



2024

TrailLink Unlimited



Guides



# Switchback Railroad Trail

*Pennsylvania*



## Switchback Railroad Trail

Pennsylvania

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When it began operating, the Switchback Railroad was the second railroad in America and the first in Pennsylvania. Built to haul coal from the Summit Mine to the Lehigh Canal, the railroad evolved from a gravity-powered system (The Down Track) and mule-powered system (The Back Track) to a 95% gravity-run operation.

In the late 1800s as steam locomotion became more commonplace, the Switchback Railroad was needed less for coal transport but was adapted into a passenger operation. From 1870, and for the next six decades, the Switchback Gravity Railroad evolved into a popular tourist attraction—one that thrilled visitors with 50-mile-per-hour rides downhill through the lush landscape of the Lehigh Valley. It is credited with inspiring the creation of the roller coaster. The tourist attraction closed in 1929,

and the Switchback was sold for scrap in 1937 and converted to a trail in 1977.

Today the Switchback Trail still inspires tourists and locals alike. Two 9-mile routes intersect to make up the Switchback. Regardless of which you choose, start in Summit Hill and bike downhill toward Jim Thorpe. The grade in reverse is challenging. Although this trail doesn't require a lot of pedaling, it commands your attention. (For a shorter ride, pick up the trail in Mauch Chunk Lake Park, which has parking, restrooms, picnic areas and campgrounds. Fishing is permitted.)

With its hard-packed dirt surface, the Down Track is the easier southern route. This track takes you along Mauch Chunk Lake for 0.5 mile and then plunges into a lush forested area. At mile 7, the trail ends abruptly on Lentz Trail Road. Cross the road, head downhill toward Jim Thorpe and continue past the power plant entrance (go around the gated drive); pick up the trail again at the back of the power plant access road. From here continue on a peaceful wooded trail, riding on a bluff overlooking the community of Jim Thorpe below.

The northern Back Track is suitable for mountain bikes. Be prepared to pay attention as you traverse ballast, navigate large rocks in packed dirt and portage your bike around sections of the trail that are too steep to cross otherwise. As this section of the trail winds down outside Jim Thorpe, you'll discover an optional small loop that takes you to a scenic overview. Beware: locals say copperheads have been seen in that area. At the trail's end, you will encounter a knee-breaking descent on a steep, slippery rock surface, where keeping your footing while holding your bike will be challenging.

Bike rental and shuttle services available in downtown Jim Thorpe will drop you off at the trailhead in Summit Hill, where you can take the Switchback Trail downhill right back



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**States:** Pennsylvania

**Counties:** Carbon

Length: 18miles

**Trail end points:** E. Holland at Amidon St.  
(Summit Hill) to North Ave. nr. Pine Ave. and  
Center Ave. nr. Packer Hill Rd. (Jim Thorpe)

**Trail surfaces:** Ballast,Dirt,Gravel

**Trail category:** Rail-Trail

**Trail activities:** Fishing,Mountain  
Biking,Walking

## Parking & Trail Access

To reach the Summit Hill trailhead, take Interstate 476 to Exit 74, then take US Highway 209 South to Jim Thorpe. In Jim Thorpe, turn left onto Broadway, which becomes Lentz Trail Road. Continue past the Mauch Chunk Lake Park entrance. At the intersection of State Route 902 turn right. Travel 2 miles until 902 turns sharply right in Summit Hill. Take that right and make another, immediate right on Holland Street. The trailhead is at the end of this street. There is no official parking at this trailhead.

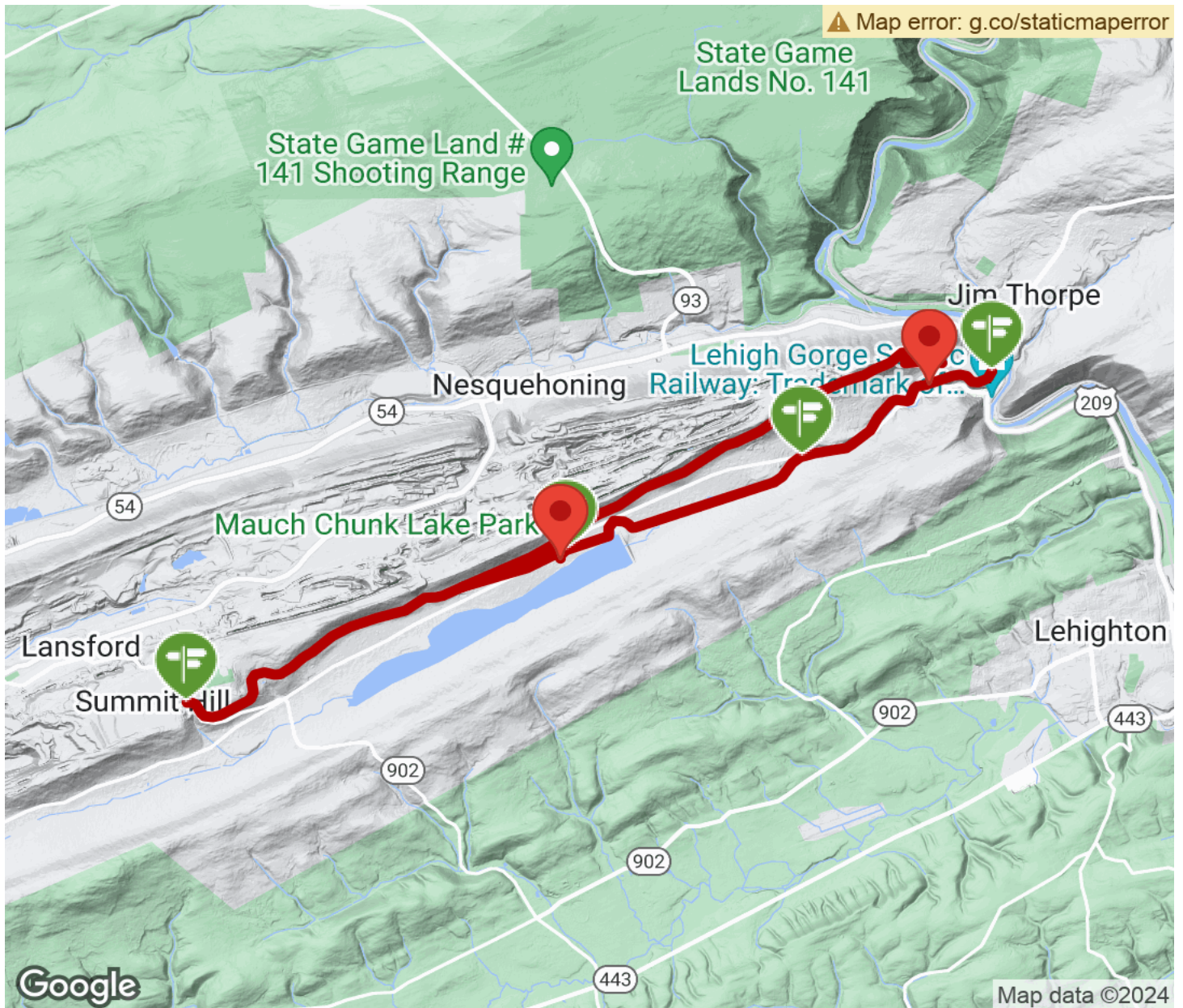
To reach the Down Track trailhead in Jim Thorpe, take Interstate 476 to Exit 74, then take 209 South to Jim Thorpe. Follow 209 past the train station and turn left onto Center Avenue. Take a right on Pine Avenue and left on North Avenue. There is a trailhead one-eighth of a mile up on your right. (This rocky steep ascent is not recommended as a start point.)

The trail can also be easily accessed from its midpoint at Mauch Chunk Lake Park, outside Jim Thorpe off Lentz Trail Road.



# Switchback Railroad Trail

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Trailhead



Restroom



Parking



Water Fountain



Tunnel



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by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

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