

Last Light: Natalie Sims and Heather Stone savor the view of the Tennessee River from Edward's Point on Signal Mountain.

Perfect TENnessee

CHATTANOOGA'S SCENE MAKES IT THE "BOULDER OF THE EAST"

On a late summer evening in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a fit-looking group gathers in a parking lot atop Signal Mountain. These trail runners are here for the Chattanooga Trailblazers Adventure Racing Club's weekly trail run, organized by local hardcores Jim and Carol Farmer.

Despite a recent foot injury, I've gamely accepted the Farmer's invitation to tag along as the group bolts into the nearby woods—a verdant expanse of dogwood, hickory, maple, redbud and pine. Known as Edward's Point, the popular area draws runners, mountain bikers and day hikers, and its maze of singletrack winds from

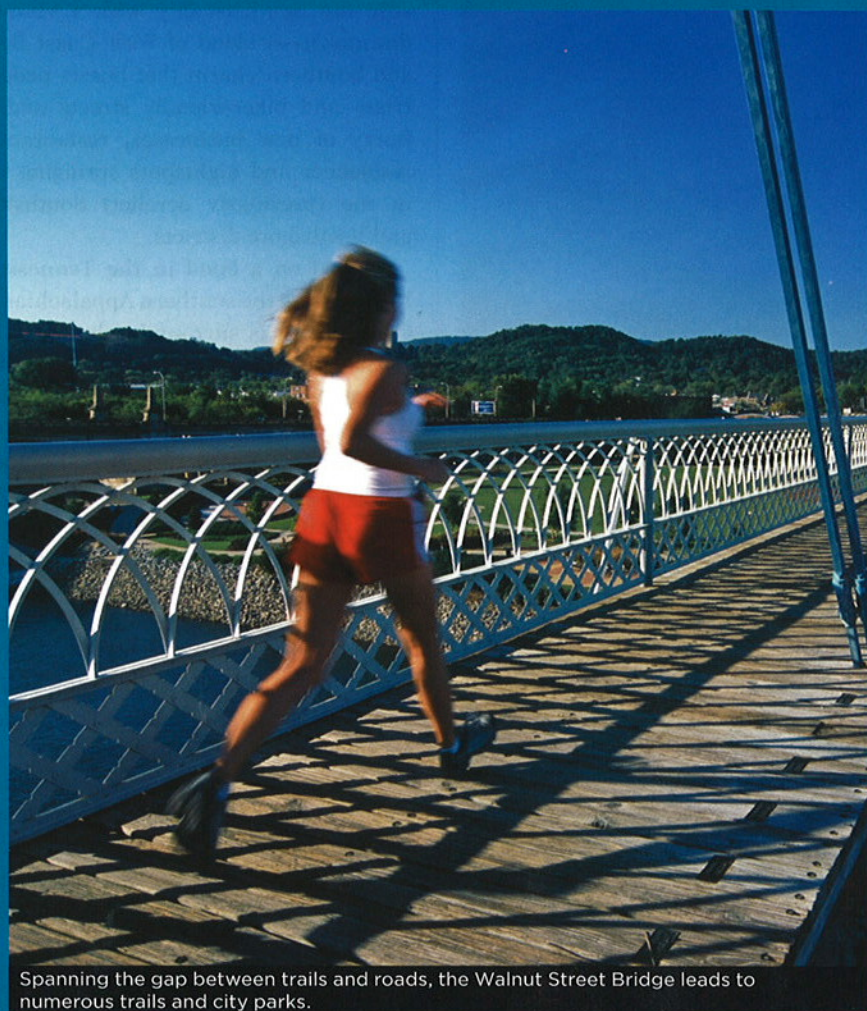
mountaintops to river bottoms, alongside creeks, waterfalls and cliff edges. Thanks to several intersections with the Cumberland Trail (a 300-mile-long trail starting at nearby Prentice Cooper State Forest), the Edward's Point routes are a popular springboard for more ambitious multi-day expeditions.

Back on the trails, the air feels cool, at least by Southeastern standards—a humid 80 degrees with a mountain breeze—with shafts of late-day sunlight filtering through the green canopy. Within minutes the group spreads out and conversation dwindles to a few sporadic remarks and some brief rest-stop ribbing between long-time training partners.

With daylight fading, we're running a challenging six-mile out-and-back to Mushroom Rock—an imposing boulder that rises suddenly amidst the trees like a frozen lightning strike.

All in all, it's just another day in the outdoor paradise that makes Chattanooga an ideal trail-runner's destination.

Chattanooga itself is an unexpect-



Spanning the gap between trails and roads, the Walnut Street Bridge leads to numerous trails and city parks.

TRAILHEAD

CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

GETTING THERE: Located in southeastern Tennessee, Chattanooga is almost equidistant from Atlanta, Knoxville and Nashville. All three neighboring airports offer direct flights to Chattanooga; driving time is about two hours.

FOOD & DRINK: For local microbrews and mouthwatering burgers, hit the Big River Grille and Brewing Works (downtown on Broad, 423-267-2739). Carbo load for the next day's run by b-line-ing to Tony's Pasta (on High, 423-265-5033 ext. 6) or Lupi's Pizza (on Broad, 423-266-5874). Lupi's has an off-the-wall décor, imported beer and to-die-for lasagna. Share trail-running war stories with pals at the Stone Cup—simply the best java jolt anywhere (on Frazier, 423-265-5010).

ACCOMMODATIONS: Lodging alternatives are as diverse as the trails, with accommodations to suit every taste and budget. Best bets offering local flavor include: Chattanooga Choo-Choo Holiday Inn (downtown on Market, www.choochoo.com, 800-TRACK29) and the Stonefort Inn (on 10th, www.stonefortinn.com, 423-267-7866). Camping is available at Harrison Bay State Park (Harrison Bay Road in nearby Harrison, 423-344-6214) on picturesque Lake Chickamauga.

WEATHER: Chattanooga enjoys moderate temperatures year-round. Winters are cool (mid-30s) and wet. Summers are hot and humid, with the mercury hovering in the 90s. Visit in the spring for the best temps and awesome trailside wildflowers, or wait for October and bathe in the famous fall colors and endless blue skies.

RESOURCES: For an overview of the city, visit www.chattanooga.com.

Rock Creek Outfitters is basecamp for the local outdoor community. The website features detailed trail descriptions (www.rockcreekoutfitters.com; 888-707-6708).

Trailblazers Adventure Racing Club hosts a weekly trail run at Edward's Point (www.trailblazerAR.com).



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Local outdoors fanatic Carol Farmer flashes down the Cumberland Trail.

SO MANY TRAILS, SO LITTLE TIME

IN CHATTANOOGA, IT'S EASY FOR NEWCOMERS TO FEEL AS IF THE TRAILS ARE RUNNING AROUND THEM INSTEAD OF VICE-VERSA. HERE ARE THREE TRIED-AND-TRUE CIRCUITS:

Craven's House Loop

Location: Lookout Mountain

Distance: 12+ miles

Type: Loop with out-and-back options.

Difficulty: Ranges from easy to technically difficult with an elevation gain of 1200 feet.

From Craven's House, head for the John Smartt trail (known around town as "Big Daddy") and go up, up, up—the first mile is a lung buster. Reach Sunset Rock, and inhale the jaw-dropping, 360-degree views.

Edward's Point

Location: Signal Mountain

Distance: 8 miles

Type: Out-and-back dirt road and singletrack

Difficulty: Moderate

This trail boasts the most spectacular views of the Tennessee River Gorge and downtown Chattanooga. Stay on the well-used trail and descend toward Edward's Point. This area is prime for longer runs (between 12 and 30 miles)—just connect with the Cumberland Trail and head down the mountainside to Prentice Cooper State Forest.

Whitesides-Shingles-Glen Falls Trails

Location: Lookout Mountain

Distance: 5.3 miles

Type: Out and back

Difficulty: Moderate to hard

A quiet trail with beautiful scenery and lots of history, it meanders through deep wooded forests and huge boulders before arriving at the falls.

edly hip Southern city with a vibrant downtown—a blend of West Coast flair and Southern charm that boasts pedestrian- and biker-friendly streets and a flurry of new businesses, restaurants, residences and nightspots springing up in the (previously derelict) Southside and Northshore districts.

Nestled on a bend in the Tennessee River among the southern Appalachians, Chattanooga is surrounded by some of the nation's best trail running, mountain biking, hiking and whitewater sports. As a result, Mayor Bob Corker dubbed this 155,000-strong city the "Boulder of the East." But the town's "get-outside" attitude extends well beyond a marketing campaign. From a network of designated bike routes, a blueway (for those who like to paddle across the river to work) and free electric shuttle buses to the abundance of rock walls and trails, Chattanooga can't help but get involved with the outdoors.

"Within minutes you can find somewhere to run as long and hard or as quick and easy as you'd like," says Carol Farmer. "You can enjoy an epic 2000-foot climb or a leisurely 10K within the same trail system."

Call it a trail-runner's delight or a cross-trainer's utopia; whatever your pleasure, all you need is a change of clothes (or two), your favorite trail shoes and a few accessories (kayak, mountain bike, post-run sandals). ■

RACE CALENDAR

CHATTANOOGA AREA

April 1, 2005

Rock Creek/River Gorge Trail Race 15K

Chattanooga's signature trail race. Features a team division, short-course race and great schrag. www.chattanoogatrackclub.org; online registration at www.active.com

October 8, 2005

Stump Jump 50K

An Appalachian-style off-road epic. www.chattanoogatrackclub.org

December 17, 2005

Wauhatchie Trail Run 6.7 Miler

No frills, straight up. Literally. jgaiter@gps.edu and www.chattanoogatrackclub.org