



**By Amy Camp, American Trails Board Member**

### Why experiential travel matters in trail communities

Once heard a speaker pose the question, “How long does a trip last?” The answer: as long as the memory. So what can we do to make trail trips more memorable?

For a segment of trail users, time spent on the path, packing on the miles, is enough. Whether out of necessity, competitiveness, or the inclination to be fully immersed in nature, their itineraries leave little room for time spent beyond the trail. I believe that the majority of trail users, however, seek to discover new places as part of their destination trail adventures. The trail may be the hook, but they also want to experience communities, their heritage, and local customs and culture.

As visitors, we want to know “What’s the story of this place?” Communities can miss the mark in answering because it can be easier to provide amenities than it is to facilitate experiences. One approach is mechanical, a matter of better connecting “trail to town.” The other is about creating

memorable and lasting human connections with local residents. This leads us to an often unrealized opportunity in trails and tourism: that of inviting visiting trail users to experience our places and the people who make them special.

### Segmenting Audiences

We think a lot about providing the basic services that thru-trekkers and competitive trail users seek. Can they

easily walk or ride to services? Are business hours conducive to trail use? It is important that these factors are considered in order to meet the needs of this audience and to welcome them warmly. The warm welcome may be a response to the rugged resourcefulness to those hiking, riding, and paddling the longest distances. It’s the stuff of “trail magic” — lending a hand to those who achieve what most wouldn’t dare to try.



*A guest handles a blue lobster as part of an overall experience in a trail town. Most trail users are interested in learning about the local culture of a destination, in addition to enjoying the trail.*

Long-distance trail users, however, comprise the minority of recreationists. On the Appalachian Trail, just one percent of trail users are thru-hikers.

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"What's the story of this place?"*

The vast majority of those who put their boots on the A.T. are day, weekend, or "section" hikers. Most trail users recreate more casually and have access to their personal vehicles or other transport during their trip, widening the possibilities of how we draw them into our places.

I think about trail users in three basic ways before approaching specific demographics and behaviors. They tend to range from budget to luxury, competitive to casual, and frequent to occasional trail users. I believe that the trail users we don't know enough about are those of the casual variety for whom the trail is just part of their travel motivation. For some, they're in the midst of a "bucket list" trip or are on vacation and are spending appropriately. They may therefore be inclined to reward themselves when off the trail (think nice meals, massage, shopping, museum stops, brewery tours, etc., and remember that most trail users have access to transportation during their travels).



Users, such as this cyclist on the High Trestle Trail in Iowa, have been found to spend an average of \$69-\$124 per day for overnight stays on trail-destination travel.

**The Business Case for Curating Memorable Experiences**

I recently hosted a group from Atlantic Canada that came to the U.S. to learn the "business of trails." We toured communities and visited small businesses that make efforts to leverage the economic opportunities afforded by trails. (Specific to rail trails, I have seen daily spending averages range from \$69-\$124 for overnight users.) Following the trip, I heard from the owner of a book store we visited. His daily revenues were up by 33 percent thanks to our 12-person group. That's pretty good for a Wednesday afternoon. Visiting trail users make up about 10 percent of the shop's customer base, which is impressive considering it's located nearly a mile uphill from the trail. It helps



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that the owner appeals to trail users with bicycle-themed and easy-to-carry merchandise.

While the group was here on a learning mission, they were also travelers. While visiting, they bought t-shirts, ball caps, books, water bottles, pottery, wine, and other takeaways unique to this journey. Our group, just one of many, left an imprint: one hotel stay, one restaurant meal, one bike rental, one latte, and one ice cream (or 12) at a time. Less tangible, but just as important, were the memories created through rich experiences. We designed a trip that allowed our guests to experience local culture: cooking demos, live music, and having the chance to operate a canal lock.

I layered these experiences into the trip because I had been influenced by a course I took on experiential travel this spring. The course, held in Newfoundland and Labrador, allowed participants to learn by experiencing. That's how I found myself at a national park marine center holding a blue lobster, learning to steam mussels, and then being cozily squeezed into a fishing shed for a family style lunch on one of the coldest days of winter. This is the stuff of experiential travel! I left the course knowing that we are not in the business of providing the products of trails and tourism. Ideally, we offer experiences, the kind our visitors won't soon forget. There are trails all over the globe. What is it that makes visiting the trails in your part of the world memorable?

We retain 5-10 percent of what we learn through reading and lectures, and recall 75 percent when we learn by doing. Imagine all of the ways that visiting trail users can be engaged more effectively. Why put the effort into creating lasting memories? Experiential travel, as defined by my course instructor, Nancy Arsenault, "connects you with the essence of a place and its people by engaging visitors in a series of memorable travel activities... that are inherently personal, engage the senses, and make connections on an emotional, physical, spiritual, social, or intellectual level."

Don't both our visitors and our trail communities deserve this level of

connection? This deeper connection can result in increased spending, return visits, and word-of-mouth referrals. If multi-day cyclists spend upwards of \$70 a day, for example, what more is possible if we create experiences for them and charge accordingly? And it's not just about

## Trail Towns 101

On May 19, I co-presented the American Trails "Trails and Towns Together" webinar. The webinar focused on how communities capitalize on trails and tourism. We fielded a lot of questions on how to get started in creating a "trail town" program. Here's a primer to help you in getting started:

- **Don't wait to launch a formal program to get started with improvements.** The trail town approach is about connecting "trail to town" for the benefit of both trail users and trail communities. Things like signs, bike racks, bike lanes, "welcome" messages, horse hitchers, and public art are all examples of physical cues that can enhance a trail user's visit. Go ahead and get started!
- **Be clear on your purpose.** There are trail community programs throughout the U.S., all run independently and focused on a single trail or region. Some are intended to bolster local economies. Others are focused on pride of place and recognizing communities that make efforts to embrace their trail. Work to clarify why you want to establish a trail town program and what value it will bring to the region.
- **Decide on some particulars.** Existing programs vary in depth of services offered and the number of towns involved. A program will almost certainly require some level of staff support. What entity will run the program? Most of the programs that I know of are managed by nonprofits in the realm of trails or economic development. Decisions will need to be made on how communities are designated, how they maintain the designation, what services are offered to communities, and how the program will be funded and sustained.
- **Look to other programs as you build your own.** The most known programs are the Trail Town Program



along the Great Allegheny Passage, the Appalachian Trail Community Program (see online resources at <http://tinyurl.com/z3ehrbp>), and the Kentucky Trail Town Program. The Kentucky program is unique in that it is run by the state tourism office and is not specific to a single trail. Look to these programs as examples as you build your own.

- **Assess, track, and reassess.** An early first step for most programs is to gauge how ready communities are to receive trail visitors. Is the route into town safe and pleasant? What kind of first impression does the town make? Are businesses open evenings and weekends? A community process can be built around this assessment and provide both baseline data and a path forward. It's also important to arm yourself with information. Demonstrate the value of your trail through counts, economic impact data, and stories shared by local business owners. Show that the trail is of benefit and could be even more beneficial if there is an intentional effort to connect trail to town.

the spending. It's about that question: "How long does a trip last?" and also "How long do we remember it?" ■

**Amy Camp, owner of Cycle Forward, helped to launch the nationally-recognized Trail Town Program® in 2007, and now consults communities on how they can rethink trails and tourism.**