

MINNEAPOLIS'

Since the rail corridor was originally dug as a trench through Minneapolis 100 years ago, the Midtown Greenway today mostly travels below street level; (at right) Ted Duepner, one of many winter warriors who brave the trail no matter the weather.

DAVE GLAD

SUPER

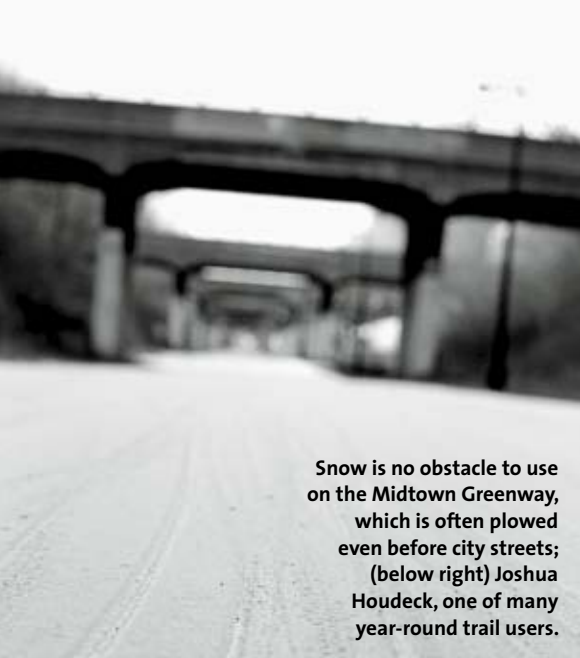


By Karen Asp

Suffice to say that cycling in the snow has never crossed my radar. I'm a fair-weather cyclist who hangs up her bike when the mercury starts dipping. Until, that is, I arrive in Minneapolis in January. The day I ride the city's famed 5.5-mile Midtown Greenway, snow is pouring from the sky and a wicked wind is blowing it sideways. >>

The Midtown Greenway:

HIGHWAY



Snow is no obstacle to use on the Midtown Greenway, which is often plowed even before city streets; (below right) Joshua Houdeck, one of many year-round trail users.



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You also have to credit the Midtown Greenway, which has been dubbed the “superhighway of cyclists,” for making commuting easier. Between 4,000 and 5,000 people use the trail every day on average, amounting to a whopping 1.5 million trips a year. “There’s actually a rush hour on the trail, especially in summer,” says Soren Jensen, executive director of the Midtown Greenway Coalition, a nonprofit organization that advocated for creation of the trail and now works to improve it. He bikes to work every day, no matter the weather.

The Greenway is now one of the state’s busiest trails. Granted, its location makes it ideal for bike and foot traffic. The trail runs on an east-west path through Minneapolis, which boasts 167 miles of bikeways. To the west, it connects with paths around the city’s Chain of Lakes (where there are numerous walking and cycling trails), while to the east it offers access to paths along the Mississippi River.

Yet the Greenway has other unique draws. For starters, the railway corridor was dug as a trench about 100 years ago.

I shouldn’t be surprised. After all, I am in a city where January temperatures hover around 13 degrees, and average seasonal snowfall totals about 50 inches. Here’s the catch, though: I’m visiting during the Winter That Never Was, Minneapolis racking up just over 20 inches of snow.

Ironically, while the snow catches me off guard, that’s not the real surprise. Instead, it’s the number of other people on the rail-trail. I count at least 20 in my 90-minute trek on the Midtown Greenway, most of them sporting ski goggles and riding bikes with chunky snow tires.

Turns out that Minneapolis has a long-standing love affair with the bike, which may explain why it was recently named *Bicycling* magazine’s top bike-friendly city. Between 2007 and 2011, bike traffic in Minneapolis grew by 47 percent, many of these cyclists ditching four wheels for two. In fact, Minneapolis has the second-

highest population of bike commuters in the nation, behind Portland, Ore.

Why such a high number? Ask Derek Olson, who rides the Greenway daily and doesn’t own a car. He’ll tell you that cycling is simply cheaper and more practical than driving. “I can get anywhere downtown faster on a bike than in a car, and I don’t have to find a place to park a car,” he says.





Originally, the Greenway was part of the Milwaukee Railroad's main line to the West Coast, which began running in 1882. By 1912, the railway was encountering so much traffic that the city asked the railroad to place the rail line in a trench. By 1993, rail traffic had slowed significantly, and the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (HCRRA) purchased the corridor for future light rail. As a result of the original design, though, much of the Greenway lies below street level, meaning trail users are largely isolated from car traffic and rarely have to cross streets.

The trail, which is open 24 hours a day, year-round, is also well lit and safe. Security cameras are posted in strategic locations along the paved path, and a volunteer group called Trail Watch polices the Greenway daily to protect the public.

And when the snow flies? "The city plows this trail faster than the streets," Jensen says. On the rare occasions when the Greenway hasn't gotten plowed, people are quick to vent their frustrations.

Ben Ortega braves deep snowdrifts and brutal cold—familiar factors along the trail in Minneapolis, where winter temperatures are often in the teens, and an average of 50 inches of snow blanket the city every year.

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Battling the Elements

While I'm a fanatic about cross-country skiing, especially when the snow is falling, I'm not sure how I feel about getting out on a bike in this winter weather. I conclude that I must be made of less hearty stock than these Minnesotans.

Several of these diehards have congregated at Freewheel Midtown Bike Center, a bike shop and café on the Greenway where I'm renting a bike on this day. They're clad in winter bike gear, many holding cups of Peace Coffee, a popular Minneapolis brew. A few are munching lunch—the café serves fresh salads, many of them gluten-free and vegetarian, and sandwiches made with local meats and produce—while others are relaxing in chairs.

I ask Mario Macaruso, Freewheel's café manager, why people seem so enthusiastic about pedaling through the winter elements. Macaruso offers an angle I would never have considered. "It's warmer to ride a bike than drive a car," he says.

I try to remember his comment as I wheel myself to the Greenway and begin pedaling toward the trail's signature sight, the Martin Olav Sabo Bridge, a cable bridge erected to eliminate the need for bikers and pedestrians to cross a busy intersection.

I'm thankful the trail is flat, as the snow is beginning to accumulate, adding resistance to my ride. I'm also grateful the crowds aren't numbering in the thousands today, for I'm having trouble seeing the lane designated for cyclists. There are lanes in each direction for cyclists

and walkers/runners, and I'm making a squiggly line through the snow. I can see, though, that I'm below the road, the trench carved gracefully on both sides of me, and, when I pass under numerous bridges, I welcome the relief, albeit temporary, from the pelting snow.

Even under these conditions, I'm impressed with how well this trail is maintained. Although the corridor is operated by the city, the Midtown Greenway Coalition has several volunteer committees that manage different aspects of the trail.

One committee, for instance, is charged with creating green spaces along the trail, and they're making good headway. One large green space recently opened, and the committee has plans to add more. Plus, through an Arbor Day project, more than 4,000 trees have been planted along the Greenway. Another committee is working to add more public art, with the long-term goal of acquiring and commissioning permanent artwork along the corridor.

The trail hasn't always looked this good, however. In fact, when George Puzak, a long-time cycling and environmental advocate in Minneapolis, first thought about turning this former railroad corridor into a recreational trail in the early 1990s, the place was a dump. Literally. "It was filled with litter, shopping carts, couches, tires, needles—anything people could dump, it was there," Puzak says.

In spite of its filth, Puzak recognized the promise and the positive impact of

TRAVEL FACTS

Feel like checking out the Midtown Greenway? Here's the scoop on where to stay, eat and play in Minneapolis:

WHERE TO STAY: If you want to be within walking distance of the trail, check into the Sheraton Minneapolis Midtown Hotel (612.821.7600; www.sheraton.com/minneapolis). If you prefer to stay downtown (you can drive or take a cab to the trail), consider The Grand Hotel (866.THE.GRAND; www.grandhotelminneapolis.com), a Kimpton boutique hotel that offers such perks as a complimentary wine hour every evening and free access to the Minneapolis Life Time Athletic Club. Another bonus? Pets of all sizes stay for free and even get bowls, bed and pick-up bags.

the corridor. He used to visit frequently and enjoyed listening to the sounds of birds. "I'd see couples on the bridges overhead, looking out at this corridor, even though it was filled with trash, and embracing each other," he says.

Puzak was so convinced that a recreational path could work there that he began lobbying for it all over the city. He drafted a letter about the whys and hows behind the trail and sent it to neighborhood groups along the railway corridor and to city and county elected officials. He showed up at festivals with handouts that detailed his vision and gave talks to any group that would listen.

Along the way, Puzak collected his own army of volunteers, some of whom were avid cyclists, and the group began meeting to discuss plans. This was the start of the Midtown Greenway Coalition, which incorporated as a nonprofit in 1995.

The idea took time to grow legs. "Many people thought it was an impossible dream because of the condition of the corridor and the resources we'd need to make it happen," says Tim Springer. Former executive director of the Midtown Greenway Coalition, Springer helped Puzak lead the charge and set a goal to create a fast, safe and pleasant bikeway.

Still, the coalition was confident. Minneapolis has a history of creating green corridors, and locals' strong affinity for open-air activities is legendary. "It's tough to live here if you don't enjoy doing something outdoors," Puzak says.

All of the efforts paid off. The city petitioned—and received—funding from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, which allocates funds for transit projects. Using this money along with state and local dollars, the city began creating the Greenway, all the time working with the HCRRA. In 2000, the Midtown Greenway opened to the public.

Not Just a Superhighway, But a Destination, Too

The bike center sits about halfway on the trail, so whether I turn right or left to start doesn't really matter. I've heard so much

about the Sabo Bridge, an architectural masterpiece, and I'm worried the snow might not allow me to explore the whole trail, which is why I turn left out of the store to see the bridge first.

The Sabo Bridge is indeed one of the trail's highlights. It's a beautiful piece of architecture with a curved ramp for easy access. Shortly after crossing the bridge, I arrive at the end of the trail and turn back, passing Freewheel as I explore the other half of the trail.

Truth be told, I'm at a disadvantage riding through a storm, for the snow encloses me in a blinding sheet of white. Numerous residential areas flank the trail—the Greenway runs through nine, with seven more a block away, including a popular commercial district called Uptown with many restaurants and shops—and I pass places where I could exit and explore these neighborhoods, but the snow doesn't allow that luxury today.

Nor does it allow for any good aromas



With the trail's many downtown and neighborhood connections, don't be surprised to see folks hauling unconventional equipment, or even carrying out a home move via bicycles.

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WHERE TO EAT: Don't miss the Midtown Global Market (612.872.4041; www.midtowntglobalmarket.org). Along with specialty shops, you'll find more than a dozen restaurants where you can sample eclectic fare. In the downtown area, try Barrio (612.333.9953; www.barriotequila.com) for Mexican tapas; The Local (612.904.1000; www.the-local.com), a hopping Irish bar; Hell's Kitchen (612.332.4700; www.hellskitcheninc.com), revered for its breakfast (try the Mahnommin porridge and homemade peanut butter); or Keys at the Foshay (612.339.6399; www.keysfoshay.com) for delicious breakfasts (and free cookie samples at the front door). Stop in at Ike's Food & Cocktails (612.746.4537; www.ilikeikes.com) for a cocktail at the bar (it's rumored to have tasty hamburgers). Grab incredible pizza (or a salad, hoagie or pasta dish, with numerous options

for vegetarians and vegans) at Pizza Luce (612.333.7359; www.pizzaluce.com), where the beer menu is as impressive as the pizza.

WHERE TO RENT BICYCLES: Pick up a bike at Freewheel Midtown Bike Center (612.238.4447; www.freewheelbike.com). If you're visiting April through November, you can also rent a bike at any of the dozen-plus Nice Ride bicycle stations (877.551.6423; www.niceridemn.org) for a

maximum of 24 hours; when you're done, return the bike to any Nice Ride station.

For more information about the Midtown Greenway, contact the Midtown Greenway Coalition at 612.879.0103 or visit www.midtowntgreenway.org. You can also explore an interactive map, user reviews and photos, and loads of other trip-planning information for the Greenway at www.TrailLink.com, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's free trail-finder website.

to waft through the air, as the trail runs parallel to Lake Street, lined with businesses, shops and restaurants. "There are spots where you get whiffs from many of these restaurants, which is one thing I love about the Greenway," Puzak says. One of his favorite places is the Midtown Global Market, an ethnic culinary center filled with shops and eateries. And he often stops for coffee at Freewheel.

Jensen hopes more people will realize that the trail is not just a commuting highway. "We want people to slow down and enjoy the green spaces, art, businesses and restaurants," he says. "Rather than something to bike through, this trail is something to bike to where you could spend the day."

To boost awareness of the trail as well as Midtown Greenway Coalition membership, which helps fund the trail (last winter, the coalition had more than 500 members, and it hopes to double that in the next year), the coalition sponsors several annual events. There's a winter walk/ride event, for example, and this year's activities included bike-powered skjoring

and obstacle courses. In June, the coalition hosted the first annual Greenway Glow, where participants decorated their bikes with lights—competing to see who could get the most and the most creative lights on their bikes—and rode the trail.

The trail is doing its own growing, too. Public transportation along the Greenway in the form of light rail, rapid bus or streetcar is currently being evaluated by Metro Transit, the transportation resource for the Twin Cities and one of the country's largest transit systems. For



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years, the coalition has been advocating for a streetcar as the best green alternative, the idea being that the tracks of the streetcar would be embedded in grass and the route designed to minimize impact on the Greenway. Developers are also constructing more apartment buildings along the trail.

By the time I return to Freewheel, I'm covered in snow. But Macaruso was right: I'm so warm, I feel like I've just been running in the Sahara. Who knows? After my snow biking experience in Minneapolis, my own bike may make its winter debut this year. I might even have to cart it to the Greenway to join the ranks of winter cycling diehards.

Freelance journalist Karen Asp specializes in travel, fitness, health and nutrition. She's the co-author of *Understanding Your Food Allergies and Intolerances* (St. Martin's, 2012) and contributing editor for *Woman's Day*. She writes regularly for numerous other publications, including *Runner's World*, *Delta Sky*, *Self*, *Real Simple*, *Redbook*, *Glamour*, *O*, *Health*, *Eating Well*, *Prevention* and *Whole Living*.