Great Allegheny Passage/C&O Canal Towpath Trip
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Riding the GAP and the C&O from Pittsburgh to Washington, DC has been on my list of "things to do" for years. I watched with anticipation for years the progress leading to a full completion of the trial. Then it was done! There is a continuous 340 mile trail that could be ridden entirely on a bicycle.

I am writing this ride report of my reflections and observations while on the trail and interactions off the trail that were necessary for a complete trip. This report will not describe each and every detail of the route, mainly because I want to leave some unknowns to be experienced by each future rider.

DAY ONE: PITTSBURGH TO CONFLUENCE: 87 MILES

My wife and traveling companion Maureen decided several days before the start of the trip that riding 87 miles in one day was a bit much for her. Rather than to have a cranky companion from the onset, we found a motel in the Rostraver, Pennsylvania area near Cedar Creek Park, which is a county park managed by Westmoreland County. We calculated that we would cut almost 40 miles off her first day ride.

I dropped her off at a Comfort Inn Friday evening after work and returned home to finish packing for the trip.

At 7:00 the next morning, I took a picture of my bike at the medalian at the Point in Pittsburgh indicating the confluence of the Monongahela and the Allegheny Rivers to form the Ohio River. All I had to do was pedal for the next five days.

I rode through downtown Pittsburgh along the Boulevard of the Allies until I reached the "official" beginning of the Great Allegheny Passage, which is behind the PNC Service Center at the corner of First Ave. and Grant Street. The first couple of miles of the GAP is also known as the Eliza Furnace Trail which is named after a steelmaking furnace named Eliza I guess. The locals also call it the Jail Trail since it passes behind and close to the Allegheny County Jail. The Gap is paved all the way to McKeeseport, about 16 miles from the Point where I started.
There were some notable moments, notwithstanding. Crossing into McKeesport was like taking a step back into the area’s industrial heritage. Unfortunately, that flower bloomed, wilted and died many years ago, so all that is left are the remains of whatever refuse that was not carted off for some other use. I got to see this close up since the GAP uses the streets of McKeesport for several miles. The route is well marked, except for two cut offs that should be avoided: The Montour Trail and the Loop Trail. Both of these fine trails may be explored at another time, but not if you are doing a through ride of the GAP. Watch for the GAP signs and follow them across the 15th Street Bridge, up a small hill, cross the road, and continue.

Hold on to your teeth for the next couple of miles between McKeesport and Boston. The trail follows an abandoned goat path and not a rail trail. Keep your eyes on the trail and watch for ruts, roots, broken bottles and glass.

I next stopped at a remodeled train station in West Newton. This town regained a new life with the development of the GAP. It is the perfect place to have a snack either from your bag or at one of the places in town. I carried my own snacks, so I used the restroom and refilled my water bottles. Connellsville is about 25 miles from West Newton, and there is not much between the two places.

On the outskirts of Connellsville is a pleasant little park with water fountains and restrooms. The trail through this little park leads to a bigger park along the river. Just after the bigger park is the town itself. There is a bike shop right on the trail and a variety of places to eat. Since I was meeting Maureen in Ohiopyle for lunch, I grabbed some water to hold me over for the 17 mile trip to Ohiopyle.

The day I arrived in Ohiopyle was the day that the state officials allowed kayakers to run over the falls. Needless to say, Ohiopyle was bustling when I arrived around 12:30. All of the restaurants were overflowing, so we settled on a barbeque from the Fall Market Restaurant, which was reasonable and filling. There is also an opportunity to use clean restrooms and fill water bottles at the refurbished train station.

Confluence is only 11 miles away, so we finished our sweet tea and pedaled to our overnight destination at the Confluence House Bed and Breakfast, which, as we discovered, was clean and satisfactorily furnished. Our room was spacious and the bathroom was large as well. One word of caution about this wonderful place. Breakfast will not be served early, so if you are planning for an early departure you should consider staying elsewhere or bring your own breakfast foods.

Our dinner in Confluence at the Smoke House consisted of some of the best barbeque we have ever had. Maureen’s ribs fell off the bone and my pulled pork wrap with coleslaw was out of this world. This was a pleasant way to end our first day on the GAP.
DAY TWO: CONFLUENCE TO CUMBERLAND: 64 MILES

Due to the lateness of our breakfast at the Confluence House, we did not leave Confluence until around 9:30. This was fine since the weather was good and all we had to do all day was to ride anyway so there was no cause to start off with a negative attitude.

There are many bridges over the Cassleman River. We lost count how many times we crossed the river only to re-cross it again a couple of miles later. The twisty trail broke up the monotony of just keeping my head down and watching the trail pass beneath my front wheel.

The trail stayed flat with no noticable positive grade through Rockwood, which has a nice restroom and clean water refills. There is a bicycle shop next to the trail (which was closed when we passed through) and a restaurant in the town itself which appeared to be rather accessible from the trail.

Upon reaching Meyersdale, Maureen reported that she could feel the upward grade starting. Meyersdale has a quaint restored train station with clean restrooms and water. However, by this time we wanted more than trail mix to eat. I asked one of the volunteers at the station whether there was a convenience store nearby. He replied that there was a Sheetz "right around the corner." Well, to get to that "corner" required traveling down, and I mean down, Main Street. When I reached the bottom of Main Street, and having found no Sheetz, I had to turn around and ride up a nearly one mile hill on a fully loaded bike. We were unhappy. I later looked a map and discovered that the Sheetz was around the "corner" which was all the way down Main Street and turn left and travel another 500 yards or so. So it goes.

We continued to climb toward the summit of the GAP, which is indicated as the Eastern Continental Divide. There is a map printed on the wall of the tunnel which proves that Maureen was not hallucinating when she noted that we were climbing for miles. While a 3% grade is not actually considered a climb in Western Pennsylvania, riding up such a grade for miles and hours does take its toll.
After passing through the tunnel through the Eastern Continental Divide, we were rewarded with the stunning vista of the mountains of Pennsylvania stretching into Western Maryland.

Since we were unable to buy food in Meyersdale, we were in somewhat of a rush to get to our destination in Cumberland. Gratefully, we nary pushed a pedal from the pinnacle of the Great Eastern Divide to Frostburg.

Along the way we crossed over the Mason Dixon Line and entered the Ole South. There is a nice little park at the Mason Dixon Line that was built by volunteers and truly merits a stop.

We thought that we would stop in Frostburg on the way to Cumberland for a snack at what we heard was a restored train station and shops. When we saw the switchback ramp that leads from the GAP to Frostburg, we opted to continue to ride the 16 or so miles to our hotel in Cumberland.

At the terminus of the southern point of the GAP there is this nice brass plaque embedded in the sidewalk outside of a restored train station. We had completed the GAP in two days.

We stayed at the Ramada Inn in Cumberland which is nice, but tired. The staff was friendly enough and the free breakfast the next morning was great. Since we were there on a Sunday night, very little was open downtown. As a matter of fact, nothing was open downtown. We went to the Crabby Pig, which is located next to the train station. We had been there before and found the service to be excellent and the food plentiful and reasonable.

All in all a good day to be riding bicycles. Tomorrow is the beginning of the C&O Canal Towpath.
DAY THREE: CUMBERLAND TO HANCOCK: 64 MILES

We left our hotel and headed back to the train station where we ended the GAP the previous day. We could not find any brass plaques embedded in the sidewalk like we had in Pittsburgh and Cumberland, so we started our trek of the C&O at the signpost mounted on the wall. Before we left, we visited the bike shop located right next to the signpost. The bike shop is called the Cumberland Trail Connection and the staff working there are great. They were extremely friendly and gladly lent us a floor pump for our tires. I highly recommend patronizing this shop if a need should ever arise.

The trail crossed the Potomoc River here and we knew we were on the C&O, mainly because we could see a canal to our left. In some places there was water in it, in others, there were nothing but trees and scrub. The indentation of the canal was present for the remainder of the trip.

Our first observation was that the C&O is not the GAP in many respects. Most of the C&O consists of parallel tire tracks and not the wide crushed limestone surface of the GAP. The second observation was the solitude. We rode for hours without seeing another human soul. I was very glad that I over analyzed our needs on a ride such as this by packing a large assortment of tools, repair items and portable food. Because there was no cellular service most of the time, self sufficiency was a necessity. While there are water pumps at the campgrounds located about every five miles along the trail, food is extremely limited.

The original lock houses have been restored at many of the locks along the canal. As a matter of fact, one can even book one for overnight stays. With the seclusion, you could almost visualize the working locks and see the people who inhabited these houses 100 years ago.
I must pass a word of caution about the Paw Paw Tunnel. Avoid the temptation to ride through and get off the bike and push. The surface of the tunnel floor is smooth and slippery limestone that stays wet from the dripping roof. The tunnel is dark and there is water in the canal to the left of a railing of sorts. I had a flashlight and I still could barely see through the mist and condensation.

When I was researching this trip, I read numerous times that Bill's Place in Little Orleans should not be missed. Well, we missed it. There are no signs to Bill's Place or Little Orleans for that matter. We blew right through the opportunity to get insulted at Bill's Place in Little Orleans. As a point of reference, when you come to a large campground called Fifteen Mile Creek Aqueduct, (around Mile Post 140), leave the trail and head out to the road. Bill's Place and Little Orleans is out there yonder somewhere.

After riding on the rough gravel of the C&O for the better part of the day, we were happy when we reached the point where we could switch over from the Canal to the Western Maryland Rail Trail. As you can see on the sign next to Maureen, this divergence is only 4.7 miles past Bill's Place and Little Orleans. The nicest thing about the Western Maryland trail is that it is paved with asphalt and is almost completely shaded by overhanging trees. There is also a slight down grade which was like riding on 120 psi silk sew-ups, if anybody can even remember what they are.

About 12 miles later we were rolling into Hancock and heading to our evening destination at the RiverRun Bed and Breakfast, which was not hard to find since it is located right next to the Western Maryland trail. We were the only lodgers that evening so we had this huge house to ourselves. The proprietor left lots of goodies and snacks for us, which was immensely appreciated.

We went to a family owned restaurant within walking distance of our lodging called the Park and Dine, which sounded familiar to us as the ubiquitous Eat and Park restaurants throughout Western Pennsylvania. Only the Park and Dine was much better. The servers thought we must have been shipwrecked when they took our order and watched the food
disappear. Did I mention either to stock up on food before leaving Cumberland or pay closer attention and don't miss Bill's Place and Little Orleans?

Another good day on the bikes, except that we missed Bill's Place and Little Orleans.

**DAY FOUR: HANCOCK TO HARPER'S FERRY: 66 MILES**

Our host at the RiverRun was gracious enough to understand that we needed to be on the bikes early as possible, so she prepared hard boiled eggs and English muffins with jam for us in the morning.

The Western Maryland Trail runs another 9 miles or so out of Hancock, but abruptly ends in a "tee" intersection with a country road. We learned, thanks to a local sitting on his porch, that one must turn right at the "tee", go downhill and at a sharp bend bearing to the left watch for a yellow gate on the right. This is the only indication that you are in the vicinity of the Canal. If you start up a huge hill after the sharp left bend, you missed the entry point. Thank goodness for the locals; otherwise, we would still be looking for the entry point.

We noticed on the map that the town of Williamsport was located at approximately Mile Post 100, which means that we could possibly have a real lunch for the first time. When we reached Williamsport, we left the trail and pedaled up Main Street only to find that the restaurants were closed. Thankfully, we found out through a post woman that there was a Sheetz one block away! We enjoyed a made to order brunch, along with an assortment of convenience store goodies. Oddly enough, no trail guide we read mentions this Sheetz. Well, here it is: Leave the trail through the visitor center parking lot and head up the hill and then down the hill. The Sheetz is on the right.

It was difficult to resist taking a siesta after our mid-morning Sheetz extravaganza, but we nevertheless pedaled onward. At about Mile Post 88 or so, we reached an area known as the Slackwater, which is a wide and calm part of the Potomac formed by Dam No. 4. What is interesting about this section of the Canal is that there is a sidewalk built into the side of the mountain. We were lucky to be riding on a weekday because there is not much room to pass oncoming traffic as can be seen in the picture at left. I am not sure how long the paving was present, but I know that the Slackwater area goes on for miles. There are some interesting blind corners along Slackwater that could be challenging on a wet day or in heavy traffic.
The Canal on this segment is pretty much the same as we have already experienced previously. There seemed to be more water in the Canal and more places to stop along the way. We had beautiful weather so every turn became another photo opportunity. Then came Harper’s Ferry.

None of the trip reports mentioned "The Stairs" in Harper’s Ferry. The Canal does not run to Harper’s Ferry. It is across the river, so to cross the river, one must carry one's bicycle and gear up a spiral staircase to the bridge.

Rather than to unload two fully loaded tour bikes only a mile from our evening destination, I instead carried each bike up the stairs to the bridge which led, thankfully to the welcome sign indicating that we had reached our destination. Not.

Our bed and breakfast was another uphill mile away to the top of the mountain. The proprietor of the Jackson Rose Bed and Breakfast offered a shuttle when I registered, but I, foolishly, declined. I made it to the top but Maureen struggled after finishing a 66 mile day on the Canal.

Dinner options are extremely limited in the area of our lodging. One restaurant, the Anvil, was closed and the other one, the Canal House may as well have been closed because they ignored our presence for 15 minutes before we left. They did not say goodbye either.

We ended up having a great dinner at a little Italian place called Mena's which was a short walk from the Jackson Rose. We ate like refugees again much to the surprise of our server.
Our hosts at the Jackson Rose knew we needed to leave early the next morning so that we could arrive in DC by 1:00, so they made us bagged breakfasts of yogurt, bananas and a muffin as well as preparing the coffee pot the night before. We highly recommend the Jackson Rose as the place to stay in Harper's Ferry.

**DAY FIVE: HARPER'S FERRY TO DC: 66 MILES**

Our goal was to reach DC by 1:00 so that we would have some time to take some victory photos and still have enough time to box our bikes at Union Station for the train ride back to Pittsburgh. Our gracious hosts prepared bag breakfasts for us, as previously noted, and we were dressed and out the door at sunrise. We got to ride down the one mile hill in the dark and ended up at The Stairs right as the sun was breaking the horizon.

The Canal from this point was pretty much the same as when we left Hancock. It was still to our left, only now there seemed to be more intact locks and lock houses. There was definitely more water in the remnants of the canal. There were thousands of turtles it seemed sunning themselves on the logs protruding from the water in the canal.

Maureen and I put our heads down and pedalled hard with minimal stops. Be forewarned that food services are extremely scarce on this segment of the Canal, so pack enough food to last you for the day. There most likely will not be an opportunity to restock on this segment.

Harper's Ferry is roughly located at Mile Post 60. The next real interesting spot to stop was not until we reached Mile Post 15, which is Great Falls. There is a restored canal boat there along with a restored inn. There is an operational lock of sorts so we got to see how one looked before it deteriorated into the ruins we have been looking at for three days.
The restored inn had a small museum with helpful volunteers who were more than happy to talk about the history of the C&O Canal. There are also clean restrooms and water fountains. And there are some great falls, too.

There were also many tourists at Great Falls who paid more attention to taking selfies with their smart phones rather than to share the trail with two loaded touring bicycles. One should exercise great caution from here almost to DC and watch for darting dogs, children, and tourists.

We made excellent time to the outskirts of Georgetown. Then all heck broke loose. I am now going to provide some information I hope the reader will find helpful when entering Georgetown. I read many trip reports of through rides on the GAP/C&O and none of them detailed the perils and pitfalls encountered at the DC end of the Canal.

First and foremost, one must keep in mind that DC is a big city with lots of people. Entering Georgetown is a constant reminder of this fact. The trail narrows to a sliver and there are people everywhere. Also, the trail crosses from the right side of the Canal to the left side. The crossing is not marked very well and we discovered this fact when we deadended into a building at the edge of a parking lot. We asked a helpful local who directed us to the trail which was reached by crossing a bridge with a steep set of stairs. I picked my bike first and when I did the local picked up Maureen’s bike and followed me. Who says there are not kind people left in the world.

The trail at this point was a single track with a building to the left and the canal to the right and people everywhere. We pushed our loaded bikes from this point on. After crossing several busy Georgetown streets, we came to an anticlimatic end of the journey. There was no brass plaque embedded in the sidewalk. There was only a closed visitors center.
If you are still reading this, stay with me a moment longer especially if you are planning a through ride to DC and will take the train back. Once you pass through the visitor center, you will see Lock 3 to your right. Pass this lock and follow the sidewalk to a "tee." This is the Rock Creek Trail such as it is. It is more like a sidewalk that follows the Rock Creek Parkway. Turn right at this "tee" and follow the sidewalk until you come to an intersection with Ohio Street. Look to your left and you will see the side of the Lincoln Memorial at this point. Cross Ohio Street and stay on the sidewalk until you get to the Lincoln Memorial. You will now be on the mall.

We rode over the the Korean War Memorial and then down through the mall until we reached the World War II memorial. We crossed over to Jefferson Street and followed this street past the museums until we reached 3rd Street. We turned left and rode to Constitution. Then we turned right on Constitution and continued to Louisiana Street. We turned left on Lousiana and continued to the statue pictured above left. This is Union Station.

We entered Union Station with two filthy fully loaded touring bikes looking like we just lived out of bicycle saddlebags for five days. The nice thing about appearing in this condition was that nobody bothered us and the crowd parted to let us through. I had previously purchased our Amtrak tickets for a Deluxe Sleeper, so all we had to to was to check in and buy boxes for our bikes.

Boxing the bikes was easier than expected. I paid $10 each for a box which was delivered speedily by an Amtrak baggage handler. He said he could not touch the bikes, but he helped us put the boxes together and slide the bikes in once I turned the handlebars and removed the pedals. He stayed with us until we were fully loaded. I wasn't sure whether he was permitted to accept tips, but I gave him one anyway.

Once the bikes were boxed and carted away, Maureen and I carried our filthy saddlebags to a pizza place in the station and had a slice while we waited for our train.
Actually, the train ride was a highlight of the trip. Our Superliner Roomette consisted of two high back recliners and ample space for our four saddle bags. There is a shower in the car which included towels, washcloths and soap with plenty of hot water. Dinner was also included. Maureen had a steak and I had a cheeseburger.

The seven hour ride seemed to fly. We pulled the upper bunk down and Maureen slept for three hours while I just read. Before we knew it we were pulling into the station in Pittsburgh. I did not know what to expect of Amtrak since this was my first experience, but I can report without exaggeration that Amtrak runs a first rate operation. All of the employees we encountered were courteous and friendly. It's truly a shame that there are not more opportunities to travel by train these days.

And that was it. We had completed the GAP/C&O through ride in five days.

EPILOGUE

I think that many factors converged, mostly out of sheer luck, which made our trip successful and enjoyable. The weather was phenomenal. There was not one drop of rain for five days and almost 350 miles. The trail was dry and stable. The sun shone every day, which made riding very pleasant.

Our equipment performed flawlessly. I bought an REI Novara brand Mazama cyclocross bike in May. I was running 40 mm tires with 80 pounds of pressure. The bike was amazing. Maureen was riding a 15 year old Trek 820 which had 40 mm tires pumped to 75 pounds. We had it completely serviced at our local REI and it was better than new. Neither of us had a flat or any other mechanical issues at all.

I bought two sets of REI Novara panniers which clipped to our racks. They were extremely stable and held everything we needed for our five day trip. Having traveled extensively on motorcycles in the past, both of us knew how to pack only essentials and to avoid the urge to over pack. This is especially so when you have to physically move the extra weight using your legs.

Both of us realized that we would be walking off of the bikes throughout the trip. I opted for Power Grip straps and trail running shoes. Maureen wore light hiking shoes with traditional toe straps. We were both glad that we did not use our standard clipless pedals and bike shoes.

Was it worth the time? Definitely. Anybody with any interest in bicycling at all must add a through ride of the GAP/C&O on the list of rides to do. It was challenging not so much in a brute physical sense, but more so in the planning logistics and time management. And the
butt on the bike seat thing is a definite consideration. As long as one takes the time to adequately plan and engage in a moderate amount of physical preparation, a through ride is completely achievable.

I hope that anybody reading this ride report can glean a helpful hint or two that may aid in planning a trip of their own in the future. In closing I have added a few random photos that we took along the way. Enjoy!