

Biking the Great Allegheny Trail

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If turtles could talk, I know what the one I passed on the side of the Great Allegheny Passage bike trail would have said to me.

Man, are you slow.

Or at least that's how I felt a few hours into my three-day, 129-mile bicycle journey from Boston, Pa., just outside McKeesport, to Cumberland, Md.

The trip had been in the works for months. I had a plan starting out - or so I thought. I'd ridden parts of the trail before, and based on my mileage and speed, I figured that pedaling 67 miles to Confluence the first day was reasonable.

There were just a few things I hadn't taken into account. I hadn't thought about how the weight of carrying a tent, sleeping bag and gear would slow me. I hadn't thought about rest stops, photo stops, the heat or the possibility of getting a late start.

I had figured my travel partner and I would stop in Connellsville for lunch.

As it turned out, we made it to Bud Murphy's in time for a late dinner.

The only thing that kept going through my mind was that line from the movie when Chunk told Mikey, "I don't want to go on any more of your crazy Goonie adventures."

Not a bike nut

I was intrigued from the first time I heard about the Great Allegheny Passage and Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Towpath bike trails making it possible to bike, traffic-free, 335 miles from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C.

There was just one problem.

I wasn't a bike nut.

I was riding fairly regularly at the time, going out for 90 minutes after work several times a week. But I'd never ridden anything close to 40-60 miles a day as I would need to travel in order to complete the trail.

I was also not in the world's best shape. I was reasonably fit but carrying a few extra pounds, and I also was prone to some unhealthy indulgences including, but not limited to, Doritos and Guinness.

But the appeal of this trail was that it was supposed to be easy enough for practically anyone to do. Because it's rail trail and towpath, it's relatively flat with a grade never greater than three percent.

I decided to put that ease-of-completion notion to the test and recruited a photographer from our Greensburg office, Scott Spangler, who was also into cycling and camping.

We decided, mainly for scheduling purposes, to break the trip into two parts. Although it's easier to ride from D.C. to Pittsburgh because you spend more time going downhill, we decided to ride from Boston, Pa., to Cumberland and head home. Then in a few weeks we'd drive back to Cumberland and pick up where we left off, finishing in D.C.

The Great Allegheny Passage

Boston, Pa., to Connellsville, 39 miles

Our trip started off well enough, following the Youghiogheny River on our left and pedaling literally through peoples' backyards in little river towns such as Buena Vista, Industry, Sutersville and Smithdale.

Everyone we passed on the trail waved hello, and every time we stopped to take photographs people wanted to know where we started, where we planned on stopping and the particulars of where we'd sleep, eat and shower.

We told them we were anxious to figure that out ourselves.

We also began to suspect that whoever said the trail was going to be easy was lying.

The miles weren't ticking off nearly as quickly as I'd expected.

It didn't help that neither of us ate a substantial breakfast and were going on energy bars and trail mix. It also didn't help that while a large portion of the trail is under a canopy of trees, the stretch to Connellsville was mostly exposed, and it was hot. As much as both of us knew about hydration, neither one of us was drinking enough fluids.

By the time we hit Connellsville at 7 p.m., we were exhausted and hungry and more than aware that Ohiopyle was out of the question, let alone Confluence. After a meal of what I swear to this day was the best spaghetti I ever had (sorry, Dad), we turned around and backtracked four miles to the Rivers Edge Campground we'd passed earlier adjacent to the trail.

Our new goal for the next day was to reach Rockwood, 47 miles away, instead of Frostburg, Md., now a completely unattainable 75 miles from where we were.

It was our first and perhaps greatest lesson of the trail - plan, but also be ready for plans to change.

Our second lesson was realized shortly thereafter, which was that the old rail trail parallels the active rail line on the other side of the river. If you don't like the

sound of trains passing in close proximity throughout the night, bring an Ipod.

Connellsville to Rockwood, 47 miles

The landscape changed completely the next day.

The first day we were never far from civilization. But once you leave Connellsville, you enter Ohiopyle State Park, and you're in the woods. You also are very much aware, once again, of going uphill.

We crossed the first of what would be several unique and beautiful old bridges that the train once followed. We later came to an overlook that literally took our breath away. As the trail had climbed steadily upward away from the river, our vantage point had become increasingly wide looking out across the water and hills below.

Before long, we were in the town of Ohiopyle.

It was the perfect time to visit a bike shop and get the rattle in my headset checked out, so we made a pit stop at Laurel Highlands Outdoor Center, where their top mechanic, Rick, was nice enough to make some much-needed adjustments as well as add air to my tires. Among other things I hadn't factored in was the influence of the added weight on my tires, which were at about 25 PSI and needed to be at 50 PSI.

He provided his services free of charge because, in his words, we were fellow bike nuts.

If I hadn't thought of myself as such before, it was now official.

We had lunch and continued on 11 miles to Confluence, a popular, easy stretch of trail that we'd both ridden before, and from there we pushed the final 19 miles to Rockwood.

It should be noted that once you leave Ohiopyle, cell phone service also leaves. It's a good time to check that your bike is in order and you have everything you need for the next 30 miles.

Although I'd be hard-pressed to pick my favorite piece of the trail, the miles between Ohiopyle and Rockwood would rate up there for the sheer beauty and solitude. In Confluence, you also leave the Yough behind and begin to follow the Casselman River.

We became aware for the first time of the other through-bikers on the trail as opposed to the day users. We saw single riders pulling trailers or loaded down with panniers. In Rockwood, we also met a number of cyclists who were making the trip in the two most popular methods - fully or partly supported.

Several companies run fully supported trips from spring through fall, in which you have a van to transport all your belongings and you stay in bed and breakfast establishments and/or hotels, with meals taken care of throughout. It's an extremely popular way to ride the trails for seniors and retirees, two groups that were well represented along the way.

Another popular method is to carry clothing and snacks, but stay in hotels and eat meals in restaurants along the way.

We were somewhere in between that and fully unsupported - we were camping and carrying supplies and snacks, but eating meals in restaurants.

In Rockwood, we stayed at what would also turn out to be my favorite campground, Husky Haven. The owner built the campground because of the trail, just one of many examples of campgrounds, bike shops and restaurants that have popped up as the trail has grown in popularity. It has everything a tired, smelly cyclist needs, including well-kept showers, a place to hose the limestone crust off your bike and an office with a cell phone booster so you can get a signal and charge the phone.

Rockwood to Cumberland, 44 miles

Leaving Rockwood, the landscape changes again.

You leave the forest and pedal into rolling farmland, passing the giant three-pointed windmills that dot the landscape around Somerset and Meyersdale.

We had lunch in Meyersdale then continued on for what would prove to be 10-12 exposed, uphill miles as we pushed toward the Eastern Continental Divide and, soon after, the Big Savage Tunnel.

The 3,294-foot tunnel was once one of the biggest obstacles standing in the way of completion of the trail between the two major cities. It was built in 1911 and abandoned in 1975 and fell into a state of massive disrepair after years of neglect. At a cost of \$12 million, and through the tireless efforts of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, it was renovated and opened for use in May 2006, completing the final link between McKeesport and Cumberland.

Now, it's a fascinating portion of the trail, and while some walk their bikes through, it is well-lit and a unique experience to ride through. It's difficult to believe that at one time there were multiple cave-ins, holes that opened skylights in the ceiling and almost enough water to paddle a kayak through.

While the tunnel stands out as a feature, the view on the other side may be the highlight of the trail.

Emerging on the other side on top of Big Savage Mountain, the view explodes beneath you. Hawks soar at eye level, and spread out below are forests, farms and, off in the distance, the light-colored cliffs near Cumberland.

From there, it's literally all downhill, across the Mason-Dixon Line to the stopping point, for this trip, in Cumberland.

We were lucky enough to have a friend come pick us up in Cumberland, with a bike rack, and shuttle us back to Pittsburgh. Other options would include renting a car one-way, or leaving a car in Cumberland before the trip.

At the one-mile marker, I realized I didn't want it to be over.

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Towpath

A month later, we were back on the trail.

It was all so different this time.

The canal was a miracle of engineering in the 1800s. President John Quincy Adams broke ground on the C&O Canal in 1828, and it was completed from Georgetown to Cumberland in 1850 with a total of 74 locks, 11 aqueducts and more than 150 stone culverts.

Already rendered obsolete by the railroads, the canal closed for good after a devastating flood in 1924.

The boats and mules long gone, algae-encrusted standing water now fills the parts of canal not drained of water entirely. Instead of boat traffic, the canal now hosts great blue herons and countless turtles that sun themselves on partially submerged tree limbs.

The canal isn't the only thing that makes you feel as though you've stepped back in time, however.

Cumberland to Paw Paw, 29 miles

The entire trail is rife with Civil War history, and just a few miles out of Cumberland, we passed a tiny graveyard a few yards off the trail. Among the graves were those of Confederate soldier Pvt. James D. Pollock and Sallie Pollock-Cook-High, a Confederate spy who was sent to a Union penitentiary in Pittsburgh after she was caught with letters addressed to Gen. Robert E. Lee.

After easy pedaling through horse country and farmland, our first night led us to a primitive campground with water and portable toilets as the only amenities. Our campground neighbors included a pack of 100 Boy Scouts, and just on the other side of the Potomac River was Paw Paw, WV.

Paw Paw to Williamsport, 56 miles

The next morning we started out in fog and remnants of an early-morning rain, and immediately came upon the Paw Paw tunnel. It was 200 feet shorter than the Big Savage Tunnel. But unlike the Big Savage, it was unlit and virtually impossible to ride through. The path was narrow, and even with a headlight, it was still dark.

During the canal's heyday, boat traffic bottlenecked at the tunnel, which is only wide enough for one vessel to travel through at a time. Now when you walk through, you can run your hand along the railing and feel the spots where ropes got hung up long ago and burned ruts into the wood.

We wouldn't have known that had we not stopped to speak to two men coming out of the tunnel just as we were going in.

The other people you meet on the trail are perhaps your best sources of information.

For instance, if we hadn't stopped and talked to a cyclist making his way from D.C. to Pittsburgh, we wouldn't have known that as you approach Hancock, Md., you can opt on to a paved Western Maryland Rail Trail that runs roughly 20 miles parallel to the towpath.

So it was cheating.

But by the time we got to Lock. No. 53, we needed a break from the potholes and roots that had dominated the clay and crushed rock trail since about five miles into our ride that day.

It was on the paved trail, about two or three miles outside of Hancock, that we came close to what would have been our greatest (and most frightening) wildlife spot of the trip thus far.

We rounded a corner just in time to see an older gentleman picking himself up after riding his bike off the trail and directly into a tree.

There was a good reason for his abrupt detour.

Just moments earlier, a black bear which he estimated to be about 350 pounds darted across the trail directly in front of him, and he was so startled that he swerved and crashed. Fortunately, he escaped with just a few cuts.

But that was as close as we came to seeing a bear. Our wildlife experience was limited to roughly two dozen herds of deer, 14-15 great blue herons, a family of muskrats, a few flocks of wild turkeys, a black snake, a red fox, a possum and countless number of turtles, ducks and squirrels that just loved to dart in front of my bike.

After stopping for lunch in Hancock, we passed through Fort Frederick State Park, which factored into the French and Indian, Revolutionary and Civil Wars. At mile 108, sat the ruins of the Charles Mill, and it was well worth getting off the bike and hiking up to the fence to get a better look at the old water wheel, gears and stream that aren't visible from the trail.

By this time, it was routine to pass plaques marking the spots where Confederate troops tried to cross the river, or take control of a dam, or where a battle ensued. It was hard to imagine the landscape looking much different now than it did then.

That night we decided to treat ourselves to the indoor plumbing and beds of the Red Roof Inn in Williamsport and pulled into the parking lot to discover only three cars.

The hotel was far from vacant, however.

It's a popular spot for bikers from the trail, and it seemed as if every room I passed on the way to my own either had a bike locked outside or visible through the window. We met most of our fellow cyclists at breakfast at the Waffle House the next morning.

Williamsport to Brunswick, 46 miles (with detour, roughly 51

miles)

Williamsport was the site of General Robert E. Lee's retreat across the Potomac after the Battle of Gettysburg. Leaving town, we crossed the Conococheague Creek Aqueduct, damaged by Mosby's Raiders during the Civil War.

The trail soon opened up, and we were riding right alongside the Potomac River. It was a beautiful and a welcome change because to that point, most of the trail had foliage so dense that we rarely had an unobstructed view of the river.

But it wasn't long before we hit a five-mile detour between Dam 4 and McMahon's Mill, a section of trail that has been damaged by repeated flooding. Signs warned of narrow, paved roads with no shoulders and limited sight, but we encountered very little traffic riding through beautiful farm country filled with red barns and old stone houses.

Again, it helped to talk to people along the way. We got directions from someone at the start of the detour who'd just come through, and then repaid the favor to a gentleman from California on the other end.

We had lunch in Shepherdstown, but our destination for the evening was historic Harper's Ferry.

It turned out that wasn't to happen.

The Official National Park Handbook to the C&O Canal mentions that "the footbridge on the railroad bridge provides passage between the canal and Harper's Ferry" at milepost 60, yet somehow I didn't fully grasp that that meant the footbridge - and the climb up the twisting, metal staircase to reach the bridge - was the only way to get to there.

With all the gear we were carrying, getting up the stairs and back down again the next day wasn't something we wanted to tackle. We also didn't like the idea of locking our bikes and leaving our possessions on the other side of the river while we visited the town, plus it was 5 p.m. and we still had to figure out where we were spending the night.

The only realistic option we saw was to skip Harper's Ferry and keep going. We pedaled on to the Brunswick Family Campground, a spot nestled conveniently against the Potomac but in unfortunate proximity to very active commuter and freight train lines as well as a waste treatment facility.

Brunswick to Georgetown, 54 miles

One of the highlights of the entire towpath, Great Falls, waited for us at milepost 16.

We were disappointed to find that the canal was dry, and we couldn't take a boat ride in Great Falls as the guidebook mentioned. We were even more disappointed to find that the snack bar, where we'd planned to get something a little more substantial than energy bars and dried fruit, was closed.

But the overlook trail that ends in a spectacular view of the river crashing violently through Mather Gorge made us forget all of that. The Class 5-6 whitewater is a kayaker's dream and makes for stunning photographs. It is almost impossible to believe that you are just 16 miles from the heart of the nation's capital.

The closer you get to the city, the harder it is to forget.

The traffic on the trail picks up, and it's hard not to notice that the people become less friendly as you run more into people jogging on their lunch break or after work than traveling through on a multi-day bicycle excursion. Getting to the one-mile marker in Georgetown definitely felt like an achievement, but the good feeling just about ended there.

We were grubby, tired, hungry and we smelled bad, and felt horribly out of place in the upscale neighborhood. The only reasonably-priced hotels within easy biking distance were all sold out, so while Spangler stayed with the bikes, I went to the airport to get our rental car.

It's perhaps one of the more expensive options to return home, given the one-way drop-off fees most companies charge and the fact that we had to get an SUV in order to fit everything plus fuel the beast once we got it.

Given that the other option would be getting to Amtrak and boxing our bikes for a return trip to Pittsburgh, I was nonetheless glad we chose to rent a car. We found a hotel in Gaithersburg and had a well-deserved dinner and rest.

Going home

It's almost worth the extra money for the rental car to have the satisfaction of driving back the entire distance you rode your bike over the previous days. The highway runs close enough to the trail that you often see exit signs for it. While part of you initially wonders how it could take so long to ride what takes such a relatively short time to drive, you soon start to realize just how far you traveled.

Almost everyone I told about the trip has marveled at the distance. And while some have said they'd like to try it some day, most have said they could never do something like that.

But the beautiful thing about it is, yes, they could.

The ease-of-completion notion is not a myth, despite the uphill portion traveling from Pittsburgh to Cumberland.

We saw people of all sizes, shapes and ages on their bikes. Many were in their 50s or older. Many were also of average weight if not somewhat overweight. Few were the type that one would see in running a marathon, or riding in a bike race or even in a gym.

The biggest hurdle is simply putting in the time on the bike beforehand required to get your rear end accustomed to being in a saddle for several hours a day.

People come from all over the country to make this trip. We met folks from Greensburg and Plum as well as Marietta, Ohio, Ann Arbor, Mich., and the West Coast.

In Pittsburgh, we're lucky enough to have this in our backyard. Portions can be done in a long weekend, and whether you want to camp or stay in more comfortable conditions, there is an option for everyone.

The fact it's possible to ride a bike traffic-free and relatively hill-free from here to Washington, D.C., is amazing enough in and of itself.

You will see the country between here and there in a way that just isn't possible in a car, and you'll be left not only with memories and photographs that you'll share time and again, but also the feeling of accomplishment that comes with riding over 300 miles.

Even if you are slow.

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