

Restored lockhouses offer low-tech luxury and acres of beautiful scenery along the C&O Canal.

C&O LOCKHOUSES



The six lockhouses open to guests range from modestly upscale to 19th-century rustic.

OLDEN SLUMBERS

JOURNEY BACK IN TIME DURING A C&O LOCKHOUSE OVERNIGHT

Story by Michael McCarthy | Photography by Michael Kircher

I have a long history of talking my children into doing things they don't want to do. Such is the case on a recent evening when I propose to two of my three kids—Jack and Annie, ages 15 and 13—that we visit a “living museum” and spend the night.

“A what?” Jack says, with the type of detachment displayed by teens and members of organized-crime syndicates.

“Remember when we used to hike along the C&O Towpath and see those old lockhouses?”

“No.”

“Well, we're staying in one tonight. It's going to be cool,” I say, adding, “Maybe there will be girls your age, you know, in nearby lockhouses.”

“Really?” he says, sounding interested



Fresh air, a forest, and coffee on the porch. All that's missing is the grind of modern life.

but not believing a word. “But I don't remember seeing more than one lockhouse.”

And so it goes until I convince Jack that our evening on the canal will be the equivalent of freshman homeroom. Annie, ever the eager traveler, agrees that it all sounds exciting.

And so we pack our bags for Lockhouse 6 near Cabin John and dive into an evening in the woods.

The Canal Quarters program began three years ago, when lockhouses 6, 22 (Pennyfield), 28 (Point of Rocks), and 49 (Clear Spring) opened to the public for overnight stays. Two more lockhouses, 10 and 25 (located near Carderock and in Edwards Ferry, respectively), were added later.

The fees range from \$85 to \$125 on weekdays and \$100 to \$150 on weekends.

The structures—dotted throughout Washington, Frederick, and Montgomery counties—are clean, sleep six to eight people (pets have to stay home), and are as steeped in history as any walk on the National Mall.

“Our lockhouses are more than 170 years old, and this program allows us to protect our historic structures while offering an extraordinary interpretive experience,” says Kevin Brandt, superintendent of the C&O National Historic Park.

George Washington came up with the idea for the canal, and it worked efficiently enough throughout the 19th century as boats ferrying goods navigated their way from Georgetown to Cumberland.

Families who lived in the lockhouses were responsible for ushering the cargo boats through the locks. This was far from an easy gig, as lousy weather, flooding, and round-the-clock duties created myriad challenges and hardships—things that kept people from smiling in family photos.

Today, the biggest challenge is choosing which house to overnight in.

Lockhouse 6, with its weathered white stone exterior, hardwood floors, AC, indoor plumbing (which it alone offers), and

mid-20th-century furnishings, is the Ritz-Carlton of the Canal Quarters program. Some of the other houses, including Lockhouse 28, minus heat and electricity, require more of a Laura Ingalls mindset.

Matthew Logan, president of the C&O Canal Trust, says the décor of each lockhouse touches on the historically important eras of the canal.

“While the rustic lockhouses lend themselves to the construction of the canal, [the modern amenities] in Lockhouse 6 provide an opportunity to share the important story of the campaign to save the canal in the 1950s.”

Our favorite part of the house: the front porch, graced by big old rockers. We sit outside at dusk and listen to the mumble of cicadas, which turns into a full-blown yapping as darkness drapes itself over the canal and surrounding stands of sycamores.

Jack doesn't see any girls during the evening except, of course, his sister, who might as well be a moth. Still, it doesn't seem to bother him. He reads through the lockhouse's guest books, brimming with long missives, drawings, and haiku.

We linger on a page written a few weeks back by a guy named Dave from Ohio:

“Duck weed,
low country air,
waves from blonde
biker chicks, yellow
bike-trail mud, majestic
hollow American sycamore,
American gold finch, clear
blue skies, motionless
great blue heron, schools
of dragonflies, two
kayakers coming off the
river at dusk...”

Much like Dave, my kids and I savor the essence of the season—and history—during one perfect night inside a Maryland treasure. ☀

For more information on the Canal Quarters program, visit canaltrust.org.