

# BICYCLING ADVENTURES

## *Await in Western Maryland*

Riding a bicycle, especially one of the original models that came out in the early 1800s, was considered a very risky business best suited to adventurous young men. The safety bicycle of the 1880s, such as the 1880 Pony Star High Wheel model, was a big step forward toward transforming the bicycle into a common and popular mode of transportation popular with men and even women of all ages. The roadster design that later supplanted the high wheel models featured wheels equal in size, a characteristic that most bicycles retain today.

In recent years, bicycling has become an increasingly popular activity in many parts of the United States. Maryland is no exception, and state officials have taken note. According to the Maryland Department of

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*unless otherwise noted*



Larry Black, owner of Mt. Airy Bicycle, demonstrates an 1880 Pony Star High Wheel model. This bicycle and other vintage bikes are on display at the Oakland, Maryland, Transportation Museum on Liberty Street.



Transportation's 2014 *Twenty Year Bicycle & Pedestrian Access Master Plan*, "Walking and bicycling are fundamental to life in Maryland. One of the most densely populated states in the country, Maryland is poised to become the best state for walking and bicycling in the nation."

While other states might take issue with this assertion, Maryland does indeed offer a wide range of bicycling opportunities, from road rides to mountain biking to competitive events. Cyclists will find some of their most challenging and scenic terrain in Western Maryland, the state's three westernmost counties – Washington, Allegany and Garrett. Known for its mostly rural character and mountainous terrain, Western Maryland represents Maryland's segment of Appalachia. The topography is well suited to competitive events attracting cycling athletes who live for the thrill and challenge of pushing themselves to the limit. But fortunately, where there are mountains, there are valleys. So cyclists looking for less elevation and more relaxation will find plenty of rides in the region to enjoy.

## Washington County

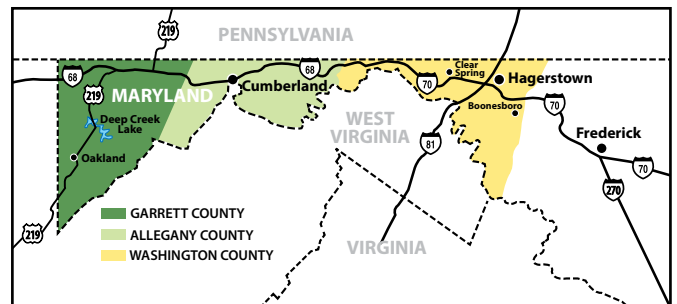
As the Western Maryland County located farthest to the east, Washington County features fewer steep grades and gentler rides than its western neighbors. Cyclists will find an abundance of scenic rides through its lush countryside, farmland, orchards, parks, and historic sites. One of the County's most popular cycling routes is a portion of the 184.5-mile C&O Canal Towpath that extends from Cumberland, Md., to Washington, D.C. Along the way, cyclists may spot some of the 74 lift locks once used for canal boat traffic, while lock houses along the Towpath evoke memories of earlier times. The Towpath's Washington County portion travels alongside the North Branch of the Potomac River from Sideling Hill to Maryland's location across from Harper's Ferry, W.V. Its unpaved surface of hard-packed dirt or crushed stone is generally level. Free campsites located every 6 to 8 miles along the Towpath include a picnic table, grill, chemical toilet and non-potable water. Cyclists can stop in the Canal Partnership towns of Hancock, Sharpsburg and Williamsport for assistance finding food, lodging, bike repairs and other services.

For those who prefer a smoother ride on pavement, the Western Maryland Rail Trail (WMRT) runs parallel to the Towpath for 23 miles. The WMRT runs from Sideling Hill Creek Aqueduct to Big Pool along an abandoned section of the Western Maryland Railroad Line. Interpretative signage along the trail provides information about the repurposed railroad line's history and natural environment.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VISIT HAGERSTOWN & WASHINGTON COUNTY CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

**Washington County is hosting the USA Cycling Amateur Road National Championships set for July 26 – 29, 2018. It features athletes from ages 11 – 22; time trials will be held in Boonesboro with road races in Clear Spring. The grand finale is in Hagerstown on July 29.**



Before its demise, the Railroad served as a lifeline for residents of Western Maryland, Western Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

Washington County offers cyclists the opportunity to explore two significant historic sites. A bicycle tour through the iconic Antietam Battlefield provides cyclists with a ride steeped in Civil War history along 8½ miles of paved road. Fort Frederick, located near Big Pool, harkens back

to the French and Indian War years when it served as a bulwark of Maryland's frontier defense. Cyclists can easily access Fort Frederick State Park and its grounds via the C&O Canal. Antietam is also accessible from the Towpath, for riders who don't mind a longer trip involving some hills and vehicle traffic.

Some of the country's best young cyclists will take on the challenge of Washington County roads this summer at the USA Cycling Amateur Road National Championships, set for July 26 – 29. The county seat of Hagerstown is the first city in Maryland to be selected as a host site for the prestigious cycling event featuring athletes from age 11-22.

“Our area has a strong culture of cycling, and we're within driving distance of some of the country's biggest metro areas,” says Dan Spedden, president of the Visit Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

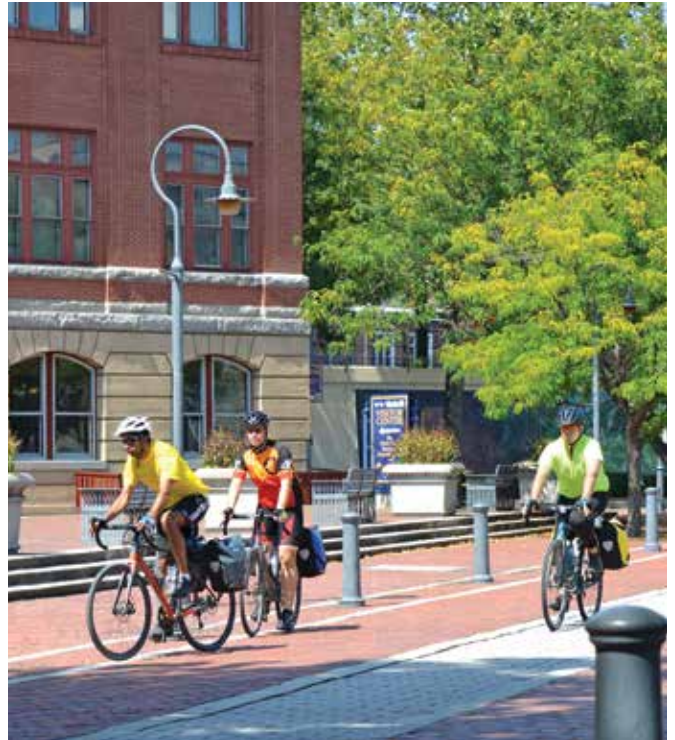
A time trial is set for July 26 in Boonsboro, followed by road races July 27 and 28 in Clear Spring. The event's grand finale on July 29 will feature a criterium – a closed circuit race – in Hagerstown. Vendors will be on hand with wares to enhance the festivities.

“We expect close to 1200 athletes and their families to be here for almost a week,” Dan says. “The residual effect of this event could be massive. It will be like a first date for them with our community. Who knows where that could go?”

## Allegheny County

Travelers heading west on I-68 from Washington County to Allegheny County can't help but notice a significant change in elevation as they travel up Sideling Hill. On the westward side lies an expanse of ridges and valleys within Maryland's Green Ridge State Forest. Its almost 48,000 acres feature some rugged terrain with elevations averaging about 925 feet. Mountain bikers can ride all open forest roads. The 12-mile, single track Green Ridge State Forest Mountain Bike Trail is best suited to riders willing and able to negotiate fallen trees, stream crossings, steep rides up and fast rides down. For a less challenging ride, mountain bikers can head west to Rocky Gap State Park to check out the single track, 5-mile Rocky Gap Lakeside Loop.

To the south of Green Ridge and Rocky Gap, the C&O Canal Towpath continues its journey west from Washington County. Soon after entering Allegheny County, cyclists will find themselves riding a series of loops as the Towpath follows a circuitous section of the Potomac River until reaching Paw Paw, WV, just across the river. Because the Paw Paw Tunnel is closed for repairs, cyclists are temporarily



**Top:** Biking along the C&O Canal towpath is a great family activity.

**Middle:** The Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) trail connects to the C&O Canal towpath at Cumberland, Maryland, at the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad Station and Canal Place.

**Bottom:** Travelers on tour by way of the GAP pause for a break in Frostburg, Maryland, near the depot. These bikers are from New Zealand.





**Riding for fun and exercise along the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) near Cumberland, Maryland.**

directed to use the 1.5 mile Tunnel Hill Detour. It's pretty smooth riding during the final leg of the Towpath, which includes several scenic, re-watered sections of the Canal. During warm weather, cyclists should be on the lookout for an abundance of turtles sunning themselves on the trail.

The Towpath reaches its terminus in downtown Cumberland, not far from the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad Station. This is where the journey may come to an end – or not. Cyclists can continue west on the Great Allegheny Passage, known as the GAP, a rail trail that follows former railroad routes for 150 miles until ending in Pittsburgh, Pa. Although it's an uphill ride through the Cumberland Narrows to Frostburg, the next town easily accessible from the GAP, it's a fairly gentle climb along an abandoned railroad bed of packed crushed limestone. On the way to Frostburg, cyclists may notice the entrance to Bone Cave and will be cycling a section alongside the route traveled by the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad. When a train rolls by, cyclists may want to get themselves and their bikes as far away as possible from the tracks, and cover their ears.

Once past Frostburg, cyclists will pass through the Borden Tunnel until they reach the Mason Dixon line at the Maryland/Pennsylvania border.

“The GAP trail is phenomenal not only as an economic engine, but it's safe and well done – and the views are gorgeous,” says Amy Owens, an avid cyclist and owner of Life Management Fitness in LaVale. Numerous businesses in Cumberland and Frostburg cater to GAP cyclists looking for food, lodging and other services.

For cyclists looking for road rides, Allegany County offers an abundance of choices. “We're blessed to live in an area where you can find roads with little traffic and beautiful views,” Amy says. She recommends a popular ride that departs from Cycles & Things, a bike shop located in downtown Cumberland. This route heads north through Cumberland on Frederick Street and continues on a series of roads that become increasingly rural in character until reaching Lakes Gordon and Koon, just over the border in Pennsylvania. Another favorite is a ride south of Cumberland that follows Irons Mountain.

“The only way you won't climb in Allegany County is by heading north,” says Mike Hutt, owner of Cycles & Things. Mike should know; he's been in the bike business since 1971.

“People coming here from the D.C. Metro area are surprised to find that the hills here can prepare you for more ambitious hill riding, such as in the Rockies,” Amy says, noting lots of options for advanced beginning riders. Recommended rides described on the Maryland Mountainside website include the Rocky Gap Short Ride (10.8 miles), Gordon Lake Short Ride (14.5 miles) and the more ambitious Brice Hollow Ride (34.8 miles). More can be found at [www.mdmountainside.com/category/cycling\\_routes](http://www.mdmountainside.com/category/cycling_routes).

Allegany County offers several notable events at Rocky Gap State Park for on-and-off road cyclists who enjoy triathlon and biathlon competitions. On June 3, 2018, the 31st Annual Rocky Gap Sprint Triathlon and 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Biathlon cater to athletes who prefer road rides. Sponsored by the YMCA of Cumberland, the cycling segment for both events features a rolling eight-mile round-trip out Pleasant Valley Road and back. Triathletes and biathletes who prefer off-road cycling will meet July 15 at the Park for the Annual XTERRA EX2 Off-Road Triathlon and Duathlon. The two-lap mountain bike course includes a twisty single-track along the shores of Lake Habeeb, wide fire roads, grassy sections, and a few rock gardens for an extra challenge.

## Garrett County

Like its eastern neighbors in Western Maryland, Garrett County has it all – road biking, mountain biking and trail biking – along with Maryland’s highest elevations thanks to its location entirely within the highlands of the Appalachian Mountain range. At 3,360 feet, Backbone Mountain is the highest point in Maryland. Garrett’s rugged terrain ranges from high points featuring flat ridgetops adjacent to narrow and steep ravines, along with broad, high plateaus.

Given the county’s topography, it’s not surprising that Garrett County is known for some of the best mountain biking in Maryland. Deep Creek Lake State Park offers about 10 miles of moderate to difficult riding along the Meadow Mountain Trail. A ride up the Fire Tower Trail is rated expert only. Herrington Manor State Park’s 20 miles of trails feature easy to moderate riding along varied terrain. At New Germany State Park, 10 miles of trail range from beginner to intermediate to advanced levels of difficulty. Riders can enjoy easy to moderate rides in the Garrett State Forest Trail system, with 20 miles of trails, plus a 5.5 mile trail through the Garrett State Forest that links Herrington Manor with Swallow Falls State Park. For more suggestions, check out Bikekinetix suggestions for Garrett County mountain biking trails at [http://www.bikekinetix.com/t\\_md/md\\_western.php](http://www.bikekinetix.com/t_md/md_western.php).

“Garrett cycling offers paved roads in good condition, a variety of hills and great views,” says Ryan Haley of High Mountain Sports in Oakland. Cyclists looking for road rides in Garrett County will find plenty of options, especially if they’re comfortable with hills. A popular choice is a 10-mile loop around Deep Creek Lake featuring beautiful scenery and lake views for most of the ride. Rail-trail fans will find easy to moderate riding on the 14-mile Meadow Mountain Trail that occasionally follows the Eastern Continental Divide. Cyclists can find maps and specific directions for this and other routes at <http://www.highmountainsports.com/bike-routes.html>.

Garrett County is host to one of the premier Gran Fondo cycling competitions in North America. The Gran Fondo, an Italian term that translates as “Big Ride” in English, made its debut in Italy during the early 1970s. In the U.S., the Gran Fondo has exploded in popularity.

Set for June 23, 2018, the Garrett County Gran Fondo offers five supported ride options for cyclists with skills ranging from recreational to professional. “Garrett’s Greatest 25” features a scenic 25-mile course through rolling farmland with no major hills. For more of a challenge, there’s the



**Mountain biking near Deep Creek Lake in Garrett County, Maryland, with moderate to difficult terrain.**

“Fabulous 44” with 5800 feet of climbing. The next ride’s name, the “Masochistic Metric,” offers a good hint of what’s ahead for cyclists attempting its 64 miles and 8400 feet of climbing. If that’s not enough, there’s the “Savage Century” that organizers claim may be “the hardest 100-mile ride in North America” with more than 12,700 feet of climbing. Finally, for highly trained and skilled riders, the Garrett County Gran Fondo tops out with the extreme challenge of the “Diabolical Double,” an epic ride of almost 125 miles and over 16,800 feet of climbing.

“The Gran Fondo encompasses Garrett County,” Ryan says. “It will kick your butt!”

For more information, check out the event website at <https://garrettcountygranfondo.org/> and its Facebook page.

For triathletes, Garrett County offers the “World’s Most Savage and Beautiful Triathlon.” The 12<sup>th</sup> edition of the SavageMan Triathlon Festival will be held September 15 -16, 2018, at Deep Creek State Park, with some major changes



and multiple events on the schedule. The main event is the SavageMan60 that challenges participants to complete a course with 50 miles of hill cycling, plus a 1.2-mile lake swim and a 10-mile hill run. The Westernport Wall returns as the highlight event of the race. Every cyclist who successfully climbs this infamous uphill ride without stopping or putting a foot down will be immortalized with a brick bearing his or her name. Adding to the fun is the Westernport Wall Block Party, with screaming spectators ringing cowbells alongside the 31-percent grade. For beginners and those seeking a less challenging race, the SavageMan20 is a sprint with a 500-meter swim, 5K flat run and 16 miles of flat cycling. The SavageMan30 consists of almost 15 miles of hill cycling, a 5-mile hill run and almost a mile of lake swimming. New this year is the SavageMan20/20 double sprint – two 500-meter lake swims, two 3.1-mile runs with one hill and a 15.5-mile ride over rolling terrain.

Recognizing Garrett County's potential to attract cycling enthusiasts and encourage healthy outdoor activity for area residents, a group of cycling advocates from local government and area businesses came together to form Garrett Trails. The non-profit group of volunteers has developed a master plan to promote trail development and support a sustainable trail network linking Garrett County destinations with links to trails outside Garrett County, notably the GAP to the north. The group has been working to develop the Eastern Continental Divide Loop, a multi-use trail with 150-miles of hard-packed surface (to promote economic development of the county and enhance its quality of life). Its website, [www.garretttrails.org](http://www.garretttrails.org), provides a wealth of information about its efforts and includes a helpful and extensive list of suggested rides.



**All three photos: Bicycle portion of the SavageMan Triathlon Festival in Garrett County, Maryland.**