

# TRAVEL

## Birmingham's trail system beckons urban adventurers



The Five Mile Creek Greenway in a suburban area of Birmingham, Alabama, runs for much longer than 5 miles. PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAILS TO TRAILS CONSERVANCY

Alabama's Magic City has become a haven for hikers and bikers in search of connections.

By Blake Guthrie | For the AJC

**P**ulling into downtown Birmingham for a late Friday afternoon check-in at the Tutwiler Hotel, the realization hit that – for the first time in my life – I was a tourist in my own hometown. Born in a hospital two miles away from the historic building that's now a Hampton Inn and Suites property, I had never set foot in the place, though I'd driven past it all of my life before moving to Georgia in the 1990s.

Growing up, downtown was a ghost town after business hours. On this evening, I walked three short blocks north of the hotel to Uptown, an entertainment district adjacent to the new City Walk – a one-mile linear park underneath the I-20 overpass, its undergirding lit up brilliantly in multicolored colors.

People were all around, walking their dogs, riding bikes, skateboarding, strolling, even teeing off at a nearby Topgolf location. As a teen and 20-something, I never would have set foot in this area after dark unless a major concert or sporting event was occurring at the Birmingham-Jefferson Civic Center, which has received a makeover and now serves as the anchor for the Uptown district.

Birmingham has garnered a lot of attention in recent years for its dynamic and diverse culinary scene, but I came home to hit the trails on a group bike ride hosted by the Rails to Trails Conservancy on Celebrate Trails Day, one of dozens of such events held around the country each spring.

This is the Year of Alabama Trails and the Magic City has become a trail town during my absence with numerous rail-trail conversions and other trail projects connecting the city and the county in an ever-expanding network known as the Red Rock Trail System. The Red Rock Trail System currently has 160 miles of trails located throughout Jefferson County that average about 2.5 million users a year, she said.

The group bike ride began at Pepper Place, a former Dr. Pepper bottling plant on the south side of Birmingham that was once vacant. It's now home to multiple



Birmingham's Rotary Trail runs along an old railroad track that cuts through the heart of town.

businesses and a weekend farmers market so well-attended that the closest parking space I could find was three blocks away.

After fueling up with a meal at the James Beard Award-winning Hot and Hot Fish Club, the group headed out for a 7-mile loop tour of town pedaling along some of the most popular trails in the network, including the Rotary Trail on a former railroad cut, the Railroad Park Rail Trail through the heart of a bustling city park and

City Walk, where I had roamed on foot the night before, all connected by city streets with dedicated bike lanes.

The in-town portion of the ride ended at Sloss Furnaces, home to the massive blast furnaces from Birmingham's heyday as a steel town, now a National Historic Landmark. A visit to the hulking, haunted ruins of Sloss is a must for any first-time visitor to

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### IF YOU GO

Birmingham is a 2.5-hour drive west of Atlanta on I-20.

#### Attractions

■ Red Rock Trail System. Check the Freshwater Land Trust for maps and details. [railstotrails.org](http://railstotrails.org)

■ Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. \$15. 520 16th St. N. 205-328-9696, [bcrl.org](http://bcrl.org). Private small-group tours of the Civil Rights District with Master Tour Guide Barry McNealy are \$150 per hour. To book a tour, email [bmcnealy@bcrl.org](mailto:bmcnealy@bcrl.org).

■ Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark. Free. (Admission varies for special events), 20 32nd St. N. 205-254-2025, [slossfurnaces.org](http://slossfurnaces.org).

■ Red Mountain Park. Free. 211 Frankfort Drive. [jeffgreenways.org](http://jeffgreenways.org).

#### Accommodations

■ Tutwiler Hotel. Iconic hotel in the heart of downtown. \$168 and up. 2021 Park Place. 205-322-2100, [hilton.com](http://hilton.com)

■ Elyton Hotel. Historic high-rise, now a hotel with a stylish rooftop bar. \$204 and up. 1928 1st Ave. N. 205-731-3600, [elytonhotel.com](http://elytonhotel.com).

#### Food

■ Hot and Hot Fish Club. Fine-dining favorite in Birmingham since 1994. \$18 and up. 2901 2nd Ave. S. 205-933-5474, [hotandhotfishclub.com](http://hotandhotfishclub.com).

■ Johnny's Restaurant. Casual Southern comfort food and Greek specialties. \$10 and up. 2902 18th St. S., Homewood. 205-802-2711, [johnnyshomewood.com](http://johnnyshomewood.com).

#### Visitor info

■ Greater Birmingham Convention and Visitors Bureau Visitor Center. 2200 Ninth Ave. N. (adjacent to City Walk). 205-458-8000, [inbirmingham.com](http://inbirmingham.com).

## LIVING &amp; ARTS

## Tours guide fans of 'Purple Rain' musical

Landmarks related to Prince abound in star's Minneapolis hometown.

By Chris Riemenschneider  
The Minnesota Star Tribune

MINNEAPOLIS — Don't be like Apollonia.

Fans making the pilgrimage to Prince's hometown for the premiere of the "Purple Rain" musical can take heed from his co-star in the original 1984 film. In the movie's opening sequence, she wound up owing \$37 for a taxi ride that should've only cost about 37 cents. There are better ways of finding your way around Minneapolis.

Several local organizations are stepping up to help fans in town for the Broadway-bound musical more efficiently find their way to Broadway Avenue in north Minneapolis and other key stops on a sightseeing tour of Prince landmarks. (The local Broadway is where Prince gave his first solo performance in 1979 at the Capri Theater.)

"There's a lot of misinformation out there about some of the sites, like his childhood homes, so it's good to get some help," said Kristen Zschomler, whose new company, SoundAround Tours, offers app-based, GPS-guided audio tours of Prince locations.

Zschomler got the idea for creating the audio guide on her hometown's famous music icon after visiting Dublin and struggling to find sites related to the band U2.

"It shouldn't be so hard with artists this famous," she said.

Now, for \$9.99, app users can download a guide that pinpoints Prince sites on a map and provides a narrated backstory to each stop. Other landmarks on the SoundAround guide — and most Prince tours — include: The Kid's house in "Purple Rain"; Sound 80 studio, where he made his first demos for Warner Bros.; and the film location for the movie's "Lake Minnetonka" scene (actually a stretch of the Minnesota River in Henderson, nowhere near Minnetonka).

"In-person tours are great, too," said Zschomler, "but it's nice to be able to do it on your own time and



Antone Johnson takes a photo of his fiancée Mona Lisa (right), and Mona's sister, Myra Russell, in front of the Prince mural created in 2022 by artist Hiero Veiga. (PHOTOS BY AARON LAVINSKY/THE MINNESOTA STAR TRIBUNE/TNS)

not have to worry about weather or other factors."

Nine years after Prince's death, the city's tourism unit Meet Minneapolis latched onto the demand for Prince tours this past summer by installing 20 glyph-embellished emblems onto sidewalks around town, a route dubbed the Purple Path. Each of the large, stick-on decals features QR codes that can be scanned with a cellphone and provide information about the location.

"People ask all the time: Where did Prince spend his time," said Christy Loy, senior vice president of destination sales for Meet Minneapolis. "This is a really fun and accessible way for them to get where they want."

Here's a rundown of your options for walking in Prince's — and Apollonia's — shoes this fall around the musical.

#### Paisley Park tour

The top attraction for Prince fans is his suburban studio/performance complex opened for



Klaria Taylor takes a selfie with the Prince and The Revolution stars in Minneapolis. Several local organizations are helping fans in town for the Broadway-bound musical find key Prince landmarks.

tours soon after his death there in April 2016. You don't get to see his personal apartment on tours, but you get access to various recording rooms, soundstages, his office

and exhibit areas where he did most of his work from 1987 on. There are three tour levels, the pricier ones offer more rooms, photo-ops and the chance to hear

unreleased music. (10 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday-Monday, 7801 Audubon Road, Chanhassen. \$75-\$199, paisleypark.com.)

#### First Avenue tour

Before he built Paisley Park, Prince used Minnesota's now-iconic rock club as his playground for pre-tour warmup gigs and, of course, as the primary film location for "Purple Rain." The venue is offering behind-the-scenes tours again timed to the musical, offering a healthy dose of Prince lore and other music history — including the chance to stand on the stage The Kid humped in the movie. Days vary based on the club's ever-shifting concert schedule. (701 1st Avenue N, Minneapolis. \$50, first-venue.com.)

#### SoundAround Town audio guide

The downloadable app offers two Prince-specific tours, plus a Minneapolis Sound tour that also incorporates sites on Jimmy Jam, Terry Lewis, Morris Day and The Time. Each tour includes geo-located sites with narration. (\$9.99, soundaroundtours.com.)

#### The Purple Path

Specifically centered around Minneapolis sites, the self-guided offered by the city features scannable information that ranges from various Prince murals to his former schools and places he liked to hang to movie and recording places. It's a very handy way of taking a lot in for free. (Downloadable map available at minneapolis.org.)

#### Captain Randy's 'Prince: The Tour'

Want a live human guide and personal driver instead of capturing your own tour? Try one of the two Prince-specific van tours from "Captain" Randy Luedtke, a historian/character who also hosts more general Minneapolis tours. He offers a three- or four-hour tour. His excursions leave from the Mall of America and stretch from the North Side to Chanhassen; Paisley Park tour tickets are not included, though. (10 a.m. most days and more. \$148-\$198, thetourmvp.com.)

## Birmingham

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Birmingham — festivals and concerts are held on the grounds year round.

After the downtown tour, the group headed to the Five Mile Creek Greenway in suburban areas for a wholly different experience in a woody landscape, a stark contrast to the urban environment we had been pedaling through. The bucolic greenway parallels Five Mile Creek, which flows for much longer than five miles, as does the greenway. Our ride crossed a couple of roadways with light traffic, otherwise, it was a level, uninterrupted path shaded by trees.

Another don't miss spot for trail hounds is Red Mountain Park. This 1,500-acre park straddles the ridge of Red Mountain with 18 miles of trails for hikers and mountain bikers, a large dog park, lots of relics from the city's iron-ore mining past and panoramic views of the city.

During the downtown portion of the ride we stopped at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI). An affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, it sits in the heart of the Civil Rights District across from Kelly Ingram Park and the 16th Street Baptist Church where so much history happened during the Civil Rights Movement. The institute's galleries provide a comprehensive overview of the entire history of the city through the lens of civil and human rights.

"What took place here fundamentally changed our country," said BCRI tour guide Barry McNealy during a walking tour of the district. He was referring to the historic events of 1963 when Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor ordered fire hoses and K9 units of German Shepherds to be used against peaceful protesters and when a bomb planted outside the 16th Street Baptist Church by members of the Ku Klux Klan killed four girls who were preparing for a worship service. The church bombing shocked the nation and within a year the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law.

McNealy began his tour at a memorial sculpture in Ingram Park called Four Spirits that captures the four girls — Cynthia Wesley, Carol Denise McNeil, Addie Mae Collins and Carole Robertson — in an innocent moment preparing



A mural honoring Fred Shuttlesworth outside of Historic Bethel Baptist Church, where he served as pastor. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLAKE GUTHRIE)



A racially motivated bombing in September 1963 killed four girls preparing for a worship service at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham and shocked the nation.

for church. He then pointed out a statue of Fred Shuttlesworth across the street in front of the BCRI, calling him "the person most responsible for all of this," meaning the

Birmingham campaign that challenged the status quo and changed the course of history. It was Shuttlesworth, a civil rights activist and pastor at Bethel

Baptist Church, who convinced Martin Luther King Jr. to come to Birmingham. He co-founded the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights after the state out-

lawed the NAACP in 1956, as well as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with King and others in 1957.

Shuttlesworth once said, "I aim to kill segregation or be killed by it," and he almost was numerous times in violent attacks by the Klan. Also inside Ingram Park, there's a small monument to Anne Frank, incongruent with local history. McNealy made a point of stopping there to expound on the bigger picture of basic human rights, tying it in to what happened in Birmingham.

The Civil Rights Trail is part of the Red Rock Trail System, with extensions and improvements ongoing. The focus now, said Buck, is "reconnecting the Historic Smithfield Community to downtown Birmingham, which was cut off from downtown when I-65 was built. We are also doing work on the 16th Street North corridor, connecting City Walk to Railroad Park."

There are no monuments to Bull Connor in Birmingham that I know of, but there are plenty honoring Fred Shuttlesworth — statues, plaques and murals. And today, anyone flying on a major airline in and out of the city travels through Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport.