

# WESTERN MARYLAND SAMPLER

## Take a “City” Tour of Hagerstown and “Country” Tour on Hancock’s Woodmont Rail Trail

by ROLAND LEISER

With hills and historic homes, these two tours offer different sights and cycling experiences in Washington County, Maryland.



### Bike Hagerstown

Photos by ROLAND LEISER

**HAGERSTOWN, THE LARGEST** city in Maryland’s Washington County, takes its support of cycling seriously.

I’ve known about Hagerstown for years, driving past it so many times on I-70 to recreational activities further west in Maryland and in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Until recently, I had never thought of it as a cycling destination, but I was going to give it a try. The idea hit me after reading the bicycle tours brochure of the Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). I would wait for dry, sunny weather to ride the 10.14 mile loop within the city and schedule a Sunday tour when vehicle traffic would be light.

The brochure’s cue sheets describe eight trails of different lengths and terrain and the Hub City Tour is one of them. Certain sections of the route include bike lanes. Hagerstown, population 40,000, publishes its own guide that’s chock full of helpful advice and tourism information and includes an enlarged trail map. Red dots indicate the location of bike racks.

The CVB cautions that the loop includes “some steep hills” and signage at the starting point in the Fairgrounds Park advises that the trail is for “experienced bikers” only.

Don’t be alarmed. Yes, the route is often hilly, but nothing that a fit cyclist couldn’t handle. And, yes, there are a couple of challenging steeps, but none should require dismounting.

Green and white directional signs guide bikers at major turns and more are planned, said a staff member

of Hub City Cycles, the town’s bike shop which hosts an annual ride each May (National Bicycle Month, of course). It’s hard to get lost — almost.

I found the fairgrounds easily from I-70/Highway 40, turning on Cleveland Avenue which leads into the area. As I removed my bike from the car rack, a youngster perhaps 10 years old was heading out on the trail and I asked, “are you doing the loop?” He quickly replied, “yeah, I’m doing the loop,” and that was the last I saw of him. Later, I spotted two adult bikers, one of whom would lead me back to the fairgrounds on a correct route.

Except for a short paved section in the Hagerstown City Park, the trail meanders along public roads. Leaving the fairgrounds, I biked past a row of townhouses on one side and Pangborn Park and a lake on the other, then into another neighborhood of modest but well-maintained houses. These gave way to a residential area of grandiose homes, many of which featured unusual architecture. I learned later that I had passed through the Oak Hill Historical District on Oak Hill Avenue, listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

On Prospect Street, the petite Oswald Park contains a handsome stone monument to one Edward Oswald Jr., city attorney for 26 years, who drafted the city’s charter.

At Prospect Avenue (not to be confused with Prospect Street), a left turn brings me into a short stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue, a commercial area, then past a block-long, abandoned brick factory on North Prospect Street. It once housed the renowned Moller Organ Works, which closed in 1992 due to financial difficulties. On a historical note, recalled CVB President Dan Stedden, the factory had shifted production from organs to aircraft wing struts during World War II.

Crossing West Washington Street into South Prospect Street, more elegant homes line the road in the South Prospect Historical District, also on the NRHP. Both historical areas were home to the city’s civic and business leaders and reflect late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early- to mid-20 century architecture, respectively.

*Continued on Page 8.*







## Woodmont Rail Trail

Photos by PATRICK HOGAN & ROLAND LEISER

**ONE LONG CLIMB** but mostly gently rolling hills, a wild turkey that scrambled to get out of camera range and a final 12 miles on a flat paved trail along the C&O towpath.

These were highlights of the Woodmont Rail Trail Tour, a 25-mile loop from Hancock in western Maryland where I and Patrick Hogan, an experienced cyclist, began the adventure at the town's Widmeyer Park. For the most part, it was easier than I expected, based on the Hagerstown-Washington County's Bicycle Tours brochure, but a tough slog over one short section. More on that later.

"Hilly for seven miles, then downhill and flat," according to the brochure. Then we are advised to "carry lots of water and a spare tube, this is a very remote route." Well, not quite.

Out of Hancock, the first hill unquestionably tested the quads. Then we headed down, eventually passing Kirkwood Park on Creek Road, the home of the city's Little League baseball team.

After crossing Sandy Mile Road on a bridge over I-68, we came to a side road that paralleled the interstate. Despite a thick forest on both sides, it wasn't enough to deaden the noise of I-68 traffic. The din drowned out the sound of the occasional vehicles behind us, which were ready to pass. With me in front, Patrick would shout, "car back!" Patrick suggested that cyclists install rear view mirrors on the handlebars or helmets if they travel this route. Speeding cars on the public roads were definitely an annoyance.

On a section of US 40 Scenic (National Pike), granny gears came into play. Then we approached the Western Pike (old Route 40) — a long gradual ascent, not especially steep, it seemed endless. Common sense ruled and we dismounted for what I figured was the last third of the climb. After a water break and an energy bar, we continued uphill. Patrick put a positive spin on the decision to dismount. "Look on it as cross-training. You get off the saddle and work a different set of muscles." That particular climb would be "great for power bikers" cycling nonstop, but a different workout for ordinary guys "pushing a bike up the hill." The reasoning made perfect sense.

On Exline Road, the Mt. Olivet Presbyterian Church, with its simple architectural lines, appeared in the

middle of farmland and neatly groomed lawns and gardens of private homes. As we proceeded to the next intersection, a wild turkey fled across Exline Road, the only wildlife seen on the tour. Then we cycled down again, ending up on Woodmont Road and passing the Woodmont Natural Resources Management Area of the Maryland Park Service.

The final half of the trail brought us into the Pearre parking lot, the far end of the Western Maryland Rail Trail, where a number of bikers were congregating and chatting prior to their return to Hancock.

There were so few turns on the route that we could pocket the cue sheet rather than fasten it to a cue sheet holder.

Yes, the tour was a little tiring at the end of four-plus hours, but satisfying to ride the back roads of this scenic part of the county.





nearly 80 miles of off-road trails in the Valley and surrounding communities.

**Lunch, Beer, or Wine**— After your day of outdoor adventure the perfect icing to your trip might include a visit to a local winery to pick up a bottle of regional wine for home, or stop in one of the spots along the Beerway, home to Virginia's best beer bar according to Craftbeer.com. If you imbibe, just remember to have a DD. Stay safe out there! :-)

### Getting There

Roanoke is located on Interstate 81 in Virginia, just 160 miles from Raleigh and Richmond and 260 miles from Washington DC. The region is easily accessible by car and plane, and now offers Amtrak service on a recently revitalized rail line. Rental bikes are available at regional shops if you prefer not to travel with gear.

Dining and sleeping in the area will be a snap. There are lots of options for both. Food can be found for many price points and 24 hours a day for the adventurous late night soul. Rest comfortably in one of the regional Inns, Hotels, or B&B locations. Suit your taste for downtown convenience with the graceful Hotel Roanoke or quiet tree lined lanes at the Black Lantern Inn.

### Want a Guide or Shuttle for Biking?

Prefer a guide or shuttle to get you onto the best roads or mountain bike trails? Roanoke Mountain Adventures can help you out. (540) 525-8295.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kimberly Perry is the Executive Director of a bicycling non-profit. Prior to working in cycling, Kim served as a community health educator and professor. Her favorite days are spent on the bike, surfing, kiteboarding, skiing, or sailing.



Carvin's Cove Forest.

### Information

- General Planning: [www.visitroanokeva.com](http://www.visitroanokeva.com)
- Art by Bike: [ridesolutions.org/commuters/bike-walk/bike-routes/art-by-bike/](http://ridesolutions.org/commuters/bike-walk/bike-routes/art-by-bike/)
- Breweries: [visitroanokeva.com/things-to-do/breweries/beerway/](http://visitroanokeva.com/things-to-do/breweries/beerway/)
- Dining: [visitroanokeva.com/restaurants/famous-foods/](http://visitroanokeva.com/restaurants/famous-foods/)
- Lodging: [visitroanokeva.com/hotels-lodging/](http://visitroanokeva.com/hotels-lodging/)
- Wineries: [visitroanokeva.com/things-to-do/wineries/](http://visitroanokeva.com/things-to-do/wineries/)
- Descriptions and links for the suggested rides available at: [visitroanokeva.com/biking/](http://visitroanokeva.com/biking/)
- Catawba Loop: <https://ridewithgps.com/routes/1611739>
- Beer Ride: <https://ridewithgps.com/routes/11005544>
- East Coaster's Ride: <https://ridewithgps.com/routes/210122>
- Carvin's Cove Recreation Area: [visitroanokeva.com/biking/mountain-biking/carvins-cove/](http://visitroanokeva.com/biking/mountain-biking/carvins-cove/)

Continued from Page 4.



Oak Hill Historical District home.



Hager House and Museum in City Park.

The trail soon crosses the city park, the site of the Jonathan Hager House and Museum for whom the city was eventually named.

An odd, short public street known as Leo Scalley Alley, honors the city's long-time TV weatherman and radio talk show host. Giving into temptation, I biked around the U-shaped road that bordered private homes off of Oak Hill Avenue.

Impressed with all the bike route signage, I stopped reading the cue sheet, that is, until trouble began.

At East First Street and Frederick Avenue, road signs appeared for Highway 40 and 40A, and the cue sheet directed riders to turn right on 40A. After a short downhill ride, I found myself in the suburb of Funkstown and I knew something was wrong. Out of nowhere, a biker saw me puzzling over the map and cue sheet and offered his help. Hagerstown resident Peter Thomas happened to have split off from his Sunday riding group and led me via Highway 40 back to the fairgrounds. I arrived at noon, completing the ride in less than two hours.

Aside from one fuzzy direction on the cue sheet, this was a fascinating trip through the city's back streets and historical districts.

### Information

- [visithagerstown.com](http://visithagerstown.com)
- [hagerstownmd.org](http://hagerstownmd.org)
- [hubcitycycles.com](http://hubcitycycles.com)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Roland Leiser is a freelance journalist based in Silver Spring, MD.