getting away from it all on a five-day cycling trip along the C&O Canal.

a change of scenery

By Melanie D.G. Kaplan • Photos by Michael Kircher
With 4.2 miles to go until the next campsite, I was imagining mileposts where they didn’t exist. It was the latest chapter in an exasperating day: I’d suffered from a headache for most of the morning and then had tripped on wobbly legs, falling hard. Meeting friends for lunch in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, was a welcome reprieve, but the break had disrupted my rhythm on the bike, and I may have been a little overzealous in my fish taco frenzy. Now I was back on the towpath, alone, tired and on the verge of an après-feast collapse. My fingers were sticky from layers of sunscreen, chain grease, chocolate energy gel and hand sanitizer. With every micro-swerve around wayward rocks and roots, the extra weight packed onto my bike threatened to topple me sideways.

Squinting at a marker in the distance, I was certain I’d conquered another mile since the last numbered post, only to cruise past a cunning tree stump. Time and again, I saw phantom mileposts in fallen trees, shadows and thin air. When the portable toilet at Huckleberry Hill campsite finally came into view, I thought I might weep.

I slowed to a stop on the towpath and surveyed my home for the night: a small, empty clearing in the woods with a lone picnic table. The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the trees, and I saw the water glistening beyond the half-bare branches. For days, the Potomac River had been my constant companion, yet we’d always kept a polite distance. Now I ached for contact — to dip my toes in and splash cold water on my face. I parked my bike, quickly pitched my tent, kicked off my sneakers and walked down to the river.

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park stretches 184.5 miles between Cumberland, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., and encompasses nearly 20,000 acres. It is home to 1,200 native plant species, hundreds of animal species, one dynamic river and innumerable spots of breathtaking beauty.

Growing up in Maryland, I picnicked with my family in Great Falls Park, which runs along a spectacular section of the river with waterfalls and cascading rapids, and I visited the canal with my classmates to ride a mule-towed boat (the origin of the term “towpath”), a replica of those used during the canal’s working days. I’d explored small sections of the linear park as an adult, and almost a decade ago, one of my first dates with a triathlete was a 52-mile round-trip pedal between White’s Ferry, Maryland, and Harpers Ferry, West Virginia — with zero preparation on my part. I wouldn’t recommend biking the canal this way, but if the excursion had been my date’s way of testing my fortitude, I guess I passed. Plus, it planted the seed for future C&O rides.

Last spring and summer, I had coped with the stress of the pandemic by spending more time on my bike, and when I decided to plan my first multiday ride, the canal beckoned. Eager for a change of scenery, a disruption of my daily routine and the thrill of an outdoor adventure, I planned an end-to-end, five-day trip, which meant a pace of no more than 50 miles a day. I scheduled the journey for two weeks before the presidential election and vowed to stay off all electronic devices.

In the months before my ride, I biked more frequently and played hooky one day for an exhausting 60-mile excursion along the canal and the parallel Western Maryland Rail Trail, which — unlike the towpath — is paved. I also hunkered down with stories about our first president, who rode horseback along the volatile Potomac (known for its floods, rapids and dry spells) at age 16. For much of his life, George Washington dreamed of a trade route that would connect the Ohio River Valley to the Eastern Seaboard. Before becoming chief executive of the country in 1789, Washington was named president of the Potowmack Canal Company. He oversaw the beginnings of a primitive canal system but didn’t live to see its completion.

By 1850, the canal — then run by the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park — was a thing of the past. In its place, the Little Rock Revival, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the end of the Cold War gave rise to a new kind of trail: the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Towpath National Historic Trail. It’s 184.5 miles of footpath, bike trail and rail trail through Woodstock, Virginia, to Washington, D.C., for runners, bikers, walkers and nature lovers.

Three days and 117 miles into my bike ride along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, I started seeing things.
We all laughed. That night, I pulled out “Captain Kate,” a young adult novel about a 12-year-old girl in Civil War Cumberland who pilots her family’s boat down the canal after her father dies. I’d packed it figuring I wouldn’t be able to absorb anything more complicating after long days of hiking. Overnight, the trains sounded like they were barreling through my tent, waking me for long stretches. The next morning, I woke to see steam rising from the Potomac. I was shivering and tired but excited to start moving. James headed back to Cumberland, and Robert and I, wearing all of our warm clothes, headed south.

Along the quiet canal, I initially kept my eyes on the path. Robert, a far more experienced rider, served as our leader, scouting out the towpath just ahead of me. Within the first couple of hours, he had spotted a pileated woodpecker (somehow recalling the brilliant red crest from his fourth grade book report), a beaver, wood ducks and turtles. The weather warmed, and I stopped to shed several layers. When I caught up to Robert, my arms were bare. “Sun’s out, guns out,” he said.

After a quick detour for lunch, we found ourselves at the entrance to the Paw Paw Tunnel, where the canal and towpath go straight through a mountain for nearly two-thirds of a mile. An engineering marvel, the tunnel took 14 years to complete. I’d read it could be dangerous to bike through and was fully prepared to walk if things got dicey. With bike lights to guide me, I coasted cautiously on the narrow and slick path, separated from the canal by only a wooden railing. A couple times my tire slipped, and I panicked, imagining skidding into the dark canal, but I steadied myself and remained upright, biking to the end.

On the other side, the path was covered with pine needles. I stopped to turn off my lights and check a faint clicking coming from my bike rack. With nearly 40 pounds of weight in gear and supplies, I knew there was extra torque on the rack, which could loosen bolts. Everything seemed secure. Then, 3 miles before reaching Fifteenmile Creek, where I’d camp and Robert would pick up his car to head home, I heard a thud. My bike ground to a crawl, and I turned around to see my bags and tent drag-
ging on the path. The bike rack had pivoted off its axle, and the bolts that held it together were gone. Eagle-eyed Robert backtracked, found one and suggested we pile my bags in his trailer. “We’ll figure out a plan at the campsite,” he said.

At Fifteenmile Creek, we befriended two campers with a pickup truck full of tools that they were happy to lend to the path. They secured my remaining bolt and added a zip tie. With my bungee cord, I was back in business. That night in the tent, I was still thinking about the book the next morning when I took off from a log in the canal, and fish jumped in the river. Since I had planned moderate distances most days, I had expected to be my longest day. I looked across the glassy river in front of me, other times behind me or to my right, casting parallelograms of light onto my route. At one point, I fell asleep by 8 that evening, though at 1:30, my eyes blinked open. I rolled over to look out the window next to my bed and saw Orion in the sky, above the towpath, blinking back at me.

The morning was spectacular as I headed out for what I expected to be my longest day. I looked across the glassy river to West Virginia and could see the trees perfectly reflected in the water, a fall bouquet of yellow, orange and green. As I pedaled, colorful leaves floated down in front of me, landing softly on a yellow trail. On the curvy towpath, the rising sun was sometimes directly in front of me, other times behind me or to my right, casting paralellograms of light onto my route. At one point, I felt like I was pedaling through a Disney montage: Squirrels leapt, a white-tailed deer bounded across the path, a great blue heron took off from a log in the canal, and fish jumped in the river. When a blue bird flitted across the path, I had to chuckle out loud.

At Williamsport, Maryland, once an important coal transfer point, the towpath crossed over Conococheague Creek on one of the canal’s most impressive stone aqueducts, which had been restored recently. I saw a fishing boat and greeted a few runners and dog walkers. One man, seeing my bags and tent, yelled out words of encouragement: “99 to go!”

By 9:30, it was 70 degrees, and I was already hungry. I stopped every few miles to fuel up on trail mix or a peanut butter tortilla wrap and to listen to water rushing around rocks in the river. Since I had planned moderate distances most days, I had expected to take detours and bike through towns like Williamsport and Sharpsburg, home to Antietam National Battlefield. But at every canal town, I found myself focused on reaching my next meal and less on the canals and lockhouses.

At Lockhouse 49, one of seven rentable lockhouses along the canal, I arrived at Lockhouse 49, where I’d be spending the night. One of 27 remaining lockhouses (seven of which are rentable), it’s a sparsely decorated brick house with slightly sloping wood floors, braided rugs and no running water. After hanging my dewy tent on the porch to dry, I tightened the bolts on my bike and rack and organized my gear, waving to the occasional cyclist on the towpath. I fell asleep by 8 that evening, though at 1:30, my eyes blinked open. I rolled over to look out the window next to my bed and saw Orion in the sky, above the towpath, blinking back at me.

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The writer rests at Mile Marker 0 in Washington, at the end of her 184.5-mile journey (above). Right inset: Cumberland, Maryland, the other end of the towpath where Kaplan had started her trip five days earlier.

Leo asked for mile-by-mile accounts from my ride. Later that day, Mélange launched a guidebook on Kickstarter to collect these and similar tips from more than 1,500 bikers. In the end, 1,800 backers pledged ＄20,000 to publish the book, which was released last year. With ＄40,000 in profits to donate, the group is working to expand this effort to other trails.

“I was overjoyed,” Mélange said of the response. “We see this as the start of a movement.”

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

It’s nearly impossible to get lost on the canal, but that doesn’t mean you should take this trip on the fly. Whether you’re hiking or biking a full day or the full length, familiarize yourself with sections and service options before you head out, and you’ll be better prepared when plans veer off course.

In the towns along the path, thru-hikers and bikers will find numerous places to sleep, refuel, eat and tune up. Some restaurants are easily reachable from the towpath, including favorites such as School House Kitchen in Oldtown, Bill’s Place in Little Orleans, Buddy Lou’s Eatry Drinks & Antiques in Hancock and White’s Ferry Grill in Dickerson. Shepherdstown has some of the best food options, but the hill to get into town from the towpath is no joke.

The Park Service offers drive-in car camping at Antietam Creek, McCoys Ferry, Fifteen-mile Creek, Paw Paw Tunnel and Spring Gap. The free hike-biker campsites, inaccessible by car, are located along the towpath, typically every 5 to 7 miles; some are as many as 16 miles apart.

Seven historic lockhouses (with varied amenities) are available to rent through the Canal Trust. Several paved trails parallel the towpath, so if you’re looking for a break from the bunks, hop on the gorgeous Western Maryland Rail Trail, which runs 28 miles between Little Orleans and Big Pool, or the heavily used Capital Crescent Trail, which parallels the canal for almost 2 miles starting in Georgetown. For the super-ambitious, back on the ISO-mile Great Allegheny Passage, which continues from Cumberland to Pittsburgh. Amtrak offers bike reservations between Washington, Cumberland and Pittsburgh. Make sure to check towpath conditions, updates and closures (expect construction at the Paw Paw Tunnel in 2021). Online planning resources are available from the Park Service, Canal Trust and C&O/GAP Facebook groups. BikeCandO.com has helpful packing tips, although some dining and lodging information is outdated. The park’s Recreational Guide by Milepost was in my pocket the entire trip. My bike in planning was Mihle High’s mile-by-mile

The O&P Canal Companion. You might also want to read the Park Service’s handbook, “Chesapeake & Ohio Canal.”

Later this year, park partner Georgetown Heritage will reopen the visitor center in Georgetown and offer mile-long canal rides on a new, historically inspired boat powered by mules and motors.

Finally, if you can’t get to the park, the Park Service offers virtual tours, and the Canal Trust’s mobile app includes 600 searchable points of interest.