

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

Walk on The Mild Side

For a breezy spring stroll, head to the canalside towpath along the Potomac River and choose your own adventure

By ELIZA MCGRAW

THE CHESAPEAKE & Ohio Canal National Historical Park stretches along the Potomac River for 184.5 miles, from Washington, D.C., to Cumberland, Md. Dr. Anthony Fauci, President Biden's chief medical adviser, power walks in the park. I prefer to wander. Over the last year my friend Lauri Menditto and I—we both live in D.C.—section-hiked the towpath that runs the entire length of the park. Because there are mile markers and a singular thoroughfare, you'd be hard-pressed to get lost, and, since I'm a notoriously terrible pathfinder, more than one person has suggested to me that's why I'm so fond of it; you just keep walking. But the main draw of the towpath is that you can get lost, at least mentally. Between the splendor of its woods and river, and the 19th relics that populate it, the towpath is meditative and exciting all at once, as if someone had untangled a labyrinth. What was transportation remains transporting.

Built alongside the Potomac to surmount the river's natural obstacles, like rapids, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal operated from 1831 to 1924, moving freight between western Maryland and Washington, D.C. Mules walked a towpath beside the canal to pull the laden boats. Railroads and highways made this mode of shipping obsolete but the canal itself, now largely dry, and its towpath remained. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, who enjoyed hiking the towpath, was among its most vocal boosters. "That's what the cities need," he wrote, "a wilderness at their back door, where a man can go and once more find harmony and peace in his inner being." In January 1954, two newspaper editors advocated building a road along the Potomac, either along or in place of the government-owned canal. Douglas invited the journalists—plus dozens of others—to walk the towpath with him. They set out from Cumberland that March. Walkers, who became known as the "blister brigade," reveled in the river's natural charms and gamely kept pace with the justice. Nine people, including Douglas, walked the entire way. In 1971, the canal became a key part of a national park, dedicated to Douglas in 1977.

Now, many people ride bikes along the canal's towpath. You can also kayak on the waterways around the canal. But for me, walking is the ideal pace to take in its quiet marvels: pawpaws, hawks and mergansers, abandoned locks, and waterfalls and caves. Afoot, you experience the juxtaposition of what the C&O canal was—a vital waterway, teeming with humans and animals—with what's here now, including old landmarks patiently tolerating vegetative growth. The canal itself only has water in some spots; otherwise it's grassy in some areas and forested in others. "It's a wonderful confluence of things," said Bill Holdsworth, the president of the C&O Canal Association, which originated as an outgrowth of Douglas' hike. My father-in-law, who also loves the canal, gave me a membership in the association. It comes with a nametag for group events.

During the Covid crisis, when green spaces were deemed the safest alternative to staying home, visits to the canal spiked, said Robin Zanotti, the president of the C&O Canal Trust, the park's philanthropic partner. "People who didn't usually use the park are falling in love with it," she said. Here, four particularly scenic stretches alongside the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, ranging from a 60- to 90-minute drive from Washington, D.C.

For history fans: Harpers Ferry, W.Va. **Suggested stroll:** Harpers Ferry to Mile Marker 62 (2.5 miles one-way). Park near the train station in Harpers Ferry, where the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers come together and where abolitionist John Brown led the raid on the federal armory in 1859. Signs will lead you across the pedestrian bridge over the Potomac at the base of town. Stairs down from the bridge deposit you onto the towpath and into Maryland, at Lock 33, mile 60.7. From there, go west. A little after Mile Marker 61, a gravelly area next to the water invites a rest. Benches at Lock 34, just after that, offer more spots to contemplate the Potomac as it flows over boulders.

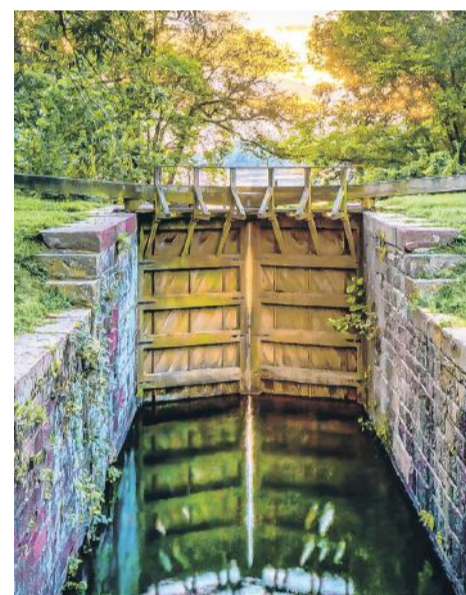
Snack break: Stop by Battle Grounds Bakery & Coffee in Harpers Ferry, to sample pepperoni rolls, a West Virginia staple (180 High St.)

For drama-seekers: The Big Slackwater **Suggested stroll:** Mile Marker 85.5 to Mile Marker 88. The boats entered the Potomac at the Big Slackwater, and the canal vanishes. Walk west from the parking lot at the boat ramp. A sign warns cyclists to ride single file, and past that, the towpath morphs into long concrete sections right next to the river. The



WILDERNESS AT THE BACK DOOR

From top left: Kayaking in the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park near Potomac, Md; boating excursions in the Cushwa Basin in Williamsport, Md were suspended during the pandemic but may resume later this year; the Appalachian Trail runs along the C&O Canal towpath for a few miles from Weverton, Md, to Harpers Ferry, W.Va. Below: Violettes Lock in Darnestown, Md.



vista broadens. Without a canal, attention focuses on the river. High cliffs loom on one side, while the other is wide open to the river. **Snack break:** Picnic tables at the Big Slackwater Boat Ramp offer a serene spot to lunch.

For canal geeks: Williamsport, Md. **Suggested stroll:** Mile marker 99.6 to Mile Marker 102. In Williamsport, you can ogle all things to make a canal obsessive swoon: A lift lock (which raised and lowered boats at elevation changes), a railroad lift bridge, a basin where the boats could turn around, an aqueduct and a refurbished lockhouse. "It's a feature-rich little section of the canal," said Mr. Holdsworth. From the parking area, climb up the railroad lift bridge to take in the river and canal in one view and get to the towpath. Continue west, cross the aqueduct over the Conococheague Creek. On pleasant days, anglers line the creek while turtles sun on logs. At Mile Marker 100, the scene turns even more tranquil as wind rustles through the brush and mallards dive in the Potomac. In spring, daffodils bloom along the river bank. **Snack break:** Grab an old-school Italian sub—meatball parmigiana, anyone?—at Tony's Pizza & Italian Restaurant, in Williamsport (10 E. Salisbury St., tonyspizzawilliamsport.com).

For ghost hunters: Four Locks **Suggested stroll:** Mile Marker 108.9 to 110.41 Named for the quartet of lift locks grouped there, positioned to handle a 32-foot elevation change in a quarter-mile section, the Four Locks area dates back to 1836, when construction began. A tiny hamlet followed and you'll see remnants of the long-vanished town as you approach Lock 49 and walk west. A stroll through a wooded section brings you to the North Mountain Hiker-Biker Campsite at Mile Marker 109.6, one of 31 rustic, first-come-first-serve campsites along the towpath, and McCoy's Ferry, an access point which hosts a larger campground, and offers a good spot to turn around. Back at Lock 49, stands the double-chimneyed Lockhouse 49. The C&O Canal Trust manages the lockhouse, one of seven available for overnight guests along the canal. Accommodations come with few amenities and no indoor plumbing, but the house is heated and quaintly decorated and bedrooms offer river views. Best of all, said Ms. Zanotti, visitors get "a little piece of the park" to themselves for a night.

Snack break: Pick up a freshly baked pie at Blue Goose Fruit Market & Bakery in Hancock, Md., and take a picnic to the riverside tables by the Four Locks parking area (557 East Main St., bluegoosemarkethancock.com).

EFRAIN VARGAS (GREAT FALLS TOWER); MARK CRILEY (CUSHWA BASIN); JIM KIRBY (TOWPATH HIKERS); STAN COLL (VIOLETTES LOCK)