

Biking round trip from Pittsburgh to D.C.

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By Shannon M. Nass, Special to the Post-Gazette



Mary Shaw

Two bicycle tourists head towards Washington, D.C. at the Continental Divide east of Meyersdale.

Visiting the beach can be a welcome respite from the grind of everyday life, but one of the hottest travel itineraries is located right in our own back yard. Adventure waits with a bicycle trip along the Great Allegheny Passage and C&O Canal Towpath from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C.

Whether this trip has been a longtime dream or just a passing thought, seasoned trail riders Mary Shaw and Roy Weil of Pittsburgh offer the following advice:

"Just do it."

Shaw is a professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University, and Weil is a civil engineer. They have each won awards from Venture Outdoors and REI (Recreational Equipment Inc.) for their work promoting outdoor recreation, and currently serve as donor advisers of the Trail Volunteer Fund at The Pittsburgh Foundation. This husband-and-wife team began making the trip end to end in 1997, and has since completed it 10 times.

"When we first started doing this 10 years ago, it took a certain amount of determination and logistics and heroics to do it because there were so many incomplete sections of trail that you had to think about how to get around," said Shaw. "It no longer takes heroic efforts to do this. It's now easy."

Shaw and Weil reach out to potential through-riders by pooling their experience, offering information and assistance in planning trips between Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. They've coauthored a book, "Linking Up: Planning Your Traffic-Free Bike Trip Between Pittsburgh, Pa. and Washington D.C. via the Great Allegheny Passage and C&O Canal Towpath" (Great Allegheny Press).

Shaw and Weil will offer a free presentation on through-trip planning from 7 to 8 p.m. Thursday at Peters Township Library.

If you can ride 30 miles on two consecutive days, you meet the physical requirements to make the trip. Their recommended 30-mile interval is for indoor

lodging purposes, as there are few stretches where the distance between lodging is greater. For them, training begins as soon as the snow is cleared from the roads and picks up as they get closer to their departure date.

"It's the kind of trip that pretty much anybody can do," said Shaw. "We've had people on the trips whose advance training was exactly zero and they did it."

Shaw and Weil typically make the trip in May, June or September; however, they consider the trails beautiful no matter what the season. When planning a trip, it is important to consider how much time you want to spend taking in the sights.

"It depends on how hard you want to ride, how much riding you do and how much time you want to spend stopping along the way to look at things," said Shaw.

Shaw and Weil recommend riders allow nine days to give plenty of time to enjoy the scenery and explore the little towns that parallel the trail. With more time, riders can also take into account rain days, which will slow the pace. If a nine-day journey is not an option, shorter trips are quite possible and can still allow time for frequent sightseeing stops.

Shaw and Weil also recommend forgoing indoor lodging and taking advantage of the hiker-biker campsites along the way.

"It's like being turned loose unattended in the history of science and technology museum and being told I can spend the night," said Shaw. "Everything is out there and you can touch it and walk around it. There are no artificial barriers."

The campsites are well maintained by the National Park Service and offer a safe haven between stops. There is no motor vehicle access to the sites, so riders who plan on camping will need to carry their gear in panniers or on a trailer. The campsites are free and offered on a first-come, first-served basis.

If a hot shower and a pillow are preferred, consider pulling into numerous bed and breakfasts along the way that cater to trail riders. When using indoor lodging, reservations should be booked well in advance -- some of the towns don't have a large stock of rooms.

To cut down on the amount of baggage, plan to purchase food along the way. There are a number of grocery stores and restaurants convenient to the trail.

Another consideration to make when planning a trip is whether to carry baggage or book a commercial trip where bags are carried for bicyclists. Carrying gear in panniers is more cost effective, but commercial outfitters offer the ease of riding without the extra weight, and they do all of the planning. More than a dozen planned rides are scheduled throughout the year. Shaw and Weil host the Internet site www.yockatomac.org, which contains a calendar listing commercial trips.

"The easy way to make the trip is to pick one of those, make those your vacation dates and pay somebody to do all the reservations for you," said Shaw.

Shaw says there are a few things riders should know before they go:

"You should know how to change a flat tire, how to recognize poison ivy and keep your hands off it, and how to set up a tent," she said.

Checking gear before leaving is an absolute must -- make sure everything is in working order before making the first pedal stroke.

Following the library program, Shaw and Roy Weil's book will be available for purchase, with all proceeds benefiting the Great Allegheny Passage.