

# Cyclists hit the rail trail for a recession-resistant getaway

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

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BOSTON, Pa. — In the end, after crossing six soaring bridges, burrowing through four mountain tunnels, journeying over the Eastern Continental Divide and taking in miles of jaw-dropping vistas, a formerly dubious Lolly Marchant, 61, dismounts her bicycle and declares that given the chance, she'd do it all over again.

Barbara Wood, 70, nursing a broken finger from a run-in with a gate 67 miles back, vows to get back on the bike for another multi-day bike tour later this month.

And only nine months after she told her husband, Joe, he was crazy to think she could handle — much less enjoy — a 330-mile bike ride, Patti Carr, 48, proclaims their marriage is as solid as ever.

## PHOTO GALLERY: [The Great Allegheny Passage](#)

The three have just reached the end of the [Great Allegheny Passage](#), one in a vast network of bike/walking paths cleaved from abandoned rail lines. Stretching 136 miles from [Cumberland, Md.](#), to [Duquesne, Pa.](#), the trail links to the C&O Canal towpath that starts in [Washington, D.C.](#), creating a blissfully traffic-free cyclists' haven.

The trail, whether tackled whole or in smaller pieces, presents a recession-resistant getaway for a variety of budgets at a time of year when the Allegheny Mountains are rich in fall color. Options range from self-contained independent rides, in which riders tote their own gear and bed down at trailside campgrounds or basic hostels, to guided rides with catered meals and a soft bed in a country inn.

This group of 49 riders on a week-long jaunt with the [Adventure Cycling Association](#) has adopted a mixed approach. Hearty breakfasts and dinners are catered trailside as part of the package. Most participants pitch their own tents at night, but a few opt to pay extra for bed-and-breakfast or motel lodgings. A mechanic is on hand to fix flat tires and a support vehicle carries the gear, while another delivers snacks and drinks and, if necessary, offers a lift to weary riders.

It's a diverse bunch, ranging in age from 28 to 77 (though there's a preponderance of men of a certain age with good legs). They've traveled from Hawaii and Vermont and parts in between. For some, this is their first multi-day bike trip. Others are veterans, including a few who've pedaled across the country multiple times.

If there's an equalizer, it's the trail itself. The Great Allegheny Passage, or GAP, is among the most popular of the nation's rail trails, partly because of its proximity to major metropolitan areas, but also because of its abundance of life-affirming views amid forgiving terrain. From Cumberland, it climbs about 22 miles to the 2,390-foot Big Savage Tunnel at a relatively gentle 1.5% grade. Beyond, there's nary a ripple in its crushed limestone base as it glides through Pennsylvania's lush Youghiogheny River Valley toward Pittsburgh.

## A boon for small towns

The last train rolled through in 1975, says Paul Wiegman, a board member of the Allegheny Trail Alliance who has written extensively about the trail and was on that last train. But initially, there was little

government interest in transforming the defunct Western Maryland Railroad line into a biking/nature trail.

"The state couldn't understand why anyone would want to ride in the woods," he tells the cyclists gathered around a campfire one evening at the Husky Haven Campground in Rockwood, Pa.

But by 1986, an initial 9-mile stretch had materialized. By 2001, the first 100 miles of continuous, quality trails were linked. It connected with the C&O Canal towpath in 2006. And when the GAP's final 4 miles are completed (said to be a couple of years away), it'll be possible to cycle or hike an unfettered 334 miles between Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C.

"The dream we had on that train in 1975 is finally coming true," says Wiegman.

Similar conversions, ranging from short spurs to the 225-mile Katy Trail in Missouri, make up about 15,000 miles of rail trails nationwide, with thousands more miles under construction. These trails are also breathing new life into small towns that fell into decline with the demise of the railroads and other industries. Along the GAP, bike shops are a growth industry. New restaurants have opened. And the bed-and-breakfast trade is on the rise.

The GAP now gets more than 750,000 visits between April and November. Standing outside a train depot turned visitor center/museum in Meyersdale, Pa., (another growth industry here), "trail ambassador" Kurt Detwiler marvels at the scope of visitors. "Two weeks ago, we had two people from Kazakhstan *independent* of each other," he says.

The trail "is an opportunity for these communities," says Cathy McCollom, director of the non-profit Trail Town program, an economic development effort for towns along the GAP. "But the good news is, it's not gentrifying these towns. There's new blood and new resources, but not so much that the feel of them has changed. [Baby Boomers](#) (who constitute a good percentage of trail riders) want an authentic experience. We advise (businesses), 'Keep it real. Keep it green if you can. Tell people they're buying local. (Bikers) may be wearing spandex, but they're high income and they may have a graduate degree and they're interested in you.' "

### **A peek into the back door**

Most of these rural trail towns still have an industrial patina. They can be delightful, depressing or a little of both, but they are, indeed, real. And one of the joys of riding the passage is the chance to see the communities from a back-door perspective.

In Cumberland (population 22,000), downtown concerts, a farmers market and outdoor dining nights are luring over-nighters who used to park their cars and ride out of town. (The cyclist-friendly new Fairfield Inn even allows bikes in the rooms.) Italian restaurant owner Tony Ottaviani says he scoffed when town leaders told him cyclists would be good for business. "I said, 'You people are nuts. People on bikes don't spend any money.' But it's been huge."

In Meyersdale (population 2,500), where a Welcome Back Soldiers banner hangs from the shuttered Colonial Hotel, you can get a cheese and apple sandwich and a decaf mocha at the Java Cafe or belly up to the counter at the more traditional G.I. Dayroom Coffee Shop for a burger and fries. In Rockwood, Pa. (population 800), Judy Pletcher has restored the former feed mill/lumber mill/opera house into a bakery/souvenir-antiques store/opera house with live performances. In May, she opened a hostel next door.

In Confluence, Pa. (year-round population 600), former defense department employee Brad Smith opened a bike shop last year in a handsome 1904 building that was once the town's department store. "I

couldn't support this without the trail," he says.

And in Ohio, Pa., a town of 65 permanent residents surrounded by a popular state park that draws 1.5 million visitors annually, Pam Kruse, co-owner of the [Firefly Grill](#) and, more recently, the vintage Falls Market, declares that she and her partner, Stephanie Sherwin, wouldn't be here without the trail.

"We love that bike trail. Biking is free. No matter what the economy is doing, people are on it."

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