



Idaho's Route of the Hiawatha

BY GLENN ZINKUS

Editor's note: In 2024, the Route of the Hiawatha will be open from May 24 to Sept. 15. We've published this article now so trail users can get a jump start on their spring/summer trail planning.

I had eagerly anticipated the moment I could finally experience the Route of the Hiawatha ([ridethehiawatha.com](https://www.ridethehiawatha.com)) on my five-day e-bike tour through northern Idaho with ROW Adventures ([rowadventures.com](https://www.rowadventures.com)) in August 2023. My excitement for this gravel ride was so intense that I even dreamed about it, waking up with the vivid sensation of pedaling across a high trestle. I also felt some trepidation; my tour began under the scorching sun, yet the weather forecast for my scheduled day on the Route of the Hiawatha hinted at an incoming cold front with a high probability of rain. But when the day came to ride, we didn't let cool, wet weather ruin the fun.

The groundwork for what is now the Route of the Hiawatha began at the turn of the 20th century with

the laying in Montana of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific Railroad (aka the Milwaukee Road). It was first surveyed in 1904 and finalized in 1909 by breaking through the St. Paul Pass, creating the most ruggedly beautiful stretch of railroad within the continental United States.

The highly stylized and futuristic passenger train fleet of the Milwaukee Road adopted the Hiawatha moniker during the 1930s, named after the fleet-footed Mohawk chief immortalized in the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem "The Song of Hiawatha." Beginning in 1947, the *Olympian Hiawatha* raced across the Midwest at speeds exceeding 100 mph before climbing the rugged Bitterroot Range en route to Tacoma, Washington.

Despite being the coolest train in service, the *Olympian Hiawatha* was never financially successful and underwent several transformations until the Milwaukee Road mainline went bankrupt and was abandoned in 1980. The Route of the Hiawatha first opened as a rail-trail in 1998, expanding in 2001 to include the iconic

St. Paul Pass Tunnel in 2001.

Our cycling group left our home base at Silver Mountain Resort in Kellogg, Idaho. A big café Americano from The Beanery ([facebook.com/thebeaneryonrailroad](https://www.facebook.com/thebeaneryonrailroad)) had me ready for a day on the trail, even in the face of unseasonably cool and wet weather. Once our guides secured our trail passes at the Lookout Pass Ski Area and we reached the trailhead, we initiated our adventure with a warmup ride along the Route of the Olympian ([rtc.li/route-olympian](https://www.rtc.li/route-olympian)) just over the Montana border. This connecting rail-trail commences at the far end of the East Portal, at the same parking area for the Route of the Hiawatha.

The Route of the Olympian, similar in character to the Hiawatha, served as a gentle introduction to the region. We covered the first 6 miles of the 31-mile trail, including a tunnel traverse and trestle crossing akin to the adventures that awaited us on the Hiawatha later in the day. I rode too fast, spraying myself with mud, and occasionally I spit out the fine gravel that hit my teeth. The first 8.6 miles of the Hiawatha are

PHOTO: Bicyclists on an August 2023 tour with ROW Adventures on the Route of the Hiawatha entering the 1.66-mile St. Paul Pass Tunnel, which connects Montana and Idaho

[The Route of the Hiawatha reopens for a new season on May 24, 2024. Learn more about how to acquire a trail pass, as well as book a shuttle or rent a bike at \[ridethehiawatha.com\]\(https://www.ridethehiawatha.com\).](#)



PHOTOS: (Top left and right) The pathway of the Hiawatha is known for its trestles and tunnels. (Bottom) Downtown Wallace, Idaho, along the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes, is a recommended town to use as a base for the Route of the Hiawatha.

THE ROUTE OF THE HIAWATHA FEATURES THE ST. PAUL PASS TUNNEL, ALSO CALLED THE TAFT TUNNEL, WHICH BURROWS 8,771 FEET (1.6 MILES) THROUGH THE BITTERROOT MOUNTAINS.

restricted to nonmotorized use and are pleasant for bicyclists and the occasional hiker.

Despite being wrapped in Gore-Tex, a hint of moisture began to creep up my sleeve, and I could sense the initial chill settling in. It was time to ride. As we saddled up, our guides had already outfitted our bikes with an additional high lumen lamp for use in the tunnels.

We all staged at the front of the entrance to the St. Paul Pass Tunnel so we could pass *en masse* through the dark. We rode through the 1.66-mile-long tunnel—the longest of the trail—subterraneously riding from Montana into Idaho. Although the day I rode the Hiawatha there was little difference in temperature between the tunnel and the outside, most summer days make this section—which averages 47 degrees Fahrenheit through the year—shockingly cool. The supplemental lamp penetrated the black so I could see the pathway and the rock walls and I was visible to others. Despite already being damp from the day, with a mud streak decorating my thankfully waterproof backpack, we maintained a steady pace of 8 to 10 mph while traversing the tunnel to minimize any additional splashes.

After emerging from that first tunnel, riders share the road with shuttle buses for the next 2 miles. “You won’t need to worry about dust

today,” laughed our guide, Connor. While I thought the views were still spectacular through that section, it’s more pleasant to be alone with the bicyclists and not have to share the road with large motor vehicles. It’s worth noting also that there is one tunnel in the shared stretch, albeit shorter than our first, traveling just 790 feet. Incoming shuttle buses beep their horn before they enter the tunnel, and I’m told by Connor that “they’re quite considerate to the riders, of course.”

I stopped to read many of the interpretive signs along the way (there are 47 of these signs along the route, all fascinating). One struck a chord—a sign titled “Life Along the Line,” with an explanation of life during deep winter snows and an illustration of an early generation snowcat. I like solitude, but this brought me flashbacks from the 1980 movie “The Shining.”

I’ve got to say, if I were to choose between the most thrilling of the trail features, tunnels or trestles,

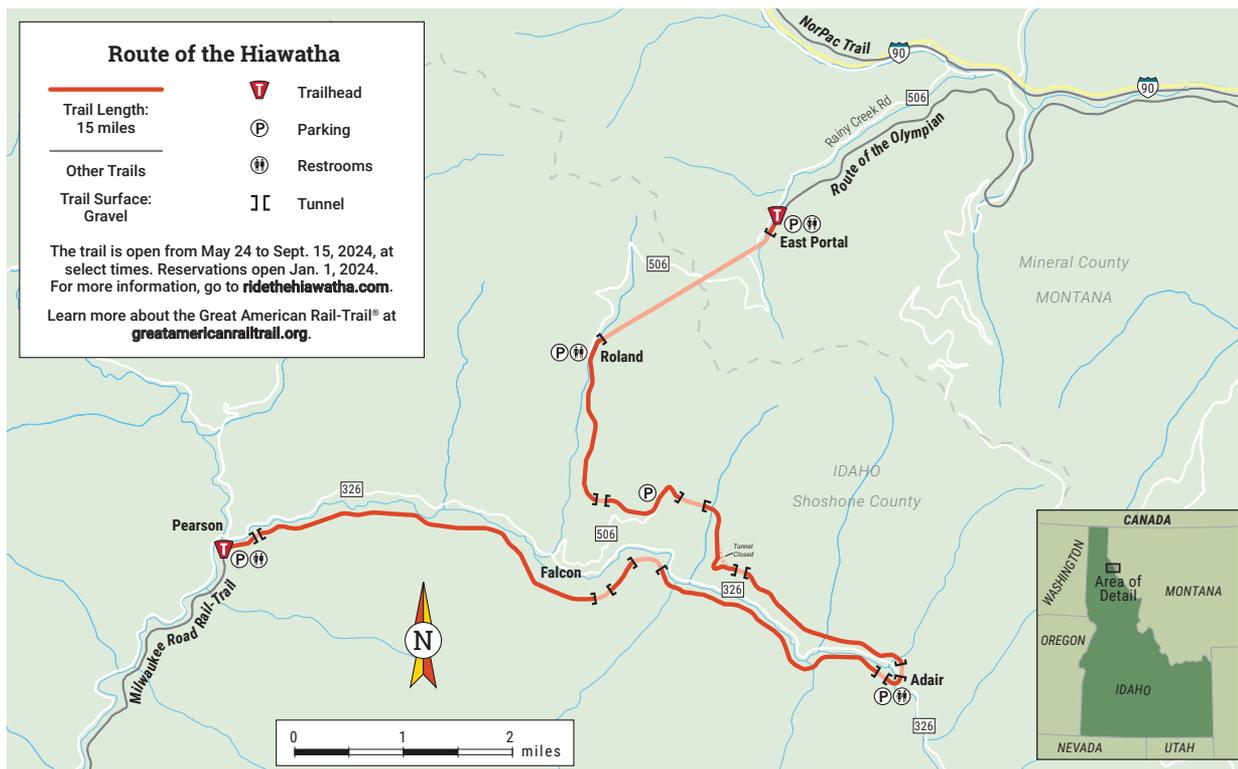
the trestles are it for me. Open air and views. Adding to the experience, the trail’s longest and highest trestle spans Kelly Creek, a hidden gem among Idaho’s fisheries, known for its westslope cutthroat trout. I can’t help but wonder what Kelly Creek is like in this location far upriver. Since this trestle is 230 feet high, the water can only be reached by a hike, and perhaps some bush-whacking. I’m told by Matt Sawyer, director of marketing for Lookout Pass, “There is a faint trail to the river that provides an outstanding view of the trestle.” The views of distant trestles spanning forested chasms seemed even more dramatic today, where long wispy clouds like strands of spun sugar floated between me and those far-off bridges.

Most riders continue for the full length of the trail, and then wait at the bottom in Pearson to catch one of the shuttles back to the top on the west side of the St. Paul Pass Tunnel.

“The challenge with the trail is trying to make sure the wait for the shuttle does not get uncomfortable,” said Sawyer. Our group, which was on e-bikes, had a plan to ride down the trail, turn around and ride back up. Note to e-bike users: Pedal-assisted e-bikes are allowed for riding the Hiawatha, but the use of the throttle on Class II e-bikes is not permitted.

There are several nearby communities serving as excellent base camps for the Route of the





THE HIAWATHA FEATURES 10 TUNNELS AND SEVEN TRESTLES ALONG ITS 15-MILE ROUTE.

Hiawatha, with Wallace being the closest, offering everything riders could desire.

Our group had dinner at the Blackboard Café during the evening of the ride. Although the name does not suggest it, the Blackboard specializes in brilliantly executed Italian dishes for its dinner service that has my mouth watering even now. The scrumptious osso buco covered with a reduced Madeira wine sauce was a perfect meal for both refueling and warming after a wet day on the trail.

GETTING THERE

Access the trail at the Lookout Pass Ski Area (ridethehiawatha.com), located adjacent to Interstate 90 at the Idaho–Montana state line at Exit 0, to purchase trail passes. The Route of the Hiawatha trailhead is located 5 miles east on I-90 into Taft, Montana. Take Exit 5, and proceed 2 miles on a dirt road, which is Route 506. At the fork, go left to the parking area.

The Lookout Pass Ski Area is equidistant, about 99 miles, from Spokane International Airport ([\[airports.net\]\(http://airports.net\)\) and the Missoula airport \(\[flymissoula.com\]\(http://flymissoula.com\)\). Historic Wallace, Idaho \(\[wallaceid.fun\]\(http://wallaceid.fun\)\), closest to Spokane, is an ideal base. Wallace is 12 miles west of the ski area.](http://spokane</p>
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WHAT TO SEE

The Northern Pacific Railroad Depot Museum (npdepot.org) chronicles the history of the railroad within the Coeur d’Alene Mining District around Wallace. You’ll also find displays discussing the history of the Route of the Hiawatha. The Sierra Silver Mine Tour (silvermine.tour.org) includes a lecture and 1.25-hour tour of a silver mine by a retired silver miner. This starts in town, and you will be shuttled by an open-air trolley to the silver mine. The Coeur d’Alene Old Mission State Park (rtc.li/cd-old-mission) features the oldest building in Idaho, The Mission of the Sacred Heart, constructed from 1850 to 1853.

WHERE TO STAY

The Wallace Inn (thewallaceinn.com) is centrally located by the entrance to Wallace, and welcomes cyclists from the Trail of the Coeur d’Alenes, a host trail of the Great American Rail-Trail®

(greatamericanrailtrail.org), as well as the Route of the Hiawatha, which is nearby. There are other hotel/motel options, including the funky, retro Stardust Motel (stardustwallace.com), as well as numerous camping locations near Wallace and around the national forests.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

My Italian dinner at the Blackboard Café (blackboardmarketplace.com) was out of this world; the osso buco, lasagna and chicken Parmesan are all recommended. Other cyclists in my group had equally delicious results for lunch.

The Fainting Goat Wine Bar and Restaurant (thefaintinggoatwallace.com) has great wines by the glass, a diverse selection of beers and a very tasty flatbread, which I had for lunch.

WHERE TO RENT

Lookout Pass Ski Area has bikes available to rent; rentals include a helmet and high lumen light (rtc.li/hiawatha-rentals). Bikes can be delivered to the trailhead with advance reservations. The Spokehouse (thespokehouse.com) in Wallace has several varieties of e-bikes available for rent. •



Glenn Zinkus is an outdoor writer, photographer, fly fisher and upland bird hunter from Corvallis, Oregon. Learn more about his work at glennzinkusoutdoors.com.