

Venture Crew 33
Fanwood, NJ

C&O Canal NHP Bicycle Trip
July 18-23, 2009

Cumberland, MD to Washington, D.C.

1. Summary:

A challenging biking trip on the C&O Canal towpath leading from Cumberland, Maryland to the heart of Washington, D.C. through a National Historic Park. The path is approximately 187 miles paralleling the Potomac River with Park maintained campsites every 5 miles or so. Possible sights are the Antietam Battleground located just off the trail, the historic Paw-Paw Tunnel and restored lockhouses manned by the Park Service, Harpers Ferry National Historic area and Washington D.C. Can stay in Washington at the International Youth Hostel and keep the bikes locked there. Scouts can fulfill requirements for Camping, Cycling Merit Badges, and the 50-Miler award. As this is a point-to-point trip, cars will need to be relocated or shuttled back to Cumberland. A chase car is recommended and can stay in contact with the biking group fairly easily all along the route.

No reservations are needed (or taken) for most of the campsites – they are small and are first-come, first-served. There are only a couple of sites that will take reservations and these are recommended at least several months in advance for any trips in the summer. All campsites have potable well water, picnic tables and at least 1 portable toilet. All camp gear and food for the trip were carried on the bicycles in panniers, on bike racks, and in 2 trailing child carrier wagons attached to the bikes. A chase car followed but did not carry any gear. Expect to make 9-11 miles per hour without stops due to the trail composition (packed dirt and/or cinder). Flat path with slight drops at the frequently occurring locks. Can swim in the Potomac for most of the upper part of the river. There are no provisions for trash, so you must pack your trash out.

2. Participants:

Advisers Thomas Loop, Rose Cubbon, Elizabeth Leeper, Nancy Cubbon (chase car)

Crew 7 Youth

3. Itinerary:

Day 1, Arrival and Start of Journey, Purslane Run Campsite: 25 miles – Drove from NJ to Cumberland, MD National Park Service Visitor Center (drive is 5 hours via Interstates 78, 81, 64). Cars may be parked in the NP parking area free of charge located nearby. Two of our cars were relocated to Greenbelt Metro Station just outside Washington D.C. (the drivers then joined us at our campsite). Took to trail by noon after collecting the latest info on the trail and lunch. Arrived Purslane Run around mile 159. Passed the convergence of the North and South Branches of the Potomac River. Water is cool here for swimming. Area is mountainous, with West Virginia on the other side of the Potomac. At one point, beach is just 50 yards across the river - can swim to another state!

Day 2, Paw Paw Tunnel, Little Pool Campsite: 40 miles – Biked through the famous historic Paw Paw Tunnel, 3118 ft long, that took 7 years to complete. Path is narrow and is shared with the canal through the tunnel. Great scenery along the whole way, as the canal follows the river which is just yards away. Saw a 5-6' black snake at lunch leisurely crossing the trail. Expect lots of wildlife and food searching critters, so plan to hang bear bags at night (not necessarily to avoid bears but the “mini-bears”). Pass the Hancock Visitor Center around mile 125.

Day 3, Antietam, Horseshoe Bend Campsite: 40 miles – Horseshoe Bend campsite is near access to Antietam Battleground. Plan to arrive as early as possible to leave time to visit the Battleground, which is several miles from the canal through access by local roads. Note detour on local roads for 3-4 miles at mile 89 as canal path is closed for this stretch rejoining the towpath at mile 85. Passed the Williamsport Visitor Center at Williamsport at mile 100, a good place to lunch, meet the chase car, or use facilities. Rained overnight and trail was soft with many puddles and soft places, making traveling harder. Expect to get dirty and wet from flying dirt. Have passed 32 locks by this point.

Day 4, Harpers Ferry, Turtle Run Campsite: 40 miles – Air is much warmer here, as well as the river. Visit Harpers Ferry Historic places free that are run by the Park Service. It was hot but there were many ice cream parlors willing to ameliorate the heat. The Appalachian Trail crosses through here, so get a picture on the trail. Cross over to Harpers Ferry on foot on the tremendous bridge over the Potomac and view the mighty Shenandoah River rushing the Potomac at the tip of the town. Virginia greets the viewer on the opposite side of the river from this point onward.

Day 5, Washington D.C., IYH 35 miles – With lighter loads due to most of the food gone, can make good time into D.C. Stop at the Great Falls Park with rushing rock falls and overlooks. More people using the towpath for running and walking as one enters the metro area. The canal soon leaves sight of the river due to buildup of houses. Be sure to hit Milepost 0 for a picture at the commemorative tablet. Dorm rooms at the Youth Hostel, separated by gender. Hostel conducts walking tours and has meals. Trip to National Aquarium. Group dinner that night to celebrate.

Day 6, Home – Visited Capitol on conducted tour, arranged by home troop Scout who was interning for a local Congressman. Tours are free, but must be reserved. Also visited the Ford Theater and nearby house where Lincoln was taken after being shot. National Park Service conducts tours and talks at both. Headed for home in afternoon after retrieving cars from the overnight Metro Park and Ride. Ride home is about 4 hours from Washington.

Administrative

The National Park Service has great resources on their website, <http://www.nps.gov/choh/index.htm>. Be sure to use the map they provide on the website, <http://www.nps.gov/choh/planyourvisit/upload/chohparkmap.pdf>, to plan the trip. No permit is needed to use the trail or campsites, other than reservations for those mentioned below.

Reservable campsite spots include Fort Frederick State Park (fee required), and Marsden Tract. Otherwise, all campsites are unreservable. Note that campsites are **small**, sleeping 6 tents or so at most. If one is full, the next one is usually just 5 miles down the trail.

Park cars overnight at the National Park Service parking lot in Cumberland (must get ticket for windshield from the Visitor Center there). Otherwise, we parked relocated cars at the Greenbelt Washington Metro station overnight for a modest fee (about \$5 per day in 2009). Note that the Metro Station is not guaranteed to be patrolled 24 hours though.

Hostel cost was \$240 for 11 people for one night. Total trip cost was about \$155 per person including transportation, sights and food.

Lessons Learned/Taught:

- Packing bike panniers efficiently and lightly
- Fitness through cycling
- Group travel options for different speed/strength/fitness bikers
- Camping practices, including campfires
- Cooking on white gas stoves
- Bicycle repair, including flat repair
- Bear bagging
- Pack it in, pack trash out
- Swimming opportunities require Safe Swim Defense rules
- Preparation bike “hikes” prior to main trip up to 45 miles in length to gauge eligibility

Specialized Equipment

- Bicycles, preferably mountain bikes equipped with a rack and bike lock. Hybrid style is also fine, provided tires are not narrow. Very little need for more than 3 gears.
- Panniers, recommended 2 per bike. Fairly easy to mount 2 panniers on rear rack and these may be sufficient with additional equipment mounted on the rack itself. Panniers should be waterproof, or can waterproof contents by securing in plastic bags inside the panniers.
- Bike pump and repair tools. Each bike should have minimum 2 tubes for flat replacement. Tools should include tire irons for changing tubes, hex wrenches for adjusting various components on the bike (seat, brakes, handlebars).
- Towable trailers, about 1 per 5 people. Depending on length of trip, the trailer can carry the crew's food and larger items such as tents. Note that there is a tradeoff between miles done each day and the amount of food needed to be brought; there are no food shopping facilities on the trail.
- Bike helmets are mandatory; cable bike locks useful for securing bikes overnight at campsites and in Washington. Water bottles that can be mounted on the bikes themselves are key, though camelbacks are also fine, if not slightly uncomfortable on hot days.
- Sunblock and sunglasses are critical on many sections of the trail due to exposed distances. Use padded biking shorts for seat comfort, and avoid long pants as the pants legs can get caught in the chain. A rain jacket is better than a poncho; if rain pants are used, be sure to secure chain-side pants leg with string, loose band, or tuck into sock. Sneakers are fine for biking; camp shoes may be flip flops or other comfortable shoes.