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# Top 10 highlights: Great Allegheny Passage bike trail

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By Lawrence Walsh / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When a rider on the Western Maryland Railway's last passenger train through the Allegheny Mountains in 1975 was asked how long it might take to convert a railway's single set of tracks into a bike trail from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Md., he replied:

"A year or two."

That overly optimistic prediction turned out to be two years shy of the four decades it took to build what now is known as the Great Allegheny Passage.

The passage was completed on May 16 -- almost 38 years to the day that the last passenger train rolled along a right-of-way now used by bicyclists, walkers, runners, hikers, birders, cross-country skiers and snowshoers.

The last mile, which cost \$1.3 million because of the complexity of the work, passes through the Sandcastle Waterpark and Keystone Metals near the Glenwood Bridge. It gives birders an ideal vantage point to watch two bald eagles raise their young in a nest the size of a dining room table.

While most people probably start the trail in Pittsburgh and head east to the renovated Western Maryland Railway station in Cumberland, a better route would be just the opposite: Start at Cumberland and work your way back here.

Why? For those who live in or around Pittsburgh, when they reach Point State Park, they're home. It saves their tired legs a trip home from Cumberland in a cramped car.

So what highlights await first-time trail users?

Whichever direction you go, we asked those who helped to build the trail and others who have enjoyed it to come up with a list of the Top 10 highlights along the way.

Of course, it could be said that every mile is a highlight.

Although there was unanimous agreement on many of the highlights, there were differences of opinion on the merits of others. If your favorite site on the passage didn't make the list, blame me, not those who helped me to compile the list.

Here they are:

**1) The restored three-story red brick Western Maryland Railway station in Cumberland.**

On its lower level, there is a mock-- up of a mule-powered canal boat that once plied the C&O Canal Towpath, now the 184.5-mile trail of the same name that leads to Washington, D.C.

The station is the starting point for those heading to Pittsburgh. Its smoke-belching locomotive, "Mountain Thunder," pulls passenger cars 16 miles to Frostburg, Md., a climb of 1,227 feet. It also welcomes bicyclists who want to get a head start on the trail. They put their bikes in the baggage car.

Cyclists who want to pedal every mile will experience a gradual but steady climb - less than a 2 percent grade -- to Frostburg, a full-service trail town reached by a series of switchback turns to the former Cumberland & Pennsylvania Railroad station. There's a short but steep climb to the main street in town.

Back on the trail, cyclists will ride over the Mason-Dixon Line that determined the northern border of Maryland and the southern boundary of Pennsylvania.

**2) The Big Savage Tunnel.**

The \$12.5 million renovation of the 3,294.6-foot-long tunnel was crucial to the success of the trail. There's no way around it, and it takes the better part of an hour to walk a bike up and over it.

The roof, walls and drainage system of the tunnel had to be rebuilt if the trail was to continue to Cumberland, said Linda McKenna Boxx, president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance and the driving force behind the trail's development. The alliance, a coalition of dedicated and determined rail-trail organizations, built and maintain the passage.

Ms. Boxx said the passage became a reality, thanks to the organization's solid partnerships with counties, corporations, contractors and businesses that generated a "feeling by all that we are working together for a collective good."

Just before cyclists enter the tunnel, they can look to their right and see how far they have come in distance and elevation from Cumberland. Although there are more than 130 miles to go before they pedal into Point State Park, it invokes a sense of accomplishment. The Narrows, a high slope of sandstone near Cumberland, can be seen in the distance.

### **3) The Eastern Continental Divide.**

At 2,390 feet, it is the highest point on the trail and features colorful murals on both sides of an underpass under McKenzie Hollow Road. It's near the tiny crossroads community of Deal.

### **4) The 101-foot-high Salisbury Viaduct.**

It stretches 1,906 feet across the Casselman River Valley that includes farmland, CSX Railroad tracks and state Route 219. It's closer to Meyersdale (two miles) than the town of Salisbury. Go figure.

The first eight wind turbines erected in southwestern Pennsylvania can be seen on a ridge overlooking the town of Garret. The towers are 200 feet high. The blades of each turbine are 95 feet long and weigh five tons.

Janet and Joe McConkey of Scott enjoy the 37-mile stretch from Garrett to Cumberland because of its "awesome man-made structures" (as noted above), "the natural beauty and panoramic views" and the "delightful coast into Cumberland."

### **5) The Pinkerton High Bridge over the Casselman River between Markleton and Fort Hill.**

It offers great views of the surrounding mountains, especially in the fall. To reach it, bicyclists cross its sister span, the Pinkerton Low Bridge, and then pedal 1.5 miles around what is known as the Pinkerton Horn.

The Pinkerton Tunnel, which once directly connected both bridges, has severe structural problems and has been closed for decades. CSX Transportation, which maintained a parallel tunnel nearby, eliminated its tunnel by removing millions of tons of dirt, rock and trees to accommodate double-stacked rail cars.

Howard Emerick of Jacksonville, Fla., who started his railroad career as a clerk operator on the Western Maryland and retired in 2007 as the assistant vice president for labor relations with CSX, enjoys riding trail segments he initially traveled as a brakeman and a conductor.

He described the Pinkerton bridges and the bypass as "a wonderful eyeful of scenery" where the active CSX railroad serves "as a reminder of what you're riding. And then there is the beautiful ride around the 'horn' where the [10-foot-wide crushed limestone trail] narrows and the tree canopy practically eliminates the direct sunlight. What a delight!"

Anne and Dave Marschik of Murrysville also enjoy that section of the passage and the picturesque segments leading up to it from Fort Hill and Markleton. Riding along the tree-bordered "horn" provides a feeling of "sailing through the trees," she said.

"We have many happy memories of fun times spent with friends riding the trail, of the beautiful wildflowers and the changing seasons."

Bill and Pam Metzger, who moved from Mt. Lebanon to Confluence in 2002 because of its proximity to the passage, highlighted the less traveled Confluence to Fort Hill segment of the trail for its tranquility and views of the Casselman River in the early spring and late fall.

Mr. Metzger, who named the trail, also wrote "The Great Allegheny Passage Companion: A Guide to History and Heritage Along the Trail." He bicycles more than 2,000 miles a year.

His enthusiastic "Where ya from" greeting to long-distance bicyclists can lead to extended trailside conversations because, as a professional mapmaker for Trains magazine, the odds are he can pinpoint the location of their hometowns as well as the names of nearby towns.

## **6) The "tree tunnels" between Confluence and Ohiopyle.**

The "tunnels" are formed by the interlocking branches of trees that arched over the right-of-way after the Western Maryland went out of business. They are cool and refreshing in hot weather.

This segment of the passage, the first one to be completed in 1986, "is made for riding at a relaxed pace to allow riders to appreciate the beauty all around them, no matter what the season," said Bill Holliday of Confluence, a frequent trail rider. Trail alliance treasurer Paul G. Wiegman of Regent Square, a naturalist, writer, photographer and bicyclist, who listed more than 40 trail highlights, encouraged riders to enjoy the spring wildflowers along the passage, especially near mile markers 58, 65, 69, 80 and in the Cedar Creek Gorge and Duncan Hollow.

Mr. Wiegman, a co-author of "An Uncommon Passage: Traveling Through History on the Great Allegheny Passage Trail," was aboard that last Western

Maryland passenger train on May 21, 1975, and has recorded the trail's progress in words and photographs since then.

### **7) Ohiopyle and Ohiopyle State Park.**

This trail town also is a mecca for whitewater enthusiasts, especially those skilled enough to run the 18-foot-high waterfall created by the Youghiogheny River. George Washington, who in 1753 was looking for a navigable water route to Pittsburgh, had to look elsewhere.

The Visitors Center, in a former railway station, sits beside the trail. Just beyond it is the award-winning Ohiopyle Low Bridge that bicyclists use to reach the Ferncliff Peninsula and then the Ohiopyle High Bridge. The latter offers upstream and downstream views of the Yough's famed whitewater.

Although it is possible to bike to Fallingwater and Kentuck Knob, both designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, the two-lane roads leading to each home are narrow and dangerous. Call the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau at 724-238-5661 for information about shuttles.

### **8) The historic Pump House in Homestead.**

It was the site of a July 6, 1892, violent confrontation between thousands of striking steelworkers and their families and supporters and 300 Pinkerton guards who had been sent to protect the Carnegie Steel Co.'s Homestead Works. Seven strikers and three Pinkerton guards were killed and dozens were wounded.

The site today offers parking, bike racks, benches, picnic tables and restroom facilities in the nearby water tower. The Pump House is home to the Rivers of Steel Heritage Market and is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on the first and third Sundays of the month April 7-Sept. 15.

Mary Shaw and Roy Weil of Squirrel Hill described the Pump House-to-Riverton-Bridge segment of the trail as "quintessential Pittsburgh industrial heritage. You start at the site of one of the principal events in labor history at the Pump House, with views across the Monongahela River to the Carrie Furnace.

"You get views into active industrial sites and the overview of all the rail lines at Port Perry. You ride right next to the foundations of the former coke gas pipeline. You see the pipe plant. Even Kennywood, a former trolley park where you can see the Steel Coaster coming right at you, is part of that history."

The wife-husband team, longtime cyclists, are the authors of "Freewheeling Easy In and Around Western Pennsylvania" and "Linking Up -- Planning Your Traffic-

Free Bike Trip Between Pittsburgh and Washington D.C." They also have led numerous bike trips between the two cities.

### **9) The restored Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad station and the Station Square development.**

The Great Allegheny Passage follows the former right-of-way of the P&LE from Connellsville to Pittsburgh. The development and the nearby South Side neighborhood offer a variety of overnight accommodations, restaurants and entertainment venues.

### **10) Point State Park.**

The tip of the park that overlooks the merger of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers to form the mighty Ohio marks the end of the passage. A marker will be placed near the park's restored fountain. Allow some time to visit the historic Block House and the Fort Pitt Museum. The latter provides information about Pittsburgh's pivotal role in the French & Indian War and the American Revolution.

The official completion of the passage will be celebrated with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at Sandcastle at 10 a.m. June 15 followed by a ride to Point State Park.

The public is invited, especially those on bikes.

Lawrence Walsh writes about recreational bicycling and other outdoor activities for the Post-Gazette.

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