

A Canada 150 Experience: Explore Alberta's Iron Horse Trail

By Leigh McAdam

The Iron Horse Trail is the longest completed section of the Trans Canada Trail in Alberta. Located northeast of Edmonton, it cuts a 300 kilometre swath across the province beginning 20 kilometres west of Smoky Lake at Waskatenau and continuing to a junction near Ashmont where it splits south to Heinsburg and north to Cold Lake. The trail is for hikers, cyclists, horseback riders, ATVers and even Red River wagons in summer. In winter it's used by cross-country skiers and snowmobilers.

My Biking Experience

I visited several sections of the Iron Horse Trail, first by car checking out some of the whimsical monuments like giant pumpkins in Smoky Lake and the world's largest mushrooms in Vilna in what is referred to as *The Land of Big* before settling on a bike ride between Lindbergh and Heinsburg. Though this section of trail is considered to be one of the prettiest, it's tough cycling if you visit after a day of pouring rain with much of the trail a large mud puddle. Still mud is preferable to the alternative, slippery cow paddies. In hindsight I'd recommend waiting a few days for this part of the trail to dry out. Other sections, like the trail around Warspite have a good base that drains quickly.

The landscape between Lindbergh and Heinsburg is diverse; travel through farmland (cue the cows), parkland and rolling hills often parallel to the North Saskatchewan River. Pass Whitney Lakes Provincial Park, home to beautiful lakes and sandy beaches and a great place to camp if you're doing a multi-day trip. It, like much of the trail is a hotbed for birding. When you reach the pretty hamlet of Heinsburg, which bills itself as the liveliest little ghost town in Alberta, take some time to ride around and see its sights, notably a restored water tower and CN Station.

A bike ride on one small section of the Iron Horse Trail will surely whet your appetite for more. It's easy to cycle from community to community and those that love epic outings would enjoy tackling the whole trail.

Tips for Exploring the Iron Horse Trail

- If you're biking take a patch repair kit, pump and spare inner tube as there is little in the way of bike services.
- Treat the Iron Horse Trail as a wilderness experience and go prepared. There's good chance you'll encounter wildlife including moose, bear, deer and coyotes.
- Enjoy the many events that are offered in the communities along the trail throughout the summer and fall including rodeos and farmer's markets along with the annual Iron Horse Ultra 100 Marathon.

Exploring the Iron Horse Trail helps you learn something of Alberta's history and shows you a side of the province you probably haven't seen. I discovered a beautiful and underappreciated landscape with some of the friendliest people west of Newfoundland.

Visit [Alberta TrailNet](#) for more information and [HikeBikeTravel](#) for a blog and photos about the Iron Horse Trail.