

# Steel Valley Trail Self-Guided Tour

## Featuring the Pipeline Coaster

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In these days of social distancing, guided tours for more than just a few people have become problematic. This narrative partially replaces a personal guide. It can't answer your questions, of course, but it does describe what you'll see as you walk or bike along the trail for about 13 miles. So take your time, stop often to look at what's there, and refer to the extended descriptions in the supporting material.

Use these Steel Valley Trail resources, referred to in the text by the [bracketed letter]:

[M] Trail brochure 2017, available at many trailheads and (2015 version) at

[https://steelvalleytrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/SVTC\\_brochure\\_2015.pdf](https://steelvalleytrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/SVTC_brochure_2015.pdf)

[P] Points of Interest at <https://steelvalleytrail.org/point-of-interest/>

[H] History notes at <https://steelvalleytrail.org/history/>

[R] Interactive map of raptor (birds of prey) nest locations at <https://tinyurl.com/raptorrow18>

Note: the stone mileposts were relocated by about 1.3 miles in the past year. Add 1.3 miles to each mileage on the map [M] to get the current milepost. That is, 135 on the map is actually at new milepost 136.3, and when you're at stone milepost 139, you're at a point that shows up on the map as 137.7. Descriptions here use the new, permanent mileposts.

Start this tour by biking on the Three Rivers Heritage Trail headed upstream from the Hot Metal Bridge (MP 145.1) past the Steelers' practice field (MP 144.6) and then alongside the CSX railroad tracks, passing several interpretive signs, a municipal water intake (MP 143.8) and the eagle viewing area [M,R] (MP 142.6). The eagles' nest is hard to spot, high on the ridge to the right, but birders are happy to point it out. The trail here is often several inches underwater after a rain, so the area is called Eagle Lake.

The trail then climbs along a retaining wall, makes a hard left, and descends to a road crossing guarded by gates. Heavy trucks and Sandcastle Waterpark traffic pass through regularly, so you should walk your bikes across. The Steel Valley Trail begins here (MP 142.2).

The first mile of the Steel Valley Trail passes between Sandcastle Waterpark [P] and the railroad. Sandcastle ends at a road crossing near Costco (MP141.3), at the beginning of the Waterfront shopping center [M,P]. Here the trail joins a wide sidewalk alongside the main road through the shopping center. The smokestacks you see as you follow the sidewalk left around Costco (MP 141.2) are original stacks from the Homestead Works [P]. Be cautious at the numerous driveways, especially the one at the Costco gas station (MP 141.0). The trail leaves the sidewalk just past a large "Welcome to the Waterfront" sign (MP 140.8) via the driveway to a parking lot. Go past the curbs indicating the edge of the lot and turn left on a concrete trail just before the next building, then right along the river on a limestone path. The next half-mile features several restaurants, most with bike access and al fresco dining on the river side. In addition, you'll pass the Kling car [M], an original hot metal railroad car (MP 140.4). You may see goats on the steep river bank; they are brought in to control the vegetation [P].

Restaurants give way to office buildings, then condos, and at the end of the condos the trail emerges at the road to join a 2-way cycle track (MP139.5). Stop to check out the sculptures and the historic Pump House / Battle of Homestead site [M,P] (MP139.4) and Carrie Furnace across the river [M,P]. The water tower has rest rooms, which were usually open in the Before Times, but not during the pandemic.

The cycle track continues around Bristol Metals, and at Bristol's busy main driveway (MP138.9) the trail swings away from the road. This is the beginning of the Pipeline Coaster section of the trail. The (other) hot metal bridge, the Rankin Hot Metal Bridge [M] (MP 138.6), crosses the Monongahela River and will eventually provide bicycle access to the Carrie Furnace Historic site, but it's currently inaccessible and mostly hidden by shrubbery. This section was especially challenging to develop because so much of the land was already in industrial use. Closing the trail gaps required agreements on dozens of land parcels and two crossings of the CSX railroad tracks. The first of these is the Whitaker Flyover [M,H] (MP 138.0). Pause at the top of the ramp to look into the industrial towns of Swissvale, Rankin, and Braddock. The Edgar Thomson Steel works [H] are at the right edge of this vista, more on this later.

A key step in the development of the trail was acquisition of US Steel's coal gas pipeline, which provide most of the trail alignment between the Whitaker and Port Perry Flyovers. The 4'-diameter pipeline sat on top of concrete foundations, many of which are still visible (MP ~137.5-136.5). There's a good view of the Braddock Lock & Dam [M,P] from the Vahosky cross (MP 137.1), but the interpretive sign comes later (MP 136.6). Halfway down the pipeline you get a unique view into the roller coasters of Kennywood Park [M,H,P] (MP 136.9), a bit obstructed by the West Mifflin sewer plant. From the trail you look directly into cars on the main drop of Phantom's Revenge, and the classic wooden Thunderbolt weaves through the Phantom's steel structure. Beyond Kennywood a couple of overlooks provide views across the river, until the trail drops away from the coal gas pipeline (MP 136.5). This is also the maintenance headquarters of the Steel Valley Trail Council [M], which invites volunteers to join maintenance work parties on Wednesday mornings.

A steep curving hill drops to railroad level and soon a ramp climbs back up to the Port Perry flyover [M,H] (MP 136.1). Pause on the far end of this bridge to absorb the history. You're looking across the river at Port Perry [H], once the busiest railroad junction in the world and a major strategic location in World War II. Edgar Thomson Works is just the other side of the railroad bridges. In front of you is a pipe coating plant, and straight ahead, atop a rusty tower, sits one of the trail's osprey nests [P,R]. The Pipeline Coaster section ends here.

After descending the ramp back to railroad level, the trail continues past the Thompson Run waterfall [H] (MP 135.8) (which is only visible when the leaves are off the trees, but has an interpretive note on the trail) through Duquesne [H,P] (MP 135.3), largely alongside an industrial park on the site of the former Carnegie Steel Duquesne Works. The trail continues along the railroad, through the "Duquesne Tunnel" (MP 134.6) (a passage through the abutment of an access bridge for the industrial park), to the Riverton Bridge across the Monongahela River [M,H,P] (MP 134.0). This was another key acquisition for the trail, because there is no other suitable crossing of the Mon River.

At the end of the Riverton Bridge, yet another ramp descends to yet another industrial park. The round building just before the jog in the trail (MP 133.6) is just a round building, not a railroad roundhouse. The buildings just past the jog in the trail are the Pure Penn marijuana farm.

Emerging from the industrial park, the trail briefly gets a lane along the road to cross the railroad tracks at grade (MP 132.8). Immediately after the crossing ("immediately" is "3 feet") the trail turns right between a building and the tracks. It follows this former alley past the police station and descends beside a parking lot, now going *below* railroad level, At Water St (MP 132.5) the main trail continues straight into the McKeesport Marina, but our tour turns right under the railroad on a quarter-mile spur trail, the McKees Point Trail, which dead ends near the mouth of the Youghiogheny River. The trail's other osprey nest is on a pole not far from the cul-de-sac [P].