

Spoke'n FROM THE Heart

STORY BY DAN D'AMBROSIO | PHOTOS BY PATRICK FARRELL

Jalet Farrell jokes that she can throw a water bottle from the front door of her hostel in Mitchell, Oregon, and hit the TransAmerica Trail. But she didn't plan things that way.

When Farrell and her husband, Patrick, opened the Spoke'n Hostel in 2016, they thought the majority of their customers would be people traveling by car between Boise, Idaho, and Portland, Oregon.

"We are the perfect midway point, especially in winter when you don't want to drive past dark," Jalet Farrell said. "Turns out I've become a darling to people in the cycling world. They have adopted me and love me as much as I love them."

Spoke'n Hostel is on U.S. Highway 26 at milepost 66 between the Ochoco Divide and Keyes Summit — on the TransAm. The hostel has six twin bunk beds, or 12 beds altogether, in the main bunk room. There are also two twin beds in a semiprivate room called Twickenham and a single bed in another semiprivate room billed as "perfect for the lone traveler."

Finally, there's third semiprivate room with a bunk bed and room for a cot to sleep three. Spoke'n Hostel has a full kitchen, a private shower room, two restrooms, and "plenty of space to relax and enjoy the quiet respite of Eastern Oregon."

A bed in the main bunk room will cost you \$25 for the night, while the semiprivate rooms for two go for \$65 and the single semiprivate room goes for \$35. But really, Spoke'n Hostel relies

on donations to survive.

All of the beds have to be reserved individually, even if you're reserving as a group — an "unfortunate glitch" in the reservation system, according to Farrell. There are also camping spots near a creek, which can only be reserved by calling Farrell at the hostel.

Farrell had a vague memory from 1976 of the original ride across the TransAmerica Trail. She remembers seeing cyclists ride through Ontario, Oregon, where she lived at the time, and cheering for them "like it was an Olympic event."

"I thought it was one and done," Farrell said.

It was only when she moved to Mitchell and began working with state authorities to get a scenic bikeway route installed that she realized the TransAm Trail was alive and well, and still hosting riders.

Farrell was successful in getting the Painted Hills Scenic Bikeway added to Oregon's six scenic bikeways before her hostel opened. At 161 miles in length, the Painted Hills route is rated extremely difficult, with a hub-and-spoke design that offers a series of rides and loops that can easily be connected for longer rides.

The Painted Hills, Farrell said, is a remarkable area of fossilized dirt "in rainbow colors" about a dozen miles from her front door.

"Different segments offer different pleasures," says the Travel Oregon website of the Painted Hills Bikeway. "The stretch from Service Creek to



Spray and Kimberly takes a sinuous path alongside the John Day River. From Service Creek to Twickenham involves climbing the stout Donnelly Grade and later dropping down into a Wild West landscape of rocks and sagebrush to a crossing of the John Day."

Riding to the historic town of Mitchell puts you in the shadow of the imposing Ochoco Mountains. Keep going for an out-and-back to the Painted Hills Unit. The aptly-named town of Fossil, meanwhile, offers the chance to dig up your own fossil.

While Farrell is proud of the Painted Hills route, she said it's the riders on the TransAm, hands down, who fill most of her beds. In 2016, the first year, Spoke'n Hostel had 365 riders stay, without any advertising. That went to 480 riders the following year and more than 800 riders the year after that, in 2018.

In 2019, Farrell hosted more than 1,500 riders, and was expecting more than 2,000 before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. She ended up with just 150 riders. Given the circumstances, it might have been all she could handle anyway.

"You know what, I was exhausted," Farrell said.

Farrell has never known what to expect in terms of visitors. Her second year in business, there was an eclipse. Mitchell, a town of about 130 people, didn't know what hit it.

Whether touring the country or base camping, the Painted Hills National Monument is well within striking distance for cyclists staying at Spoke'n Hostel; Sunset at the Painted Hills National Monument kisses the diverse desert landscape.





Cyclists are always encouraged to bring their bikes inside at Spoke'n. Every touring cyclist sleeps better knowing their kit is close by.

“We were the center point at Painted Hills,” Farrell said. “This little town swelled from 100 to well over 20,000. That was a crazy thing.”

The locals were terrified of the influx of humanity. Farrell said she laid the situation out for her fellow residents of Mitchell in no uncertain terms.

“We can gripe about this all night, but we can’t change the fact the eclipse is coming,” Farrell said. “Raise your hand if you want to close up and run for the hills, or raise your hand if you want to move forward.”

The town moved forward, Farrell said, and while it was a somewhat “contentious and bumpy road” dealing with the crowds, it ultimately did well as a small town.

Economic survival is never far from Farrell’s mind. Her hostel is also an Assembly of God Church affiliated with three others in McMinnville,

While Farrell is proud of the Painted Hills route, she said it’s the riders on the TransAm, hands down, who fill most of her beds.

Monmouth, and Eugene. On a really good Sunday, she said, she and her husband, who is the pastor, might have about 25 worshippers.

“We have adopted these little churches that were phasing out and brought life back to them,” Farrell said.

However, she said, Spoke’n Hostel could use a little help right now.

“Our building needs to be re-sided. It has 1970s plastic siding that is blowing off,” Farrell said. “Donations are keeping the doors open, but we’re not getting ahead, especially with COVID.”



Jalet Farrell in front of the Spoke'n Hostel.

Farrell is also looking for help running the hostel. Her vision is to have volunteer hosts who would stay for a week or two, helping her do laundry, wax the floors, and make the beds — “all those things we try to do to make it seem like you’re at home when you come in the door,” she said.

Whatever happens, Farrell said she will continue to welcome cyclists as long as she can.

“Cyclists are my bread and butter, but even if they weren’t, they’re my favorite guests,” she said.

Why does she enjoy hosting cyclists so much?

“A cyclist will rarely not tidy up a bit and leave things as they found them,” she said. “Car travelers almost always tear apart the space. It’s an entirely different mindset.”

Farrell also admires how “hardworking” cyclists are.

“They’re not afraid of hills,” she said. “I love the ‘can-do’ spirit.” **AC**

Dan D’Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.

