-foot-deep Conemaugh Gorge near Johnstown. In between are some of the East's loveliest highlands, worthy of a weeklong thru-hike—or a perfect weekendable segment. Dane Cramer, author of *Romancing the Trail: Six Days Atop Laurel Ridge*, suggests the section that starts at mile zero in Ohiopyle State Park and runs 27 miles to Seven Springs Mountain Resort, the highest point on the trail (2,950 feet). Lean-tos provide shelter for camping at miles 6.3 and 18.5, and huge yellow-painted blazes idiotproof the way (\$5; www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/hiking/laurel.aspx). "April brings a mix of conditions," says Cramer. "The trees will still be bare for good visibility. The streams will be liberally flowing, biting insects are unlikely, and the days are long enough that you have ample time to linger in the quietness of the woods."



Florida's Caladesi Island

FLORIDA

THE BEACH BY KAYAK

Getting dubbed America's No. 1 Beach by someone called Dr. Beach (aka Stephen Leatherman) might sound like the kiss of death, but Caladesi Island on the Gulf Coast remains tranquil and pristine despite earning that title last year. The island teems with ospreys and roseate spoonbills, and is ringed with sand white enough to sprinkle on your Cheerios. Paddlers can kayak out a mile from Dunedin and follow the 3.5-mile Caladesi Island Canoe Trail through tunnels of mangrove trees that swallow boats whole. Sail Honeymoon in Dunedin has kayaks (full-day rentals, \$55; sailhoneymoon.com). Make it a paddling weekend by exploring Weedon Island Preserve, where four miles of marked trails wind through the mangroves and lagoons. The fishing's great for redfish and snook, and you're likely to scare up ibis, spoonbills, and the occasional manatee (half-day rentals, \$40; sweetwaterkayaks.com).



ALABAMA

A SUPERSIZED RAIL TRAIL

The Chief Ladiga is a rail trail on MLB-caliber steroids. Start with 33 miles of paved riding bereft of vehicles. Add in the beauty of northeast Alabama's wetlands, streams, farms, and a sizable chunk of Talladega National Forest, surrounded by, but not traversing, some considerable relief. Best of all, if you have more than 30 miles in your legs, the Chief connects at the state line with Georgia's Silver Comet rail trail to total 95 miles, the longest paved pathway in the country. For Pete Conroy, the trail's creator, the ideal weekend starts in Anniston, Alabama, and ends in Cedartown, Georgia (no camping, but lots of B&Bs in the area), a round-trip of a hundred miles. The highlight? "Rosa's Taco Stand in Cedartown," he says. Spoken like a true cyclist (epic.jsu.edu/clt/index.html).

VIRGINIA

ONE SEASIDE SHACK FOR TWO

Oysters ruled Virginia a century ago. The bivalve industry was huge, and oystermen guarded their grounds like moonshiners did stills, setting up in remote marsh cabins to fend off poachers. Overharvesting ended the mania, but the odd oysterman's cabin still stands on stilts in the Chesapeake Bay. Southeast Expeditions has restored one such cabin and will set you up there for a weekend of paddling the Virginia Coast Reserve (doubles from

\$595 for three days and two nights, including boats, guides, and all meals; sekayak.com). Guides paddle out with you, whip up a beachside lunch on Mockhorn Island en route, and leave you at the solitary shack after they cook your dinner. Then you're on your own to explore some of the bay's uninhabited barrier



islands, do some birding—April being a major migration month—or just hang out at the hundred-year-old cabin, protecting your turf. ▲