

Railroad's bike trail transforms town

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By William L. Spence of the Tribune

Idaho's Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes is one of the best pedaling routes in the country



Chatcolet Bridge near Heyburn State Park is one of the most scenic sections of the Trail of the Coeu...



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HARRISON, Idaho - When John Kolbe decided to open a bicycle shop here nine years ago, most of the locals thought he was crazy.

At the time, the town catered mostly to the boaters and cabin owners who came to enjoy Coeur d'Alene Lake. Biking wasn't a notable part of the economy. His business, Pedal Pushers, seemed like a sure flop. But Kolbe, a former forester and trained airplane mechanic, heard there were plans to convert the old Union Pacific railroad lines in town into a bike trail. After doing a little research, he decided to take the plunge.

"I did some research on rail-to-trail projects, and it read like a road map to success," said Kolbe, while working on a customer's bike in the back of his shop. "I opened the business two years before they paved the trail. It's just now being discovered."

That trail is the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes, which follows the railroad right of way from Mullan to Plummer. At 72 miles, it's the longest paved bike path in Idaho and one of the premier trails in the entire country.

"It's truly a world-class trail," Kolbe said. "No one goes away disappointed, and it's transformed the entire town. Now, the whole place feels like a support system for bikers."

Like the rail line itself, the trail owes its existence to the massive ore deposits in the Coeur d'Alene mining district around Kellogg and Wallace. The district is the largest silver producer in the United States; during more than 100 years of mining activity, it also yielded huge amounts of lead, zinc, copper and some gold.

As many as 25 mines operated in the district at one point, but most stopped production prior to 1990. The last trains left the region in 1993. Before the right of way could be abandoned, the Union Pacific had to do something about the heavy metals-laced mine tailings that were used to construct the original rail bed, as well as additional contaminants that spilled from passing rail cars. Turning it into a bike trail was the most economical solution. Work on the project was completed in 2002.

"It was a settlement between the mining companies, the railroad and the Environmental Protection Agency," said Roger Howard, a ranger at Old Mission State Park, which manages the portion of the trail between Mullan and Harrison. "They had to clean up the rail corridor. Instead of removing everything, they encapsulated it with clean material topped by six inches of asphalt. The total cost was in excess of \$40 million."

As part of the cleanup agreement, he said, money was also set aside to pay for annual trail maintenance. If any sections are washed out by floods, the railroad picks up the cost of those repairs as well - and the path gets totally resealed every five years, so it's quite smooth.

"It's a sweet deal for trail users, and it doesn't cost taxpayers a dime," Howard said.

The trail follows the south fork and main stem of the Coeur d'Alene River for most of its length, running through the chain lakes region and alongside Coeur d'Alene Lake before crossing the historic Chatcolet Bridge near Heyburn State Park and climbing from there. The entire middle section, from Kellogg to Harrison, is almost dead flat, making it suitable for bikers of any fitness level. The trail loses about 1,100 feet in elevation between Mullan and Kellogg, and gains about 600 feet from Harrison to Plummer. With 17 different trailheads, plus numerous wayside picnic tables and restrooms, it's easy to bite off as much or as little as you please.

Trail users should take water and snacks with them, as most of the trail goes through remote areas with more moose than services. Although the river is nearby, signs warn the water is still polluted with lead, which can't be removed even with filtering or boiling.

For those who like to mix history and culture with their biking adventures, Wallace makes a convenient base camp. The entire downtown area is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. There are also three museums in town, including the Wallace District Mining Museum and the Oasis Bordello Museum. The Oasis was the last of the town's seven bordellos to close.

The Sierra Silver Mine Tour, said to be the second-most popular tour in Idaho after the Old State Penitentiary in Boise, departs from Wallace. For \$12 per adult and \$8.50 per child, the tour guides - all retired local miners - give presentations on the equipment and working conditions found in the mines. Silver ore was first discovered in the district in 1884, by a miner searching for a lost mule. It went on to become one of the three largest silver mining districts in the world, with more than 1.2 billion ounces of production. Three mines are still active in the district.

On a more spiritual level, the oldest building in Idaho is located about 22 miles west of Wallace, near Cataldo. Built by Jesuit missionaries in 1853, the Old Mission of the Sacred Heart served as a center of Jesuit activity until the early 1900s. It became a state park in 1975.

The mission isn't located directly on the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes, but Howard said bikers can reach it with a four-mile detour along back roads. Plans call for a formal connecting trail to be built at some point.

Given the multiple access points, Howard said it's hard to estimate how many people use the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes over the course of a year. However, "we get about 100,000 visitors here at the mission, so the trail could see quadruple that."

For more information on the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes and other regional bike trails, visit www.friendsofcdatrails.org.

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