

Hostels Along the  
Great Allegheny Passage & Long  
Distance Trails

*A Guide for Business Owners and Developers*



# Hostels Along the Great Allegheny Passage and Long Distance Trails

## *A Guide for Business Owners and Developers*

*This publication is intended to serve as a guide for the development of hostels along the Great Allegheny Passage in southwestern Pennsylvania and western Maryland, though the information presented herein can be applied to hostels across the United States. This is not a step-by-step instruction manual on how to operate a successful hostel but rather an attempt to answer some of the major questions a new business owner may have regarding the development of their hostel. It is based on independent research and experience. Additional resources are attached included at the end of the work.*

## Hostels and Hostellers

### What is a hostel?

At the most basic level, a hostel (sometimes called a youth hostel, though this term now pertains only to hostels managed by Hostelling International) provides a bathroom and sleeping quarters for travelers at a relatively low price. However, the quality, services, and style of hostels vary greatly, with high-end hostels offering everything from suite (private) facilities to in-house bars or restaurants. A hostel is a uniquely customizable, personal and friendly business where people from a variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds share common living facilities.

### Who are hostellers?

A hosteller is a hostel customer. Once limited to the under-25 crowd, hostels are for the most part no longer age-restricted. For hostellers, a hostel provides a “home base” to organize their trips within a particular area, or acts as rest stop on a longer journey. Many hostellers are self-sufficient, and prefer simple accommodations.

Along the Great Allegheny Passage, most bikers are over 18 with the majority of them being 30-70. Although, many trail users are local, there is a great need for lodging along some portions of the trail. The overnight accommodations of multi-day trail users range from primitive camps to the best rooms that money can buy. A well placed hostel would be positioned to capture an available market along the trail.

## Creating Your Hostel

Included in this packet are three publications from Hostelling International USA: *The HI-USA Hostel Quality Standards* and tips for *Developing and Operating a Hostel*. These resources provide additional guidance for the development of an independent hostel as well as information for affiliating with Hostelling International.

## The Building

Almost any building can function as a hostel. Some hostels are created from renovated homes, old apartment buildings, old churches, or community centers. The size, shape, layout, and style of a hostel depend on the preferences of the hostel's owners and managers, as well as the architecture of the building. However, keeping certain factors in mind will help ensure a hostel is popular and successful:

- Locate a hostel close to business and cultural districts or to nearby attractions. This allows hostellers easy access to restaurants, bars, and the sights and sounds of their destination.
- For a hostel that is located along the trail, it is important to keep in mind that most users will only have bikes, using public transit, or are walking as a means of transportation. Although, not likely to be intimidated by a long ride, hostellers may be worn out from their trip,

and would like to take it as easy as possible. A location close to the town center or to a bus stop can boost a hostel's popularity.

- Unique architecture or amenities like balconies or gardens will make a hostel more attractive.
- Hostels should instill sustainable practices into their daily operations. Their use is encouraged not only because of the immediate benefits they bring to our local environment but also to boost popularity among environmentally conscious visitors.
- The hostel must be clean and in good condition.

## Services, Rooms, and Amenities

The services provided by a hostel vary from place to place. Hostellers will expect a clean bed, a bathroom, a shower, and some kind of storage facilities for their belongings. The size and type of the building will often determine what kind of extra amenities a hostel can offer. The more a hostel offers in these components, the more convenient hostellers will find it and the more popular it will be. These components include:

*Reception*- This is often the first area a hosteller will encounter. Here the hosteller will select the type of room he or she wishes to stay in, pay for the night(s) they will be staying, receive keys and other items (like sheets or sleeping sacks), and learn the rules and layout of the hostel. This is the area where the hosteller can come with questions, complaints, or emergencies, and a convenient area for a bag-check. This is also where the first impression of the hostel is formed, so the area and desk clerks should be welcoming and friendly, as well as knowledgeable about local attractions, restaurants, and other amenities in the area.

*Dormitory and Suite style bedrooms*- Originally, hostels offered only large dormitory-style sleeping arrangements, with as many as 20 people to a room.

Many hostels still offer co-ed dormitories, but in recent years suite rooms have grown in popularity. Many hostels now offer single, double, or larger private rooms (sometimes with private baths) for those willing to pay a higher rate. Some hostels also offer separate, female-only rooms. Bunk beds are typical, especially in dormitories. Power outlets will be expected and appreciated by hostellers needing to charge cellular phones, laptops, or other devices.

*Kitchen*- often adjacent to the common room, the size and quality of a hostel kitchen (self-catering facility) can vary greatly. A kitchen is a much-appreciated amenity and it is rare to find a hostel without one. At its most basic, the kitchen should incorporate a large sink and countertop for dishwashing, a table, a microwave oven, a coffee maker, a refrigerator, and some communal dishes. Appliances should be easy to use. For example, a simple microwave oven will make cooking easier and less dangerous. More advanced kitchens may have more appliances, larger refrigerators, and an electric stove, as well as communal pots, pans, dishes, and mugs. Coffee and tea is generally provided free of charge to hostellers, while hostellers are expected to cook and clean up after their own meals. Some hostels do community meals, such as a pizza night, but hostellers are generally expected to be responsible for their own meals. The rules of the kitchen, as well as instructions for using appliances, should be posted clearly and a desk clerk should be available to assist if needed. A fire alarm and extinguisher must also be present, here and in every room of the hostel.

*Common room*- Several couches, chairs and coffee tables in a centrally-located area open to all guests at all hours can help promote conversation and foster a sense of community among hostellers. Single chairs, loveseats, or dining room tables and chairs can be set apart from the circle, allowing for more private conversations, games, reading, or internet work. These common rooms often have small libraries, decks of cards or board games, town information and events, and a computer with internet access. Wireless internet is a valuable feature many hostels

now offer to guests. Depending on the size of the kitchen, hostellers may eat in the common room too.

Occasionally, hostel managers will cook communal breakfasts or dinners for guests, either for free or for a small fee. This service is often offered once a week, and should not be included in the price of the room.

*Laundry*- washers and dryers are essential for many long-haul travelers. Coin-operated laundry machines are the norm, but this service can be included in the price of the room or for an additional fee. Detergent should be available, either for free or for a small fee. Again, instructions should be posted and easy to understand.

*Shower/Bathroom*- Hostellers will often expect a lesser degree of privacy in a hostel than in a hotel. Communal and/or co-ed bathrooms are typical but the more personal space that is provided, the better. Simple fixtures are best; everything should be easy to clean and cleaning supplies should be available in the bathrooms. Extra toilet paper must be easy to find and within reach of the toilet. A plunger is also a good idea, as is an aerosol spray. Windows or exhaust fans will also help keep the room ventilated from moisture and foul smells.

Shower facilities must be private or separated by sex, and individual stalls with curtains or doors are preferred to group showers. Water must be hot; cold showers leave a bad impression of your hostel. Hostellers are expected provide their own towel and soap, but extra towels, soap, and toothbrushes can be sold at reception.

*Lockers/Storage*- all hostellers will be carrying with them a great deal of personal property, much of it essential to their continued travel. Due to the communal nature of hostels, theft can be a major problem, and theft of money or property can ruin a trip and leave a bad impression of your hostel. However, theft can be guarded against easily by providing lockers (either coin-operated or with rental locks) and/or bag storage at the reception desk. Experienced hostellers will

often carry a lock with them. If bags are to be stored at reception, the room must be secured and locked when unoccupied. Especially for the hostels along the Great Allegheny Passage and other long distance trails, bike lockers and/or indoor bike racks should be provided by the hostel.

*Additional components-* A hostel is exceptionally customizable, and the more unique features of your hostel the more likely it is to be remembered and recommended. In the end, any feature that makes your hostel more fun, more unique, or more convenient for hostellers will make the hostel more popular and more profitable.

- A patio or porch with seating, a grill, and/or a fireplace can make a popular and fun addition to the hostel.
- A TV room or reading room separated from the common room can keep one hosteller's activities from disturbing another.
- A garden, a greenhouse, or a balcony can make your hostel more charming.

*Décor-* It is important to remember that just as the features of your hostel will influence its popularity, so will the building's look and feel. Many of the websites that rate hostels include "attractiveness," "fun," and "character" in their assessment. Warm, bold, and inviting colors can make the difference between a lively common room and a dull hangout. Form and function go hand in hand in a hostel, as excess décor, fragile furniture, and delicate or valuable knick-knacks will not stand up to the test of time. Furniture does need not to match but should be comfortable and sturdy, and natural light should be used where ever possible. In addition, both hostellers and hostel owners will appreciate flooring, countertops, and upholstery that is resistant to stains and easy to clean. Overall, simplicity, tastefulness, and recognition of the building's architectural style and history will go a long way in making sure your hostel looks as open and friendly as it is.

# Managing Your Hostel

## Rules

The rules of a hostel are at the discretion of a hostel owner. You may find the rules of your hostel and the rules of your household to be very similar, and the behavior you expect from hostellers to be the same as you would expect from a houseguest. Most hostellers understand this relationship and will be well behaved, polite, and clean. However, for first-time hostellers or the occasional bad apple, a clear set of rules and punishments for violation must be posted. Try to strike a balance between rules and enforcement; clearly state punishments (like warnings, fines, or expulsion from the hostel) but remember that too many rules or punishments will make the hostel seem uninviting or unfriendly. Enforcement of rules is at the discretion of the hostel management, but illegal or dangerous activity should be reported to the police immediately.

Some rules unique to hostels include:

*Curfew-* Some hostels lock up overnight and a few require hostellers to return before a certain hour (usually midnight or 2 am). Most hostellers will accept this and return on time, but a 24-hour phone number should be available for emergency situations. An extra fee charged for admitting locked-out hostellers is at the discretion of the management. When a reception desk can be staffed at all hours, a curfew is usually not enforced (a feature many hostellers will appreciate), but locking doors at midnight and requiring late returnees to call for admittance increases the security of the hostel.

*Lockouts-* A few hostels lock up for a few hours in the middle of the day (when most hostellers are gone anyway). This allows time for the hostel to be cleaned or, if the reception desk cannot be staffed 24 hours a day, for owner/managers to run personal errands. Hostel owners can require that hostellers



leave for that time, or can allow them to stay. Again, a phone number should be available to hostellers for emergencies.

*Lights-out and/or quiet hours-* Lights-out time applies only to larger dormitories, and not to suite rooms. Bathrooms and common rooms should be open 24 hours, as can kitchens and reception desks. Quiet hours can apply to the whole hostel or only to dormitories, and both lights-out and quiet hours usually begin around midnight, though the exact time is at the discretion of the management.

When making rules about curfew, lock outs and quiet hours keep in mind that bike use is discouraged after dark along the GAP.

*Alcohol-* Most hostels do not allow alcohol in dorm rooms, and some do not allow it at all. Permitting alcohol in common rooms, kitchens, or other areas is at the discretion of the management.

*Cleanliness-* Hostellers are expected to keep their sleeping areas neat, and to clean up after themselves in showers, bathrooms, and the kitchen and common room. Cleaning supplies should be available in the event of a spill, either stored in a marked closet or at the reception desk. Chores can be offered as an option in exchange for a reduced room rate, unless your hostel is associated with Hostelling International. HI does not allow its member hostels to require hostellers to do chores.

Some hostels allow hostellers to use personal sleeping bags, sleep-sacks, or linens, while others mandate that linens be rented from the hostel. In either case, the hosteller will not be surprised to have to make their own beds and (in the case of rented sheets) to hand in their sheets to the front desk upon leaving. You should plan to have sheets ready to rent regardless of whether or not you will allow hostellers to use their own sheets. Sheets can be given out for a deposit, included in the cost of the room, or rented outright to cover the cost of laundering.

## Town Information

Hostellers will use your hostel as a home-base from which to explore the area. Information about local activities, events, attractions, restaurants, etc. will be welcomed by the hosteller. Brochures or publications from the local chamber of commerce or other organizations are appropriate for your common room, and bookmarked websites featuring local information are appropriate for internet stations. In addition, knowledgeable desk clerks can provide invaluable “locals-only” information about the best places to see, eat, and drink.

## Trips and Activities

Some hostels will organize activities for their hostellers, which can range from sight-seeing tours, whitewater rafting trips, or pub crawls. Deciding which kinds of activities to offer (or whether to offer activities at all) and how much to charge is completely at the discretion of the management. Hostellers will also appreciate any special discounts to local attractions that the hostel can offer.

Hostels often set up activities to do in the hostel too. Activities can range from movie nights, game nights, to activities around the city solely with the hostellers. This varies from hostel to hostel and is up to the discretion of the management.

## Charges

For a hosteller, the lure of a hostel is not only the freedom and the opportunity it provides for meeting a variety of other hostellers, but the low cost of staying there too. For hostel owners, the cost of running a hostel is much lower than a hotel, and that should be reflected in the price of a room or a bed. Naturally, exact prices will depend on exact costs of running your hostel, but in general, prices will be close to the following:

Dormitory bed: \$25-\$50 per night  
Private rooms: around \$50-\$80 per night  
Linens: FREE or \$1-\$5 for rental  
Laundry: FREE or coin operated  
Lockers: FREE or coin operated or \$1 lock deposit  
Communal meals (all you can eat): FREE\* or \$2-\$5

## Advertising Your Hostel

When using a hostel website to advertise your hostel, provide as much information as you can. The more a hosteller knows about your hostel, the more likely they are to consider staying there. Provide pictures of the accommodations, the building, the staff, etc, and remember that your hostel will be rated by these websites on several criteria, including character, location, security, staff, cleanliness, and fun. In addition to any self procured advertising, the Trail Town Program includes advertising for businesses located in the towns it services along the trail in its brochures, the Trail Town Certified Network, and internet advertising.

## Hostelling Websites

Besides [hihostels.org](http://hihostels.org), which represents only Hostelling International hostels, many websites rate and list thousands of hostels in hundreds of countries, and allow users to search for hostels and book their stay online. Two of the largest of these websites, [www.hostelworld.com](http://www.hostelworld.com) and [www.hostels.com](http://www.hostels.com), list all types of hostels (HI and independent) and occasionally list budget hotels.

## Should you affiliate with Hostelling International?

The largest hostel organization is Hostelling International (HI), found on the web at [www.hihostels.org](http://www.hihostels.org). It is the brand name of the not-for-profit International

Youth Hostel Federation (IYHF) and its member Youth Hostel Associations around the world. The original and the largest international hostel organization, HI offers hostellers membership for a fee in exchange for reduced rates at member hostels. It also ensures a certain level of quality in its member hostels as well as making certain policies (like a lack of an age limit) and other rules uniform across its member hostels. In the United States, Hostelling International is represented through Hostelling International USA, the country's affiliate organization. Hostelling International USA can be reached at:

Tel.: (301) 495 1240  
Fax: (301) 4956697  
E-mail: [members@hiusa.org](mailto:members@hiusa.org)  
Online: [www.hiusa.org](http://www.hiusa.org)

The choice to affiliate is yours; most hostels across the world are independently operated, but some hostellers like HI Hostels because they are guaranteed a certain level of quality and can save on many services besides the hostel itself. Being part of that network makes your hostel more inviting to HI members who can receive these discounts, but it may or may not deter non-members who will not receive those kinds of discounts.

## Training

Although HI does not publish a hostel manager "training manual" as of yet, HI can provide training for new hostel owners by having them shadow other successful hostel owners and managers. For more information about job shadowing opportunities as well as other information about Hostelling International USA, please use the following information:

Address: Hostelling International USA  
National Administrative Office  
8401 Colesville Road, Suite 600  
Silver Spring, MD, 20910



Phone: (301) 495 1240 ext 146  
Fax: (301) 495 6697  
Email: [btempelhoff@hiosa.org](mailto:btempelhoff@hiosa.org)  
Online: [www.hiosa.org](http://www.hiosa.org)

## Trail Town Certified Network

Joining the Trail Town Certified Network certifies that a business uses sustainable practices and trail-friendly practices. A majority of hostellers are environmentally conscious and if the hostel is located near a major trailhead, as many of the lodging options on the Great Allegheny Passage and other long distance trails are, it is important to instill trail-friendly practices in the hostel and with the staff. For more information, please use the following information:

Address: Trail Town Program  
425 West Pittsburgh Street  
Greensburg, PA 15601

Phone: (724) 216-9160 ext 318  
Email: [wprince@progressfund.org](mailto:wprince@progressfund.org)  
Online: [www.trailtowns.org](http://www.trailtowns.org)

## *About the Trail Town Program®*

*Research for this publication was done on behalf of the Trail Town Program®*

*Trail Town Program® is a special initiative of The Progress Fund that was developed in partnership with the Allegheny Trail Alliance to recognize the economic impact of the Great Allegheny Passage.*