

By Bryan Goebel

THE ROAD TO A THOUSAND WONDERS

Photos by Michael Starghill Jr.

The Sundial Bridge peeks out from a tall canopy of cottonwood trees as I approach Redding, Calif., on state Highway 44. It looks like an enormous white harp, or an egret. Designed by Spanish architect and engineer Santiago Calatrava, the eight-year-old bridge radiates over the lush green landscape, linking both sides of the Upper Sacramento River where it makes a wide turn at Turtle Bay. Unlike some of the region's other manmade marvels, the bridge doesn't touch the waterway or its precious runs of salmon and steel-head. The tall pylon is the world's largest sundial and doubles as a support column for the steel cables that suspend the 700-foot structure over the frigid waters of the "Upper Sac."

The bridge sits next to Turtle Bay Exploration Park, a 300-acre complex dedicated to discovering the river's rich history and featuring a museum, aquarium, arboretum and botanical gardens. The bridge, park and Redding's vast network of trails—built in phases over the past three decades—have helped this once-thriving rail hub restore its identity. What were once neglected railbeds and trash-strewn mining roads have been transformed into world-class trails where Olympic athletes train and locals come to spend time outdoors.

"Our citizens here are as proud of the trails as they are of anything," says Mike Warren, a former Redding city manager



The Sundial Bridge—a local icon and focal point of Redding’s trail system. At the heart of this system, the Sacramento River Trail has encouraged an increase in physical activity and fitness in the area.



Lassen, a dome volcano that last erupted in 1915. To the west is Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, a popular mountain biking area. These stunning vistas of the Cascade and Trinity mountains surround Redding (population 90,000), the gateway to the Sacramento River National Recreation Trail.

Redding Revival

For folks passing through on Interstate 5, Redding has been considered mostly a stopover to fill up the tank and grab a bite to eat. Until recently the town was “built with its back to the river,” says Terry Hanson, a semiretired Redding community projects manager who, along with a small group of dedicated trail advocates, is largely responsible for getting the trails funded and built. “No one enjoyed the river or used the river very often because it was not integrated into the fabric of the community.”

The Upper Sacramento River is still recovering from years of hydraulic mining and excavations. Now, Redding’s increasingly popular trails, combined with restoration efforts, have brought renewed appreciation for the town’s riverfront splendor. People come to enjoy the trails on foot, bike, skates, and horseback. There are a total of 226 miles of paved, dirt and single-track trails, with spurs that connect to almost every neighborhood, providing arteries to work, play and take in this bounty of natural treasures.

“Some people, a few, still haven’t figured it out, but I think it’s transformed the town,” says Steve Anderson, former head of the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Redding, and a stalwart trail advocate. “Houseboating on Lake Shasta was always the thing to do in the summertime. Now what you’re seeing is, ‘Wait a minute, this is a great place to be in the spring, this is a great place to be

in the fall, and this is a great place to be in the winter.’”

As a result, figures from Healthy Shasta, a local partnership formed to “promote healthy and active living among north state residents,” show that more people in Redding are biking and walking. A survey found that 62 percent of residents bike and walk for recreation more often since the critical Dana Drive to downtown trail extension was built along Highway 44 in 2010.

Redding has also seen a reduction in vehicle miles traveled in recent years, and bicycle counts are up on city streets, all spurred by a greater interest in the trails.

The idea to create what is now the Sacramento River Rail Trail had been talked about for decades. A rail-trail study was completed in 1990 with support from the McConnell Foundation, which has funded a lot of trail building here. The study sat on the shelf until 2000. That’s when trailblazing advocate Bill Kuntz arrived in Redding. He came from the BLM’s Susanville office, where he had worked on the Bizz Johnson Trail. At the time, most of the ballast and rock that held the Redding corridor’s rails and ties in place had been removed. What remained was mostly a rocky undulated path littered with garbage and washed out in some places.

All that has changed. The mostly flat 8.2-mile Sacramento River Trail begins at the Sundial Bridge and follows the path of an old mining road on the north banks to Keswick Dam. On the south side of the river, the trail runs from the historic Diestelhorst Bridge before turning into the Sacramento River Rail Trail at Keswick Reservoir. The rail-trail then proceeds for 10.7 miles on original railbed, except for a two-mile stretch that winds through rolling hills above the reservoir.

and now CEO of Turtle Bay Exploration Park. “People who come into our community are amazed, simply amazed, that a community our size has this many and this quality of trails.”

Redding’s name comes from Benjamin Barnard Redding, a politician and land agent for the Central Pacific Railroad. The company built the western transcontinental railroad, which came through here, and christened the town in his honor when it was founded in 1887. Redding is home to one of the most photographed peaks in the world, the snow-capped wonder known as Mount Shasta. To the east is the gem of the cascades, Mount

It then descends onto the banks of the reservoir and Shasta Dam.

West of the bridge I ride the Arboretum Loop, circling 200 acres of savanna oak and wetlands. Swallowtail butterflies appear, wild grapevines wrap around trees, and trail users are treated to a wide variety of wildflowers, mostly purplish lupine and yellow buttercup.

Several hundred feet west of the gardens I join the main river trail again and meet up with Jeff and Anne Thomas. Local bike advocates, they run Shasta Living Streets, an organization that hosts open-street events and works to build support for safe bikeways on city streets. “The trails are opening up people’s minds to that,” explains Anne Thomas. “People get out on the trails and realize how much they enjoy it. Later they think, ‘I just have a short errand to do and I’d like to do it on my bike.’”

In addition to drawing 750,000 visitors every year, the trails now are the route of choice for many bicycle commuters. That picturesque ride to the office is one reason people looking to escape high rent and stressful lifestyles in the Bay Area or Southern California are relocating to Redding.

“If you had asked me if I wanted to move to Redding 10 years ago, I’d say, ‘No way. Forget about it,’” says John Eliot, who moved with his family from San Diego to the Redding area in 2007. “As a young professional, I like being out in nature, and it’s what attracted me to Redding.”

Soon we pass a seasonally erected diversion dam that extends across the river at Caldwell Park, home of the Redding Aquatic Center. It contains two fish ladders to help push salmon and other fish upstream as they make their final journey home. When this spectacle happens, visitors can take a peek underwater by stepping down to a glass viewing area just off the trail.

Several hundred feet up the trail, a stunning piece of railroad history comes into view: a 70-year-old rail trestle built when a 26-mile chunk of the Central



The trail system is credited with a boom in biking and walking amongst locals, and a renewed appreciation of Redding’s waterfront and its historic features, including the Diestelhorst Bridge.

Pacific Railroad was diverted for construction of Shasta Dam. The truss bridge, with its rusty triangular components below the deck, is still used by Union Pacific and Amtrak, and stretches almost a mile over the river.

The Shasta Route

The railroad used to wind through the canyon as part of the Southern Pacific Railroad’s California-Oregon line, which was marketed in the early 1900s as “The Road to a Thousand Wonders.” The segment from Gerber, Calif., 40 miles south of Redding, to Ashland, Ore., was known as the Shasta Route. At the time, there was an abundance of resorts, the most popular being the world-renowned Shasta Springs, at the base of Mount Shasta, where guests got to sip its famous sparkling water.

Just beyond the trestle we approach Lake Redding Bridge and the Diestelhorst Bridge. Built in 1915, the Diestelhorst was the first highway bridge to cross the river. In the 1990s, with the popularity of the river trail growing, the Redding City Council decided to make it a biking and walking bridge, providing a critical link to the rail-trail on the south side of the river. Riders crossing the bridge are overwhelmed by panoramic views of the mountains and the river canyon leading north.

At this juncture, trail users can choose to continue west on the north side. We



make our way back from the Diestelhorst Bridge on the south side of the river, following the trail as it winds along original railbed. As we pedal up the trail, the river changes color. No longer turbulent, it turns from blue to greenish, reflecting the rich green habitat along the banks. In the waters one might spot river otters, muskrats and elusive beaver hauling mud and sticks to build dams in the tributaries. Trail regulars occasionally see a black bear or a mountain lion. Rattlesnakes emerge in the warmer seasons.

Farther up the trail, a suspension bridge takes trail users to the southern side of the river, forming a loop popular with locals that leads back to the Sundial Bridge. This is the spectacular Sacramento River Trail Bridge, a 420-foot-long, 13-foot-wide, stress-ribbon concrete structure. I ride onto the deck and take in the view.

At Keswick Dam Road I reach the base of what is aptly called Heart Rate Hill.



As I climb the hill, with the sun pouring down, I break into a sweat and start breathing more heavily. Locals call this portion of the trail the roller coaster. It gets steeper as I pedal on. Signs warn bicyclists to proceed slowly on the descents. The trail rises above the river, which turns into Keswick Reservoir beyond the dam. Here I get a breathtaking view of the vast river canyon below.

A fork in the rail-trail at the top of Heart Rate Hill leads to a spectacular viewing area built by the local Rotary Club. “We didn’t have any money for it and they came to us and said ‘Hey, that’s a great spot; we’ll do the work for you,’” explains the BLM’s Kuntz. That community spirit is typical of how the river-trail was built: volunteers pulling together to turn an abandoned railbed into the magnificent rail-trail it is today.

The rail-trail ends at Coram Road, which ascends to the top of Shasta Dam. From atop the dam, the view is simply incredible. To the north sprawls an endless lake, with Mount Shasta reigning above. To the south lies a spectacular canyon, “The Road to a Thousand Wonders.”

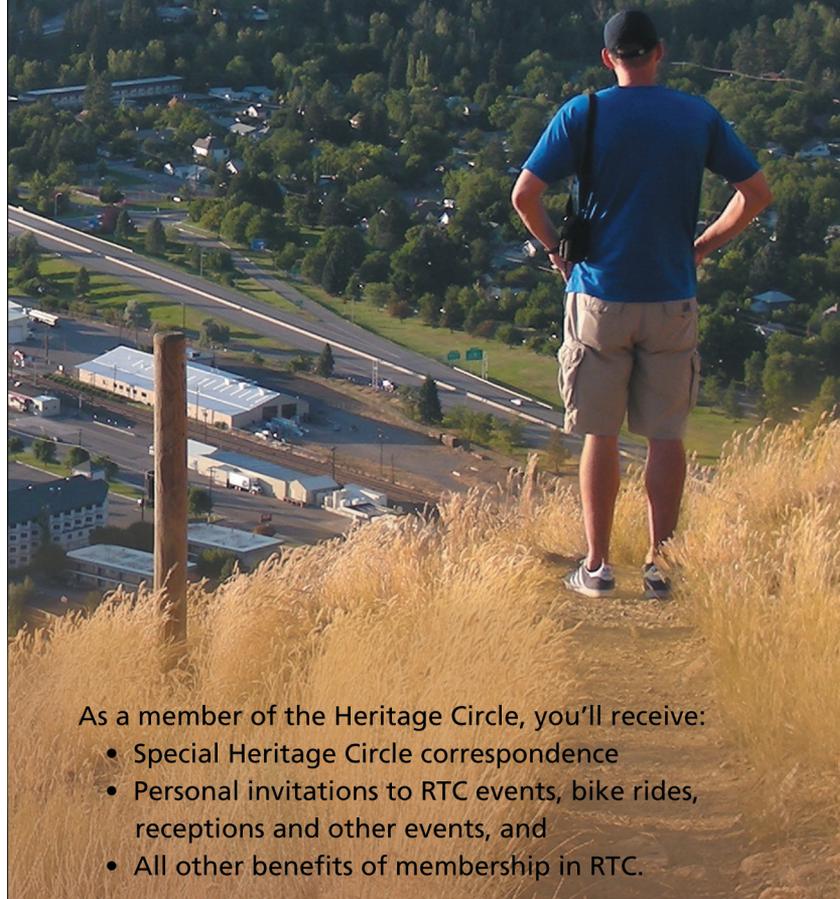
For Kuntz, the trails are not only about rediscovering the river, or the rich history of the area, but also about getting people off their couches. There is a deep sense of accomplishment for him and others who worked tirelessly to build this remarkable trail system.

“I meet so many people who didn’t have much opportunity to go out and use trails around here,” says Kuntz. “Some of them have lost 20 pounds, 30 pounds, and they’ll come up to me and shake my hand and say ‘Thank you for your trails. They saved my life.’”

Bryan Goebel is a reporter at KQED Radio in San Francisco and the original editor of *Streetsblog San Francisco*, an advocacy journalism site covering biking, walking and transit issues.

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- Personal invitations to RTC events, bike rides, receptions and other events, and
- All other benefits of membership in RTC.

If you are interested in including RTC in your long-term plans or have questions about the Heritage Circle, please contact Katie McKinney at katie@railstotrails.org or 866.202.9788.