

“Whoa.” It doesn’t qualify as an exclamation, since it comes in a matter-of-fact tone that’s just a notch above deadpan. It is an expression not of awe but of awareness—the sudden and immediate appreciation of one’s place in the landscape, the world, the universe.

I turn to look at my 9-year-old son who is chewing a mouthful of peanut butter and jelly sandwich and gazing placidly at the woods around us. His little sister beats me to the question.

“What is it?” asks Hannah. Wilson is silent for longer than she cares to wait, and she’s about to ask him again when he replies, with typical older-sibling vagueness, “I’m just looking.”

The three of us are sitting on the trunk of a fallen sweetgum tree just off the Ike Maston Trail. This is part of a network of nearly 11 miles of hiking/biking trails that veins Alabama’s 1,200-acre Red Mountain Park. Located mostly within the city limits of Birmingham, the mountain for which the park is named was the primary source of the rich iron ore deposits that prompted the founding of Birmingham as the first industrial center of the “New South” in 1871. It was the city’s lifeblood for more than a century afterward.

The forested slopes we’re traversing were honeycombed with ore mines for decades—the last of which was closed in 1962—and crisscrossed by railroads and tramways that transported Red Mountain ore from the mines to the furnaces that dotted the area in and around Birmingham. Among them was the Birmingham Mineral Railroad, 150 miles of track that encircled the city, with stops or spurs at most of the area’s major mines and furnaces. Operated by the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, the Mineral Line—also known as the High Line—was ▶

Destination: Alabama

Exploring Red Mountain Park

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