

Indiana's Mighty

Monon

One mile north of Broad Ripple, a runner heads south on the Williams Creek Connector. (Opposite page) Though the trail in Broad Ripple on this snowy day is peaceful, the area is also known for its shopping and night life.



By Karen Asp
Photos by Tod Martens

Helen O'Guinn, a longtime Indianapolis resident and author of *Day Trips from Indianapolis* (Globe Pequot, 2004).

That's evident by the sheer number of people I pass as I bike the trail from start to finish and back again. It starts at 10th Street in Indianapolis and ends at 146th Street in Carmel, a small town on the northwest side of Indianapolis. The south end of the trail is quiet, as it passes through undeveloped areas. Street crossings are frequent, but I rarely have to stop for traffic. Nor do I have to dodge many other Monon addicts.

Trail traffic picks up, though, the farther north I get, especially once I pass the Indiana State Fairgrounds, where the fair is in full swing. From 49th to 52nd Street, murals of various scenes—men and women cycling and children playing—created by Indianapolis artists line a series of flat buildings. I pass several blocks of housing

complexes and apartments before coasting into Broad Ripple, a quaint village within Indianapolis known for its eclectic mix of cafes, restaurants, bars and vintage shops.

I encounter the heaviest traffic in this area, and when I stop at Rusted Moon Outfitters, I meet an employee who tells me he loves using the Monon to grab lunch, because parking's a nightmare. "So are the crowds," says another employee. He lives at the end of the trail in Carmel and, although he bikes the Monon to work, he usually stays off the trail during the peak of summertime traffic.

I understand why. From Broad Ripple to Carmel, where I encounter a short, temporary detour, I have to navigate more carefully to avoid other cyclists, runners, skaters and walkers, many with their dogs. It's more scenic here, though, as dense trees shade the trail. At one point, I pedal across a bridge over the White River and see groups launching kayaks.

This strip is more residential, too, and many of the homeowners along the trail



In-line skaters crossing the White River make use of the paved Monon—even in the winter, and (below) trail access is a real estate selling point where the Monon meets Main Street in Carmel. (Opposite page, clockwise) A birdwatcher near Marott Park, north of Broad Ripple; a bronze “First Ride” sculpture in Carmel’s Arts and Design District; street signs at new trailside condominium development in Carmel; a gazebo in Broad Ripple.

have concocted wooden and stone walkways from their backyards to the Monon. The Monon wasn’t always so popular, though.

Opened in the mid 1800s by the New Albany and Salem Railroad, the Monon Railroad carried supplies and volunteers to Union troops during the Civil War and transported the wounded. In the late 1980s the tracks on the abandoned Monon were ripped up, and the city of Indianapolis bought the line using a loan from the federal government.

Discussions began about the fate of the then-overgrown Monon, and when residents heard about plans for a walking and biking path, some balked. “They didn’t know what a trail like this would bring, especially since it wound behind residential areas,” says Richard Vonnegut, vice chair of the Hoosier Rails to Trails Council.

Yet the city decided to open the Monon for recreational purposes, especially after other trails such as the Fall Creek Trail that link to the Monon were developed. In 1996 the first section of the Monon was paved. By 2003 all 10.5 miles in Indianapolis and the remaining 5.2 miles in Carmel, known



as the Monon Greenway of Carmel, were paved and open to the public.

Since then, the trail has changed the face of Indianapolis and Carmel. “The Monon has become a social and recreational entity, as thousands of people use this trail to be active and stay social,” Vonnegut says. Adding that the Monon links parks, schools and residential and retail areas, he says, “It’s also become a transportation corridor, allowing people a way to commute to work, restaurants, even downtown events in Indianapolis.”

Take, for instance, Carmel resident Kevin Heber, who uses the Monon year-round. (The trail is plowed in the win-

ter.) He calls it his “connection point” for almost anywhere he wants to go, including Indianapolis events. And since the Monon opened in Carmel in 2001, Heber and his family, now including a seven-year-old son and three-year-old daughter, have ridden five miles round-trip on the Monon every Saturday in warm weather to the farmer’s market. If he ever moves, Heber

says, “I’m going to find an area with a trail that’s as full of life as the Monon.”

Full of life is perhaps an understatement. Greg Lindsey, Ph.D., associate dean in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA) at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, has been studying the Monon’s use for the past 10 years. His numbers are impressive. Lindsey’s data show that 25 percent of Indianapolis residents have used the Monon in the last year. During a typical year, traffic on the Monon runs about 600,000, with the highest traffic count on one day clocking in at 6,000, making the Monon the most popular trail in Indianapolis.





(Top to bottom) A runner heads north over the White River, one of several river crossings on the trail; Bub's is a popular trailside restaurant; the Monon is well maintained and mile-markers help set the pace. (Opposite page) Bicyclists pause for a view of Williams Creek.



Lindsey explains that SPEA has one of the most comprehensive and longest running trail monitoring systems in the country. On the extensive trail system in Indianapolis that includes the Monon, for instance, there are infrared counters at 30 locations that log traffic. “We want to understand how people use trails in their efforts to remain physically fit and how trails affect neighborhoods, particularly in relation to property values,” he says.

The Monon has also been a boom to the economy. Studies show that real estate values along certain parts of the Monon are skyrocketing, Vonnegut says. He adds that development has spurred cleanup efforts around rundown sections of the trail. More development is expected over the next few years, with businesses even including Monon in their names.

Matt Frey can attest to the Monon's economic impact. He and his wife, Rachel, opened Bub's in 2003, and he credits the Monon for much of the restaurant's success. “Most of our initial business was trail-driven,” he says. Today Bub's continues to draw heavily from Monon users. In fact it's become such a landmark on the trail that people will bike from 10th Street to 136th Street just to eat at Bub's. Even those fanatical 30-mile-a-day runners who used to race by now stop at Bub's for burgers and beer. “Of course, they have to walk home,” Frey jokes.

And the Monon may not be done growing. There's talk of extending the trail north past Carmel. It also will soon connect with the Cultural Trail, a seven-mile corridor through downtown Indianapolis. That project is expected to be completed in 2009.

I don't want my day on the Monon to end. If I lived in Indy I would ride this trail daily, which makes me think of something Heber told me earlier: “You get addicted to the Monon.” I couldn't agree more.

Karen Asp writes about health, fitness and travel for numerous publications, including *Natural Health, Prevention, Redbook, Self, Shape* and *Woman's Day*. She's also the fitness columnist for *Allure*.



TRAVEL FACTS

If you know Indianapolis only as the home of the Indy 500, you're in for a treat. This small but bustling Midwest city is packed with activities and attractions.

GETTING THERE: Downtown Indianapolis is located about 10 miles from the Indianapolis International Airport. You can access Indianapolis via five major highways (I-69, I-70, I-74, I-65 and I-465). For detailed directions on accessing the Monon, visit the Monon section of the Indianapolis Greenways Web site (www.indygreenways.org/monon/monon.htm).

FOR MORE INFORMATION. To help you plan your trip to Indian's Monon Trail, visit www.railstotrails.org/newsandpubs/magazine and learn about accommodations, rentals, and other activities in the area.