

Biking to D.C. an easier pleasure as trail links improve

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 By Len Barcoucky, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Len Barcoucky/Post-Gazette

The Salisbury Viaduct near Meyersdale along the Great Allegheny Passage

Laboring for more than an hour to get up and over the eastern Continental Divide, the Capital Limited twisted and turned as it made its way through the Allegheny Mountains outside Cumberland, Md.

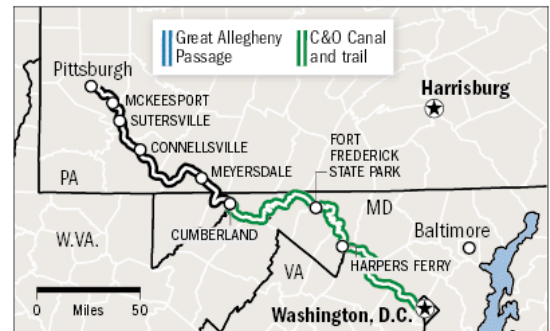
The 300-mile route between Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C., that took us seven days by bicycle would take about seven hours by train traveling in the opposite direction. Still, even a train pulled by a modern diesel locomotive has to struggle to get through the mountains that straddle the Maryland-Pennsylvania border. Those mountains are evidence of the challenges in riding the trail.

During 2004 and 2005, a buddy, Mike Pellegrini, and I had ridden all the portions of the Great Allegheny Passage and the C&O Canal Park trails that were open to cyclists. We did it in sections, returning home after each stretch and then picking up our journey where we left off.

Since that time more of the trail between Pittsburgh and Washington has been opened, including a critical link east of Meyersdale in Somerset County. It takes cyclists over the Continental Divide and through the restored Big Savage Tunnel, providing the final off-road link between the Allegheny Passage and Canal Park trails.

Late summer seemed time for another shot at the whole journey.

Riding this time with Jim Everitt, a boyhood friend who now lives in California, I mapped out a route of approximately 305 miles that would take seven full days. We both turned 60 this year, and a 43-mile-per-day average seemed realistic, especially if we hit mechanical problems with our bikes or bad weather.



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One traditional starting point for through-riders beginning at the Allegheny County end of the trail is Boston, in Elizabeth Township, just outside McKeesport. To reduce our first day from 60 to 50 miles, we began a little farther down the trail at Sutersville.

Riding the trail is a different experience than it was five or six years ago.

Many more people are using the trail than when I first made the trip. While we saw some hikers, I would guess that 90 percent of the people on the trail were on bikes. They were of all ages, including a pair of senior citizens who were taking the long route to Washington. They started their journey on the Montour Trail at Coraopolis. That route required that they share the road with cars on parts of their route until they arrived at the Allegheny Passage at McKeesport.

Biking is easier on the joints than many other forms of aerobic exercise, and the grades, whether rising or falling, are slight along almost the entire trail. Through-riders are of all

If you go

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ages, and my buddy and I were by no means the oldest guys taking on the trail.

Enjoying the sights

With growth in the number of users, more businesses are catering to cyclists. They include full-service bike shops, hostels and motels that keep a garden hose hooked up for cyclists who want to wash the mud off their vehicles at the end of a wet day. The operator of the Java Hut in Meyersdale, for one, said bike riders stopping for breakfast are critical to keeping the doors of her coffee shop open.

Some of the younger riders we met on the trail, those in their 20s and 30s, told us they planned to do the ride in four 75- to 80-mile days. It's an impressive physical feat, but it doesn't leave much time for enjoying the sights and pleasures to be found along the way.

Our seven-day schedule allowed opportunities, for example, for lazing away an afternoon on the banks of the Potomac near Little Orleans, Md.

Little Orleans is home to Bill's Place, a landmark tavern and general store just a few hundred yards off the trail. Popular with bicyclists, Bill's offers air conditioning, hot sandwiches and cold beer to cap off a day's ride.

Little Orleans is ordinarily quiet, but on the afternoon we arrived motorcyclists, many of them well tattooed and well into middle age, were gathering for the annual "East Coast Sturgis" motorcycle rally. My Trek mountain bike, even with its bulging saddlebags, looked tiny and frail next to the dozens of chrome-covered monsters parked in front of Bill's.

The trail brings its share of surprises. They included a stubborn black-and-green garter snake that stretched itself across the trail near the Paw-Paw Tunnel outside Cumberland. Neither stamping nor waving could persuade him to move until he was ready. Only after doing a final check of the air with his tongue was it ready to slither off into the thick brush next to the trail.

North of Harpers Ferry, we came across a squad of Confederate infantry, taking a short rest along the C&O Canal towpath.

Weren't they on the wrong side of the Potomac River? During the Civil War, Maryland was a border state that stayed in the Union. The gray-clad re-enactors explained that they represented a Georgia unit and were walking the 10 or so miles from Harpers Ferry to a weekend re-enactment at nearby Antietam National Battlefield, outside Sharpsburg, Md.

Riders who have the time to stop can get a look at history from an earlier era at Fort Frederick, a stone fortress built during the French and Indian War. Inside the fort are reconstructed barracks with displays of weapons and uniforms. The fort is part of a state park, and it has a gift shop that sells snacks and ice cream bars. Located halfway between Hancock and Williamsport, Md., it's a good stop for lunch or an afternoon break.

Trail towns offer specialities

Each small town and city along the way offers its own pleasures.

Connellsville is one of several communities now marketing itself as a "Trail Town," and each participating community has selected its own outdoor-themed flavor of ice cream. Connellsville's choice is a chocolate-and-brownie concoction called "Youghiogheny mud" that made a restorative snack on a hot afternoon. One of the best things about long-distance cycling is that for a few days, you can eat like a teenager again.

Meyersdale is flanked by the 1,900-foot-long Salisbury Viaduct on its western side and the 3,300-foot-long Big Savage Tunnel to the east. They are two examples of monumental railroad engineering that continue to awe a century after they were built.

From its southern portal, the tunnel offers spectacular views of rural Pennsylvania and Maryland. Off to the southeast is the distant Narrows, the natural gap through the Alleghenies that leads to Cumberland, Md. Cyclists coming from the direction of Pittsburgh have been peddling gradually uphill for more than 100 miles. For the next 21 miles or so, they can coast

Ohio Canal Park portion of the journey.

The route uses two major trails.

The Great Allegheny Passage covers about 130 miles from McKeesport to Cumberland, Md. It follows the former route of the Western Maryland Railroad, which was primarily a coal-hauling line. Making use of dozens of trestles, bridges and embankments, the route was laid out to minimize changes in elevation as it winds its way southeast. For much of its length it follows the path that the Youghiogheny and Casselman rivers have cut through the Allegheny Mountains.

The trail then continues through the C&O Canal Park, and it is all gently downhill from Cumberland to Washington's Georgetown neighborhood. Along its route are the remains of 75 locks, 11 stone aqueducts and dozens of locktender houses.

What you should know: While you are rarely more than four or five miles from a town or village while on the trails, cell phone service is spotty in some sections. Riders would be wise to get a physical before taking on the trip and to take along a small first-aid kit.

Common sense is critical when riding on what is sometimes a treacherous trail surface. Near Meyersdale, we met a man with a large adhesive bandage covering his nose and one cheek. He had been texting on his cell phone when he fell off his bike, his wife explained.

Sources of water -- fountains, pumps or vending machines -- can be 10 or 15 miles apart, so it's a good idea to carry two water bottles and to keep them topped off. Outdoor toilets are similarly spaced and vary in cleanliness. Take some toilet paper.

Both trails mostly adjoin private property, and riders should respect owners' rights and stay on the well-marked route.

Information: The Allegheny Trail Alliance publishes a "Trail Book" annually that includes a weather-resistant vinyl map and information on food, lodging and camping along the route. Another choice is "Linking Up: Planning Your Traffic-Free Bike Trip between Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C.," by Mary Shaw and Roy Weil.

More detailed information on the history and sights along the trails can be found in Bill Metzger's "The Great Allegheny Passage Companion" and Mike High's "The C&O Canal Companion."

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through two more tunnels and around several horseshoe curves on a downhill journey to the start of the C&O Canal Park.

Cumberland has a pedestrian mall lined with restaurants and a half dozen small museums. It was a great location to recharge after three days on the trail and before tackling the miles yet to go.

As the trail winds through long stretches of rural Pennsylvania and Maryland, riders mostly see a canopy of trees, and they mostly hear bird song and the murmur of the nearby rivers.

Rarely, if ever, however, does the trip feel like a wilderness adventure. It would be unusual to go more than a mile without meeting, or in my case, being passed by, another cyclist.

Stop for lunch or a snack at a trailside restaurant or at a motel for the night, and you're likely to find other riders already there, eager to share stories about the day's events.

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