

WARM SHOWERS



WARMSHOWERS LOW-DOWN

- There are now almost 400 Warmshowers members across Australia – and more than 10,000 members worldwide.
- The list began life as a text file in 1993 and, until about four years ago, had 1000 members. Since going online in 2005, membership has steadily increased.
- Warmshowers is free to join and run mainly by volunteers.
- The website is in English, but it recently launched a Spanish and French translation option. Other languages are on the cards.
- Warmshowers is a reciprocal experience – all members are encouraged to host as well as be hosted, even if it's at some undetermined point in the future.
- To find out information, go to www.warmshowers.org

Keen to begin bicycle touring, Rob and Maureen Byrne found a website that would enrich their lives – even before they left home

Two years ago, we began to think about bicycle touring. We'd always enjoyed cycling and kept hearing about people touring the country, and even the world, on their bikes. We started doing research, including joining online cycling forums.

We saw plenty of positive comments about something called Warmshowers.org and discovered it was a hospitality list that puts touring cyclists in touch with hosts all over the world. The hosts offer somewhere for the cyclist to sleep – everything from a room to a patch of grass for pitching a tent was on offer. Best of all, after a long day in the saddle, they also provide the use of a warm shower.

It seemed like a great idea so we joined, offering to host cyclists in our home in Grafton

LIFE CYCLE: Inspired by hosting other Warmshowers members, we now can't wait to ride off on our own adventure.



on the New South Wales north coast. We knew we'd get to meet interesting people on their fun adventures just like the one we were planning, and would learn all sorts of things from them. We suspected they might also be inspiring folk and we were right.

We've now hosted more than a dozen travellers since we joined in late 2008. Our guests have been fascinating people, many of whom we're still in contact with and hope to visit when we take off on our trip. The cyclists tend to be passionate with a positive, can-do attitude, and quite a bond forms when they get together. It makes for some interesting conversations about destinations and experiences on the road.

If you like a quiet night in front of the TV, Warmshowers is probably not for you. But if you like the company of intrepid adventurers, who pedal in and out of your life, then it's perfect. You'll hear remarkable stories and learn lots. We've been

able to pick our guests' brains around the dinner table which means, when the time comes, we'll be more than ready for our own trip. We're hoping to cycle around Australia and New Zealand first, then Europe and Asia, possibly concluding in North America. It sounds almost impossible but, every time we host another touring cyclist, we realise just how feasible it is.

Most of the people who stay with us are doing a trip up or down the east coast. Sometimes it's just between Sydney and Brisbane, but usually it's longer. Some have been around the world and the east coast is just a small part of their trip. Once our place was just a safe haven for a couple to leave their car while they toured the area for a few days.

We also got to experience Warmshowers hospitality when we headed down to a bike shop in Canberra. We wanted to look at recumbent bikes – the kind where you sit back in a similar position to when you drive a car – and the nearest stockist was in Canberra.



We contacted Robert, a lovely Warmshowers member who lives near the shop, and he was happy to host us, even though we were driving and not cycling. He was a true gentleman, and a mine of information as he's toured a lot. We had a great time and it was the perfect introduction to the service.

It's been useful seeing what kind of kit people carry. Some travel incredibly light – to the point of riding without socks to save weight. Others pack quite a few luxuries; we had a doctor stay with us who had enough medical supplies to undertake roadside surgery, which he had actually done in South America.

We love hosting. At first we were a bit nervous we'd get more requests than we could handle, as we're on the popular east coast route and there are no other hosts within 80km of us. But the reality is we wish more people would pass through, even though we both work full-time.

One thing we really like about

ON YOUR BIKE: The colourful Grafton streets (top) are popular with cyclists from groups such as Grafton City Cycles (far left), Maclean Bicycle Centre (above left), and travellers, like this nice couple we hosted (above right).

Warmshowers is that you can offer the level of hospitality you're comfortable with. In our case, we provide a section of our house with bedroom, bathroom and living area. We usually feed our guests, too. Anyone thinking of being a host who provides food should be aware that cyclists are always completely ravenous.

They may look lean, but that's because they burn thousands of calories each day on the bike, not because they don't eat much. We cook what looks like way too much, but it's always easy to convince them to polish it off. Our guests are always so hungry they think our cooking is excellent, which we think is extraordinary!

We haven't really had any bad experiences. One guy called us up the day before he was due to arrive to say he was only 20 minutes away, which was a little inconvenient, but we got around it. Obviously we click more with some people than others, but even if there is language barrier

(we've had guests from Asia and Europe) we always manage to make a connection. Often the talking doesn't stop from the minute they roll into the garage. The challenge is to pause long enough for them to take that nice warm shower.

Two guests who stand out were the ones who arrived with a bag full of ingredients and cooked us a meal. After a hard day at work we really appreciated it, although we felt guilty as they'd probably had a harder day than us.

Warmshowers is great because everybody gets something out of it. At first glance it might seem like the cyclists get the most benefits – our guests love a home-cooked meal and the peace and quiet of our place, and the non-Aussies love the kangaroos who hop into our backyard. But we've also reaped the benefits.

We know far more about what works and what doesn't when you're touring now. And we've learnt plenty about equipment, camping gear, routes, the best countries to visit, places to avoid etc. All these things will make life a little easier when we set off ourselves. We can't wait to begin our trip as soon as our work commitments allow.

Staying with locals through Warmshowers will help us move away from feeling like traditional tourists. It'll be a much richer experience, and we'll get to spend nights relaxing and making new friends. There's also the bonus of cutting costs so we can stay on the road for longer. But whether we have a bed, sofa, or simply somewhere to pitch a tent, that much-appreciated warm shower will be the biggest plus of all. **W**

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