

# LET'S STAY

Frostburg, Maryland's Allegheny Trail House is a cozy getaway on the GAP



*Gus (left) and Jason welcome you to Allegheny Trail House.*

JACQUI Q PHOTOGRAPHY

# INN

story by Dan D'Ambrosio

**J**ason Yowell owns and operates the Allegheny Trail House, a bed and breakfast in Frostburg, Maryland, where he has welcomed cyclists since buying the historic home in 2016.

Yowell's B&B is in one of Frostburg's earliest homes, built in 1865 by Henry Shaffer, a prominent businessman who raised 10 children with his wife. Yowell writes on his website that several of those children remained in the home long after Shaffer died in 1897.

"Today this wonderful old home — well known as the 'Shaffer House' — still stands at 156 East Main Street," Yowell writes. "Registered as a historic property, it is finding new life as the Allegheny Trail House, Frostburg's first and only farm-to-table bed and breakfast."

As it happens, Frostburg is strategically located close to dead center on the 335-mile route from Washington, DC, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, combining the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) in the north with the C&O Canal towpath in the south to create one of the nation's premier rail trails. Yowell credits the trail for his livelihood.

"If you know anything about the GAP Trail, it's really popular with cyclists," Yowell said. "It's the reason for the success of businesses like mine in towns in Appalachia between Pittsburgh and Washington, DC."

The GAP Trail from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Maryland, consists mostly of crushed limestone and sheds water very well, Yowell said.

"Even on days like today when it's rainy, the trail will be wet but not muddy," he said.

The C&O Canal towpath is a different story, according to Yowell.

"They're updating the surface, but it's still compressed dirt along a river, so it's more prone to flooding," Yowell said. "There are some particular sections that with really heavy rain you'll get floods that go over the top of the trail. It really makes a mess."

That's why Yowell recommends beginning cyclists take on the Great Allegheny Passage first.

"The first half is good for people getting their feet wet," Yowell said, without a hint of irony.

Leaving from Pittsburgh, cyclists pass through old industrial areas and the suburbs.

"You go through an amusement park and water park, with neighborhoods on either side of the trail," Yowell said. "Once you break through the suburban layer and get more into the wilderness, there's lots of interesting things to see. There are all of these beautiful, multicolored waterfalls — they're likely the result of terrible mining practices, but are still unique and captivating in their own right."

Throughout the trip from Pittsburgh to DC, you're never far from a small town, according to Yowell. That means restaurants, grocery stores, and other facilities are never more than 15 or so miles away.



Guests can enjoy breakfast on the porch.

JASON YOWELL

"That is usually how people break up the trip," Yowell said. "They ride a certain distance, have lunch, then ride more before stopping for the evening, either at a camp, B&B, or big hotel."

Yowell recommends taking three days to ride the 150 miles of the GAP Trail, which works out to 50 miles a day. That sounds like a lot to many novice riders.

"I usually tell them, 'You have nothing to do all day but ride,'" Yowell said. "Have breakfast, ride 25 miles. After lunch, ride another 25 miles."

It helps that the trail is relatively flat.

Yowell purchased the Allegheny Trail House from a widow who had lost

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**YOWELL WELCOMED HIS FIRST CUSTOMER FIVE YEARS AGO THIS PAST JUNE. HE SAID BUSINESS HAS BEEN “MOSTLY AN UPWARD-TICKING ARROW” EVER SINCE.**

her husband the previous year. He said the house was already well-suited for what he had in mind.

“They had, I believe, planned to do something like a bed and breakfast, because they remodeled the house in such a way that it was perfect,” Yowell said.

There’s a large, inviting kitchen, where Yowell prepares vegan meals, including box lunches to take along on rides. His most popular dish by far

is pancakes, which are vegan and gluten-free. People request the recipe all the time, which he’s happy to share. There are two large parlors for entertaining and warming up by the fireplace, and four bedrooms upstairs, each with its own bathroom. Not only that, Yowell said, but the bathrooms separate the bedrooms from one another.

“One of the things I checked when thinking about buying a house is that nobody wants to hear people next door having a conversation,” he said. “You can’t hear anything from room to room. They did a good job in renovating it.”

Before opening the Allegheny Trail House, Yowell was the general manager of a bike shop in nearby Cumberland and part owner of a restaurant in Frostburg, skills that he has combined in his B&B. Yowell has set up a bike repair shop in the basement of the old home to take care of the needs of his cycling guests. He said locals are beginning to show up as well to get their bikes serviced.

“The other thing I do is shuttle-assist,” Yowell said. “I’ll drive people all over the trail.”

Yowell’s father is his main shuttle driver, “as long as he holds up,” Yowell said. The senior Yowell is 66 years old, while Jason is 44. Jason saves the harder, longer shuttles for himself, and lets his father take care of the easier trips.

“Sometimes we’ll pick people up in DC and take them to Pittsburgh,” Yowell said. “Ten hours in the van. That’s hard on me at 44.”

If he’s going to provide a shuttle ride to one end or the other of the GAP Trail, Yowell prefers taking riders to

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*Facing page, from left: A peek inside the kitchen, where Jason makes box lunches for guests to take on the trail; The Dixon room, named in honor of the building's former owner.*

*Relax with fellow guests in the sunny living room.*

the beginning of their trip rather than picking them up at the end. He said it's better for a couple of reasons.

"They're less likely to be late, because they're driving in their car, so it's easier to pick an arrival time," Yowell said. "They're also less likely to be covered in mud and stinky."

Yowell welcomed his first customer five years ago this past June. He said business has been "mostly an upward-ticking arrow" ever since.

"We stay at about 60 percent occupancy from May through October, then it gets pretty slow from November to March," Yowell said. "In April, you never know. It's the most weather-dependent month."

The COVID-19 pandemic was scary at first for an innkeeper, with travel halting altogether.

"For a couple of months, it was nerve-wracking and stressful," Yowell said. "By the time information about the pandemic started to get fleshed out and the government shut down travel, I already had thousands of dollars of deposits in reservations for spring and summer. Essentially, everyone canceled their reservations at the same time."

Yowell refunded deposits until he ran out of money. The travel ban couldn't have come at a worse time — at the end of the slow season, when Yowell's bank account was at a low ebb.

"I had to tell some people, 'I don't have the money to give you right now,'" Yowell remembered. "Some were very compassionate about it and asked me to credit the money to a future stay. I had a good many of those I was thankful for."

Yowell only remembers one person who made a "really big deal" of having to wait for a refund.

"That person was just panicked about the situation," Yowell said. "I tried to be empathetic and compassionate. I refunded the money as soon as I had it."

Yowell was able to make all of his customers whole as grants and relief funds from the federal, state, and local governments began to roll in.

"Even before then, lenders were happy to work with me on deferring payments," Yowell said.

In the middle of July 2020, travel restrictions were eased and Yowell said his business "sort of exploded."

"August and September of 2020 were the busiest of those two months I've ever had," he said. "September in particular is one of my busiest months."

The Allegheny Trail House enjoyed a strong season in 2021, but Yowell said he doesn't believe he topped the numbers for 2020.

Yowell is trying to make the Allegheny Trail House more of a four-season destination, adding an outdoor firepit and a six-person jacuzzi that's open to all guests. He's also adding an outdoor sauna to "court the winter sports crowd."

"One important thing for *Adventure Cyclist* readers to know is I built this place for people like them," Yowell said. "I am a person like them. I see things from their perspective. I've been in this industry for a long time in one way or another." **AC**

*Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.*



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