



A cycling gem in Hastings

Article by: , Star Tribune

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Gliding down the asphalt ribbon across a Nininger Road bluff in Hastings, bikers are wowed by a bucolic panorama: Spirited horses standing in a dandelion-dabbed meadow overlooking the huge Spring Lake backwater and cliffs rising across the wind-blown Mississippi River.

It's one of the more spectacular views along Hastings' scenic secret: A 12-mile-plus loop of bike trails that circles the river town. The bikeway crosses breathtaking Vermillion River gorges and ambles along the Mississippi banks in the historic downtown that once hosted a spiral bridge.

The loop "is a little hidden gem," says city parks director Barry Bernstein. "It will not disappoint you."

It's a decade-old secret that's growing in reach, if not renown, beyond the town.

"The gorge area is really spectacular," said

Dorian Grilley, executive director of the nonprofit Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota. "The Vermillion River is one of the best-kept secrets in the Twin Cities."

The trail provides easy access to downtown restaurants and businesses that will make Hastings a biking destination once it hooks up to regional trail systems, Grilley said. Planning is underway on several fronts to connect it to larger systems, Bernstein said.

The most immediate is a 3.4-mile stretch that will carry Hastings bikers northwest to Schaar's Bluff for impressive views of ravines and river in the Spring Lake Regional Preserve. That segment is set to open July 1, said Bruce Blair, a Dakota County parks development manager. He said the county has bike trails running south from St. Paul almost to Rosemount. The two final legs are expected to be paved by 2015 to complete a 27-mile trail from Hastings to South St. Paul's northern border, he said.

The Nininger bluffs segment is the steepest hill in the loop. It carries bikers down and across a dike between Lake Rebecca and Spring Lake to Lock and Dam No. 2. Ducks and geese nest on the woody Lake Rebecca dike side, while bone-white driftwood washes up on the Spring Lake side, a

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Mississippi backwater. Red-winged blackbirds, bluebirds and herons flew past on an overcast day in mid-May.

At the Lock and Dam, the trail cuts south along the Mississippi, passing a park dock equipped with a free viewing scope. It's helpful to gawk at bald eagles and birds migrating north in the spring.

Anna Amy, 41, of Hastings, enjoys riding the trail in the spring and fall with her two children. She likes the gradual inclines and availability of downtown restaurants and ice cream shops.

"I'm excited [to go] because soon the lilacs and crab apple trees will be in bloom," she said.

Construction of the new Hwy. 61 bridge downtown has detoured cyclists away from the bike path that went under the existing bridge and will be rebuilt under the new bridge. The new span will have a bikeway across the Mississippi. The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) is talking to local officials about upgrading the Hwy. 61 shoulder north of the bridge for about 1,200 feet to an abandoned railway. Washington County has bought that railway for a 2.5-mile bike trail from Point Douglas

Park on the St. Croix River, said Peter Mott, a county parks planner. But the two projects lack funding, and a Hastings hookup is at least five years away, said Marc Briese, east area MnDOT engineer.

For now, the bridge detour brings bikers to Second Street, the main avenue along the river with dozens of historic storefronts. Turning north on Sibley Street returns you to the riverside trail. A nearby interpretive trail sign displays actual photos of the 1895 spiral bridge, sitting next to the present span that replaced it in 1951.

After several blocks, the path leaves the river and heads south past an old railroad station along Bailey Street to 8th Street. Bikers can continue south 10 blocks to the Vermillion River, or take a left on 8th, which becomes busy Ravenna Trail. The bike trail swings east for a short, optional loop near Lake Isabelle, then follows a narrow Ravenna shoulder a few blocks to a trail sign. It points up a short hill into woodsy C.P. Adams Park, which offers picnic tables for a lunch break, and a disc golf course for a weary-butt break (bring your own disc).

The trail inclines up past the Hastings Veterans Home and then crosses gorgeous gorges twice along the tree-lined Vermillion

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River. After crossing over a wooden bridge, the trail leads to a walking path along the south bank cliff that overlooks the 35-foot-tall Vermillion Falls.

The falls powered a flour mill, built in the 1850s and now owned by ConAgra Foods. Mill stone and brick walls tower above the falls on the north bank. The trail passes under Hwy. 61 by ConAgra and follows the Vermillion west past farms along County Road 46 for more than a mile to Pleasant Drive. The loop's longest -- though gradual -- hills arise going northwest up to General Sieben Drive across Hwy. 55, and eventually back to Nininger Road.

Because it has few steep hills, the loop is popular with families and senior groups, Bernstein said. The trail makes a nice morning ride, he said, after which some families buy tickets to the city's public pool for an afternoon swim.

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Weekend getaway: A day trip to Hastings

Article by: JOY RIGGS, Special to the Star Tribune Updated: August 4, 2012 - 4:19 PM



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Hastings offers the best of both worlds for weekend vacationers -- it's only about a 30-mile drive from the Twin Cities, but its geography and history have shaped its identity as a river town with abundant recreational attractions.

WHAT TO DO

Located along the Mississippi River, and bisected by the Vermillion River, Hastings takes advantage of its proximity to water. Public boat launch and dock areas make boating and fishing accessible, and a 15-mile loop trail routes runners, walkers and bicyclists past the city's notable attractions, including the Federal Lock and Dam No. 2, the Vermillion Falls and the LeDuc Historic Estate. (A trail map can be found at: www.startribune.com/a1561.)

You can access the trail at Jaycee Park, just northwest of downtown. The park also is a great place to watch the progress of the \$120 million Hwy. 61 bridge that's being built across the Mississippi. The old bridge, which remains in use during construction, replaced an iconic spiral bridge that was demolished in 1951.

Jaycee Park adjoins Lake Rebecca Park, a popular spot for canoeing and kayaking. Continue northwest along the bike path or along Lock and Dam Road until you reach the lock and dam operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It's the second in a system of 29 locks on the Mississippi River between Minneapolis and St. Louis. An elevated observation deck near the parking lot gives visitors a better view of the lock and dam and any barge and boat traffic.

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To explore sights along the Vermillion River, head southeast of downtown. At **Old Mill Park**, on the river's north side, a short paved path leads to the ruins of a mill once owned by Gov. Alexander Ramsey. A pedestrian and bicycle path that passes over a former railroad bridge offers scenic views of the gorge and leads to the **Vermillion Falls**, where water plunges 30 feet into a limestone ravine.

The falls is next to the **ConAgra Mill** and is conveniently close to the best deal in town, \$1 chocolate shakes from the **Hastings Dairy Store** (1701 Vermillion St.; 651-437-9414; www.hastingscreamery.com). The store is operated by a farmer-owned cooperative that's been in business for more than 90 years.

North of the creamery you'll find the home of one of the city's influential early families, the LeDucs. William and Mary LeDuc began construction of their 15-room Gothic Revival mansion in 1862, and they moved in with their children in 1865 after William returned from the Civil War. Two of the LeDuc daughters later operated a nationally known needlework business out of the home. The **LeDuc Historic Estate** (1629 Vermillion St.; 651-437-7055; www.dakotahistory.org) was restored by the Minnesota Historical Society and given to the city in 2005. It's now operated by the Dakota County Historical Society. Guided tours are offered Wednesday-Sunday from late May through late October (\$6 adults; \$3 ages 6-17). The estate also hosts free outdoor concerts on Sundays in August starting at 7 p.m. It will host a Civil War weekend Sept. 8-9, commemorating the 150th anniversary of William LeDuc's appointment as quartermaster in the Union Army. Cost is \$8 per person.

Visitors can appreciate history of a different kind by attending a **classic car cruise-in**, held downtown every other weekend through September from 5 to 9 p.m. Remaining dates for 2012 are Aug. 11, Aug. 25, Sept. 8 and Sept 22.

Summer's the time to enjoy free weekly jazz concerts at the **Alexis Bailly Vineyard** (18200 Kirby Av.; 651-437-1413; www.abwines.com) while sampling wine and playing bocce ball. The concerts are on Sundays from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. through Aug. 26.

WHERE TO EAT

If you're looking for a quick dine-in lunch or the fixings for a picnic, stop at **Emily's Bakery & Deli** (1212 Vermillion St.; 651-437-3338; www.emilysbakerydeli.com) for made-to-order sandwiches, tempting doughnuts and a variety of bars.

For sit-down dining in a casual atmosphere, head downtown to the **Onion Grille** (100 Sibley St.; 651-437-7577; www.theoniongrille.com). Recommended items include fish tacos and the seared scallop salad. The restaurant makes its own ice cream.

Another friendly downtown spot is **Karl's Red Rock Cafe & Espresso Company** (119 2nd St. E.; 651-437-5002, www.karlredrockcafe.com), which serves breakfast and lunch, plus homemade malts and espresso drinks.

IF YOU GO

The Hastings Chamber of Commerce & Tourism Bureau (1-888-612-6122; www.hastingsmn.org) has maps and information about recreational activities and events.

Joy Riggs is a Northfield-based freelance writer.

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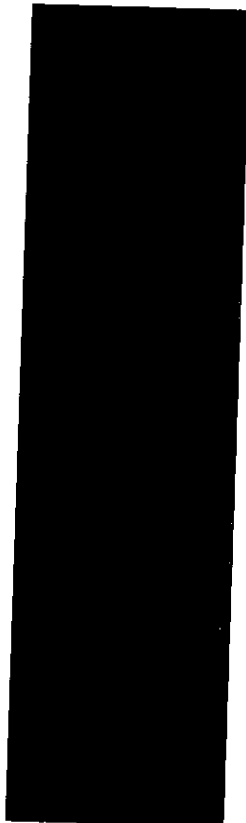
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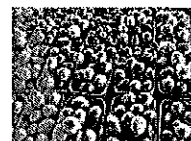
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