Back Into the Wild

Sean Penn and Jon Krakauer bring the haunting story of Chris McCandless to a new generation.

Biking: 6 Classic Fall Rides

THE BIG TRIP: GOOD MIGRATIONS

PERFORMANCE: ALTITUDE 101

GALÁPAGOS IN CRISIS

EXTREME PHOTOGRAPHY
Chasing the Global Meltdown

FALL STYLE
Peak Season in Patagonia

OCTOBER 2007
ALLEGHENY THRWAY: The Paw Paw Tunnel at mile 156 along the new GAP-C&O bike path is one of four that will pass through between Washington, D.C., and Pittsburgh.
Smack in the center of the mid-Atlantic, the new 300-plus-mile GAP-C&O Canal Towpath slices through the heart of the Appalachians—and gives mountain bikers a glimpse of American history along the way. It just might be the East's ultimate autumn trip.

By Jim Gorman

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD WILLIAMS
Look closely at a satellite image of North America at night and you'll find that even in the brightest blots of white, there are dark traces promising wildness and seclusion. My companions and I had found one such seam, and we were working it.

After a late start on the Great Allegheny Passage—Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Towpath, the longest unpaved bike route east of the Mississippi, we were rushing westward in total darkness. During an hour of hard riding, not a single beacon of light, whether from a car, house, or parking lot, had broken the inky spell—even though we were technically within the Washington, D.C., metro area.

Then out of the black came a flash and a roar. Through leafless trees to my right the illuminated passenger compartments of a fast-moving commuter train barreled past. Distracted by the spectral sight of homeward-bound office workers floating through the night woods, I swerved into a quagmire. Wheels hit mud at precisely the wrong angle and, slam, down I went, bike, trailer, and all.

"Oh man, that's got to hurt," said my friend Dan Seligman as he rode up on the wreckage. I checked for any protruding bones.

"As long as you're taking a break, mind if I adjust my cleats?" joked David Dickinson, who rounded out our headlamp-armed threesome.

The nearly completed GAP-C&O route between D.C. and Pittsburgh removes riders so quickly and thoroughly from civilization that modern intrusions can knock you on your backside. For 335 miles, bikers will travel in a green bubble, blissfully insulated from cars, trucks, and most any other technological invention to come along since the steam locomotive. The trail, a happy accident of the industrial revolution, follows the abandoned rights-of-way of defunct railroads and a canal, bores through mountains in long tunnels, and vaults deep river valleys on steel-girded bridges. Along the way, it showcases a deep cross section of American history and the remarkable amount of open land still to be found on the eastern seaboard. Just outside the cocoon, a dozen or so former rail and canal towns pepper the route. Which means that a four-poster bed and a plate of pan-seared halibut are just a short detour away.

Autumn, as we found, is the best time to make the ride. Days are usually warm, nights cool, and as the leaves drop, expansive views extend over the Potomac, Casselman, and Youghiogheny Rivers. At the time we began, late last fall, a final section of the GAP-C&O hadn't opened yet, but would in a few weeks. By securing the go-ahead to ride it, we could earn lifetime bragging rights as the first visitors to officially pedal the length of the near-completed route.

A delayed departure due to equipment problems at milepost 0 in D.C.'s Georgetown district had already put that plan in jeopardy. If we pulled up short today, Thursday, the cascade effect would scuttle our carefully wrought scheme to drive home from Steelers country to Redskins territory on Monday. Hence the night riding—and the spill in the mud. Guidebooks recommend seven or more days to cover the route, but in a sporting effort, Dan, David, and I decided to try it in five.

Our itinerary left us with a daily quota...
of 65 miles, which seemed ambitious but doable. David's a category four bike racer, Dan's a hammerhead who puts in 80 miles a week on his bike, and our route promised to be level. The GAP-C&O, after all, doesn't so much roll up and over the intervening Appalachian and Allegheny Mountains as plow straight through, courtesy of the twin forces of erosion and 19th-century TNT. But flat, we were about to learn, doesn't always equal easy.

IF, LIKE ME, you're a cyclist whose riding consists of road outings spent hugging the white line as SUVs rocket past and half-day mountain bike blitzes, then the GAP-C&O comes as a revelation. Among long-distance, off-pavement bike trails in the U.S., only the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route (2,490 miles) exceeds it in length. None rival it at presenting history on the fly. The route is a fusion of two existing trails (the GAP and the C&O Canal Towpath, go figure), and riding it is a lesson in the age-old American impulse to open the West and make a quick buck. Since the days of George Washington, whose Patowmack Company blasted channels around rapids so daring boatmen could transport goods, the natural cleft in the Appalachians carved by the Potomac River has attracted visionaries consumed with dreams of empire.

Though you can ride the GAP-C&O east to west or west to east, we decided to stick with the flow of history and set out on the C&O, the older and more authentically adventurous part of the route. The canal, which connects Georgetown to Cumberland, Maryland, was begun in 1828 and intended to shuttle coal and grain from the inland mountains to East Coast ports more efficiently than Washington's river runners. It was obsolete even before completion; by the late 1800s faster and cheaper railroads had driven a spike through its heart. Today the canal trail courses along the berm once trod by mule teams pulling barges loaded with cargo. Along the way whitewashed lock houses and intricate stone retaining walls are all that mark the waterway's former passage.

After camping the first night at Bald Eagle Island, one of 30 hiker-biker sites on the banks of the Potomac, the three of us spent Friday riding through some of the Civil War's most contested ground. General Robert E. Lee twice led his army north across the C&O, first to a tactical draw at Antietam and then to defeat at Gettysburg. Antietam's Sunken Road and infamous stone bridge, somber reminders of the bloodiest day of battle in American history, are easy side treks from the towpath.
We swept upriver in big looping arcs, through alleys of mottled white sycamore, past long cliff lines, and always with the broad waters of the Potomac to our left. The sound of our wheels crunching a carpet of golden leaves spooked a 12-point buck; we raced it for nearly a mile until the big fellow bounded away. Determined to avoid more night riding, we accelerated our pace from the day before. Dan and David formed a peloton and I drafted behind. For miles on end, our conversational highlights consisted of “mud left!” and “mud right!” Once or twice we passed a rogue cyclist, but otherwise we were alone.

Despite our best efforts, autumn’s short days won out and darkness overtook us at the river town of Williamsport, Maryland. We were past the halfway point on the C&O—nearly a third of the entire route—but unbelievably still 25 miles shy of Hancock, our goal for the day. After tugging on jackets and gassing up on energy bars, we rode the canal across a small river, with our headlamps blazing. A night of bumping in the dark lay ahead of us.

While the GAP, which follows abandoned rail lines from Cumberland to Pittsburgh, is a wide, smooth tread of packed gravel, the C&O is, for the most part, a rough and muddy doubletrack. The miles come hard, especially when you’re weighted down with panniers or a trailer. Our saving grace was locating the Western Maryland Rail Trail, a paved path that briefly parallels the C&O, to ease our final 11 miles into Hancock. At Weaver’s Restaurant & Bakery, we loaded up on pork chops and blueberry pie. The place is legendary among C&O cyclists, and the waitresses didn’t bat an eye at three haggard and mud-caked riders walking in five minutes before closing. “I’m surprised I can even move,” Dan said, flagging down our server to get more whipped cream.

Gearing Down
THE ESSENTIALS FOR MOUNTING YOUR OWN MULTIDAY BIKE TRIP

WHAT TO RIDE: If you plan to be out for several days, consider a cross-country-style bike, such as the new Gary Fisher Montara ($1,150; www.fisherbikes.com) or the Specialized Tricross Sport ($1,100; www.specialized.com) equipped with wide, nubby tires. Either will handle the mud and bumps on the C&O but also roll nicely on the packed, crushed limestone surface of the GAP. Whatever bike you ride, make sure it has suspension in the front fork or seat post to ease constant jarring, fenders to keep mud splattering to a minimum, and bar ends to offer multiple hand positions.

WHAT TO CARRY: Stash all your gear in water-resistant rear panniers, such as the Arkel T-42 ($189 per pair; www.arkel-ox.com), or tow a one-wheeled Bob Yak trailer ($299; www.bobtrailers.com). Flat tires are a fact of life on the trail, so don’t leave home without a patch kit and pump.

WHAT TO WEAR: Autumn conditions can range from sunny and 80 degrees to rainy and 45 degrees. Protect your hands with waterproof and insulated gloves, like the Pearl Izumi AmFib ($65; www.pearlizumi.com). Give your feet the same attention with the Cannondale L.E. Max booties ($60; www.cannondale.com). Shed water and mud with the Cannondale Morphis shell ($100) and Cannondale Kold Fusion pants ($170). Two pairs of high-quality bike shorts are key: one to wear while the other dries after a quick wash in the hotel sink. We like the Pearl Izumi Vertex Microsensor shorts ($120) and the Cannondale Fourteen 40 Carbon shorts ($120). —J.G.
1. Best Day Trip: The Class V Upper Youghiogheny River in Ohiopyle State Park is one of the East Coast's best whitewater runs.

2. Best Eats: The lauded River's Edge Café and B&B in Confluence draws crowds from as far away as Pittsburgh.

3. Best Climb: Big Savage Mountain near Cumberland doles it out with 24 relentless miles to the top of the Eastern Continental Divide.

4. Best Bike Shop: C&O Bicycle (www.candobicycle.com) in Hancock offers a full-service shop along with overnight bunks.

5. Best Quiet Moment: At Antietam, near Sharpsburg, you can pay homage to one of the Civil War's most infamous battles.

THE VITALS

CYCLING: Riders should plan to cover 45 miles a day. Free campgrounds, each fitted with water and toilet facilities, are situated roughly every five miles along the C&O. Campgrounds are less frequent on the GAP.

Mountainside Bike Tours runs fully supported rides on the GAP-C&O ($850; www.mountainsidebiketours.net).

LODGES: The Jacob Rohrbach Inn ($129; www.jacob-rohrbach.hypermart.net) in Sharpsburg is within walking distance of Antietam. In Cumberland, the Inn at Walnut Bottom ($112; www.iwbinfo.com) is biker friendly. The River's Edge Café and B&B ($75; 814-395-5059) overlooks the Youghiogheny River in Confluence.

GETTING BACK: Amtrak runs trains between Pittsburgh and Washington ($42; www.amtrak.com). Freedom Trail Riders arranges shuttles along the length of the GAP-G&O ($190 from Pittsburgh to D.C.; $60 for each additional person; www.freedomtrailriders.com).

EASTERN PASSAGE At 335 miles, the Great Allegheny Passage-Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Towpath is the longest off-road bike route east of the Mississippi. With old railroad tunnels, aqueducts, and Civil War battlefields—all packed among Appalachian peaks—this soon-to-be-completed trail is an American classic in the making.

detour. The grand opening wasn't scheduled for another few weeks, but with permission from the Allegheny Trail Alliance, David and I ducked the construction barriers and began the grueling ascent of Big Savage Mountain.

"Will this thing ever end?" David yelled to me from his lead position. The grade up the mountain maxes at a moderate 1.75 percent, but it doesn't relent for 24 miles until topping the Eastern Continental Divide at an elevation of 2,390 feet. We both swore the ensuing ten miles were tilted uphill as well, but the guidebook said otherwise. Not that it much mattered. For the first time in more than 200 miles we were savoring top-down views. Below us a patchwork of forest and farms covered long ridges that receded in rank into the distance.

We entered the half-mile-long Big Savage Tunnel, the crowning achievement of the trail alliance's effort to open the GAP-C&O. It cost $12 million and took four years to rehabilitate. Today it was doubling as a wind tunnel, channeling the gusts hitting the backside of the mountain through its narrow opening. David and I shifted into low gear and shouted to hear each other.

As we plowed deeper into the coal country of the Allegheny Mountains, it was difficult to comprehend that just a century earlier the surrounding valleys had been an industrial wasteland. The mountains were shorn of all saleable trees, mines pocked the hillsides, and thousands of bootleg coke ovens fouled the air with pollution thick enough to choke the sun's rays. These days, in a testament to the recuperative power of nature, the forest has regrown, clear-running streams tumble toward the big rivers, and only a practiced eye could discern slag heaps and other man-made scars.

Near Garrett, Pennsylvania, we glimpsed a potential second act for these struggling mountain towns: eight giant
windmills in the Green Mountain Wind Farm spinning lazily in a stiff breeze.

We spent our fourth and final night at the River’s Edge Café and B&B in Confluence, Pennsylvania, having arrived once again in the dark, by now a reluctant tradition. White Christmas lights strung in the trees created the warmest welcome two weary riders could imagine. Views of the Youghiogheny River flowing by were so good and our bodies so sore the next morning that we lingered long before saddling up. In the miles up ahead we passed through Ohiopyle State Park, one of the biggest parks in Pennsylvania and a hiker’s dream, and Ohiopyle itself, the once forgotten town remade by whitewater rafting. At our finish in McKeesport, just outside Pittsburgh (the remaining 19 miles of trail into the city center will be completed in late 2008), David and I high-fived, snapped some photos, then followed our noses to the nearest restaurant.

On the drive back home from Pittsburgh, I marveled at how far we had come in five days—and how quickly our vehicle undid our mighty effort. But in a way that seemed only fitting. Our secluded riverside route, sure to become an outdoor classic, is a dividend of American capitalism’s unending process of creative destruction, which churns industries and entire ways of life. In the beginning, the canal wiped out George Washington’s Patowmack Company and its brave river runners. Then the railroads followed the canal. Lastly, highways decimated the railroads. As we sped along Interstate 70, I could see into the future: This roadbed was going to make one fine bike trail someday.

**VIEWS OF THE YOUGHIOGHENY RIVER FLOWING BY WERE SO GOOD AND OUR BODIES SO SORE THE NEXT MORNING THAT WE LINGERED LONG BEFORE SADDLING UP.**

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**GOING THE DISTANCE**

FIVE LONG-HAUL MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAILS THAT PAIR BACKCOUNTRY BLITZES WITH FRONT-COUNTRY COMFORTS

1. **OC&E WOODS LINE STATE TRAIL**
   - **OREGON, 99 MILES.** Millions of board feet of lumber were hauled out of the Sprague River Watershed to clear this abandoned railway. Now adventure-seeking bikers can ride from Klamath Falls into Fremont and Winema National Forests to admire ponderosa-covered mountains, rolling ranchland, and distant views of Mount Shasta. The trail—and the countryside—becomes progressively wilder as you leave Klamath Falls behind, culminating at the 400-foot-long Merritt Creek Trestle.
   - [www.oregon.gov/oprd](http://www.oregon.gov/oprd)

2. **JOHN WAYNE PIONEER TRAIL**
   - **WASHINGTON, 109 MILES.** Let’s clear a few things up: The Duke never wore bike shorts and the early pioneers entered Washington from the south. Nevertheless, this whimsically named rail-trail between Seattle’s eastern suburbs and the Columbia River delivers Panavision-worthy scenery, with dramatic trestles and the two-mile-long Snoqualmie Tunnel easing the route through the Cascades. The trail surface is packed gravel, and hiker-biker campsites and several state parks along the way make it simple to plot a trip. Plans are afoot to link with other bike trails to create a continuous off-road route to Spokane and beyond.
   - [www.wa.gov](http://www.wa.gov)

3. **COWBOY TRAIL**
   - **NEBRASKA, 195 MILES.** Flyover country never looked so good. The Cowboy Trail traces an old railroad route through prairie, marshland, and lush river valleys. Construction this summer extended the path from Norfolk on the Elkhorn River to Valentine on the edge of the Sandhills, where prairie grass covers 30-story-high sand dunes. Small towns along the way offer food, lodging, and camping. When completed, the 321-mile route will be one of the longest continuous rail-trails in the nation.
   - [www.gnc.state.ne.us](http://www.gnc.state.ne.us)

4. **GEORGE S. MICKELSON TRAIL**
   - **SOUTH DAKOTA, 195 MILES.** Think of this as the pannier-toters’ version of the rough-and-tumble Maah Daah Hey Trail. Spanning more than a hundred bridges and changing through four tunnels, the Mickelson Trail traverses the Black Hills, mostly in national forest. Scenery is diverse, with excellent mountain views, and riding north to south minimizes elevation gain. Towns along the route offer B&Bs and hotels; private and public campgrounds also line the trail.
   - [www.mickelsontrailcoalition.com](http://www.mickelsontrailcoalition.com)

5. **KETTLE VALLEY RAIL TRAIL**
   - **BRITISH COLUMBIA, 263 MILES.** A rail-trail system as big and wild as B.C. itself, the Kettle Valley Rail Trail surmounts three mountain ranges and tucks surging rivers into remote areas populated by brown and black bears, moose, and mountain sheep. Scenery shifts from cool montane forests to orchards to one of Canada’s few pocket deserts. Count on a gentle grade but highly variable trail conditions, including deep sand and knee-high stream crossings. Begin the planning process with Cycling the Kettle Valley Railway (Heritage House, $22), which details routes, campsites, and highlights.
   - [www.spiritof2010trail.ca](http://www.spiritof2010trail.ca)

—J.G.