

Venture Crew 33
Fanwood, NJ

Great Allegheny Passage Bicycle Trip
Aug 6-14, 2011

Cumberland, MD to Pittsburgh, PA and back

1. Summary:

A scenic but vigorous biking trip on the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP), formerly the Western Maryland Rail Road railbed, from Cumberland, MD to Pittsburgh, PA and back. The path is each way is approximately 145 miles and crosses the Eastern Continental Divide early on before gently descending into Pittsburgh. Along the way it follows several creeks and rivers, including the Youghiogheny River where whitewater rafting is available. Possible sights include a side trip to Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic Falling Waters house, the Flight 93 National Memorial, and historic towns along the route. Scouts can fulfill requirements for Camping, Cycling Merit Badges, and the 50-Miler award. Note that this route travels through a large amount of rolling farmland and state parks, is sparsely populated, and thus difficult to follow with a chase car between towns along the trail. It can be done point-to-point, but is very doable in a round trip fashion with different stops on the return.

There are several "primitive" campsites along the trail, mostly nearer to Pittsburgh, that are free. Otherwise, tent campsites are generally privately managed and must be reserved. These tend to be areas connected with RV campsites with other amenities such as pools, showers, and small stores. The free sites have potable well water, toilet facilities and picnic tables and are located by the riverside. The RV campsites may be on or within several miles of the trail and generally cost \$5-10 per person per night. All camp gear and food for the trip were carried on the bicycles in panniers, on bike racks, and in 1 trailing child carrier wagon attached to one of the bikes. One mini-van was required to transfer all gear and bikes to Cumberland. Free parking was provided by the National Park Service Visitor Center which requires car registration in order to issue a parking permit for their secure overnight lot located near the Visitor Center. Expect to make 6-8 miles per hour approaching the Continental Divide on a steep 3% grade. Otherwise expect to make 9-11 miles per hour not including stops on the western part of the divide on the packed cinder path. There is almost no opportunity for swimming in the rivers. There are frequent trash bins encountered along the trail, but food should be suspended at night with bear bags and ropes.

2. Participants:

Advisers Thomas Loop, Erin O'Connor

Crew Crew chief and two participants

3. Itinerary:

Day 1, Arrival and Start of Journey, Frostburg, MD: 15 miles – Drove from NJ to Cumberland, MD National Park Service Visitor Center (drive is 5 hours via Interstates 78, 81, 68). Cars may be parked in the NPS parking area free of charge located nearby. Took to trail after noontime lunch waiting out rain after collecting the latest info on the trail. Trail parallels an active section of the restored Western Maryland Rail Road, a coal driven train terminating in Frostburg. Arrived Frostburg Trailside Inn in late afternoon after grueling 1.5% grade climb with full load. The elevation change is 1200' over 15 miles. The Trailside Inn is located up the hill – another steep climb – and its tent campsite is even further up a hill overlooking the Inn. Meals are available at low cost in the Inn. Be sure to go into

town to the local university ice cream hangout, where the ice cream is plentiful, delicious and inexpensive. The Trailside Inn also has dorm rooms for groups.

Day 2, Big Savage Tunnel, Eastern Continental Divide, Rockwood: 28 miles – Biked across the famed Mason-Dixon Line separating Maryland from Pennsylvania, through the mighty Big Savage Tunnel, 3294 ft long, and over the Keystone and nearly 1900' long Salisbury Viaducts – bike bridges that span river gorges and provide vast scenic vistas. The Divide, at 2392', is reached shortly after the tunnel and it is "all downhill from there". Refreshments and campsites available in Rockwood. One campsite is on the river, another a few hilly miles away at a RV campsite equipped with a pool. Local ice cream is not to be missed after such a rewarding day.

Day 3, Ohiopyle State Park, Ohiopyle: 30 miles – Bike along the shaded bluffs overlooking a portion of the Casselman River up to the closed Pinkerton Tunnel and its 2 mile detour around it. Pass through the tidy, bustling town of Confluence, so named for the several rivers merging there, and on to Ohiopyle. Arrive before noon in order to go white water rafting with any one of the several outfitters here on the Youghiogheny ("the Yog") River, a class 3 river with several class 4 rapids to negotiate. Stay in the Ohiopyle State Park overnight, though beware of the shortcut trail up to the campsites: it is VERY steep and bikes must be walked up. Bears are about, so hang food promptly. Full restroom facilities, including showers, available to the tent campsites.

Day 4, Dravo's Landing: 50 miles – Several free campsites available along this stretch of trail, all equipped with toilet facilities, potable pump water and picnic tables by the riverside. Dravo's Landing is hard by the historic Civil War Dravo Cemetery. Didn't see any ghosts. Camped here 2 nights for interim day trip to Pittsburgh. Don't leave any valuables in the campsite while on the day trip to Pittsburgh, but it should be reasonably safe to leave tents up and bear bags suspended in tree. River was good for bathing.

Day 5, Pittsburgh Day Trip: 50 miles RT – With little to no loads due to leaving bulky items back in Dravo's Landing, trip into Pittsburgh went much faster. Trail here is mostly unshaded, so sunblock and sunglasses are essential. The path is mostly asphalt paved from here on into Pittsburgh. Note that in August, 2011 there was a little over a mile of travel through the streets of Duquesne as the path was still under construction. Also, in Homestead just outside Pittsburgh, the path required an arduous detour along Route 837 and over a highway bridge with streaming traffic and little protection up to the Hot Metal Bridge. Be sure to check the latest updates on the path completion before attempting this segment! Rewarded ourselves with lunch and ice cream at the Three Rivers confluence across the river from downtown Pittsburgh. Note the great support for bike paths in this city! Return to Dravo's Landing in the afternoon. With the reverse in direction, the path gently gains elevation.

Day 6, Adelaide: 30 miles – Retraced earlier path going gently uphill, though it is hardly noticeable at this point. Over the 55 miles from Pittsburgh, the elevation gain is only about 400 feet. Path is well maintained packed cinder, shaded, with few riders on it. More people ride between the occasional towns on the trail in early evening. The RV campsite at Adelaide has showers, pool, ice cream shop and camping store. Campsites are near the river.

Day 7, Fallingwater, Confluence: 30 miles – Leave Adelaide early to arrive Ohiopyle in 2 hours and visit Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic summer home named Fallingwater, built for the Pittsburgh retailer, Kaufman, in the woods. Reservations are mandatory and should be made prior to the start of the trip. One can bike there, but the steep hills along the 4 mile route from the GAP in Ohiopyle will be very daunting. Instead, arrange a round trip ride from one of the whitewater outfitters in Ohiopyle for about \$5 per person. Keep bikes and gear locked up with the outfitter in this case. The house tour is about 2 hours and cost \$20 per person at this writing. From there it is about 12 miles onto the Outflow National Campground in Confluence. The campground supports RVs, has shower and full restroom facilities and good ice cream located nearby.

Day 8, Recrossing the Continental Divide, Frostburg: 47 miles – The path steepens for the 38 miles to the Continental Divide. Cheer those who can make the final climb to the top without stopping and walking! On the other side, travel is swift, coming down that steep grade. Expect to make 12-15 miles per hour into Frostburg. Stay at the Inn, celebrate the end of the trip with ice cream, and watch the Western Maryland RR steam engine turn around at the great turntable located next to the Trail Inn.

Day 9, Cumberland, Home: 15 miles – Follow the trail running along the railroad for the easy ride back to Cumberland. Pick up a souvenir chunk of coal from the rail bed that has fallen off the train's coal tender before reentering the Visitor Center where one can get a number of lunch recommendations and a discount coupon for one of the popular lunch/ice cream parlors. Repack bikes and gear, and 5 hour drive back to NJ.

Administrative

Maps and information about the trail are available on the website, <http://www.GAPtrail.org>. Be sure to check their trail status at <http://gaptrail.org/tmi/status.cfm>, in order to get updates on the route, especially for getting into Pittsburgh.

Campsite reservations at many of the private campsites are highly recommended, but can be made on relatively short notice. Mention that you are a Scout group and you will get a discount in most cases. No one else stayed at the free sites when we camped, but be prepared to share if necessary. The sites are relatively spacious. To stay in the Ohiopyle State Park, a reservation is required and can be found through, <http://www.pa.reserveworld.com/>. Read the info there then navigate to the park for an online reservation. Note that there is a cancellation fee. In Frostburg, reservations can be made for a campsite at the Trail Inn, <http://www.trailinnatfrostburg.com/>. For other private campgrounds, consult the gaptrail.org website or info booklet. Periodically discounts are offered in the booklet's ads.

Park cars overnight at the National Park Service parking lot in Cumberland (must get ticket for windshield from the Visitor Center there upon registration).

There are several whitewater outfitters in Ohiopyle. Laurel Highlands, <http://www.laurelhighlands.com/>, is the one we used, which offered a discount through their advertisement in the GAP info book, obtainable through the GAPtrail.org website. After the discount, our cost was about \$43 per person for 3-4 hours.

Fallingwater has a website, www.fallingwater.org, which has information needed for tour availability, hours, and tickets. Be sure to check their schedule in advance as they are not open every day. Reservations are mandatory and should be made as far in advance as possible. We made ours during the trip but could not get our preferred time slot.

Cell phone coverage on the trail is often non-existent due to its remoteness. In most towns on the trail, there is cell phone coverage, but that ends within 3 miles on either side until you get close to Pittsburgh.

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
- 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.

- Bike helmets are mandatory; cable bike locks useful for securing bikes overnight at campsites. 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.
- Gear for whitewater rafting include swimsuit, non-cotton “tech” shirt, close-toed water shoes, straps for eye or sun glasses a must.