



HEY BUDDY, CAN YOU SPARE A WARM SHOWER?

BY DAN D'AMBROSIO

Warmshowers

is a worldwide network of hospitality catering solely to touring cyclists, and it continues to grow at a prodigious pace

The exact origins of Warmshowers, a worldwide network of hosts for bicycle tourists, are somewhat fuzzy.

"A couple of people had a list," board member Ken Francis said. "If you wrote them and added your name, they would send you a copy."

In the 1990s, the list of hosts became an Excel spreadsheet, photocopied for new members who wanted to take advantage of the hospitality offered, Francis said. Then in 2005, former Executive Director Randy Fay put the list on the internet and named it: Warmshowers.

The official history on the organization's website credits Terry Zmrhal and Geoff Cashman as the "originators" of the idea for Warmshowers in 1993. In 1996, Roger Gravel began updating and managing the list after he found it wasn't being maintained. Then Randy Fay came along to create a database and map-enabled website.

The name, which has come under some criticism over the years (why not Hotshowers?) was meant to convey the idea that all you're promising as a host is a warm shower and a bed, not a meal, not a tour of the town.

Fay "took it to the next level" when he put Warmshowers online, Francis said. Francis is a host himself, in Long Beach, California. He joined Warmshowers in 2013 after some 30 years of touring experience.

"When I joined in 2013 we had 30,000 people and would get 30 new members a day," Francis said. "Since then it has exploded to over 100,000 members."

The exact numbers, from Warmshowers.org, are 108,037 members and 62,549 hosts in 161 countries speaking 17 languages.

Francis said Warmshowers recently deleted about 30,000 inactive members, but that the membership soon grew to more than 100,000 again. In the summer, he said, Warmshowers can get 200 new members every day.

"It became international, that's the big thing," Francis said. "Most of the new members don't come from the U.S."

Most of the funding, however, for the organization's \$95,000 budget comes from the U.S. Warmshowers is entirely funded by donations, without any government funding or grants. One of Francis's goals as a board member is to find a way to increase the amount of donations coming from members in Europe and Asia.

INSPIRATION AND REINVIGORATION

Philip Robinson has been a member of Warmshowers for about four years. He lives in Seattle, near Sea-Tac airport, which makes him the perfect host for riders beginning or ending cross-country journeys.

"I don't get that many requests, the requests I get are mostly people who are flying into Seattle," Robinson said. "I'm not on any route per se."

Robinson gets a mix of domestic and international riders who are starting in Seattle to ride their bikes cross country. He has hosted riders from Germany, Great Britain, and even one from Tunisia.

"One guy was out for two years," Robinson said. "He came from Australia via Hawaii to Seattle. For someone ending or starting a ride flying into Sea-Tac, I'm convenient. I've gone so far as to pick someone up from the airport."

Robinson's home is also a convenient starting point for a tour down the West Coast, where his good friend Ken Francis waits at ride's end in Long Beach.

"He'll host in the beginning and they'll end up with me," Francis said.

Robinson and Francis have been doing tours together for 15 years. The longest ride they have taken to date has been two weeks, as both still have day jobs. Robinson, 62, works in customs compliance for FedEx. Francis, 55, is a therapist working for Kaiser Permanente.

The two friends have mostly done domestic tours, although recently they went to Iceland for two weeks. That idea came from a Warmshowers cyclist Francis hosted in Long Beach.

"Hosting encourages me," Francis said. "I was thinking I was getting too old. Guests who have come in have reinvigorated me. One guest said, 'Ken, you need to go to Iceland.' So Philip and I went to Iceland. I'm hoping I do this for several more years."

MORE THAN FREE ACCOMMODATIONS

Even though Warmshowers was named with the intent to make it clear that hosts are not expected to socialize with their guests, human nature being what it is, socializing happens. Often.

The inspiration for Warmshowers, after all, is the serendipitous

PHOTOS COURTESY KEN FRANCIS

connections that touring cyclists so often make with the people who live in the towns they pass through on their journeys. The farm family who offers a backyard to pitch a tent and ends up making dinner and taking the cyclist to the county fair for an evening's entertainment. The druggist who offers a spare bedroom and regales the cyclist with an accounting of the town's long and fascinating history.

Many touring cyclists have had these unforgettable experiences, and most point to those experiences as one of the richest rewards of independent tours for which overnight stays are not part of the itinerary, but come in the natural flow of events.

Like these impromptu overnight stays with locals, Warmshowers hosts do not charge their guests. The idea is "reciprocal hospitality," Francis said. I stay with you, and someday you might stay with me.

"It's more than just free accommodation," Francis added. "It's connecting with the community."

Unlike Robinson in Seattle, Francis lives on a busy cycling route in Long Beach and has hosted nearly 200 people. He said he copied Adventure Cycling Cofounder Greg Siple's Open Road Gallery of portraits of touring cyclists who visited the organization's office in Missoula, Montana, over the years, published in the pages of this magazine. Like Siple, Francis has taken portraits to create a gallery of his guests holding an original Pacific Coast Bicentennial Route sign that he acquired.

Francis waited until he had a home — and backyard — that could accommodate visiting cyclists. He said he often takes his guests kayaking, and occasionally takes them for a trip to Disneyland, or serves them breakfast in a jacuzzi.

Francis recently had the "amazing experience" of three couples and a solo female rider converging on his home all in the same night.

"I waited until I had the right property," Francis said. "I have a big backyard to set up tents."

The evening was one big dinner party, according to Francis.

"Everybody had a great time," he said. "It's like having a campground in your backyard."

PARTICIPATE OR ELSE

Seth Portner is the executive director of Warmshowers, taking the helm for the organization in 2016.

Portner, 47, has been involved in bike touring and nonprofit organizations for most of his career, mostly in the energy sector where he helped utilities conserve power.

"I'm kind of a semiretired entrepreneur," Portner said. "I was just looking for something to do that was a nice mix of something I was passionate about and something I could contribute to."

Portner has been bike touring since he was in high school. His first tour was along the Kancamagus Highway in New Hampshire, where he grew up. He's going to Australia in March to ride in Tasmania, and when his eight-year-old daughter turns 10, the two of them are going to tour the coast of California.

Portner is Warmshowers' only paid staffer, answering to a board of directors scattered around the world. The board recently launched a short survey any member can take to determine a five-year plan for the organization "that hopes to capture the needs and wants of the community."

Portner marvels at the resiliency of the Warmshowers website. He said the site could have many more than 100,000 members, but the policy is to delete folks

who are not active. If you haven't logged in for 12 months you'll get an email saying if you want to be involved, log in and participate. Warmshowers deleted about 17 percent of its members in 2017.

"In the web world, that makes us an anomaly," Portner said. "That's web suicide. Nobody does that. It's heresy. But we only want folks involved who want to host or tour."

Portner, who works out of Boulder, Colorado, says the single biggest revelation he's had from running Warmshowers is that it's more about what the hosts receive than what the guests receive — a free overnight stay.

Portner said that literally once or twice a week he'll hear from a host who just wants him to know what a great experience he or she had.

"I think the secret about Warmshowers is the gift is in the hosting," Portner said. "That's a common idea around the world, taking somebody into your home. Whether you buy into that or not, I hear it every day."

"Our hosts have literally had the world come into their houses to teach their children a song, or make them a meal, teach them a language, or share something culturally, and I just love that." **AC**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer to Adventure Cyclist.



Warmshowers host Ken Francis takes portraits of all his guests, a tradition inspired by the Adventure Cycling National Bicycle Touring Portrait Collection.