

Bicycle over the rivers and through the sites along the Heritage Trail

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By Lawrence Walsh, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

bike seat provides one of the best vantage points to see Pittsburgh and stretches of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers.

And the Three Rivers Heritage Trail offers bicyclists an easy-to-pedal ride on a predominantly paved trail that parallels each river. The trail is a segment of the 150-mile Great Allegheny Passage that, when completed, hopefully in 2010, will link Pittsburgh and Cumberland, Md., and the 182.5-mile C&O Canal Towpath to Washington, D.C.

The nonmotorized, multipurpose heritage trail, which features dozens of interpretive signs along its 21-mile length, welcomes bicyclists, walkers, runners, inline skaters, birders and cross-country skiers.

But bicycling is the most popular activity.

Visitors can enjoy the trail on their own bikes or by renting one from Tom and Britt Demagall. The couple give riders a trail map prepared by the Friends of the Riverfront, an organization incorporated on Valentine's Day 1992 to reclaim the city's riverfronts for public access and greenway/recreational use.

"If they ask me where to go, I recommend the Hot Metal Bridge, Point State Park, the Rivers Casino and the Washington's Landing development on Herr's Island," Tom Demagall said.

First-time riders can get on the Eliza Furnace Trail at the bike shop and head upstream about two miles to the Hot Metal Bridge. The bridge that once carried railroad cars loaded with molten steel over the Monongahela River now transports bicyclists and pedestrians to and from Downtown, Oakland and the South Side.

"It's a significant example of adaptive reuse, a combination of the old and the new," said Tom Baxter, executive director of the Friends of the Riverfront. "And the view from the center of the bridge is spectacular."

That it is. Take a camera.

Riders have upstream/downstream options when they reach the South Side.

Upstream takes them past the practice fields of the Pittsburgh Steelers and the University of Pittsburgh Panthers. The trail dips down to the riverbank near the border of Pittsburgh and Baldwin Borough, where Pittsburgh public works employees often ate lunch while they built the trail. It's a wonderful picnic site with great views up and down the river. A little farther out, sharp-eyed riders will see the rusted hulks of two barges anchored to the shore line by sumac trees growing through holes in their hulls.

The trail ends a short distance from the Glenwood Bridge and the Sandcastle property line. County Executive Dan Onorato is negotiating with the new owners of the water park to allow bicyclists to ride through the property on their way to McKeesport. They then can pedal the trail that overlooks the Youghiogheny and Casselman rivers en route to Cumberland.

As the trail heads downstream from the Hot Metal Bridge, it enters a "leaf tunnel" between 18th and Ninth streets that are created by the branches of overhanging trees bordering the trail. The shade and coolness are refreshing on a hot summer day. The trail doglegs a few blocks around a cement

company as it continues toward Station Square and the Mon and Duquesne Heights inclines. Riders can take their bikes on the inclines during off-peak hours to reach Mount Washington.

Patrick Hassett, an assistant public works director, said bicyclists "often are surprised by the number of free parking places near the trail.

They're marked on the Friends of the Riverfront map. One of the most popular is the lot under the Birmingham Bridge.

Riders can use the Fort Pitt or Smithfield Street bridges to get to Point State Park and its landmark Block House and fountain. They also can cross the Allegheny River via the Fort Duquesne and the Robert Clemente, Andy Warhol and Rachel Carson bridges (at Sixth, Seventh and Ninth streets). They'll pedal by PNC Park, Heinz Field, the Rivers Casino and Carnegie Science Center on their way down the Ohio River past Brunot Island to Woods Run or up to Herr's Island and its Washington's Landing development.

George Washington and his guide Christopher Gist dined on the island after getting dunked in the river when their log raft capsized in 1753. The island, a favorite picnic site, is home to the Three Rivers Rowing Association, whose members can be seen plying the Allegheny River in their graceful watercraft, especially in the morning.

Lawrence Walsh writes about recreational bicycling for the Post-Gazette.

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