

9 Undeniable Reasons to Visit Lake Blackshear Resort

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Whether it's history, family, a love for Thomas the Tank Engine or just I-75 that gets you to Southwest Georgia, a ride on the historic **SAM Shortline Excursion Train** is worth a visit.



My family and I rode the train while visiting **Lake Blackshear Resort** in Cordele, where the train begins. A few years earlier, Sue and her father headed to Cordele while working on a story about **Experiencing The Hunger Games in Georgia**. Her father worked for a company that made Chessie cabooses. It was his favorite job, well, after dairy farmer anyway. Together we learned a ton of fun tidbits about this Ga train ride...keep reading.

Rolling State Park

The SAM Shortline is Georgia's only rolling state park. In addition to enjoying the rich history of the train cars and the path through Southwest Georgia, you experience the history of Crisp and Sumter Counties, with people and events that have impacted Georgia and the nation.



The Train's History (and how it got its name)

SAM stands for Savannah, Americus, Montgomery, as well as the name of the line's founder and president, Colonel Samuel Hugh Hawkins, a prominent 19th century Sumter County capitalist.

Politics, tariffs and other railroad antics caused a disruption for farmers and traders in Americus, Ga. Sam Hawkins and others organized the Americus Preston and Lumpkin Railroad in 1884 to ensure that Americus would continue to dominate the region's trade. The AP&L would be Georgia's only railroad constructed entirely with local capital.

In 1888 they extended east and west, creating a direct route between Montgomery, Alabama and Savannah, Georgia. In the same year the road was appropriately renamed the Savannah, Americus & Montgomery Railway, or S.A.M. Upon its completion the SAM's mainline would stand at 340 miles in length. Loans defaulted, mergers happened, the Ga DOT intervened and ultimately the train passed to the Ga DNR in 2000. After a hiatus, SAM Shortline was reborn. Two years of careful planning, track rehabilitation, and equipment acquisition allowed passenger trains to begin rolling down the historic mainline again.



The Hawkins Car

Riders can choose between three cars: the VIP lounge car, the premium car with tables and chairs, or standard coach. Not all cars run for all tours, so be sure to ask.

VIP seating is in the 1939 **Samuel H. Hawkins** car, named for the founder. This is the car we rode in, with gorgeous leather booths, wood paneled walls and climate-control. It also includes a complimentary beverage and lunch from the concession car (Chick-Fil-A sandwich or hot dog & chips). Yes, it costs a little more, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of trip so splurge if you can. The comfort factor is well worth it.

The **Americus** car offers premium includes a complimentary beverage and snack mix. Guests sit at tables and chairs along the sides of the train, with window views. Each family sits at their own table so it is a bit more "personal" than the standard coach class with padded bench-style seating. Not all cars run for all tours, so be sure to ask.

Multiple Excursions

There are multiple excursions to pick from. Our family rode the Watermelon Express, which goes from Cordele to Plains for a 90 min layover, then back to Cordele. Sue rode the Peanut Express which adds a second stop in Leslie, Ga to see the Rural Telephone Museum. Click this link to learn more about her trip to the **Rural Telephone Museum**.

The Americus Explorer offers a 3-hour layover in Americus, where the **Historic Windsor Hotel** is a must see. Finally, the Presidential Flyer includes a 75-min stop in Plains plus a 45-min stop in Archery, where you'll see the Carter Family Farm. There is a stamp here for your NPS Passport.

These are the most common excursions offered, each with their own special nuances and history.

Special Events

October is a wonderful time to bring your little ones to experience a **Day Out With Thomas**. They'll take the train for a short 25-min ride, meet Sir Topham Hatt, and enjoy arts, crafts, stories and more.

In December, ride the evening **Christmas in Plains** train to see President and Rosalyn Carter throw the switch to light up Plains. There will be Christmas music and activities to put you in the spirit of Christmas. Even Santa joins the fun.



Plains Georgia and President Jimmy Carter

Most of the SAM Shortline excursions include a stop in Plains, Ga – Jimmy Carter's hometown. You can certainly eat lunch here, there are two great hometown restaurants. But, with two National Historic Sites and plenty to see, you'll be glad that you ate on the train before stopping.

Kim Fuller – Billy Carter's daughter, Jimmy Carter's niece and the Executive Director of the Friends of Jimmy Carter National Historic Site- met the train with a wonderful itinerary. We followed it to the letter and loved every minute....

Leave the train and head across the street to the **Billy Carter Museum**, housed in his old service station. We loved seeing cans of his beer and some of his crazy outfits.

Take a short walk to **Plains High School**, which is home to the JCNHS Visitor's Center. Be sure to snap a picture behind a replica of Carter's desk in the oval office. You'll also see paintings done by Carter, his Nobel Prize, and more. Don't leave without stamping your National Park's passport – there are three stamps here.

Head back over the main street to the "downtown" area. Your first stop should be **Plain Peanuts**. The peanut butter ice cream here is HEAVEN!! You'll get a free sample, but that won't be enough to satisfy you. You can also tour Plains Antique Mall, Indigo Planet and The Trading Post, all with antiques and fun political memorabilia.

After you eat your ice cream, head to the **Plains Depot** which serves as Carter's campaign museum, and is also part of the JCNHS.

You're back near the train. Grab a photo in front of the engine, hit the restroom (located right there) and then board the train!



Proximity to Ga Veterans State Park

SAM Shortline Excursion train tours leave from Cordele Ga Veterans State Park. You can also pick up some excursions in Americus. We stayed the night at Lake Blackshear Resort the evening before – it sits within the park. Rooms are comfortable, and the amenities are fantastic. There's a pool, a marina, restaurant on site, and lots of room for kids to run and play. The State Park also has a military museum and equipment that makes a great pre-train tour.



What: SAM Shortline Excursions Train

Where: 2459 West US Highway 280, Sam Shortline Depot, Cordele, GA 31015-4371 (Note this is the Cordele Station)

When: See their calendar for specific **dates and schedules**

Cost: Range from \$19.99 – \$49.99

Disclosure: Thanks to SAM Shortline for the complimentary tickets. Opinions here are all our own.