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Odyssey race to visit Panhandle

Bavarian Inn will host an important exchange zone

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SHEPHERDSTOWN — The second American Odyssey Relay is coming to West Virginia.

And seemingly leaving almost as quickly as it arrives — except that's really not the case

The Mountain State will provide virtual inches of distance for participating runners compared with the whole of the 200-mile race for 12-member teams on April 23-24.

The race begins in Gettysburg, Pa., and ends in Washington, D.C., taking in much of the region's history along the way.

Competitors from each of the teams take turns running parts of the race and resting up while riding vans between their opportunities to use their legs.

"The relay race," race director Bob Fleshner said, "and I'm stealing this from something I saw, and it's perfect, it's a 24-hour

road trip with intermittent bursts of running.

"That's a great way to describe it."

The Bavarian Inn will host an exchange zone — a "transition area," race officials like to call it — for legs 24 and 25.

Leg 24 enters West Virginia; Leg 25 takes runners back to Maryland.

And two runners from each of the entered teams will run about .2 of a mile in Shepherdstown, coming or going.

While competing runners at the time might just get to wink at West Virginia, the stop in West Virginia will be pretty critical.

"It's a major transition area," Fleshner said. "It's a van transition, so every runner in the relay will be there."

Some might even be awake to take in the look down the river from the bluff at the Bavarian, right at the bridge over the Potomac River, that so captivated

Fleshner and his wife on a visit.

"What we're planning at the Bavarian is for people to get a recharge," Fleshner said. "They'll be there at 3, 4, 5, 6 in the morning."

"Our goal is to have a local charitable organization there, sell pancakes and orange juice and coffee. We're hoping to make it into a nice festive area, quiet, not a party with music and stuff like that. It's a way to get people to get ready in the morning and get ready for the sunlight."

Fleshner is working with Mark Cucuzzella, who directed the first Freedom Run last fall in Shepherdstown, to help organize the West Virginia stop.

Last year, 108 teams from 32 states participated.

Race officials are hoping to attract a team from West Virginia, if not more, as the field is being expanded to allow for a total of



Photo by Scott Nelles

Adrian Fenty, mayor of Washington, D.C., hits his pace during last year's American Odyssey Relay. This year's race will momentarily pass through the Eastern Panhandle.

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175 teams.

Fleshner said the entries have already surpassed 100.

"People just had a great time," Fleshner said. "It's really a fun event. Even our volunteers, 75 percent of our volunteers have already said they're coming back, because it was so much fun."

A running nut of some 300 races, some 50 of them marathons, Fleshner said there's nothing quite like a race like this one. He ran several long-distance, relay races out west earlier in the 2000s before being prompted to start one in the east. The historic areas of this

region made Fleshner see this locale as being perfect.

"People have a blast," Fleshner said. "In all my running, this is the most fun I've ever had."

"An individual pursuit turns into a team concept. You want to run for your teammates. ... Along the way, you get an identity, and people refer to you by your team name."

Fleshner said many teams are outfitted in the same uniforms and decorate their two vans to identify their teams as runners are shuttled to other exchange areas to take a handoff from their teammate and set out on foot.

Ideally, teams are comprised of 12 runners, each running a segment of the

race that ranges from 3 to 8.8 miles. Runners handle three segments apiece — unless they are of the more hearty variety, like a team called "Can I Get in the Van, No Ya Stink," which will put just six runners through the paces.

Heartier still — or is that insane? — "Team Dane" features just Dane Rauschenberg, a runner who in 2009 competed in 52 marathons in 52 weeks.

"I'm going to be curious to see if he can do it," Fleshner said. "He's run 100 miles before. ... Just because you can run 10 miles doesn't mean you can do a 20-miler."

"The Bucknell Alumni Fossils" will return to defend

its team title, as will runner-up "Fleet Feet AOAT," featuring Washington Mayor Adrian Fenty.

Having Fenty on board proved to be a boon to the race in its second year.

Last year's race concluded on national parks land, which precluded organizers from holding little more than a finish line with parking headaches.

That problem has been rectified, thanks to Fenty, who is allowing the American Odyssey Relay to finish at the Southwest Waterfront on city-owned property.

"That gives us the ability to have a finish-line festival," Fleshner said.

There is also a mid-race festival at Boonsboro, Md.,

High School.

Registration fee is \$1,260.

Go to www.american-odysseyrelay.com for registration information.

Fleshner advises interested teams not to wait to register, even though the race is three months away. That's because of the limit.

"We could tell it was a popular event and could see it would grow," he said. "We don't want it to grow too fast."

Still, it's growing and even expanded to include a miniscule piece of West Virginia.

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