

## ROOSEVELT ISLAND TRAMWAY

If you mention Roosevelt Island to the average person, you will probably receive one of two responses: "Where's that?" or "That's that place with that red cable thingy, right?" That "red cable thingy" is the Roosevelt Island Tramway or "The Tram." The Tram is Roosevelt Island's undisputed icon. In the late 1960s, however, it was not in anybody's wildest imagination. When the island's residential buildings opened in 1975, the Roosevelt Island Subway Station was supposed to open with them. But the subway would not arrive for another 13 years, and residents needed an alternative. Deep in the left field of ideas was the Tram.

In 1976 the Tram made its first 4 1/2-minute trip across the East River. It was designed by Prentice & Chan and Ohlhausen and built by the Swiss company Vonroll. With a 125-passenger capacity, the Tram is the only commuter cable car in North America. It travels 3,100 feet at an average speed of 16 mph, rising as high as 250 feet.



*The trolley before the Tram: This trolley, running along the Queensboro's outer roadway, dropped and received passengers at the Elevator Storehouse and shuttled them to Queens and Manhattan. The trolley ceased operation in 1955.*

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The Tram has experienced more than its 15 minutes of fame. It has appeared in Billy Crystal's "City Slickers" and in the hostage scene of Sylvester Stallone's "Nighthawks," among other movies. On the Universal Studios, Orlando, ride "Kongfrontation," the massive gorilla besieges a replica of the cable car.

When the subway finally opened in 1989, residents were quick to defend the Tram against removal. Its defenders cited the cable car's unusual degree of self-sufficiency (fares pay for 70% of its operating cost, compared to 25-60% for other public modes), its relatively low operating cost compared to the subway, the need for alternatives to the subway once the island's residential development is complete, its preferability for late-night travelers and the physically challenged, and its sentimental value to the island. Now the Tram's place here is secure. In 1995 it passed the 20-million-passenger mark. It continues to offer some of the best (and least expensive) views of Manhattan, especially at night.

*To continue the tour, follow the Manhattan facing seawall north (that is, away from the Queensboro Bridge). Follow the white and green "Roosevelt Island Historical Walk" signs.*

**Roosevelt Island Historical Walk**

Boy Scout Troop 59

Neil Tandon

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Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation  
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*The Elevator Storehouse, opened in 1919, housed an elevator that transported cars and people from the Queensboro Bridge down to the present-day Tramway Plaza. In addition, it contained storage space and a reception ward for the island's Metropolitan Hospital. The building, whose main lobby was on its top floor, was nicknamed the "upside-down building" and was featured in Ripley's Believe It or Not for its peculiar design. With the opening of the Welfare Island Bridge, the building closed in 1955 and was demolished in 1970.*