

Couch surfing: sofa, so good

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R Y E R S O N I A N S T A F F

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Any seasoned traveller will tell you that the true joy of travel lies not in the big sites and attractions, but in immersing yourself in local life. But it's easier said than done. Unless you're embarking on a long trip, you may not have enough time to wade out of the inevitable touristy quicksand and begin enjoying unspoiled local experiences.

Couch surfing is the practice of staying at people's places – couches – for short periods of time while travelling. It's also a website – Couchsurfing.org or "CS" – that connects travellers with locals willing to host them and show them around. And so for those of us who lacked the time and/or foresight to take a year off from real life and go travelling, CS is a godsend. It allows you to instantly immerse yourself in the culture of your travel destination, evading the underwhelming, overpriced tourist swamps.

A few months ago, I took off to Spain for a three-week backpacking trip. One of my first stops was the capital, Madrid. Although I stayed in a hostel, I managed to meet – through CS – a couple of 20-something Indians of Telugu ethnicity (like myself) who lived and worked in Madrid. It was fascinating and disorienting to see people from my hometown speak Spanish with an Indian accent (it's a trip) and hear about what it's like to be a young Indian expat professional in Spain.

Through them, I also met a guy of Indian origin whose family had been in Spain for generations. I learned that Spain's Canary Islands are home to a thriving Indian diaspora, and discovered that Spain is home to several thriving cricket leagues. Cricket. In Spain. Point is I learned many fascinating things about the lives of my compatriots in Spain, all thanks to CS.

Awesome as that was, it still wasn't an actual "surfing" experience. Prior to heading to Spain, I sent a barrage of couch requests to would-be hosts in Cordoba, my final stop. I was a new CS member with no references, which meant someone would have to take a leap of faith by hosting me. Someone did.

My hosts, a pair of young English teachers, lived outside Cordoba in a rural town called Montilla. On the 25th of May, my bus pulled into the Montilla bus station – a concrete shed. I wasn't sure how my hosts would react to my appearance – eight hours of kite surfing lessons in Tarifa had left me with tomato-red eyes, a sunburned face and a less than sunny disposition. They didn't seem to care and appeared excited to meet me. They were to be my first CS hosts, and I their first guest.

We went to the rooftop of their apartment building. One of them thrust a glass of the local red wine into my hand and I took in the view. In the distance, there were rolling hills dotted with vineyards and clumpy olive plantations. On the street below us, children ran around and yelled. An old man struggled to light his cigar.

Later that evening, they took me to a flamenco peña, or club. At that point, my only regret about my trip was that I hadn't had the chance to visit a grimy, authentic flamenco club. I did catch a flamenco show in Sevilla; while the performers there were magnificent, the venue was too slick and tourist-centred for my liking. The peña was exactly what I'd been looking for. It reeked of cigars and cheap perfume. I'd never seen that many virtuoso musicians in one place. There was nothing slick about the place, but it had soul. What I'd fruitlessly searched for over three weeks in Spain, my CS hosts had helped me find within three hours.

CS truly is about more than just finding a place to lay your head. It's about meeting people willing to help you get the most out of your travels. But what's in it for the host?

A couple of weeks ago, I received an interesting request from an American woman who was to arrive in Toronto after a five-month volunteering stint with an NGO in Iraqi Kurdistan. She said she would likely be culture-shocked returning to western society, and wanted to use her time in Toronto to readjust.



Rahul Kalvapalle (right) with couch surfing buddies in Madrid

Rahul Kalvapalle / Ryersonian Staff

I was intrigued. Here was a white American girl of privileged upbringing, returning to North America after five months in Iraqi Kurdistan. I was curious to see how disoriented she'd be, and figured she'd have some great stories to tell. It's not often that you meet someone in that situation. I accepted her request.

Over two days, she regaled me with incredible stories about Iraqi Kurdistan. I was enthralled. Hosting her was worth the stories alone. But having her around also helped me appreciate Toronto more.

When you host a traveller in your city, you begin to see it through their eyes. When a traveller enjoys and admires your neighbourhood and city, you see it in a new light and begin to appreciate previously mundane aspects of your surroundings. It's probably the biggest benefit of CS hosting.

More importantly, CS harks back to a time when people weren't paranoid and sheltered, and opened their homes to strangers. Good couch surfing experiences enhance your faith in, well, people. Sure, things can go wrong – you could end up with someone who's unreliable, disrespectful or worse. It's a judgment call, and comes with no guarantees.

People raise their eyebrows when I tell them I stayed with absolute strangers in rural Spain, and hosted one in my own home, and ask if I wasn't worried for my safety. My rebuttal is that there are no guarantees anywhere – someone in your hostel dorm could be a deranged psycho, as could the person sitting behind you on your tour bus.

The romance of couch surfing lies in the unpredictability and spontaneity, and in never knowing exactly what lies ahead. It isn't for everyone, but those willing to take the plunge invariably gain something from the experience. I know I did.

Staying with a couple of complete strangers in a remote, rural town in an alien land, I found comfort outside my comfort zone.

Try it. You might just thank me.

Comments (4)

ahiffptw writes:

11/04/2012

mttmez

akamum writes:

09/20/2012

As the 'mum' of that vagabond woman - I can tell you she was happy to share your mum's cooking left behind in the freezer for her bachelor son..."we had a feast one night of wonderful homemade Indian food" ...shared, I gathered, along with mutual stories with a delightful CS host. She has met the most incredible people over her two years on the road - thanks for being one of them.

Lapo gias writes:

09/20/2012

wonderful, indeed! I for one could never understand this madness but I think I do now !! well written piece.

Welshy writes:

09/19/2012

Wonderful article! A balanced and well-written account of both sides of the CS coin. I think it's time for me to sign up!

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