

Take a ride through the Great Allegheny Passage

By Bob Karlovits, PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW
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It can be the site of multiday adventures or it can provide any number of one-day outings.

It is, in part, covered so densely in trees, a hard rain has a tough time finding ground. Or it is high enough to provide a look into several states. It cruises through small towns and miles devoid of people.

It is the Great Allegheny Passage, a trail that provides a car-free passage for bicyclist, hikers, and even cross-country skiers from Cumberland, Md., right now to the borough of Duquesne. In Cumberland, it meets a like trail that goes to Washington, D.C., and the plan is eventually to bring it to Point State Park, Downtown.

Linda McKenna Boxx, executive director of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, the group that has masterminded the construction of the trail, is optimistic the Downtown connection will be made by the goal date of Nov. 11, 2011. But, she is quick to point out, it provides a world of potential right now.

While the trail can be used in a number of different ways, it is best known now for bicycling. There are many options for a one-day trip: Boston to West Newton for lunch; or just go as far as Sutersville for ice cream at the Yough Twister; Connellsville to Ohiopyle is another good one.

But Boxx probably is right when she says "the best part is in the woods."

8 a.m.

The starting place for this adventure "in the woods" is Meyersdale, Somerset County.

It is perhaps better known for the annual maple festival every spring, but it also is the headquarters of one of the trail's better visitor centers and only 10 miles or so from one of its highlights and best vistas.

Getting there will take almost two hours from Pittsburgh, so planning and bike-sense should be considered. This is going to be an adventurous day -- as exciting as an individual wants to make it -- so a good breakfast is in order.

Making sure the bike is in good shape also is important. Checking brakes, gear-shifting systems and overall mechanics should have been done before the day of the trip. But that morning, make sure the tires are pumped up and don't forget that helmet. Most of the trail is dirt, but it still is hard enough to cause a head injury.

Take the Pennsylvania Turnpike to the Somerset exit (110) and then follow Route 281 to Route 31. Berlin Plank Road will then lead to U.S. Route 219, which goes to Meyersdale. It also will provide a glimpse from below of the Salisbury Viaduct, a 1,908-foot expanse that carries the trail over the Casselman River Valley, six lanes of roads and a rail line.

The viaduct is a little more than a mile west of Meyersdale, which is not the direction of this adventure, but it is worth a side trip to get a look from above as well as below.

10 a.m.

The Meyersdale Trailhead and Visitor Center is just off Main Street on the east side of town. It is a remodeled train station along the trail and has all the facilities needed as the headquarters for a trip: souvenirs, staffers who can answer questions, restrooms and some snacks.

It is open 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, May through October. To check weekday hours, call 814-634-8654.

While the visitor center does have snacks, there are a number of other places in Meyersdale for a pre-trip brunch. One of the best in that regard is the 218 Java Cafe at 218 Center St. It offers pastries, deli and grilled sandwiches, soup and, of course, coffee. It is open 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday.

Finally, it is time to hit the road.

11:30 a.m.

The ride to the Big Savage Tunnel is all uphill, but don't be afraid. It is on ground that once held a rail line, so it never gets steeper than a shallow climb.

If the ride begins to feel a little tiring, remember, it is all downhill on the way back.

The ride is quiet and through woods that are not as dense as they are near Ohiopyle to the west. But they provide a peaceful ride past farms and crossroads and some standout sites.

- **The Bollman Bridge** -- At mile 30.5, only a mile and a half from town, the Bollman Bridge does the job it has been doing since 1871. The iron truss span designed by Wendell Bollman (1814-84) crossed another road until 2007 when it was relocated because it was too narrow for modern vehicles. It is just about perfect for bicycle traffic.

- **The Keystone Viaduct** -- At mile 30, the 910-foot smaller cousin of the Salisbury Viaduct crosses the Flaugherty Creek.

- **The Eastern Continental Divide** crosses the trail at mile 23.5. It creates watersheds that flow to the Mississippi River to the west and the Chesapeake Bay to the east.

- **The Big Savage Tunnel** -- At mile 22, the tunnel is 3,300 feet long and illuminated with a row of ceiling lights. It is named after John Savage, a surveyor who mapped out this area in 1736. The tunnel was built in 1911 and reconstructed in 2003 as a key to the completion of the trail.

Just on the east side of the tunnel is a great vista overlooking Somerset County and Allegany County in Maryland.

Those who are not too tired may even be interested in traveling another mile and a half to the Mason-Dixon Line, otherwise known as the Pennsylvania-Maryland border.

With that option, this trip is only 12 easy miles long. That would not be difficult to do in an hour, but take some time. Enjoy the viaduct, the tunnel and the overlook. Near the viaduct is the Garrett Wind Farm where, on a quiet day, the turbines add a power-generating hum behind the trip.

2:30 p.m.

The ride back to Meyersdale is an easy one, all downhill with return stops at some of the great sites.

Back in town, a stop at the rail station will provide a way to stretch the legs or get a refreshment.

A walk through town will offer a look at this little community and a bigger variety for eats. After all, you've just ridden at least 20 miles, so treat yourself.

A little walk down into the heart of town will lead to Take Six Pizza and Subs at 202 Grant St. Besides good food, it also has beer, wine and soft drinks.

It's also a good place to plan other trips to the passage