Historic views, fishing opportunities, relaxation and adventure all can be experienced while paddling along the Swatara Creek Water Trail.

Traversing 60 miles from Pine Grove, Schuylkill County, to the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission’s (PFBC’s) Middletown Access, to the Susquehanna River, Dauphin County, Swatara Creek Water Trail follows Swatara Creek through the heart of a densely forested Swatara State Park, past Lebanon County farmland and through developed suburban woodlots.

Remnants of the past remain in the form of Union Canal locks, abandoned railroad beds and geological rock outcroppings including the only known lava deposits in Pennsylvania.

With multiple campgrounds and eateries along the way, as well as access points about every 7 miles, this water trail is ideal for half-day, full-day or multiple-day paddle and float trips down the Swatara Creek.

The first official access is at Pine Grove, near Route 645. Here, through Swopes Valley, it is relatively narrow, swift and shallow at places, so it is best suited for kayaks.

Once entering Swatara State Park, the stream begins to widen, making a high-riding canoe a more feasible option, but it still does maintain some tricky turns and shallow riffles. An experienced paddler helping to steer the rear of the canoe is advised.

Floating through Swatara State Park, paddlers will encounter a natural setting of mixed hardwoods, wildlife and an unspoiled wilderness atmosphere just a few miles from civilization. The float through the park can be accomplished in about 2 hours before a view of the highway opens up again near Green Point.

This stretch from the I-81 bridge into Jonestown can be treacherous at places, with protruding boulders, swift turns and a potentially deadly dam area that should be avoided at all costs. Paddlers should portage around this hazard as a precaution.

Just below the dam is a nice launch area, adjacent to Scotto’s Italian Restaurant. This section from Jonestown to the Waterworks Access is a nice, quick float that can be doubled in length by going all the way to Harper’s Tavern (just south of Fort Indiantown Gap) for a roughly 10-mile quest. The Blue Rock Limestone Outcrop is a sight to behold, and the fishing is fair but definitely improves as one travels downstream.
The Swatara Creek Water Trail is a great place to get outside and enjoy nature by kayak. Pack a lunch and make a day of it.

The long, middle stretch from Harper’s Tavern to Boat House Road Park, just west of Hershey attractions, offers another 10-plus miles of stream that is entirely suitable for intermediate-level or even beginner-level kayakers and canoeists.

There are a lot of nice, slow runs through agricultural landscapes that make this section perfect for a relaxing, leisurely float, as well as some deeper sections that harbor Channel Catfish and Smallmouth Bass. The slower current makes fishing by kayak ideal, as maneuvering a vessel through swift water while trying to operate fishing tackle can often prove quite difficult.

There is also plenty of places to pull off and enjoy lunch, either streamside or formally in a park or dining establishment within walking distance of the creek. The PFBC access at Swatara Watershed Park is especially nice. The park is available for facility and canoe rental, as well as camping from the Swatara Watershed Association, which organizes an overnight Swatara Creek Sojourn trip each May (www.swatarawatershed.com).

Continuing downstream in Dauphin County, the final stretch does have some potential hazards such as a dam near Union Deposit, rapids near Hummelstown and a former dam near Middletown. However, there are ample opportunities to safely put in and take out watercrafts at launch areas to avoid these tricky spots.

The closer one gets to the Susquehanna River, the wider and deeper the Swatara Creek becomes, and some great fishing exists even by small watercraft in these long reaches. Tiger Muskelunge, Channel Catfish, bass and large suckers are known to frequent the area. Adhere to all fishing and boating regulations, which may vary depending on the time of year.

The Swatara Creek Water Trail offers a bit of everything, from scenic views through a historic landscape to fishing and leisure paddling opportunities. It is a great way to explore one of Pennsylvania’s most treasured water resources, within a short drive of Pennsylvania’s capital.
Swatara Creek Water Trail

Access
1. Pine Grove
2. Heinbaugh’s Ford/Trailer Park
3. Swatara State Park, Pine Grove
4. Swatara State Park, Union Township
5. Swatara State Park, Swatara
6. Lickdale Trailhead
7. Route 22 / William Penn Highway
8. Jonestown Launch
9. Waterworks Access
10. Swatara Watershed Park
11. Access at Valley Glen
12. Boat House Road Park
13. Access above Union Deposit
14. Swatara Park
15. Hanover Street Bridge
16. Access at Keller Fields
17. Hummel Nature Trail
18. Clifton Bridge
19. Middletown Access

Owner
Pine Grove Borough
Heinbaugh Trailer Park
DCNR
DCNR
DCNR
Lebanon Water Authority
Jonestown Borough
PA Fish & Boat Commission
Swatara Watershed Assoc.
Private
Derry Township
Private
South Hanover Township
Hummelstown Borough
Hummelstown Borough
Hummelstown Borough
Lower Swatara Township
PA Fish & Boat Commission

Sources: ESRI, USGS, NOAA. Sources: ESRI, Garmin, USGS, NPS