Pittsburgh, PA to Cumberland MD Youth Group Trip

The following is a report of a group ride that 9 young men (14-18) and 3 adults took on the week of June 17, 2019 from Pittsburgh, PA to Cumberland, MD. There were not many reports of a large group moving through the passage, so I thought this might be useful to others who were interested in doing a similar trip with a relatively large group of inexperienced cyclists. We were trying to keep the cost down so that meant that we camped each night rather than trying to find rooms to rent. We also brought all of our food with us so that we didn’t need to plan stops along the way to shop for food.

PREPARATION-

Because none of us were avid cyclists and because some of the young men wanted to earn the cycling merit badge we did a program of prep work before the ride. We did 2 rides at 10 miles each, 2 at 15 miles each and 2 at 25 miles each. We did a ride every 2-3 weeks starting in early March. The last ride was done in late May. If I do this again, I would try to do the rides on consecutive weekends. Our prep rides were too far spaced out. I think prep rides closer together would have prepared some to sit on a bike seat more comfortably for longer periods of time.

We had a range of bikes (26 in, 29 in, hybrid and mountain bikes) that all perform very well. We all live in the Wilmington Delaware area so we took a 15 passenger van and truck with a 20 foot trailer. We had 12 rides and two drivers. We took 16 bikes in case we had some breakdowns that we couldn’t repair on the road and so that the drivers could ride once they moved the vehicles to the next stop point. We thought it was important have reasonable access to the vehicles in case there was an emergency and we had to get everyone off the trail.

Because we were far from home and not avid cyclists we decided to have our truck/trailer and the van meet us at lunch time and every evening. The truck would carry all our gear (tents, camp chairs, clothes, food) and make the ride much easier and enjoyable for the young men. When we rode we only carried bike tools, tubes, tire pump, water and snacks for breaks. Each rider carried a small back pack (cinch sack) or fanny pack. Some boys had storage compartments they had attached to the bikes. In addition, because we were meeting the truck and van, we didn’t need to worry about weight or space constraints when thinking about food, water and camping gear.
DAY 1 – June 17, Monday

We left at 7 am and drove to Pittsburgh (5.5 hours). We unloaded the bikes and geared up and were ready to ride by 1:30 pm. We started at Point State Park fountain. From this fountain you can see the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers to form the Ohio river. Across the river you can see Heinz field where the Pittsburgh Steelers play. As we posed for the picture it began to rain. This was to a sign of the next 5 days. It rained every day. However, we enjoyed the rain. We knew that this time of year we would likely have rain but we prefer that to the hot and humid streaks that can come to this area (and did as it turns out!) in July and August. We didn’t have our gear with us on the bikes, it was in the back of the truck which had a topper that kept everything dry. The rain was refreshing and kept the temperatures cool. At times it rained really hard, but not for long periods of time. The trail held up well as there were no soggy muddy places on the trail that couldn’t easily be avoided. Some areas had very shallow puddles, but the ground was still relative firm under the water even in the heavy rain. The first part of the trial through Pittsburgh is all concrete and pavement. In the city there are lots of interesting building and bridges, etc to see. It wasn’t always easy to see the trail when in the city so you have to watch for the signs and markers. You also had to watch out for cars when crossing roads and you may have to wait 5 minutes for a train. It was our intent on the first day to ride to Apache Springs Campsite. We thought we would be able to get the vehicles to that location as Google map shows a road to it. However, the road turned out to be a private road and the vehicles could not access the campground. This was our first change in plans. We had to make adjustments. We rode about 2 miles further down and came to the town of Buena Vista where we could access the trucks. We made our case to the owner of the Buena Vista VFC Swimming Pool and he allowed us to sleep on the grassy area next to the pool. We could us a porta potty that was about 0.25 miles away on the trail. We were grateful that he bailed us out. Please don’t plan on using the swimming pool property or bother the nice owner who allowed us to stay there. If I were to do this trip again and wanted to meet vehicles I would probably look to stay in West Newton. This would have made for a longer first day, but a shorter second day.
Day 2 – June 18

This was our longest day on the bikes. We went to from Buena Vista to Ohiopyle. We left at 8 am and reached Ohiopyle at 3 pm. We had reserved campsites at Ohio Pyle State Campground. There is a short trail that goes from the Great Allegheny Passage up to the park, but I had read that it was steep and about a quarter mile. We decided to have the truck/trailer and van pick us up in Ohiopyle and transport us up to the park. Once at the campsite we were able to unhooked our trailer and were able to park the truck, trailer and van in a close location to the camping sites. The campsites we stayed in were really small (dogwood road, sites 59, 60 and 61). While they advertise that you can put two tents in each campsite we could only do that if we were next to the fire pit. So we couldn’t have fires at two of the campsites. Site 61 was large enough for two tents and still have a fire. Because it had been raining so much the tables at each campsite were damp/wet and slimy. Overall, the second day went smoothly.

Day 3 – June 19

We planned to take a day off the bikes and do some white water rafting in Ohiopyle. Ohiopyle is a great little town, lots of river rafting outfitters. I have used a couple of different ones and they all seem pretty similar, with similar prices. We did the lower Yough. It was a lot of fun but we were tired and ready to be off the water by the time we were finished. We had three rafts that day. The water was very comfortable, it was overcast (and rained), and the water was fast. One boat flipped twice dumping everyone out. Another raft had everyone fall out at one point. The last raft stayed upright and no one fell into the water. After the rafting trip we went into town, found ice cream cones and walked along the river front. It was really nice and the people were very friendly.
Day 4 – June 20

After being off the bikes for a day, we were all excited to get on the bikes and start the next day. We had about 40 miles to do. The truck and van took us back down to the parking lot where they had picked us up a few days earlier. The weather was cool, and it was overcast. We unloaded the bikes, geared up and started to ride at about 8 am as it started to rain. It would rain at a moderate rate steadily for a couple of hours that morning, but the boys, bikes, and trail held up. It was the one time during the trip that the rain while riding was getting old. By mid-morning they were muddy mess and it was a little bit cool as well. Our goal was to make it to Meyersdale to be able to watch the US Women’s National Team player a soccer game in the World Cup Tournament at 3 pm. There were some very scenic views and some great engineering projects on the trail this day.

It rained that day until lunch time. However just after lunch the rain stopped and it began to warm up. We rode the rest of the day in warm weather. That afternoon we pulled into the Pennsylvania Maple Festival Fairgrounds. It is a steep drop from the trail down into town. The boys loved this camping area. It had hot showers, flushing toilets and we were able to set up tents under a pavilion where we were protected from the rain. It would not rain on us while we slept for the first time on the trip. The fairgrounds are off the trail and more in center of town, which meant they had access to pizza, ice cream places and lots of small stores. We found a big screen TV at Albrights Pizza ($8/all you can eat pizza) where we were able to watch the soccer game that we wanted to see and eat all the pizza they could make pretty much. If you have a chance to stop there you should take it.
The food was really good and they had great service. The rest of the day and evening we walked around town and relaxed at the fairgrounds.

Day 5 June 21

Leaving the fairgrounds in Meysdale we rode up the hill to get back on the trail. The weather was overcast all day but it only rained for a few minutes early in the day. The ride to Cumberland was the best day. We were able to reach Cumberland by 11 am. We also stopped more on this day to take pictures and checkout the scenery. On the way to Cumberland from Meyersdale you cross the Eastern Continental divide and it’s all downhill from there. As we rode downhill we passed many cyclists heading the other. They were working hard to get up the hill. We were not sure how much the downhill would aid in our biking speed. While most of the trip we averaged (with stops) about 10 mph, on the downhill section I could coast at 14 mph. Needless to say, the downhill section went much easier. The vehicle drivers had purchased pizza and drinks so that when we arrived we loaded our gear ate and were on our way home by noon.

All things considered we have a fabulous time on the trail. We had four minor accidents where knees and hands were scrapped up. Only one flat tire and that happened in the first 100 ft from the starting point. We had a lot of fun and the young men really enjoyed spending time with one another. We can’t wait to get out there again.