



# BIKE AUSTIN, MINNESOTA

Austin, Minnesota is becoming a well-known destination for biking enthusiasts. Austin offers over 13 miles of hard-surfaced trails that connect you to many locations in the city. Austin has been awarded Honorable Mention for being a Bike-Friendly Community from the League of American Bicyclist.



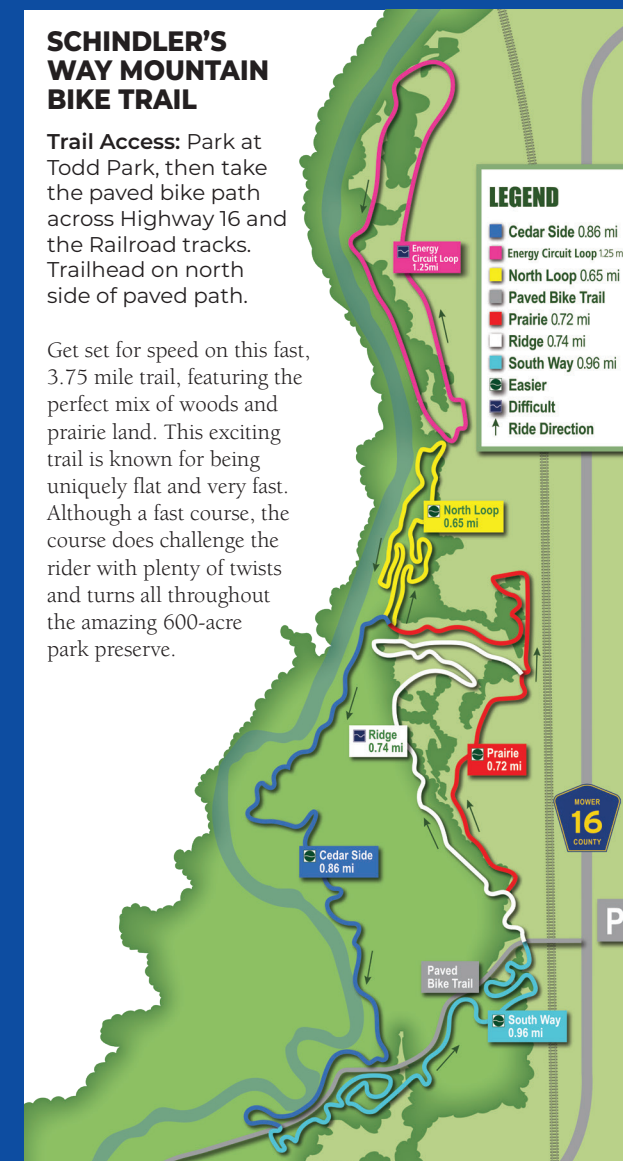
Visit [AustinMN.com](http://AustinMN.com) for places to stay, things to do, and where to eat and shop.



## SCHINDLER'S WAY MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAIL

**Trail Access:** Park at Todd Park, then take the paved bike path across Highway 16 and the Railroad tracks. Trailhead on north side of paved path.

Get set for speed on this fast, 3.75 mile trail, featuring the perfect mix of woods and prairie land. This exciting trail is known for being uniquely flat and very fast. Although a fast course, the course does challenge the rider with plenty of twists and turns all throughout the amazing 600-acre park preserve.



## RYDJOR BIKE SHOP AND MUSEUM

219 North Main Street  
[www.rydjr.com](http://www.rydjr.com)  
 (507) 433-7571

View the evolution of bicycles at the RydJor Bike Shop and Museum located in downtown Austin. It is an outstanding bike shop that will take care of equipment needs and repairs, offer friendly advice and supplies maps to local trails. The history of bikes is displayed on 16-foot walls inside the shop. Each of the 80+ bicycles



has its own story, beginning with the 1868 "Boneshaker" and a bike from the personal collection of Robin Williams.



- Bikes may be borrowed and returned to the SPAM® Museum during open hours.
- Bikes will be checked out at the SPAM® Museum front desk.
- ID will be left with the SPAM® Museum front desk receptionist.
- Each bike borrower must sign a waiver
- Bike can be borrowed for up to 3 hours

101 3rd Avenue NE  
[www.spam.com/museum](http://www.spam.com/museum)  
 (507) 437-5100





Story and photos by Jan Lasar  
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I was there when they cut the ribbon to welcome the Shooting Star State Trail into Austin, MN. Since 1993, the grassroots Prairie Visions group had been working hard on their dream of a bike trail in southern Minnesota, between Lake Louise State Park and Austin, and on a blustery October morning in 2019, that moment had come. At about the same time, the city dedicated a mountain bike trail system, and kids started joining the high school mountain bike team in droves. Austin was now solidly in trail town territory, but this transformation actually started before that. In 2011, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources made a stretch of the Cedar River through Austin an official state water trail, and the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center has been welcoming visitors to its ten-mile trail system since 1975. It was time to put the pieces of this puzzle together, and my wife, Jen, and I decided to go in for a closer look.

Our headquarters for the weekend was Oakwoods Trails, a privately owned, full-service campground, just eight miles west of Austin. We checked in with owners Brian and Jan Sorenson and drove through farm fields to the shady oak grove that housed the sites.

We didn't waste any time after setting up and drove to Austin's Lafayette Park. Tim Ruzek, Water Plan and Outreach Coordinator of the Cedar River Watershed District in Mower County, was waiting for us with canoes and gear, and the three of us hit the water.

25 miles of the Cedar River's 338 miles are designated as a Minnesota state water trail, between Lansing and the Minnesota-Iowa border, but we weren't that ambitious that day. Our trip was an easy 3 and a half mile paddle downriver at a leisurely pace, and it was a calm and sunny day to boot. The Cedar is subject to regular flooding and has carved a sizable river bed into the southern Minnesota landscape.



The day we paddled, water levels were low, and we traveled through a kind of shallow valley, lined with cottonwoods, maple, and the occasional limestone outcropping. We were hidden from the city, but we could clearly hear it. Eventually, Turtle Creek joined the Cedar from the northwest, then we float-

# DISCOVER AUSTIN, SOUTHERN MINNESOTA TRAIL TOWN

ed past the former McAfee Dam. It was removed in 1936; its only remnant was a yellow brick building on the east bank. With the city behind us, the sounds turned more natural, and we spotted a great blue heron when we came around a bend. Our journey ended when we reached the Riverwood Landing near Austin's Sola Fide planetarium.

Before heading back to camp, we had a couple of stops to make. A trip to Austin is not complete without a visit to the SPAM® Museum, of course. We wandered the halls, learned about the potted meat's history, and shopped the merchandise. SPAM® comes in a variety of flavors, previously unknown to us, such as Gochujang, a spicy Korean chili paste. Everywhere we turned, a friendly SPAM™bassador was ready with a tray of samples. We also played some interactive SPAM® Games, including one that tested our mettle in filling SPAM® cans against actual production values. Turns out, in the time it took us to fill, seal and "bake" five cans with a pink beanbag blob, the factory would have filled about 700. Before we left, we picked up a key ingredient for Friday night's dinner.



On the way back to the campground, we stopped at Super Fresh Market to pick up the rest of the fixings, including some locally made hot sauce. Sam Hastings, a professional chef by trade, decided to change trajectory after the COVID pandemic shook the restaurant world and is using his trained palate to create new flavors in the hot sauce world. Made in Austin, his Sam Sa'House hot sauces have found a national following. After a visit to Angry Hog Brewing for some crowslers to go, we were en route back to Oakwoods Trails.

Back in our cozy grove, I dusted a couple of SPAM® loaves with BBQ rub and glazed them with Sam's Chim'Charr hot sauce. While our portable BBQ smoker did its thing, we enjoyed a spectacular sunset and a couple of Giggling Piglet cream ales from Angry Hog. We ate at our picnic table by the light of a camp lantern. Our smoked SPAM® was delicious and a fitting meal for a visit to Austin, MN.

The Sunny Spot Café on Austin's north side was buzzing with hungry diners on a sunny Saturday morning. Jen was feeling adventurous and ordered the Benedict omelet. I stuck to a classic, bacon and eggs, and, of course, it was Hormel bacon. The sound of beaters whisking eggs in a bowl meant a good breakfast was coming up, and we waited patiently for our food. When it arrived, we went to work and built a good base for a busy day.

All the rocket fuel in the world is no good if there isn't a spark to ignite it, and we picked that up at Hot Off the Press Coffee and Comics. This combination coffee house and comic book store takes up the bottom floor of a former millinery store in the

historic Wagner building in downtown Austin. The place where the sophisticated woman of the 19th century might once have browsed the latest in hat fashions now serves coffee drinks and superheroes to go. While our barista carefully weighed and steeped our coffee press java, we perused the magazine racks. Coffee in hand, we found a table in front of the SPAM® museum, sat down, and watched the city come alive. The rocket fuel soon kicked in, and we were ready for the next item on our itinerary.

In 1973, two twenty-somethings, friends Pat Geraghty and Dan Ulwelling, opened up a bike shop in Austin. Rydior Bikes has moved a few times in its history, but it's been in its current location in downtown Austin, MN for the last forty years. Dan passed away in 2006, but his legacy lives on in the form of a bike collection that adorns the walls and ceiling of the former Kresge department store building. Pat was at the shop and had two mountain bikes ready to go for us.

Schindler's Way is a flat and fast, five-mile singletrack system that flows through forest and prairie and sweeps along the Cedar River near the Hormel Foods campus and Todd Park. It was on our Austin to-do list that morning. Just a short trip on Austin's city bike trail system took us there and we warmed up on the Prairie trail, then moved on to the North Loop and Cedar Side trails.

Builders really eked out all they could from this small sliver of river bottom land, and constructed winding trails through open fields and thick forest, as well as singletrack along the river. Throw in a couple of log jumps, a rock garden and a drop, and it was a fun couple of hours well spent. We managed to ride about eight miles and returned to downtown, ready for lunch.



Tienda Y Taqueria Guerrero was bustling with a lunch crowd. This grocery store with a restaurant serves up Mexican staples like chilaquiles and barbacoa, but something else caught my eye. The Picaditas con cecina, the corn griddle cakes with salsa and cheese, served with grilled steak, were fantastic and came hot and fast, despite the crowds. As soon as Jen saw birria tacos on the menu, her search was over. The hot and tasty consommé they came with wasn't ideal after a hot and sweaty bike ride, but it was just too good to pass up.

We spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around Austin's very walkable downtown and popped into different shops. At Sweet Reads on Main Street, the long and narrow store was packed floor to ceiling with books, as expected, and we especially enjoyed browsing the selection of Minnesota authors. As for the sweet part, they also had a selection of old-timey candy on hand. Next door, at Gypsy K Consignment and Boutique, the racks were brim-

ming with the latest fashions, and Jen disappeared for a while.

Down the block, we stopped at the Austin ArtWorks Center. The retail gallery is operated by Austin Area Arts, a non-profit that's been working to bring fine arts to the public since 1990. Through their efforts, the once-abandoned historic Paramount Theatre is now once again host to movies, but also live music, comedy, and dance performances year-round. At the ArtWorks Center, the retail gallery on the main floor is only part of the story. The second floor is a gallery space with rotating exhibits, and the basement has studio space for art classes and a kiln.



We decided it was time for a break and grabbed a booth at Dusty's Lounge. The theme there was funky, the good kind. It started with the iridescent tile and double-swinging porthole doors on the outside, and carried on with jazzy, eggplant-colored chairs, exposed brick walls, a white tin ceiling, and wood floors on the inside. Vintage light fixtures and a restored 1940s art deco bar rounded out the picture. From our corner we had a good view of the crowd, an early afternoon wedding party, and they did not look out of place in this swanky lounge. A tiny pickup window in the back of the room allowed a glimpse into the kitchen. The menu offered late-night snacks, but also "deviled eggs by Edna." No surprise, their sandwiches can be upgraded with SPAM®.

Our nightlife tour continued across the street, but with a very different ambiance. At Gravity Storm Brewing, the vibe was that of a laid-back beach resort, with a dress code of flip-flops and aloha shirts. We strolled up to the bar and examined the beer taps under the surfboard-turned-bar sign, then settled on a flight of four of their ales.

We shared a table with Sam Hastings, the man behind Sam Sa'House hot sauces, who just happened to have brought a few samples to the brewery. When Jen and I travel, we like to keep it local, and we very much enjoyed this little get-together. Beach vibes, hot sauce and a couple of good pints were the perfect combo for a Saturday night.

We didn't have to go far for dinner. Two doors down, at Piggy Blue's Bar-B-Que, the smell of smoke was in the air. We had, in fact, smelled it all day walking around town and were finally ready to have some. Our Smokey Smorgasboard came with shredded pork, brisket, chicken, turkey, ribs, pit potatoes, baked beans and cornbread. There was nothing to feel melancholy about in this place.

Our last day started out with a hearty breakfast. Kenny's Oak Grill is one of those restaurants that's endured the test of time and has become an institution. In 1965, Kenny and Joanne Knutson took over what was

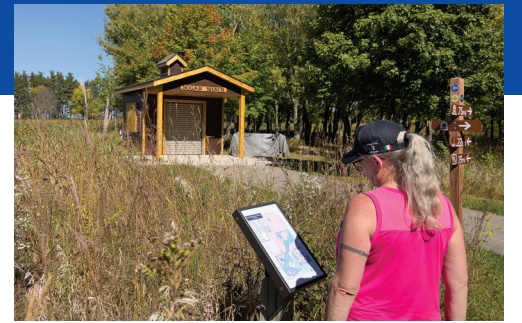
then just the Oak Grill, changed the name, and started serving scratch-made meals in the heart of Austin. Their magic formula was still working when we showed up for Sunday breakfast. A banner on the outside read "SPAM™Town USA," and the dining room was packed. Luckily, a table for two had just opened up.

The walls were decorated with tin signs, musical instruments, hockey sticks, and other knickknacks in a nod to the 1950s, and gray and white checker floors completed the look. Right by the door, a low lunch counter sat about a half dozen customers, and a yellow neon above the serving window announced that we were, indeed, at Kenny's Oak Grill. In the kitchen, several cooks were working hard to keep up, moving fast between sizzling griddles. We had barely enough time to discuss the day's itinerary, when our food arrived. The Breakfast Croissant and the Everything Hash Browns came out so fast, we thought we were getting someone else's food by mistake. It was delicious, and we were on the road in no time.

Before we drove to the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center to ride the Shooting Star Trail, we had one important stop to make. In 2022, artist Gordon Huether unveiled his The Power of Food sculpture, and we just had to see it, because we never pass up an opportunity for a photo op. Yes, it's true. You can take 20,000 little forks and make them into one big, 25-foot-tall one. There it was, standing tall and sparkling in the morning sun in a manicured park on the Hormel campus, as if ready to dig into a giant can of SPAM®.



At Jay C. Hormel Nature Center, we started our journey on the Shooting Star Trail. Leaving Austin, the trail travels through farm fields and pockets of remnant prairie. It visits the towns of Rose Creek, Adams, and Taopi, then snakes through Lake Louise State



Park, and on to LeRoy, where it ends after 28 miles. Our itinerary for the day was a ride to Rose Creek and back, followed by a walk at the nature center.

We left Austin behind and rode through the open country on a wonderfully sunny day. The flat trail made the going easy, and the light headwind didn't bother us, because we knew the reward was coming on the return trip. Combines were bringing in the last of the summer harvest, sending dusty plumes into the air. Fall was knocking, but we didn't think about that at all. Our legs were good, the pedals turned effortlessly, and we chatted away as we usually do on our bike rides. 18 miles later, we were back at the nature center, but not quite done, yet.

The Jay C. Hormel Nature Center's 500 acres of wetlands, forest and prairie are home to ten miles of walking trails, some of which become ski trails in the winter. The nature center itself houses an interpretive exhibit and puts on programs for school groups. It felt good to shake out the legs after the ride, and we enjoyed strolling the grounds and taking in the natural sights and sounds of this green oasis.

Lunch was a simple affair. We spread a picnic blanket on a grassy spot in the shade and feasted on sandwiches, chips and salsa. Most of the ingredients came from Super Fresh Market and the Austin farmers market.

We hung around long after lunch and talked about our trip. Over the last three days we had been on a water trail, a mountain bike trail, a paved bike trail, and a walking trail. We had eaten well, seen sights and met fun people, and we both agreed that we needed to visit this trail town again.



For more visit: <https://mntrails.com/discover-austin-southern-minnesota-trail-town/>

