

The Impulsive Traveler



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Roll through the lush Ohio & Erie Canal twice: Bike Aboard lets cyclists, top, bike one way on the towpath, left, and ride back on the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad.

Pedal to the metal along the Cuyahoga

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

In Ohio's Cuyahoga River Valley, I discovered a place where it's cool to board a train wearing a bicycle helmet.

The Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad offers Bike Aboard, which allows riders to cycle one way on the Ohio & Erie Canal towpath and catch the train coming back. I stood in line with a few other cyclists at the Indigo Lake station as a porter hung our bikes on the wall in an empty train car. With a quick glance back at my wheels, I headed for a passenger car and found a window seat.

Early summer around the Cuyahoga River is lush, and during much of the hour-long 18-mile ride, we rolled through a tunnel of green. (You can usually go up to 26 miles, but part of the track was under repair.) The tracks more or less parallel what's left of the historic Ohio & Erie Canal and its towpath; the Cuyahoga River; and a scenic byway, so the picture out the window previewed my return bike ride.

The first stop was Peninsula, once a bustling canal town and now the hub of many recreational activities, including hiking, cycling and contra dancing. At each stop, more bikes and cyclists boarded, and the seats filled with excited helmet-clad passengers. Children and grandparents sat with their noses to the window, looking for an eagle's nest or a beaver marsh. A church group boarded, talking about pedaling to a picnic lunch.

At the northernmost stop, Rockside station, I stepped off the train and waited for my bike, preparing for the ride back to my starting point. By now, passengers were reconnecting with their bicycles, and their helmets seemed normal. But, for the chance to observe them in their headgear on the train, delighted with the ride and the occasional train whistle — not to mention my own joy — I considered my fare the best \$3 I'd spent all year.

Along the Ohio & Erie Canalway, a

National Heritage Area that stretches from the shores of Lake Erie down to the Tuscarawas River Area south of Canton, bikes on trains is just the beginning of cool. And I say this as a Washington native who grew up taking field trips to the C&O Canal, which is slightly younger and more than twice as long as its counterpart in northern Ohio. I love that I can pedal from my house to the C&O Canal, and that I can take it all the way to Harpers Ferry, W.Va., or Cumberland,

At each stop, seats filled with excited helmet-clad passengers. Children and grandparents sat with their noses to the window, looking for an eagle's nest or a beaver's marsh.

Md., if I'm feeling adventurous.

But last year, when I discovered the Ohio & Erie Canalway — and so many related activities that I barely had time for a good sampler — I couldn't help turn a tad green with envy. So in late June, I returned to the other canal.

The most vibrant part of the canalway, including the scenic train, is in Cuyahoga Valley National Park, which lies between Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Canton's newly renovated Pro Football Hall of Fame. In the canal's heyday, from 1827 to 1913, mules pulled boats carrying passengers and products up and down the waterway, making it possible to ship goods from Lake Erie to the Gulf of Mexico along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers.

The canalway towpath stretches 85 miles, and when it's completed in 2020, it

will extend another 16. Every month, countless events fill the canalway calendar, from full-moon hikes to horse-drawn boat rides to boomerang classes. In the winter, the unplowed towpath becomes a favorite spot for cross-country skiers.

I arrived in Macedonia — there are so many tiny towns in the region, you seldom know when you're leaving one and entering another — on a Friday night and awoke the next morning to a light rain. But I knew that locals would brave all sorts of weather to get to the beloved Countryside Farmers Market. Sure enough, a couple of dozen eager beavers were queued up behind a rope before the market opened at 9. We gazed out on an open field with white vendor tents lining the perimeter.

"Lots of strawberries today, lots of produce," shouted the all-powerful market-opener as she began to lower the rope. "Have fun out there!" A young girl rang a cowbell, and we shoppers started across the wet field.

At each tent, I learned something new about the region's bounty. Naturally, the emphasis was on "local," from grass-fed buffalo to sheep's milk blue cheese. I sampled local kale pesto and caressed local yarn. In the background, a folksy band played beneath a tent in the center of the field. I bought some fruit, a tiny pie and a jar of honey.

By mid-morning, the sun was peeking out from behind the clouds, so I parked at one of the trailheads and took my dog for a walk on the towpath. We passed Hale Farm & Village, an outdoor living-history museum, which hosts a harvest festival every October. On the other side of the river is Blossom Music Center, a large outdoor music venue that featured Toby Keith the weekend of my visit.

Later that day, I embarked on my Bike Aboard adventure. On the ride back, the towpath was busy with cyclists, joggers and bird-watchers. I passed several locks that raised and lowered boats back in the

day; a couple of folks in period dress explained to visitors how the canal once operated.

That night, I parked my car in Peninsula and biked a short distance to Century Cycles, which has been organizing night rides on the towpath for 20 years. I'd heard that sometimes up to 200 people participate, and one night ride every season is always a pajama party. Though this wasn't the weekend to bust out my superhero PJs, I had still planned my trip around the ride. I imagined twinkling bikes zipping along the crushed limestone path in a magical dark forest, with frogs ribbiting and bats flying in the background.

I joined other cyclists waiting around the bike shop, and a few minutes after 8 p.m., a man with a bullhorn gave very informal instructions about the ride — which direction we were headed, where we should turn around, how to pass (politely, with warning) and that lights were mandatory.

But lights were unnecessary. I'd failed to remember that this was one of the longest days of the year, and 15 miles later, it was barely dusk; our night ride was foiled by the summer solstice. For a few miles, I rode beside a man who said that the fall rides were spectacular — pitch-black except for the bike light in front of you. I pedaled ahead, envious of his experience.

But by the time we returned to the bike shop, the twinkling I'd imagined earlier had come true: The sun had finally set, and I saw a woman wearing a bike jersey covered with stars and moons. She'd wrapped teeny blue Christmas lights around her bicycle, powered by a small battery pack, and at last, in the sort-of-darkness, they glowed. Yet try as I might, I still couldn't hear any frogs.

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IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

United offers nonstop flights from Reagan National and Washington Dulles and Southwest offers nonstop flights from BWI to Cleveland. Peninsula, Ohio, is about 25 miles southeast of Cleveland.

WHERE TO STAY

Stanford House
6093 Stanford Rd., Peninsula
330-657-2909
www.conservancyforvcnp.org/pages/space-rental/lodging
Rustic historic home in Cuyahoga Valley National Park, near several trailheads, with furniture made from reclaimed wood, and a communal kitchen. Individual rooms (available April-October) start at \$50 per night with shared bath; one room with private bath is available for \$125.

Inn at Brandywine Falls

8230 Brandywine Rd., Sagamore Hills
330-467-1812
www.innatbrandywinefalls.com
Historic six-room inn. Rooms from \$145 weekdays and \$190 weekends, including breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT

Sarah's Vineyard
1204 W. Steels Corners Rd., Cuyahoga Falls
330-929-8057
www.sarahsvineyardwinery.com
Savor the winery, art gallery, gardens and fire pit along with your dinner. Salads and sandwiches \$8-\$9. Thin-crust wood-fired pizzas on the deck Wednesdays and Thursdays through October, \$15.

Winking Lizard

1615 Main St. (Route 303), Peninsula
330-467-1002
www.winkinglizard.com
A local chain and popular hangout before and after towpath activities. Lizard Freckles (fried pickle chips) \$6.29, soft Bavarian pretzels \$7.79, sandwiches and burgers from \$7.49.

The Dragonfly Tea Room

116 S. Canal St., Canal Fulton
330-854-4832
www.dragonflytearoom.com
Across the street from the canal; open for lunch and tea. Sandwiches, panini and wraps from \$7.55. Afternoon tearoom sampler \$9.95.

WHAT TO DO

Century Cycles
1621 Main St., Peninsula
330-657-2209
centurycycles.com
Bike rentals \$9 per hour, including helmet, for daytime only. Night rides on the towpath trail are free. All skill levels welcome; 12-15 miles; your own bike, helmet and light are required. Rides leave from store at 8 p.m. Sept. 13 and 27.

Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad

1630 West Mill St., Peninsula
800-468-4070
www.cvsr.com
Bike Aboard, \$3 for passenger and bike, available Wednesday-Sunday through Oct. 26.

Countryside Farmers Market

Howe Meadow
4040 Riverview Rd., Peninsula
www.cvcountryside.org
Saturdays 9 a.m. to noon through Oct. 25.

INFORMATION

www.ohioanderiecanalway.com

— M.D.G.K.