

Biking Coal Country's Tracks and Tunnels



Jeff Swenson for The New York Times

RIDING HIGH A Western Maryland Scenic Railroad locomotive on the Great Allegheny Passage near Frostburg, Md.

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Frostburg, Md. — THREE hours by bike from Cumberland, Md., on the Great Allegheny Passage, I rode into the mouth of the abandoned Borden Tunnel near here, where freight trains once rumbled, hauling coke, steel and coal. The air was black as engine oil.



[Biking the Great Allegheny Passage](#)



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Bicyclists in the rain on the 101-foot-high Salisbury Viaduct near Meyersdale, Pa. [More Photos »](#)

In the middle of the tunnel, darkness swallowed my pedals and handlebars. My wheels wobbled on crushed limestone, but I couldn't see them anymore. My friend David Howard was pedaling far in front of me and loving every minute of it. "I can't see a thing," he said gleefully. "It feels like an out-of-body experience."

But I was so unnerved that my bike spun out of control and I nearly slammed into the wall.

As I discovered on a three-day trip this year, the passage, which travels 132 miles from McKeesport, Pa., to Cumberland, Md., is part industrial history lesson, part nature excursion and part fun house, with thrilling and spooky moments: barely lighted corridors through mountainsides, whitecaps on rivers a hundred feet below and the lonely sound of a freight-train whistle.

Word is getting out that the trail is a world-class biking destination. Linda Boxx, president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, a coalition of seven organizations that oversee the project, said 10,000 to 15,000 people rode a long-distance trip along it last year. The trail was built at the cost of \$65 million after the rail tracks were abandoned in 1975.

The trail — which will eventually reach Pittsburgh, 18 miles from McKeesport — feels remote but is within a half-day's drive of much of the Northeast. Along the way, bicyclists cross the Mason-Dixon Line, sweep through farmland and gain 1,750 feet of elevation from Cumberland west to the Eastern Continental Divide.

At Cumberland the Great Allegheny Passage joins the C&O Canal towpath, which stretches east to the [District of Columbia](#). When the trail is complete, hardy bicyclists will be able to travel unimpeded from Pittsburgh to Washington, some 335 trail miles.

Yet the railroad grade route is so gradual that riders usually can't see the hills they are climbing, even when they feel the slow burn in their quads. Travelers have the uncanny feeling that they are burrowing through the Allegheny Mountains instead of traveling up, over and around them. In a sense this is true; the trail builders have made ingenious use of old trestles, bridges, viaducts and tunnels to help bicyclists punch through. Although I'd heard the trail was nicely graded, I decided to take some backup: my good friend David, who is the executive editor of *Bicycling Magazine*.

In Cumberland I rented a Cannondale touring bicycle and overloaded it with tools and spare tires I wouldn't need, and we started off. Buildings vanished as we pedaled through a forest canopy and past the Bone Cave, where scientists scraped out the remains of cave bears and saber-toothed cats.

As we made our way through a mile-long slash between the Haystack and Wills Mountains known as the Narrows, a murky yellow light levitated like a ghost, followed by a horn blast. A carbon smell burned in the air. A steam train took shape on a working track next to us, trailing vapor. David waved as the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad train clanked past and rolled out of sight, a reminder of the route's original purpose.

That day, after a long climb, we paused for breath near a row of benches. Everything we'd passed through in the last few hours lay beneath us: fields and hills, and pillars of smoke from farmhouse fireplaces miles away in Allegany County, Md. Fog boiled out of Cash Valley.

Soon afterward we came face to face with the 3,294-foot-long Big Savage Tunnel. Inside, the tunnel was dreamlike, like a Roman catacomb or a secret passageway between the Great Pyramids. Every hundred feet or so a pale yellow light hanging from the ceiling showed the way.

I was enjoying the echoes and the distant drip of water, when David warned me about a burned-out light. Darkness fell suddenly and I slammed the brakes; I skidded, lost control of the bike and fell to the gravel with a heavy plop.

It was a harmless fall, but the adrenaline helped me with the last hard push to the crossing of the Eastern Continental Divide, where we swept through a short tunnel. Inside is a sign showing the elevation gain of the trail as a series of frightening, near-vertical peaks. At the highest point was a small arrow and the message, "You are here."



Jeff Swensen for The New York Times

Tandem bicyclists on the trail.



The Great Allegheny Passage

We high-fived. Now the way was paper flat or downhill.

Satisfied, aching and a bit torn up after more than 30 miles, I was glad to hear the porch swings creak at Gram Gram's Place, a new bed-and-breakfast/bike shop in Meyersdale, Pa. Craig Bowman, who runs Gram Gram's with his wife, Jackie, drove us to the White House Restaurant, which has flag-motif knickknacks and crockery, a "God Bless America" sign above the bar and an enormous century-old butcher's block turned into a groaning board for homemade bread.

At the restaurant time's passage was irrelevant; our waitress was the sprightly Lil Drake, 79, who had worked there for 40 years. Even the house specialty — fried haddock — came from a recipe unchanged since the 1950s. David admired his gooey heap of buttery sour-cream splattered mashed potatoes. "If I ate this stuff every day, it would probably kill me," he said.

But there was no danger of that. The next day was 42 miles, starting with a bridge that someone had festooned with toilet paper, the only litter or vandalism we saw on the immaculately clean trail. Soon we pedaled across the Salisbury Viaduct, a 101-foot-high 1,908-foot-long steel trestle that gave me the feeling of hang-gliding over the valley.

We made great speed over skinny bridges, dodging rabbits and wobbling past the closed-off Pinkerton Tunnel, which looked like the entrance to a ruined temple. But the trouble began in the oldest section of the trail, in Ohiopyle State Park, where the pathway got narrower and lost its right shoulder.

The right edge dropped to a forested slope, giving way to the middle fork of the Youghiogheny River. Rafters bobbed and screamed in the whitewater. Unnerved by the drop, and having some difficulty with my heavily laden bike, I lost control again and fell, but didn't go over the edge.

By the time we reached Ohiopyle I had three narrowly avoided head-on collisions under my belt. Hemmed inside 20,000 acres of state park land, it was a good place to recuperate: Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece Fallingwater was an easy shuttle ride away, Class 3 and Class 4 rapids coursed through town, and the local pub served craft beers while [music](#) played at tinnitus-inducing volume.

Later we wandered around and watched bats wheel in front of a full moon. We joined 40 people who had set up a TV outside and were watching a hockey game. People gobbled hot dogs, drank Pabst Blue Ribbon and groaned in despair.

In attendance was Jim Greenbaum, general manager of White Water Adventurers, one of four outfitters in town. Sobered by watching his favorite team, the Pittsburgh Penguins, get knocked down, he changed to a more uplifting topic, the bicyclists "discovering" a town once known as a river-running nexus.

Mr. Greenbaum noted that the motel where we were staying was attracting new visitors, thanks in part to the Great Allegheny Passage.

"Thirteen years ago they built the motel for rafters," he said. "Now only 18 percent are rafters. The rest are bikers and Fallingwater people. Who would have ever thunk it?"

The **Great Allegheny Passage**, between Cumberland, Md., and McKeesport, Pa., is complete — but trail builders are raising money to finish bicycle/pedestrian bridges between McKeesport and [Pittsburgh](#). Information about the trail is at www.atatrail.org.

In 2006, trail builders linked the passage to the C & O canal towpath, creating a 318-mile motor-vehicle-free [bike](#) and walking path from McKeesport to Washington, D.C. Information about the C & O trail is at www.bikewashington.org/canal.

Cumberland is a logical starting point for an adventure because the serious climbing is largely out of the way within the first 24 miles — with mostly straightaways and descents after the trail crosses the Eastern Continental Divide. The passage is on a railroad grade, meaning there are no sustained strenuous climbs.

ALONG THE WAY

In Cumberland: **Cumberland Trail Connection**, Building A-2, Canal Place, (301) 777-8724, www.ctcbikes.com. Bike rentals start at \$25 per day for full travel days, or \$15 for half days. Arrange with the owners to park free near the shop. The owners can also supply information about shuttle pickups, trail logistics and conditions.

Some riders cut out much of the first day's climbing by traveling on the **Western Maryland Scenic Railroad** (13 Canal Street, Cumberland; (800) 872-4650, www.wmsr.com), which accepts bicycles and travels to Frostburg, Md., a convenient stop along the trail. In summer months, the train departs Thursday through Sunday at 11:30 a.m., and Friday through Sunday in September at 11:30; in October, for the fall foliage, the train departs Tuesday through Sunday at 11:30 (second departure at 5 p.m. on Saturdays). In November and December it reverts to weekends only (but runs on the Friday after Thanksgiving). Fares start at \$30 per person, with an extra \$5 fee for bikes. On Thursdays through the end of August, the train offers a one-way bicyclist discount of \$25, which includes the bike fee. Trains do not operate January through April.

In Meyersdale, Pa: **Gram Gram's Place**, 508 Main Street, (814) 634-0461, www.gramgramsplace.com. Double-occupancy rooms, with continental breakfast included, start at \$65 per night. **Levi-Deal Mansion Bed and Breakfast**, 301 Meyers Avenue, (814) 289-7600, www.levidealmansion.com. Double-occupancy rooms start at \$90 on weekdays, and \$110 on weekends.

The White House, 515 Thomas Street, (814) 634-8145. Deep-fried haddock dinner with soup, bread bar and choice of potato or vegetable is \$12.50.

In Ohio, Pa.: **Yough Plaza Motel**, 28 Sherman Street, (800) 992-7238, www.youghplaza.com. Double-occupancy rooms start at \$109 per night.

Falls City Restaurant & Pub, 112 Garrett Street, (724) 329-3000. Nachos grande with tortilla chips, red peppers, black beans, onion, olives, cheddar and jalapeno are \$6.95. www.fallscitypub.com.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

White Water Adventurers, 6 Negley Street, Ohiopyle; (724) 329-8850; www.wwaraft.com, offers guided and unguided rafting trips along the Youghiogheny River. Guided trips (in the middle Yough), during the weekday, start at \$34.50 per adult, \$45.50 on Saturday and \$40.50 on Sunday. For a fee, the company will provide shuttle service to [Frank Lloyd Wright](#)'s Fallingwater house, as well as shuttle rides back to Cumberland for cyclists.

Fallingwater, (724) 329-8501, www.fallingwater.org, is halfway between Mill Run and Ohiopyle on State Route 381. Adult admission with tour is \$18. Because of its remote location, there is no public transportation to Fallingwater; you must drive there or arrange shuttle transport from Ohiopyle.

<http://travel.nytimes.com/2009/10/23/travel/escapes/23passage.html>