

Pedal-powered rail travel on the Oregon coast

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It's always fun to discover new adventures right here in Oregon, and this is certainly one of the more unusual ones. When the Pacific Railway & Navigation Company (PR&N) began work on a new rail line in 1905, they certainly had no idea that, more than a hundred years later, part of that rail system would become a popular tourist attraction with pedal-powered rail cars!

With its smoking steam engines, steep grades, harrowing trestles, and tight curves, the PR&N acronym earned the uncomplimentary nickname of "Punk, Rotten, and Nasty" because it often left passengers feeling uneasy or even nauseous. Its primary use was for the logging and lumber industries, as well as for delivering tank cars of milk to the Tillamook Cheese Factory. The PR&N line was closed in 2007 due to landslides and flooding and was never reopened.

Meanwhile, Railriders began official operation in Oregon at the instigation of avid bicyclists Kim and Anita Metlen in the northeastern Oregon town of Joseph. The custom-made four-person aluminum pedal cars are descended from railroad handcars and velocipedes. This generation of rail vehicle was first tested in 2013, with informal commercial operation in the Willamette Mountains beginning in 2014; regular scheduled service began in 2015. Officials in Tillamook learned of the operation and persuaded the Metlens to expand their business to an idle section of PR&N track linking Tillamook and Bay City in 2016.

Railriders focuses on family fun and also encourages group activities. The twelve-mile round trip crosses the Kilchis and Wilson Rivers, along with numerous unnamed creeks and sloughs and offers views of Tillamook Bay, estuaries, and wetlands of the region. The very scenic route mostly follows a forest corridor lined with abundant coastal flora, including spruce, alder, Douglas fir, blackberries, elderberries, and many others. An unexpected highlight of the route is the almost constant serenade of Swainson's thrushes, one of the most beautiful and musical of all bird calls.

The railroad has a grade of no more than one-half of one percent and can be negotiated by persons of all ages. The route highlights many forms of coastal Oregon's

agricultural economy and passes several farms with varying crops, then ducks beneath Highway 101. The tracks also skirt a 4,000-cow dairy farm and the back of the famed Tillamook Cheese Factory, which is well worth a separate visit from the front entrance!

The Tillamook Cheese Factory, with its 1.3 million annual visitors, is the most popular tourist attraction on the Oregon coast and just opened its brand-new 38,500-square-foot visitor center last month. The new center is a must-see attraction for any visit to the area. Last year, Tillamook Cheese donated \$1.5 million to Oregon State University for a fermentation research facility for the Food Science and Technology Department of the Agricultural College.

Historical highlights of the Railriders tour include the two railroad river bridges, both of which were fabricated in New England more than a century ago and shipped by rail to Sacramento, California, where they were in use until the 1950s when they were sold to the PR&N. The bridge over the steelhead-rich Kilchis River was built in 1898, and the Wilson River bridge was completed

in 1901.

Each Railriders tour includes the services of two guides who look after safety and logistics concerns. The guides stop vehicle traffic at each road crossing and — at one major crossing — even hand operate an actual railroad crossing signal, complete with lowering crossing arms, bells, and flashing lights.

On our trip, the guides also fixed a dropped bike chain and retrieved a lady's purse dropped on a trestle. Fortunately, the purse did not fall between the ties or it would have been lost. Riders on this attraction should be advised to wear clothing or devices with pockets (preferably with zippers) because the recumbent cycling position can cause objects to fall away or work their way loose. There are slots for water bottles, but nowhere to stow loose gear. Clothing should be comfortable, and appropriate for circumstances requiring moderate exertion. Plan accordingly.

Currently, the tours leave at 9 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m. Riders should arrive a half-hour early. Allow an extra 10 minutes if child car seats are to be used, and you must provide those yourself.

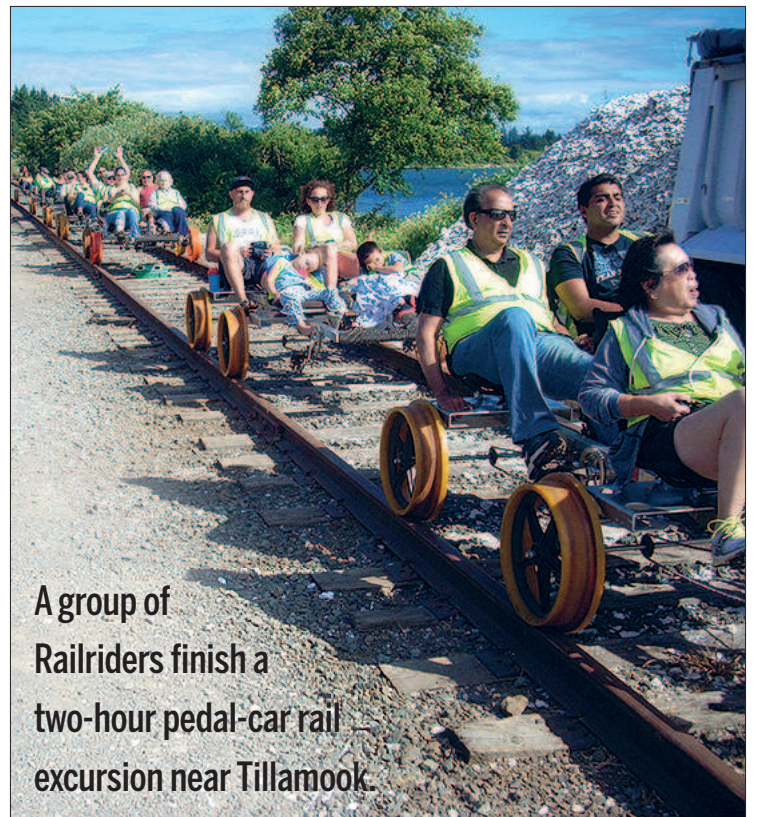


PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

A group of Railriders finish a two-hour pedal-car rail excursion near Tillamook.

Reservations are recommended, as pedal car capacity is very limited. Also, due to the nature of the pedal devices, individual passengers must weigh less than 250 pounds. Prices are currently \$24 per person, and half that for children 11 and younger.

The entire round trip tour takes about two hours at speeds that typically run around 10 mph or less, although it is reported that

one group of four "hard-core" cyclists were able to bring a pedal car to a top speed of 20 mph.

Oregon Coast Railriders is located on Highway 101 at Hayes Oyster Drive in Bay City, just north of Tillamook. The tracks and "station" are on the west side of the highway next to some large piles of oyster shells. For further information see www.ocrailriders.com.

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