

Sleeping with strangers



Popular 'hospitality exchanges', such as Couchsurfing, allow travellers to stay with locals around the world — for free. But as any experienced host or surfer will testify, there's more to this trend than penny-pinching

WORDS: Joseph Reaney

I am folded in half. My knees are tucked up to my chin; my chin tucked into my chest. I can't even feel my feet. In fact, my only sensation is a sharp jabbing below my shoulder blade, where the spout of the tap has found its home. I pull a rough, damp towel across my midriff, and resign myself to the sleepless night ahead.

Thankfully, this doesn't represent the standard 'surfing' experience. Before tonight, I had slept in a series of springy beds, spacious sofas and spongy roll mats. But here, in Seoul, the six other strangers ushered in by our generous host had already appropriated the bed, couch and floors, leaving just one lonely corner of the bathroom vacant. So in I clambered, origami-ing my 6' 5" frame into what is clearly a Korean-sized bathtub.

Back to the beginning

I'd first heard about couchsurfing two months earlier, in the midst of a punishing trek up to Everest Base Camp. I was talking to fellow masochist Evan about the next portion of my gap-year trip — Japan — and listing my concerns about the high hostel costs, when his eyes shone. "You know," he said, "there's this cool website..."

During the morning's climb, from sun-soaked Namche Bazaar to snow-strewn Pangboche, Evan outlined the concept. Couchsurfing, he divulged, is an online travel community in which

local 'hosts' offer their available bed/sofa/floor for free to passing travellers ('surfers'). In return, the host may later 'surf' another stranger's couch. At its fundamental level, it's a hospitality exchange — a free stay for a free stay — but Evan was quick to highlight the other advantages. It offered surfers unique local insight into the cities they were visiting and gave hosts the chance to make international friends without leaving home. For him, it was an idyllic society, where people of every nation could come together in mutual understanding and respect. For me, it was my ticket to free accommodation. The hippy, social nature of couchsurfing sounded all well and good, but as I sat in a Kathmandu cafe, sending my first requests, my thoughts were dominated by the budgetary benefits.

It took me a month to secure my first stay. As a newcomer to the community, with no references and an ill-advised profile picture — an earnest snap of my bearded visage: my serial-killer selfie — my first dozen requests were declined. By the time I was checking into yet another pricey hostel in Okinawa, the mid-point of my Japanese odyssey, I'd all but given up on the idea of free accommodation. But then I logged online to see a new email land in my inbox. Zach, an American living in Kagoshima, was offering to host me for three nights.

We met under the enormous white stone gate marking the entrance to Terukuni jinja ▶

From top: Guest house, Seoul; Kims' Guest House sign, Seoul



shrine, then walked down a series of side streets to what my host assured me was the best ramen place in Japan. When the food was served, it was hard to disagree: the thick, clear noodles spiralled into a light vegetable broth, sprinkled with chunks of tender *kurobuta* black pork and served with pickles. I was already reaping the benefits of local couchsurfing knowledge. Halfway through the meal, Zach casually mentioned that he would need to leave for a trip the next day – then handed me his keys! I was gobsmacked. I had only known him for 45 minutes, yet he already felt that he could trust me with his flat. I'd realised that welcoming travellers into one's home required a general belief in the decency of others, but I had never known someone to put so much faith in a stranger.

This volume of generosity was exhibited again and again over the coming weeks, as I surfed the length and breadth of Japan's Kyushu island – then boarded a ferry to continue sleeping with strangers in South Korea. Each one of my hosts during those three weeks was warm, friendly and fascinating, and afforded me several unique experiences that will forever be seared into my memory. In Beppu, I would share a naked *onsen*

through the Middle East and into southern and eastern Europe. I surfed all the way, and the unique experiences kept on coming.

In Jerusalem, I stayed for two weeks with host Kfir and his lovely family, including his ultra-orthodox grandmother, and had the opportunity to take part in the traditional rituals of Shabbat. In Tirana, Albania, I was welcomed by three Canadians, who took me to a picturesque antiques market in Krujë, where I bought a year's supply of birthday presents. And in Brasov, Romania, my local hosts led me up into the mountains surrounding the city to learn how to play the bongo, convinced the high altitude air made for a purer sound.

All in all, during my gap-year trip, I surfed a total of 25 couches in 12 different countries. By the time it came to an end, with a flight from Kiev to London, I had not only saved a vast amount of money, I had experienced amazing things I would have missed if I'd hostelled. And, of course, I'd made a whole new world of friends.

Little did I know, this was only the beginning of my couchsurfing adventures. After moving to Manchester for work, I decided I should start to pay back my debt to the community, and convinced my new housemate Sam that we should offer our couch to passing travellers. He agreed, and over the course of the next 18 months we hosted more than 40 travellers from every corner of the globe. We delighted in showing visitors the hidden corners of 'the Mecca of the North' (as we liked to promote it), and hosting gave us an excuse to continually seek out local events. There were other, unintended benefits, too. One of our surfers, Rou from Mexico, would later become Sam's wife. Another, Marti from the Czech Republic, will shortly become mine.

From that chance gap-year encounter with a passionate surfer to my current life in the Austrian Alps – where I continue to host passing travellers – it's no exaggeration to say couchsurfing has transformed my life.

I am not the only one. Having discussed the considerable impact of couchsurfing with some of my hosts, a theme that crops up regularly is community. Miranda, one of my Canadian hosts in Tirana, says: "It has been such a warm community to me... and I have made many friends. The best part is that feeling of connectedness I have attained from people who at first were complete strangers. It has built my trust in humanity. I'll surf in the future with my daughter, as there are many life lessons to be discovered out there."

Matteo, one of my hosts in Beppu, also hails the website's impact on his life: "The best thing about couchsurfing is being able to meet people from different cultures and backgrounds," he says. "I prefer hosting long-term adventurers or people with some sort of goal, as it's always good to hear their stories.

"It's also great to share those hidden secrets that only a few people experience. Couchsurfing also helps build a network of friends around ►

As I lay wide awake in the bathtub, with that tap digging into my spine, I felt perfectly content. Because I understood the couchsurfer's joy of making new friends and being part of a global society

(hot spring spa) with some heavily-inked members of the yakuza, an organised crime syndicate. In Shimonoseki, I was taken to try locally-sourced *fugu*, a poisonous puffer fish that must be painstakingly prepared to avoid inadvertently killing the diner. And in Busan, South Korea, across the Sea of Japan, I had my first taste of an all-night karaoke bar – complete with microphones, guitars and drum kit – and then witnessed a drunken Taekwondo bar fight.

Shortly after, I arrived in Seoul. My host Yong hadn't told me he was already hosting other couchsurfers, so on arrival I was taken aback to find the tiny studio flat overflowing with six fellow travellers. Yet the evening that followed was great fun, as we all shared our surfing secrets, our inspiring travel tales and our politically incorrect national stereotypes. By the time I was lying wide awake in the bathtub, with that tap slowly digging its way into my spine, I felt perfectly content. Because I now understood what Evan had been promoting. The joy of couchsurfing comes from making new friends and being part of a global society. If you get a free night's sleep too, then that's a bonus.

Surfing into Europe

From Seoul, I flew into Cairo, and then continued my travels for another five months up



the world. I particularly recommend it to anyone living outside of the main cities," he says.

Kfir, my kind host in Jerusalem (the longest stay of my entire gap year trip was with his family), adds: "The great thing about couchsurfing, other than the fact it cuts your travel costs, is you really get an insight into the country you're staying in. You get to meet real nationals, who may end up becoming your [long-term] friends."

The future of hospitality

Despite these glowing references for the community, Couchsurfing has courted controversy in recent years. In 2011, the previously non-profit, volunteer-run site was sold to a private corporation, leading to protests from long-standing members. Following this, there were some contentious changes to the site, such as new terms of use stipulating that all member content (including personal data and photos) can be freely utilised by the corporation, as well as unpopular updates to the user experience. In addition, there were accusations that any critics were being censored. Yet for all this, the site has continued to grow rapidly, with the latest company statistics claiming there are seven million members in 100,000 cities around the world. Couchsurfing has become the Facebook of hospitality exchanges: the most frequented social site of its kind.

And it isn't without its rivals. The most successful of the 'new breed' free, non-profit hospitality exchanges is BeWelcome, founded in 2007 and home to 50,000 members in 150 countries. Another popular free exchange (and meet-up site) is YowTRIP. There are also a growing number of cheap but paid-for exchanges, including Evergreen Club, where

travellers over 50 years of age pay an annual membership of \$75 (£45), and then a nominal fee for each night's stay; and Zotel, where one night with a host anywhere in the world costs a fixed fee of \$40 (£24).

For many of these hospitality exchanges, the primary selling point is saving money — even the paid-for exchanges compare their costs favourably to stays in hotel rooms or rented apartments. However, as I learned during my gap year, couchsurfing from Japan to Jordan, from Macedonia to Moldova, while it may be the budgetary benefits that lure you to sign up, it's the people you meet along the way that really give the trip its value.

Essentials

Hospitality exchanges

Couchsurfing: couchsurfing.org

Hospitality Club: hospitalityclub.org

BeWelcome: bewelcome.org

YowTrip: yowtrip.com

Evergreen Club: evergreenclub.com

More on couchsurfing

Online: Vicky Frost recalls her experiences with Couchsurfing around Latin America:

theguardian.com/travel/series/goinglocal

'Couchsurfing: More Than Just A Free Bed For The Night': independent.co.uk/student

Book: *Sleeping Around: A Couch Surfing Tour of the Globe* by Brian Thacker. RRP: £16.

(Allen & Unwin). □

Above: Joseph Reaney's hosts in Brasov, Romania