

Travelers save money, make friends through global Web site

May 4 2009, By Charles Grau

When Will Bradwell and his friends were planning a cross-country road trip three years ago, the idea of paying for hotels, gas and food seemed impossible for their college-student budgets.

Then a friend suggested CouchSurfing.com.

Launched in January 2004, it's a hospitality-exchange networking site where people offer free lodging. When opening a free account, you can choose to host, surf or show travelers around (even if you're not hosting).

"It sounded like hitchhiking, but on a whole different level," said Bradwell, 24, of Miami. "It's a really smart way to [travel](#) for people our age who are trusting like that and don't want to spend all that money on hotels."

The thought of staying at a stranger's house may scare many. But those who have tried it say "surfers" share a love for traveling and meeting people.

"Most participants are of the same like mind and are willing to share a little bit of their lives and we share a little bit of our lives," said Rick Murphy of Fort Lauderdale, who has been a host. A lot of research preparation goes into surfing or hosting, he added. You can read profiles, request additional information from your host or surfer, and build a pre-trip rapport by phone or e-mail. You can also read other people's comments.

The site has other safety checks in place, said Crystal Murphy, public relations team leader for CouchSurfing.com.

Although not required, surfers can pay a fee and become verified members. The recommended amount varies by income and country, but the maximum is \$25. Verification helps confirm a surfer's identity and address.

Another is vouching. Members can vouch for other members and leave comments about their stays. Vouching is a way for members to declare their trust in other members -- the only way to become vouched for is to be extremely trusted by someone who has been vouched for by three other members, according to the site.

Even with all the safety checks, surfers are urged to use common sense when planning a trip, Murphy said.

"You shouldn't let someone stay at your house who just started a profile yesterday or contacted you in a shady way," she said.

The nonprofit site, registered in New Hampshire, was developed by Casey Fenton, Sebastien Giau Le Tuan, Daniel Hoffer and Leonardo Bassani da Silveira.

"We first started the site to facilitate intercultural understanding and enable people to have adventures and new experiences they would not otherwise encounter," Hoffer said. "But we did not expect it to get this way."

The openness and trust of the CouchSurfing community impressed Bradwell and his three friends who, at the time of their cross-country road trip, were students at the University of Florida.

"Every place we ended up staying at was its own little adventure," Bradwell said. "They felt they needed to take us out on the town and show us everything there that is cool. And that was usually the best part of the trip."

As of April, the site reported more than a million registered members from about 230 countries. The average age is 27, but CouchSurfing doesn't discriminate.

Rick Murphy, 55, and John Devine, 45, of Fort Lauderdale, joined in January 2007 and have hosted visitors from Brazil, Britain, Serbia, Germany, Belgium and Canada.

"As a gay couple, we didn't know how many people would want to stay with us," Murphy said. "CouchSurfing is not a gay thing or a straight thing -- it's a people thing."

While traveling to South America, the couple bumped into several surfers who had stayed at their home.

"One of our friends who ... works for the FBI ... thinks we've lost our mind," Murphy said. "But out of the 100-plus people we've hosted, never has anyone had to leave. We never had anything broken or stolen from us."

TOP 10 COUCHSURFING COUNTRIES

United States

Germany

France

Canada

United Kingdom

Italy

Australia

Brazil

Spain

Netherlands

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TIPS FOR HOSTS & SURFERS

Make sure your "couch information" is clear. You decide how much access surfers have to your home. Be clear in what you are comfortable with, and communicate your rules in advance.

When you receive a request, try to get an idea of who is writing to you. Communicate with each other before a CouchSurfing stay to establish a rapport.

If you're looking for specific info that's missing from your surfer's profile, ask for it. They are asking you for your trust, so you deserve to get a sense of who is coming into your home.

As a surfer, you may want to have a backup host. Once you have a couch

arranged, you may want to ask another host to be your backup, just in case.

Tell friends from home how long you will stay. And also how to get in contact with you.

For more on safety, go to couchsurfing.com/safety.html

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