

FORWARD

Hello. My name is L'il Blue. I am being lent to Friend in preparation for a bike ride along the C&O Canal (the "Canal") and the Great Allegheny Passage (the "GAP") later next month. Formally, I am a Transeo 2.0 built by GT. Currently, I am owned by a friend of Friend, a retired technologist. I came into being around 2015; still learning as I go.

I am not a bike of much complexity. If you are seeking dialogue and/or deep thinking, you will need to seek another source. I try to keep it simple for me and my like-minded bikes. I do apologize in advance if my thoughts don't "flow" in the following narrative. I am a bike and sometimes I do think in a circular manner (in keeping with my method of travel?).

Hopefully, you will find the following story of my journey to be informative and entertaining. If not, I don't apologize; I only speak from my experiences. You may want to read Melville or PD James if this is not sufficient. With that said, let's move on.

I am currently housed in the basement of Friend with two other bikes. One is Sleek Black Beauty. She is a hybrid bike; an Ariel 4.0; came into being around 2007. This bike was converted last year to an electric bike capable of speeds reaching 50 MPH! I have renamed her Speed Demon.



Speed Demon at home



Big Blue at home

The other bike is Italian through and through. Formed of Columbus tubing in 2004, he is kitted with Italian components as well. While his formal name is Torelli, I have chosen Big Blue as this bike's name. He has had the privilege of riding some of cycling's renowned routes – Col du Tourmalet, Alpe de' Huez, Besse, Mont Ventoux, Col du Lautaret, among others. He is a road bike without any other pretense. And after so many years, he is still a beauty poised for the next road ride,

Right now, Friend is focused on preparing me for the trip. Since I have never ventured beyond my neighborhood, I am excited to discover some new environments as I get ready for this ride. I have never carried anything but a rider so being set up for carrying luggage bags as well as a rider is going to be a real new experience.

Preparing me for riding longer distances is also going to be a test of my ability to endure each day. I have been told that the daily distance will be about 60 miles. THAT seems like an awful lot of riding each day. And carrying additional luggage the entire time is going to be a real challenge. But, I am up for this. Let's do it!!!

One day of training, I get to ride over to the Angler's Inn near the Canal and Great Falls. Riding distance on asphalt is not exactly what I am designed for but I make the best of it. After all, I need to work on my endurance before the trip begins. Don't want to let Friend down just because I wasn't ready. On another training ride, I get to venture over toward the Triadelphia Reservoir in Howard County. I have never been this far from home. It is a lot of fun even though I am now carrying some rear luggage bags as part of my preparation.



A training ride rest stop

I also train by riding on sections of the Canal that I won't be riding for this trip. If nothing else, I get a feel for the terrain and the surface. All of this is beneficial as I adjust my attitude and thought process along this scenic bike path. On weekends, I feel a bit claustrophobic with so many people using the Canal for exercise, family outings, and dog walking, among other activities. It is so crowded; like Metro Central during a morning commute without the dress clothes.

I need to trust Friend as he prepares me for this journey. He has considerable experience in this type of endeavor. He has previously ridden across the country logging over 4500 miles; crossing the Rockies twice in as many weeks ascending over 11000 feet on one such climb and into Yellowstone Park to see nature's wonders. He also crossed Glacier National Park along the Going to the Sun Highway.



Taking a break during a training ride on part of the Canal

He has also ridden down the Pacific Coast Highway and many times in Europe. So, I need to just rely on his prior knowledge of long distance bike touring as he prepares me for this trip.



Here is am stabled between Friend's bikes ready for the trip

As I get kitted out, I am really amazed at the amount of gear that I am going to carry. You wouldn't think that a five day ride would require so much stuff. I think Friend is a big believer in self-sufficiency when it comes to this kind of thing.

I guess I will be places that are not so easily reached if I have a mechanical problem; being prepared for most repairs, short of breaking my frame or some other catastrophe, is a good idea. That way I can enjoy the ride and not worry about fixes in the field, as it were. I guess the gear needed is the same whether it is for a week or for many weeks. Better to not need it and have it then to need it and not have it? A good motto for bike touring.



After each ride, I get the royal treatment: a full wipe down and cleaning ensuring that my skin and mechanical equipment is kept in tip top shape. This type of treatment is really nice. Makes me feel like one of those race horses you see during the Derby. As you can see from this picture, I can get pretty dusty from riding on the Canal! This may well be each day's outcome next week as I ride toward Pittsburgh.

Each time I go out for a ride, the distance and/or amount of gear I carry is increased. I suspect this is done to maximize my endurance level; don't want to have an energy breakdown mid-way through the day. I want to complete each day's ride without being exhausted and/or too tired to recover properly for the next day's adventure.

While my body is not ideally suited for carrying a front luggage rack, I have been set up Rube Goldberg style to facilitate this situation. Lots of protective material has been used to protect my skin. Go Rube!

I hear the forecast may be "iffy" next week. I sure hope things turn out sunny and mild. Time will tell. In any event, I am ready for whatever comes my way; I am in good hands (and feet) with Friend.



Notice the front luggage rack with all the protection on my skin

I am getting excited as the start date approaches. My tires have been checked, my gears have been cleaned and oiled, my wheel bearings have been cleaned and repacked with a good quality grease; and my body has been checked over and have had all my nuts and bolts tightened.

It's time to roll roll roll along down the Canal path merrily merrily I go....

Day One

Gaithersburg, MD to Harper's Ferry, WV 60 miles

Today is Monday, September 23. It is early. The air is cool. I am loaded for the next week's adventure. Clothes, repair gear, shoes, snacks, water, and odds and ends needed to travel without resorting to "outside" help. Friend is a strong believer in being prepared for unexpected events; he is well experienced with this kind of travel. He rode across the North American continent decades ago covering over 4500 miles with all the gear secured to his bike. Across the Rocky Mountains three times on one such trip climbing over 10,000-plus foot summits, into Yellowstone Park from the East, and over the Going to the Sun Highway in Glacier Park. At another time, he rode down the West Coast along the Pacific Coast Highway. And multiple times in Europe. So, I feel very comfortable with him in the saddle, as it were, this next week as we explore the Canal and GAP. Did I just repeat myself? I warned you about my circular thinking, Onward...

But, the load I am now carrying can feel somewhat overwhelming. This is my first time adventuring beyond my neighborhood for so long and so far! Dare I say the weight I am carrying is more than I imagined would be necessary. We are only gone for five days. I feel ready for a months long journey. I guess whether it is a few days or weeks, the same planning must go into preparing for a bike ride that goes for more than a few hours. After all, Friend has much experience in this kind of thing. I need to trust his judgment when it comes to this particular activity.

I know he has prepared me for the trip. He checked my brakes, cleaned and oiled my gears and chain, test rode me after adding each set of luggage and/or luggage rack, and made sure my tires were in good shape. And, after each training ride, he spent time wiping me down and cleaning off any dirt or sweat. I felt like a thoroughbred race horse; it made me feel really good and valued as a trusted mount. I hope I can repay his thoughtful attention as we begin our journey this week. For the next week, it is going to be me and Friend alone along the Canal and GAP. Just the two of us relying on each other to complete each day's ride without any mishaps. But I digress.



Canal Journey Begins at Pennyfield Lockhouse

The first 10 miles or so are along paved roads as we make our way from the basement to the start of our Canal ride at the Pennyfield lock junction, just before Mile Post 20. The road is pretty smooth; automobile traffic is not too high; it is overcast right now as we head west toward the Potomac River and the Canal towpath. It rained late last week. As a result, the towpath is not so dusty. Yeah!

Last weekend after my final training ride, I was covered with a grey patina of dust, gritty and foul tasting. I took a bath when I got back to Friend's home. Boy, did that feel invigorating and soothing. Cleaning off the grit was important; my gears don't work so well when that stuff gets into my pivots, jockey wheels on the rear derailleur, wheel bearings, and assorted mechanical parts that make me function.



Standing tall in Friends' back yard after a training ride

My tires seem to be singing to us right now. As we ride across the asphalt, my tires make contact with the road surface for a very short period of time; maybe just a few milliseconds or so; maybe just one square inch of my tire rubber touching the ground or road at any one time. The vibration the road is giving me makes my tires sing. This is a really interesting sensation; something I don't recall experiencing before. I think it is a combination of the extra weight I am carrying and my excitement on actually making this trip after weeks of preparation and anticipation. Go Friend, go! Let's put the pedal to my metal (pun intended!).

The cloud cover keeps me cool and avoids any sun burn. On the other pedal (after all I don't have any hands!), the lack of sun means the Canal is going to be damp from the rain that is now coming down as a fine misty drizzle.

My load is well balanced. The front bags carry items that are readily reached and accessible during the day – sun screen, emergency items, spare tubes and repair tools. The luggage on my rear rack contains post ride gear – change of clothes, night time wear, toiletries, and anything bulky that Friend may not need often but available, if the need arises, like a rain poncho. And attached to my rear end is a sign that says "Pittsburgh or Bust" with a silhouette of that city's skyline! Now I have to complete this ride; having advertised my objective so loudly. Way to go Friend.



I look out over an Aqueduct along Canal

All of the luggage detaches from my racks upon arriving at each night's destination. Boy, will that be a load off my frame. Can't wait for that so I can relax and recharge for the next day's ride.

Speaking of tires, Friend tells me that my tires are very suitable for the bulk of the terrain that will be traveled this week. Overwhelmingly packed gravel and small road base gravel that provides good drainage and smooth riding. My tires are not so suited for regular paved road riding. They are pretty wide and have lots of knobs on the surface giving a somewhat rough ride. Maybe this is the cause of the "singing" I hear?

On the other hand, riding on this unpaved surface is quite relaxing and nowhere near as hot as paved surfaces. That I will appreciate as each day progresses.

A bit about my feet, I mean tires. I use 700 millimeter size tires about 1.5 inches wide. That means my tires are a bit more than the "normal" 27" tire of the past; 27.551" to be exact. So I go around and around about 732 times for every mile we will cover. If I extend the math to pedal strokes, Friend will rotate my pedals as many as 24,000 times during each day. That is a lot of calories burned as we head toward the Eastern Continent Divide in about 200 miles. I hope I don't get dizzy as the day goes by. I want to stay on course; stay out of the weeds; stay out of the canal; stay dry as much as possible. But I have no control over water from above - weather be damned.

For you technical types, the following are my drive train specifications: I have a triple chain ring set up attached to my pedals. I have a 48 tooth, 38 tooth, and 28 tooth set of chain rings at the front where Friend's pedal power is received. I have a 11-32 rear cassette attached to my rear wheel. The spacing of this cassette is 11, 13, 15, 18, 21, 24, 28, and 32 teeth on each cassette sprocket. I feel most comfortable carrying all this gear by setting the chain on the middle front chain ring and on the 21 tooth cassette sprocket on the rear. This arrangement means that for each complete rotation of my pedals, my tires spin 1.81 full rotations on the ground. Since the grade of the towpath is about 1%, I can manage this without too much difficulty.

I am made of aluminum, not steel. It makes me lighter without sacrificing strength. And the road noise transfers up through my bones more quickly. I am pretty responsive to Friend's motions on the handle bars, pedal, and body position. I think that is a combination of my frame design and material construction. Go GT!!!

The trees are beginning to turn as fall has just arrived this past weekend. The weather has been quite dry lately lending to the rapid change in the leaves from green to various fall colors – orange, brown, tan, and various shades of green. They are coating the trail now and add to the cushioning effect and crunching sound that I feel today. I suspect this effect will accelerate as we head west and into higher elevations as the Canal and GAP climb toward the Eastern Divide at about 2400' elevation.

It continues to drizzle off and on all day during the ride to the first night's destination. The Canal is made up of hard packed, but wet road base gravel and muddy single track ground. My gears got all clogged up with dirt; makes shifting my chain between the gears a bit harder and certainly more noisy. In any event, the day progresses without any drama; I see only a few bikes and they are going the other direction. There are also

some people walking and some cheer me on yelling "Go Pittsburgh or Bust"! Makes me feel appreciated and acknowledged.



I saw many of these Lockhouses along the Canal



This abandoned bridge crosses the Canal at White's Ferry



Reading Canal history during day's ride

We arrived at our destination early this afternoon - Harper's Ferry in West Virginia just across the Potomac River and Canal at about milepost 61. We crossed the river on a bridge with wide angle views of the river and town that rests at the juncture of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers. And we get to travel along the Appalachian Trail at the same time as we cross over the river. I can now brag to my buddies how I rode the Appalachian Trail for my vacation.



Climbing the stairs to cross bridge at Harper's Ferry

Crossing the bridge to Harper's Ferry was challenging for me. While I can certainly roll along for hours and hours, climbing stairs is very difficult. My feet are round, not square so they don't exactly fit the steps from the Canal to the bridge deck above. Friend carries me up the steps to the bridge deck. I really appreciated his care and concern for my well being making the river crossing pretty painless...for me at least!



Crossing the bridge from Harper's Ferry

Boy, is this one hilly town! From the waterfront, it is nothing but uphill to get to anything. After a day of riding with all this gear, the last thing I want to do is climb one of these hills to get to tonight's stay. Fortunately, our stay is only a few hundred yards up High Street after crossing the bridge. That is a relief for this tired guy. I shift into my "Granny gears" and walk up the hill as if it was level. Isn't technology wonderful...when it works. Makes me wonder where the phrase Granny gear came from? It seems the phrase was not one of endearment. It was a bit derogatory directed at those that could not power their way through steep inclines. I reject that after covering 60 miles with 40 pounds of gear and carrying a



High Street from tonight's destination

grown adult for the past 6 hours. Besides, using this gearing allows me and Friend to protect joints and muscles for another 4 days of riding.

Friend navigates the short ride and dismounts for the last time today. He removes the luggage and secures me to the provided bike rack for the balance of the day. After he checks in, he prepares me for my post-ride pampering – wipe down to remove any road dust and grime as well as checking my luggage racks for tightness and stability. The feeling I get from all this attention is really great. I should be so lucky the rest of my time doing what I do best: carrying people on bike rides.

As night comes, I am left all alone with other bikes. We chat off and on during the night replaying the day's activities and gossiping about how our riders handle us and treat us. I can say without any hesitation that Friend is clearly one of the best, if not best, riding partner if what I hear from others is any indication. It's getting late now so I need to really rest up for the next day's adventure. Hope everyone else rests well. Good night.

Day Two

Harper's Ferry, WV to Hancock, MD 65 miles

Today is Tuesday, September 24. It is not nearly as early. Friend must have slept in this morning and/or took a longer time during breakfast and packing the luggage to affix to my racks. The air is still cool. It is wet out here; rained off and on all night. Friend got to spend the night indoors all dry and cozy. Seems a bit unfair to me since I am carrying the gear. All he does is pedal during the day non-stop for 6 hours. How tough can that be? Ugh???



View of Canal towpath

I am now reloaded for the next day's adventure. I descend down the High Street hill really fast keeping my brakes on so I don't get too carried away and crash. After I re-cross the bridge over the river to get to the Canal, I am unloaded once again and carried down the steps back onto the Canal trail where I am reloaded for the trip toward Hancock. Once again, the Canal is soggy. The single tracks are really messy. The mud I raise as my tires churn toward tonight's destination is quite sticky. I think I am going to carry an extra five pounds of mud by the end of the day. Yuck.

The mud is everywhere. My front fork. My frame tubes. It gets into my chain, my shifting mechanisms, and the rear cassette. It gets into the jockey wheels on the rear derailleur. Those are the little wheels that help guide the chain when I shift into easier or harder gears. It even splashes up onto the bike bags and onto the Friend's clothes. It really takes away from the ambiance of this otherwise enchanting environment. For better or worse, Friend likes to stay in one gear setting during the bulk of the day's ride. Makes it easier for me to adjust to the situation since I don't have to work so hard moving the chain up or down the cassette and/or front chain rings.

As I mentioned before, the Canal is a fairly constant rising trail when going east to west. I can feel the changes in the terrain subtle though they may be. The additional weight I carry seems to compound this effect. The canal locks seem to be a good five to seven degrees higher than the path is to their east. This has to account for the use of locks to control the flow of water and allow the barges to rise and fall as they progressed from one location to another years ago. I have to speed up to ascend this slight increase in grade to get to the next plateau of the



A typical Canal lockhouse and canal trail

Canal to maintain that 1-2% grade until the next lock.

I spend most of the day dodging mud and puddles as much as I can but it is a tiring and tedious process. I have to concentrate a lot on this effort instead of truly enjoying the surroundings and getting into a “groove” just riding the Canal. Many times, I have to ride on the grass on either side of the main trail to avoid splashing myself any more than is necessary to advance toward Hancock.

I am glad that my tires are so well suited for this kind of terrain. Wide enough to maintain my upright posture but narrow enough to not become too resistant to progress. It is obviously a balancing act that I have mastered over the years. Once again, I raise my saddle (don't have a hat afterall!) to GT.

My frame is designed to respond to motion fairly quickly. My front end is pretty vertical compared to touring bikes. By that I mean that the angle of the fork blades are more upright. Touring bikes have forks that are angled with the ends of the fork where the wheel is attached a lot more forward compared to where they are attached to the frame. This allows for the shock of any road irregularities to be tempered; my fork sends those shocks right up to my frame. It can be quite jarring!

Touring bikes also have lots of attachment fittings directly attached/welded right onto the frame allowing for securing bike racks right onto the frame. I don't have those fittings on my fork. Friend had to fashion this attachment, as I mentioned in the Forward, to use the front bags.

I have a thumb lever that allows for my fork to act like a shock absorber. It can move up and down to help deal with road shocks when engaged. I can also lock my front fork so it does not move allowing for more rapid response to rider movement of my handle bars. During this ride, Friend leaves my shocks engaged so I can better handle the load and terrain irregularities. For that I am very appreciative.



Front rack and assorted padding and attachment items

We get to Hancock in the late afternoon. For some reason, all of these towns are uphill from the Canal. Go figure. We ride up to the front of tonight's stay, a really neat home built in 1838. Friend leaves me on the street while he knocks on the front door. The host helps to unload my rear bags and directs me up a really steep hill to access the garage in the rear.



Friend displays the days muddy result outside day's destination

It's not enough that I have had to trudge through rain, mud, and muck all day that I now have to get myself up this hill that looks a lot like that street in San Fransisco –Lombard Street. Once again, I get into my Granny gear and walk up this hill. Fortunately, it was not as long as yesterday; make it to the top and coast down the driveway toward a garage used to store guest bikes for the night.

I meet five or six other bikes heading east (again). During the day, I saw a number of other bikes heading east. Bikes with electric motors, trikes, pulling trailers with kids, gear, even a pet dog. I feel sorry for the dog. They get splashed and don't get to explore the trail unless their owner lets them out and even then it is for only a short period of time before being cooped up in the trailer again. But I digress....again.

I get hosed off, literally, by Friend. He is gentle with the spray pressure to avoid getting water into my bearings. For that I am very grateful. After all, I just had a grease job last weekend.



Friend's bike shoes. Notice the tape on the toes

At least I get to spend the night in a covered building. I chat with the other bikes and we discuss the ride, the terrain, the weather, and what to expect the next few days. I advise them of the detours to come as they get closer to DC. Quite a few projects being done right now along the Canal to repair bridges and other areas worn out from decades of exposure to the elements.

The other bikes cover 30-35 miles each day. A very leisurely approach to cycling the Canal and GAP dare I say. It certainly allows them to start later in the day and finish sooner in the afternoon. It sure allows them to rest more and not have to bear the burden of the load and rider for so long each day. Am I jealous? Yes and No. Yes, because the weather right now is a real bummer. No, because I am built for durability; I finish sooner and get back home. It cuts both ways.

It is getting late now; I am resting up for tomorrow's journey toward Paw Paw and that famous tunnel. Time to sleep now, rest up, and recharge my "batteries" (figuratively speaking these days, for me anyway!) for the next day's ride.

Day Three

Hancock, MD to Cumberland, MD 61 miles

Today is Wednesday, September 25. It is not nearly as early...again. Friend must have slept in this morning and/or took a longer time during breakfast and packing the luggage to affix to my racks. Is he slacking as the week wears on? The air is still cool. I get my chain and gears treated with some much needed oil. The prior day's weather, mud, and subsequent hosing have allowed some rust to grow on my chain and gears. This rubbing of oil from a prepared rag is just the antidote; I am restored to my usual, healthy condition.

I am now reloaded for the next day's adventure. The bags are attached to my front and rear racks. Friend is checking all my mounting points and assuring that I am well balanced and firmly secured. My tires are checked for proper air pressure. He sure is careful and attentive to my needs. For that, I am very grateful.

We descend that hill and rejoin the Canal and head west toward Cumberland. Today's ride starts off on a nicely packed towpath; no single tracking for the morning today. What a relief that is after yesterday's slop. But that changes between Hancock and the Paw Paw tunnel several times between single track and firm packed gravel. Some of the Canal is right on top of the Potomac River...literally. I suspect this concrete replaces what was once the canal towpath until Mother Nature decided to erode the ground it sat upon.



Part of Canal literally follows Potomac River for several miles

As I head west, the Canal leaves the Potomac River and makes its way in a more direct line instead of following the river's bends, a section of the river that winds and twists its way west by going north, south, east, and then west. This section of the towpath goes in a more direct line instead of tracking with the river; saves about 5 miles of riding...yeah.



East entrance to the Paw Paw tunnel

The trees are beginning to change more as the Canal's altitude rises toward Cumberland and the East Divide. The crunch of the fallen leaves and small grains of the gravel path reverberate up through the tires, wheels, fork, and into my frame. We finally make it to the east entrance to the famous Paw Paw tunnel. It took over a decade to create this tunnel through solid granite rock.

The tunnel served as the most direct route for the Canal and has a rock ledge that the mules used to pull the barges from one end to the other. This part of the canal is only wide enough for a single barge and was the source of considerable friction by and between the two factions operating from each end of the tunnel.

The ledge is a good ten feet higher than the canal and maybe four feet wide. Even today you can see the irregularity in the path's rocky surface. I am sure that much of that is the result of decades of wear from the mules' shoes as they pulled loaded barges back and forth through this 3000+ foot, unlit engineering feat. The rock ledge is wavy and uneven. Makes for some unsure footing. Progress is going to be slow with complete attention to stay close to the tunnel wall. The walls slant in such that riding is not an option so Friend is careful and attentive to where he steers me so I don't take that dangerous fall. Thank you Friend!



On the wooden boardwalk approaching the Paw Paw Tunnel



The Canal and towpath surrounded by steep canyon walls

The entrance to the tunnel from the east is very narrow and steep. There is a lot of protective fencing attached to both sides to prevent rocks from cascading down on us unsuspecting visitors. Since there is no light in this tunnel, I have to use my headlight to illuminate my path. Access is across a wooden boardwalk; the Canal is on my right. One slip and off the edge I go down a good 20 feet. Good thing my tires have good grip on the path's surface! It takes about 15 minutes to traverse this unique engineering landmark. While I can see the light at the other end, it sure feels like forever to finally emerge back into daylight. I can now breathe a well held sigh of relief.

While heading west, a group of bikes is coming toward us from the other end of the tunnel. Friend pulls me real close to the tunnel wall and stands still to allow the others to pass without creating any problems for the others. There must be 10 bikes heading toward Hancock in this group. Once again, I am struck by how few are heading west. I don't know if I should feel privileged or am a fool at this point in this journey. Time will tell...I hope.

The rest of the day's ride is uneventful. The rain holds off. The sky is still overcast, but at least I am not getting wet from above. The single track we encounter; however, is another matter. By the time we are done today, I will probably weigh another 5 pounds heavier.



Another view of the tunnel approach from the east.

I finally see the day's goal. The night's stop provides courtesy cleaning and towels to dry me off after I get another hosing down to remove the accumulated muck. This hotel seems to cater to us bikes. I see lots of other bikes as we check in for the night - electrics, mountain, road, and hybrids like me. I even get to spend the night in the same room as Friend. Boy, is that a nice thing to contemplate as we ride the elevator up to the room. Go figure. A hotel that treats bikes as well as people.

Even though I get to spend the night indoors, I stay loaded throughout the night. Oh well, the tradeoff is okay since I stay warm and dry tonight. Tomorrow is supposed to be quite a long day. I get to finish the non-stop climb to the top of the eastern divide. I finally get a break from the constant climbing since starting the ride Monday morning.

One of the things I noticed during the past few days is the consistency of the terrain, the wildlife and trees and plants, and unending horizon that happens along the Canal. Lots of white tail deer, birds, squirrels, and insects. The tree canopy, while very nice when it is sunny and hot during the summer months, does create a tunnel that limits your ability to see the surrounding topography. This sameness can create a sameness that inhibits my ability to judge how much ground I have covered and how much further I have to go during the day. The only thing that really helped were the mileage markers that occurred every mile from the first day. There were times when the towpath was straight for miles or so it seemed. Seeing the horizon at those times was not visible.

Looking forward to going downhill tomorrow toward Pittsburgh. And I get to ride on a trail that doesn't have any single tracking. No more mud. It's about time I get a break. Time to rest and get ready for that climb to the Eastern Divide tomorrow. Here's hoping the weather turns in my favor. Wouldn't that be nice. Good night...

Day Four

Cumberland, MD to Ohiopyle, PA 72 miles

Today is Thursday, September 26. I am ready to climb up to the Eastern Divide. Friend was very organized this morning. My bags are packed and ready; breakfast was extensive and filling; time to climb the Great Allegheny Passage out of Cumberland. I ride down the elevator and head to the GAP trail where the Canal ends.



The beginning of the GAP trail in Cumberland MD

The air is still cool. It's not raining and the beginning of the GAP is asphalt leading up and out of Cumberland to the west and north. Today will be the longest day of riding. And we get to cross the Eastern Continental Divide!

This will be the highest point on this side of the country along the GAP. It separates how water flows either toward the Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean. Over ½ mile into the sky! I bet the views are really spectacular. Can't wait to get there because then it is all downhill – literally!



The end of the Canal towpath in Cumberland MD

The Canal ends and the GAP begins at the same spot in Cumberland not far from last night's stay. How convenient is that? The ride out of Cumberland is easy and quick. I join up with the old Western Maryland Railroad right of way almost immediately. Trains cannot operate above a 2-3% grade without using some form of a gear/cog system and the GAP maintains that grade for as far as the eye can see. The GAP is what I was told – hard packed gravel base, wide, well maintained, and follows the WM for miles and miles all the way to Frostburg, MD. After the past three days, this is almost paradise!

The WM and GAP path cross each other multiple times as the ride heads out of Cumberland. In order to safely cross railroad tracks, I have to place my tires at a 90 degree angle to the rails. This allows me to navigate the slick rail tops with the most tread grabbing and keep my body weight solidly balanced. Doing anything less may subject me and Friend to a dangerous fall where either of us could get seriously injured. This “dance” happens at least six times before the path settles into a steady direction – up, up, up and northwest.

This part of the GAP has left the advantage of the river gorge as I make my way toward Pennsylvania. The climb is constant and persistent. The rails of the WM and I follow the same grade for 15 miles. Things do not change until after I pass by Frostburg. Every



A view from GAP looking north toward PA



Artwork displayed by people along GAP

once in a while I get a view of the surrounding countryside. Quite the view from up here and the cloud ceiling is high enough now that I can see beyond the end of my tire (since I don't have a nose like Friend!). And someone built and mounted a nice piece of artwork to humor me and keep my spirits up as I make my way up toward the summit.

The ride is still quiet. Only the crunch of fallen leaves and the gravel trail breaks the surrounding silence at this hour. I don't see another bike for many miles. And those that I do see are coasting downhill toward Cumberland and points east.....again.

It is my understanding that bikers race against a steam locomotive each year in the fall. I was told this by several bikes this morning as we left Cumberland. The average speed to win is over 17 MPH! Up hill. For over 15 miles! On the GAP path. This means that you cannot easily use a road bike with typical road tires. And while I may be well suited to attempt this challenge, I sure cannot do this carrying all of this gear and luggage racks. Having said that, I am not too interested in beating myself up for this challenge. Let's call it discretion as the better part of valor. Enough said!!!

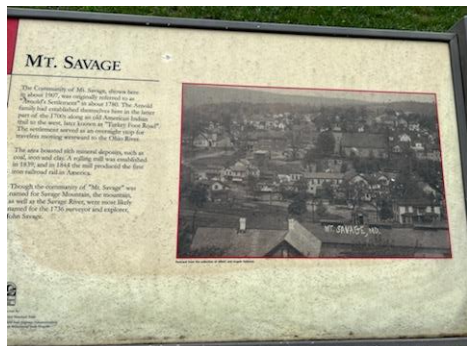
The mile markers of the GAP come and go at regular intervals 1...2...3...4...5...6...7...8...9...10...etc...etc...etc. I am in a fairly low gear now. I cover about 8 miles in an hour. At this rate, I should be at the crest in a bit less than 3 hours. Now is a good time to discuss some of my features. I have clip in pedals. These allow a rider, like Friend, to insert a matching cleat into my pedal clip and securely rotate my pedal using a pull and push method instead of only pushing a "regular" pedal. It helps with pedal efficiency and makes riding me a lot more comfortable since the shoe does not move around while pedaling.

Another feature, mentioned before, is my gearing setup. I offer a wide range of gear ratios for the rider. I allow the rider to choose how hard or easy they want to push/pull on my pedals regardless of the grade going up or down. Right now, I am in a gear combination that makes it relatively easy to move me and the gear I am carrying up a constant, long upward grade. You may not believe that a 2-3% grade can be so difficult. But, when you add additional weight and a longer ride to the situation, this climb is pretty challenging. I am grateful that Friend has prepared me for this part of the trip by training me with and without the load. By adding mileage to my prior training rides, I have developed the necessary strength and durability to manage this part of the ride without feeling worn out and/or tired. I can actually enjoy myself while making my way up and up. Thank you Friend!

Somewhere just past GAP mile marker 20 I reach the Maryland Pennsylvania state line; the Mason Dixon Line. Surveyed hundreds of years ago by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon to resolve border disputes by and between Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware during colonial times. As you can see from the picture, I have decided to straddle the line for a brief period of time as I say “goodbye” to Maryland and “Hello” to Pennsylvania. Do I have a split personality for this moment of self reflection/humor? I don't feel any different so I continue on up the path after my photo op.



At the state line marker on the GAP



Historical info about Mount Savage along GAP

The Savage Mountain tunnel is up ahead. The path runs through the Tunnel. It is wide and paved. It is dark but not as dark as Paw Paw was yesterday afternoon. There are lights every so often that seem to be activated by the motion of bikes. This makes sense since you don't need lighting during night hours since no one is going to bike in the dark; not safe and exposes bikes to nocturnal creatures. About half way through the tunnel, the path grade shifts noticeably downward. Not only is this a strange feeling after going up and up all day for the past three days, but it allows me to coast a short while.

The path's incline has increased quite a bit. I would not be surprised if the grade has increased to 4 or 5%. So close and yet so far. And for Mother Nature to throw this curve ball is just plain cruel. It has been a long slog. Over 22 miles of steady climbing since I left Cumberland. I am not about to stop now. I dig in and power my way up and up. I can see the tunnel that straddles the divide. It is getting closer with each pedal rotation.



Inside Mount Savage tunnel heading west



Inside Mount Savage tunnel looking toward where I was



Heading west over the Divide and into the exhibit tunnel

In other 1.5 miles or so I arrive at the eastern divide. Almost 2400 feet above sea level. It feels really great to finally reach this summit. It has been a real challenge the past four days. Rain, drizzle, mud, grit, and a relentless, constant upward grind through 208+ miles. The



History display at the Divide exhibit



Here I am reading about the Divides impact on water

feeling of reaching this milestone is great.

The rest while I talk with other bikes is well earned. But I am the only one going west. Everyone else is going east. It has to be the distance to this point. 125 miles going east. 208 going west. Pittsburgh is higher than DC.



This image clearly explains my theory on the trip's impact on the ride!!!

The distance is shorter going east. The climb is less over a shorter distance. Nothing else makes sense. Knowledge is power. That's my story and I am sticking with it! It is now time to make some headway toward today's destination.

The first five miles are pure joy. I shift into a higher gear and cover some miles without a lot of effort compared to just 15 minutes ago. Even the weather seems to be cooperating right now. What a shift in altitude, literally (pun intended!), and speed. Woo Hoo!

I eventually join up with the old Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad right of way. Every so often, I pass a large white marker in the ground on the side of the path with "P&LE RR" block letters in black across the top. I follow this right of way for many miles heading toward tonight's destination. The path levels out; I lose the initial downhill euphoria right after crossing the Divide. Bummer. I am now following the Casselman River.



Crossing the Casselman River today

Mile markers go up. 25...30...35...40...50...60...getting tired. The day is getting short; light is beginning to fade while still in the trees. While I was initially planning on riding to Connellsville, a total of 92 miles, I decide to stop in Ohio; discretion is the better part of riding into the dark. Besides, I already covered 72 miles; I have nothing to be ashamed about, right?

I meet a tandem coming east from Seattle, WA. So far, it has travelled over 4500 miles as it makes its way to Silver Spring, MD. I find that to be an amazing adventure; crossing the continent through Canada, around the Great Lakes and back into the country. This bike's name is Comotion. He comes apart for easy transport using a very clever coupling system across the top and bottom tubes. He is almost twice as long as I am. Makes for some tough turning in tight spaces; like a tractor trailer.

Comotion carries a lot of technology to entertain himself during the day. I have none, but I don't regret it at all. I am able to be "in the moment" each day and make the most of my travels through the quiet that the Canal and GAP have offered so far. We are secured to a bike rack for the night. I am beginning to adjust to this manner of nightly accommodation. It's really not too bad so long as it isn't raining.

I am so glad I don't have to carry the luggage for two people that Comotion is carrying. It's enough that I am carrying for one person, thank you very much. Dark descends on us; the only sound I hear is the nearby Youghiogheny River. I get myself settled in and finally get to rest after a long day of climbing and descending along the GAP. Four days done without any mishaps; one day to go. Hoping for a dry day tomorrow and reaching Pittsburgh in a safe and sound condition. Good night...

Day Five

Ohiopyle, PA to Pittsburgh, PA 70 Miles

Today is Friday, September 27. It is my last day traveling the GAP. Yes!!! Pittsburgh is the final day's destination and the end of this journey. I get to rest a bit longer while Friend has breakfast down the street. I get to chat with Comotion some more; he is heading east toward the Divide but may stop in Myersdale about 8 miles before the Divide. Evidently Comotion weighs about 140 pounds when fully loaded. I can't imagine the energy needed to move him and his riders up toward the summit. No wonder covering more than 30 miles heading east right now is a full day's work. I can tell you I am not the least bit jealous of Comotion, but I am impressed with his perseverance and onboard technology. He has GPS, Podcast, communication systems, along with the usual bike equipment. The gearing is very interesting. Clearly, he gave a lot of thought to his pedal system to accommodate all the weight and the two riders, a husband and wife taking the entire summer to travel across the continent by bike. Quite a journey to be remembered during all their lives.



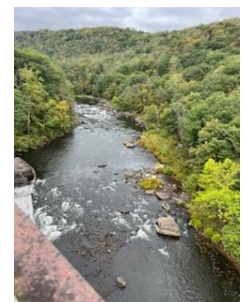
Me chatting with Comotion before we get ready for the day's ride

The luggage is affixed to my racks for the last time. I am looking forward to seeing the final end point of this journey - the confluence of the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monongahela Rivers. Our final ride stop is at Point State Park where the old Fort Duquesne was located many centuries ago by the French.



Here I am crossing the Youghigheny River near Ohiopyle

I cross the Youghigheny River as Ohiopyle is now in the rear and Pittsburgh is ahead...eventually. The path follows this river valley between lots of rugged terrain on both sides. The path is broad, covered with lots of leaves on a broad, packed gravel surface. This is a great trail. The communities that line the GAP take great pride and provide lots of support. It shows in the path's condition.



Looking north over the Youghigheny River

The sky is not so dark. The clouds don't look so ominous today. I hope this is an indication of the weather and I can avoid the mess experienced earlier this week. Wouldn't that be a pleasant change.

Early in the day, a state park truck is on the path doing its "thing". I ask to pass and the truck challenges me as to whether or not it will catch up with me and pass me so why

try and pass. I take up the challenge and ride a bit faster; get a big assist from some barriers about five miles later that block vehicles from entering the path on the other side of a road crossing the GAP. Breathing vehicle exhaust is not too good for my health.



Here I am chatting with some local artwork installed by the town. Nice blue color!

Along the way, I see some more bike artwork. A nice touch celebrating the town's involvement with the GAP. The terrain is beginning to open up as I leave the Laurel Highlands and get that much closer to Pittsburgh where two major rivers meet up to form a third. Every so often, I pass a marker that provides some additional distance information for those interested to know. This information can be both helpful and harmful depending on your frame of mind, where in the day you cross it, and whether or not the information show little or lots of distance to go. In my case, I view it today as very positive.



A rest stop along the GAP

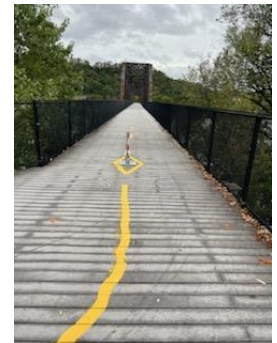
There are now more signs of city living. The silence that accompanied me the past four days is becoming overwhelmed by the sound of modern life, especially the sounds of trains. Speaking of trains, the PLE RR markers stop as I approach McKeesport. I guess modern life finally erased the last vestiges that I followed for so many miles the past two days.

Here I am reviewing a mileage sign post



Reading about the area's history

The path becomes macadam as it winds its way through the urban landscape. The scenery changes from trees and water to buildings and fences. I cross the Monongahela River multiple times as the route makes it way to downtown Pittsburgh and the end of the trip. Some of the overpass ramps are steeper than anything I encountered to date. So unfair! I race a BNSF



Crossing the Monongahela River

train out of its rail yard start and stay ahead for about 30 minutes. Take that you diesel beast.

Riding on hard surfaces with my tires is harder than what is worn by Big Blue and Speed Demon. Remember them? My tires are great for the gravel and dirt trails. Not so for the hard surface now a part of the GAP. Road resistance is greater and maneuvering is a tad less responsive. This is not a big deal for short rides but doing this for 30 40 or 50 miles will wear me and my tire tread out. On the other hand Big Blue's road tires would be completely useless for the past 4+ days given their narrow

profile. And with all the gear I easily managed, he would literally sink. Besides, his frame has no ability to do anything but race. Bike touring? Not a chance. Even Speed Demon's tires would have had a hard time with the wet conditions. While my tires can manage with a bit less air to create a softer ride, those other tires need to be really firm by design to properly function.



Checking into the room

As I get closer to the end, the traffic around me begins to increase. The roads that I had no interaction with the past four days begin to multiply. And those vehicles that I so gratefully did not see are now everywhere. I navigate the last miles into downtown Pittsburgh and make it to the final night's stay.



In the room before unpacking

I check in and go up to the room to unload my luggage for the last time. What a relief! I don't have to think about resting up for the next day's travels; I can rest and really relax now. Yeah!!!

Friend takes me downstairs and outside for one more quick cleaning, removing any obvious dirt and debris that may have accumulated on my body the past two days. He wipes me down with a towel and makes sure that my parts are reasonably cleaned off. I suspect I will get a thorough cleaning when we get back home. After my cleaning, I am returned to the hotel but this time I am secured to an indoor bike rack. I meet some city bikes that guests use when visiting Pittsburgh. I have a hard time understanding their language and the terms they use for various activities; must be a cultural thing that I don't relate to here in Pittsburgh. Maybe it is a function of being an urban bike and not a city bike? In any event, we seem to get along which is always important.

AFTERWARD



Here I stand at the end of the GAP

Today is Saturday, September 28. The sun is shining for a change. First time in over a week. What a difference a day makes. I get out and venture toward the very end of the GAP ride at Point Place Park. The downtown Pittsburgh traffic is very light and I easily get to this historic park in a few minutes.



View of Fort outline looking toward downtown Pittsburgh

I visit the actual site of Fort Duquesne and Fort Pitt. This fort was the site of much activity before the American colonies were formed. The French and British, with help from natives, fought a war. The fort's outline is established by the stone in the ground. It is my understanding the original stockade was



View of Fort outline looking toward fountain and river

burned down to the ground by the French rather than have the British take over the fort as they assumed control of the territory. Eventually, this became the city of Pittsburgh named after William Pitt, the Elder.



View of Three Rivers Stadium, home of the Steelers

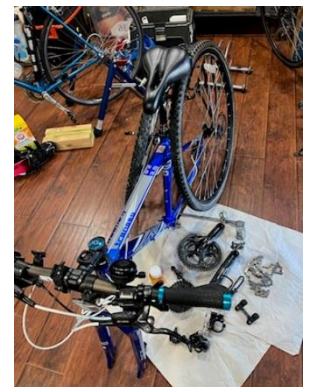
Across from the park is the home of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Today is a Saturday so the stadium is quiet and unoccupied. I guess the sound coming across the river when there is a game can be quite loud with cheers bouncing off the otherwise calm water surface.

I am dismantled for the ride home in the back of Friend's car. My front wheel is removed from my fork; the luggage bags are loaded around me to cushion my ride while lying down. I get to actually sleep during the four hour ride back to the starting place six days ago.



My equipment removed for the royal spa treatment

I get completely cleaned and groomed when back. Everything is hand washed, cleaned, and oiled as needed. I feel all the dirt, muck, and grit fall off as I get the royal spa treatment. There was stuff inside my front chain rings; muck in all



Here is my post spa results prior to assembly

the pivot points of both derailleurs; and my chain looked like it had been involved in a mud bath!



Ready to go home

Friend took a lot of time to ensure I was in the same operating condition as I was before the trip. He was successful I can tell you. I look brand new. Ready to finally go home to Scooter and Aventon. The stories I will be telling them about the past week's journey. I know they will be jealous and will start nagging for their own adventure.

Looking back, I think the most important observation I can make is to prepare prepare prepare. Make notes, check your list multiple times, test everything, assume nothing about the condition of the equipment. And be sure to test everything and train a lot. The effort on the front end pays enormous dividends during the trip.

Hope you enjoyed my journey and got something out of the past five days. I know I did. May you keep your rubber down and your frame upright. Li'l Blue signing off.