Iron Ore Heritage Trail

Explore the history of Michigan’s iron mining industry on the Iron Ore Heritage Trail. The first 28 miles of this 48-mile “path through the past” was completed in 2013 from Kewalghagen Road to Winthrop Junction. The western 20 miles of trail to the former mining town of Republic runs on the abandoned Duluth, South Shore & Atlantic Railroad. A 2.5-mile section of trail east of Republic was upgraded with fine limestone in 2015. Another 3 miles of trail west of Winthrop Junction was surfaced with fine limestone in 2016. The rest of this “motorized” section of trail is surfaced with coarse stone aggregate, but rideable with fat tire or mountain bikes.

The eastern section of trail follows along the Lake Superior shoreline from Kewalghagen Road to the historic iron ore dock in Marquette harbor. It then travels west, on a gradual uphill grade, to the mining communities of Negaunee and Ishpeming, passing by several museums, abandoned mines, historic sites and scenic natural areas. A series of interpretive signs keep you informed along the way.

If you don’t have time to ride the entire trail, but would like to experience the most historic sections, we recommend the 38-mile round trip (19 miles each way) from the Marquette iron ore dock to Winthrop Junction and back. It’s mostly uphill on the way there and mostly downhill (easy) on the way back.

The paved path begins at Marquette Commons. After a couple of miles, the trail surface changes from asphalt to finely screened limestone. The uphill grade begins to level out as you reach “Pellet Pavilion,” a pitched roof under a railroad trestle that protects the trail from iron ore pellets (taco nine balls) that occasionally fall from passing rail cars. West of M-35, a spur of the trail takes you about a half mile north to the Michigan Iron Industry Museum.

You must travel a short distance north on Forge Road (around Negaunee Cemetery) to reach the museum entrance.

The trail surface changes to asphalt as you approach Negaunee. Follow along Rail Street to Jackson Mine Park where you will come to the site of the Jackson Mine, the first open pit iron mine in the Lake Superior region. Stop and check it out.

As you arrive in Ishpeming, you will see there towering mine shafts dominating the landscape. At Lakeshore Drive, a northern spur of the trail takes you to the Cliffs Shaft Mine Museum. The paved trail continues west of Ishpeming for another two miles to Winthrop Junction. Here you will come to an observation deck overlooking a lake. This is the flooded remains of the Section 16 Mine. As you gaze across the water, you will see the mountainous tailings of the mighty Empire Mine (still in operation) off in the distance—the world’s largest open pit iron mine. West of Winthrop Junction, the trail travels through a lush landscape of woodlands and wetlands, passing over and along Carp, Larson and Bruce creeks and the Escanaba and Black rivers.

Republic/Champion Grade Trail

The 9-mile Republic/Champion Grade Trail is a spur off the Iron Ore Heritage Trail. It begins about 2.5 miles north of Republic and ends at the beach at Van Riper State Park. The final two miles of trail from Champion to the state park is paved with asphalt.

This motorized, multi-use trail is exceptionally scenic and a pleasant ride on a mountain bike. It travels through vast wetlands teeming with waterfowl and seasonal wildflowers, passing by Tower Lake and Fish Lake and following along the Black River for most of its length. You’ll see lots of beaver lodges and dams along the entire trail. Camping is available at both ends of the trail.