

A man in a dark tank top and shorts is running through a field of tall grass. In the background, there are several city buildings, including a prominent blue one. The sky is clear and blue.

# Milwaukee's HOME RUN of Trails

By Jay Walljasper  
Photos by Darren J. Hauck

The Discovery World science museum, pictured here near the lakefront trailhead, is one of many signature Milwaukee attractions located directly along the Hank Aaron.



A few hours on the Hank Aaron State Trail will expand many people's idea of what a rail-trail can be. For one thing, the Milwaukee trail is not named for a railroad or a river, but for a baseball hero who hit many of his 755 home runs while playing for the Milwaukee Braves just a line drive away. For another, the 12-mile trail doesn't meander through bucolic countryside, but runs smack through the middle of what once was the industrial heart of the city, the Menomonee Valley. More than 400,000 people live within a 15-minute bike ride of the trail, which borders the state's most ethnically diverse neighborhoods, says Trail Manager Melissa Cook of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

And that's not all. Yes, the Hank Aaron State Trail has a distinctly urban and industrial character. But even as it winds through Milwaukee, around downtown, past the Harley-Davidson Museum, near the Miller Brewery and beyond the Wisconsin state fairgrounds, it offers the allure of a quiet getaway. On the trail you may hear the chirp of crickets, or see herons wading in the river. Riding along a scenic stretch of riverbank in the shadow of the Brewers baseball stadium, I even find 19-year-old Chang Xiong fishing. "I come down here to get away from the stress," he says, casting his line for salmon and trout.

### Wasteland Transformed

That would have been unthinkable 80 years ago, when the valley was home to tanneries, stockyards, foundries, factories and the third-largest railroad facility in the world—the sprawling, 160-acre Milwaukee Road center, where tens of thousands of train cars were built and repaired, including the famed Hiawatha streamliners that sped between Chicago

and the Twin Cities. In 1920, more than 50,000 people worked at plants along the river.

"It was incredibly polluted," local historian John Gurda tells me over lunch at a family-run Mexican restaurant on the trail. "All the factories burned coal, and you could see the smoke billowing out of the valley."

By the 1980s most of the industrial plants had closed due to shifting economic fortunes and relocation of jobs out of Milwaukee. Even the sprawling Milwaukee Road shops closed in 1985, as the bankrupt company negotiated a merger with the Soo Line railroad. But considerable pollution remained. Environmental engineers found three feet of diesel fuel floating on top of groundwater in the area. The Menomonee Valley had become an environmental and economic blight.

Milwaukee's mayor at the time, John Norquist, lived nearby and articulated a vision of revitalization for the area, starting with a bike trail named for the slugger with the second-most home runs in



baseball history. Mike Brady, who rides the Hank Aaron to his job as employee benefits director for the city, tells me how he first learned of plans for the trail. "It was about 1994 and John Norquist calls me up and says, 'Let's meet by the river,' which was about midway between our houses. I get there and he lays out the whole idea for the trail, saying it's going to give the entire neighborhood a place to play and work."

Norquist (now president of the Congress for the New Urbanism, an organization that promotes community vitality across the country) spread his enthusiasm to local neighborhoods, city leaders, state officials and the business community. These groups worked

Lakeshore State Park  
at the eastern end  
of the trail along  
Lake Michigan.





**The Hank Aaron has helped revive an industrial riverfront corridor that was contaminated and largely deserted in the 1980s.**

together to create the Hank Aaron State Trail. The first four miles of the rail-trail opened in 2000, followed by a 5.25-mile extension in 2010, and another 2.5 miles last November. Today, the trail heads west, away from the river and the industrial center into residential districts along the old Milwaukee Road tracks.

The Hank Aaron is truly a collaborative effort, built by the state using federal and state funds. With state help, a group of Milwaukeeans rolled up their sleeves and began the hard work of restoring the Menomonee Valley's ecological and economic health. State and local officials carried out extensive environmental remediation, removing chemicals from the water and carting off contaminated soil. Volunteers help take care of the restored prairie along the river.

The three main goals of the project involve giving inner-city residents better access to nature, recreation and jobs. These goals have largely been realized. Since 1998, when the trail was planned, 29 companies have moved to the Menomonee Valley industrial area, and seven others have expanded, accounting for 4,700 new jobs. Nearly 10,000 people now work in the area at 100 firms, a number of which emphasize green practices. One of them is Ingeteam, a Spanish-owned company that makes windmills. More than a million square feet of sustainably designed facilities currently operate in the area, boasts Laura Bray, executive director of Menomonee Valley Partners, an organization that plays a major role in area business development.

"There has been so much energy and cooperation on this project," says Cook as she picks up litter along the trail she

manages. "We get tremendous support from the businesses here. They really see the value of the trail for their workers. And you can't overlook the important contributions of the neighborhoods, which work hard to make it happen and use the trail for both transportation and recreation."

I join Brady, the new president of Friends of Hank Aaron State Trail—a volunteer position—for a ride. He admits that when the trail opened he wasn't sure he would use it for his daily commute. "It's a bit longer for me," he explains. "But from the first day, I knew it was the way to go. Every morning I am greeted by this elderly Hispanic couple taking a walk, and people jogging, going to work, walking dogs. It's the life of the community."

### **Taste of Milwaukee**

Besides being a great community and economic asset, the trail also provides visitors with a rich sampling of Milwaukee's history, culture and neighborhoods—a close look into the soul of this convivial city.

I start my exploration on a September morning near the lakefront trailhead at the Discovery World science museum. Nearby is the Milwaukee Art Museum, featuring Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava's internationally famed addition that, from the outside, resembles the skeleton of a giant prehistoric bird.

Next I hop aboard my city bike and loop 1.7 miles



## **TRAVEL FACTS**

**TRAIL INFORMATION:** To learn more about the trail (and download a map that covers two new sections completed in 2011), go to the Friends of Hank Aaron State Trail website: [www.hankaaronstatetrail.org](http://www.hankaaronstatetrail.org). You'll also find a listing of special events.

**GETTING THERE:** To the east, the Hank Aaron trail starts at Discovery World science center on Lake Michigan (adjacent to downtown Milwaukee on Michigan Street). It connects here to the Oak Leaf Trail, which runs parallel to the lake for many miles through Milwaukee and its northern suburbs.

To the west, the trail begins at West Underwood Parkway, just off Bluemound Road near Interstate 94 in the suburb of Wauwatosa. It also connects to the Oak Leaf, a trail that winds 100 miles through Milwaukee and surrounding communities. This trailhead can be reached by bus (Milwaukee County Transit System Route 10). All buses have bike racks.

Seven trains a day run from Chicago to Milwaukee (and one from Minneapolis-St. Paul and the West Coast). Amtrak and most bus companies will carry your bike for a small additional cost. The downtown Milwaukee Amtrak Station (which also is served by Greyhound and other bus companies) is convenient to the Hank Aaron State Trail. Just a few blocks west of the station is the Sixth Street North Bridge. Turn left, take the bridge across the river, and you'll find the trail one block away, running adjacent to Canal Street.

For flights, General Mitchell International Airport is less than 10 miles from downtown Milwaukee. The airport services a number of major carriers.

**BIKE RENTALS:** Milwaukee is exploring a bike-sharing system, and plans are under way to open a bike shop near the trail. For now the best bet for bike rentals is Ben's Cycles, which has been operating two miles south of the trail at 1018 W. Lincoln since 1928 ([www.benscycle.net](http://www.benscycle.net); 888.275.5111). Ben's rents a wide selection of bikes by the day or week.



More than 400,000 people live within a 15-minute bike ride of the Hank Aaron trail, which connects to some of the most popular parks in the city.

of paved trail in the new Lakeshore State Park, a 17-acre manmade island that convinces me Lake Michigan is really an inland ocean, with its vast vista of blue-green water and winds strong enough to whip up whitecaps.

Leaving the park, I follow the rail-trail on city streets into the Third Ward. (The trail is well marked, but it's a good idea to download a map from the Friends of Hank Aaron State Trail website because baseball fans sometimes steal the signs as Aaron souvenirs.) This section is Milwaukee's answer to SoHo. It brims with restaurants, offices and galleries in handsome loft buildings, with a lingering spirit of *la dolce vita* left over from the neighborhood's days as Little Italy.

I'm tempted out of the saddle by the Milwaukee Public Market, a few blocks

off the trail on Water Street. In this European-style food hall, local vendors offer everything from sushi to pastry, not to mention heaps of Wisconsin's signature cheeses and sausages. I enjoy a pesto chicken sandwich from Rupena's Butcher Shop, but hard as I try, I cannot justify a stop this early at nearby Benelux, a bike-themed bistro with 170 Belgian beers served on a gorgeous rooftop patio, or the Milwaukee Ale House, a brewpub with outdoor seating right on the river. Both must wait until I come back to the Third Ward after my ride.

I cross the Young Street Bridge (so named though the street is Broadway) into the Fifth Ward—where young artists, activists, restaurateurs and entrepreneurs who can no longer afford the Third Ward set up shop. I

follow the trail to the Harley-Davidson Museum, whose striking building captures the industrial elegance of America's most iconic motorcycle. From here the trail separates from the street, carrying me along the river and past landmarks of Milwaukee's industrial past, such as the Falk gearworks, which has been operating on the site for more than a century.

### Strudel and Home Runs

Just past a historical marker detailing the history of the Milwaukee Road shops, the trail takes a short side trip along the river to Miller Park, downhill from the Miller Brewery and home of the Milwaukee Brewers baseball team. In 2000, Miller Park replaced County Stadium, where Aaron played for the Milwaukee Braves and later the Brewers. Next door at the much smaller Helfaer Field ballpark, where youth teams play, home plate is on the exact spot where Hank Aaron

**Hank Aaron State Trail**

- Trail Endpoint
- Parking
- Restrooms

On-road section  
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 Oak Leaf Trail  
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Total trail length: 12 miles  
 Trail surface: Asphalt

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLEMARKS.COM





Chad Brady of Appleton, Wis., works on his seven-week mural project south of Miller Park, home of the Milwaukee Brewers.

hammered countless pitches out of the park.

Back on the main trail, I cross the river over a new foot-and-bike bridge and find a mural depicting the history of the area that's emblazoned with images of hawks, workingmen carrying lunch buckets, Hank Aaron, civil rights marchers and anglers. A winding pathway leads up to Silver City, a classic Milwaukee neighborhood teeming with bungalows, taverns and ethnic restaurants. From here the trail continues west toward the Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, which showcases a collection of exuberantly Victorian buildings dating to 1869.



From here it's a straight shot for seven miles—including bridges over all major intersections—through tidy urban and suburban neighborhoods interspersed with woods to Underwood Creek Parkway. There, the Hank Aaron trail connects to a network of county and state trails that lead all the way to Madison, 70 miles away.

Riding back on the trail toward downtown, I realize I've burned enough calories to indulge in lunch at one of Milwaukee's fabled German taverns. I turn south off the trail at a small exit at 56th Street and make my way a few blocks to National Avenue and 59th Street, home of Kegel's Inn. The eatery offers a *gemütlichkeit* (cozy and convivial) atmosphere and hearty food. After heaping portions of bratwurst, German potato salad and apple strudel washed down with Riverwest Stein beer from the local

Lakefront microbrewery, I'm fortified for the ride back.

Soon I meet Mary Lou and Dennis Doehr, a couple from suburban Wauwatosa astride a tandem bicycle. "We come here every day," Mary Lou says, "even in the winter, so long as it's not too icy. We stop to see the trumpeter swans on the lagoon at the VA Center. We watched them paint the mural on the wall over there all summer. And I like the wildflowers; they bloom a bit different every day."

"You just can't beat getting on the trail right by your house," Dennis adds, "and being able to see all that's here."

**Jay Walljasper, author of *The Great Neighborhood Book*, is contributing editor of *National Geographic Traveler* and editor of *OnTheCommons.org*. He rides the plentiful bike trails of Minneapolis year-round for both fun and transportation.**