

Couchsurfing Killed the Youth Hostel?

Couchsurfing.org is fast becoming a hit with young globetrotters looking to share experiences, cultures, and their couch. Since it got off the ground six years ago, the social networking site which makes it possible to stay in a local's home in just about any country in the world, has attracted almost two million members. This free travel network opens up a world of opportunity for "surfers", but will it affect the billion dollar backpacker industry?

The Couchsurfing Project gained momentum soon after computer programmer Casey Fenton took a trip to Iceland without organising a place to stay. Wanting to experience Iceland like a local, he spammed 1500 students in Reykjavik asking if anyone would let him crash on their couch for the night. The overwhelming number of offers he received led to the creation of couchsurfing.org ("creating a better world, one couch at a time") in January 2004. In its first month, an average of 37 people signed up each week, but for the past few years around 15,000 people have consistently joined every week.



"Couchsurfing started out on the fringe, but it's started becoming a mainstream phenomenon," said Dan Hoffer, co-founder and Chairman of the Board for Couchsurfing International. "We never expected it to grow so big so fast. We were really surprised by the growth of the community and by the passion people feel for the whole experience."

At the time of publication, there were 1,821,847 couchsurfing members offering their free hospitality in 238 different countries, and around 2 million positive "surfing" and hosting experiences had been recorded. But because couchsurfing is still in its relatively early days, it is difficult to predict just how big an impact it could have on the backpacker accommodation industry.

Tourism Australia's 2009 International Visitors Survey (IVS) reported that two thirds of all backpackers (defined as those who stay at least one night in a youth hostel or backpacker accommodation) visiting Australia are under the age of 30. Youth hostels rigorously target their budget dorm accommodation at these young travellers, who often seek the cheapest option. The survey also found that more than half of the backpackers arriving in Australia are from Europe. Interestingly enough, more than two thirds of couchsurfing members are also under 30, and more than half of all couchsurfers are also from Europe (around 30 per cent are from North America).

But despite the fact the backpacker industry thrives off the same youth travel market, various observers say the rapid growth of couchsurfing members should not ring alarm bells.

"[Couchsurfing] may have over 1.8 million members but the amount of people who use the site as their exclusive mode of travel remains relatively small," said Vicky Baker, freelance journalist and creator of the Going Local Travel blog. "I don't think hostels feel under threat and they shouldn't. Couchsurfing will never take over from hostelling. The hostels that are incorporating new services are more likely to be trying to reach the growing "flashpacker" market," she said.



Far from sustaining injury, youth hostels are thriving with the emergence of the "flashpacker" - backpackers who travel later on in life with more funds to their name. The 2009 IVS found there had been significant growth in older travellers within the backpacker market, particularly in the 40-49 age bracket, who are increasingly more likely to stay in backpacker accommodation instead of standard hotels.

"The hostel industry as a whole has made a successful push to change travellers' perceptions," said Pete Meyers, Vice President of hostel review website Eurocheapo. "By adding more amenities, increasing the volume of private rooms available in addition to dorms, and providing more services

for local sightseeing...hostels are broadening their appeal to a larger audience. We've seen a steady, constant increase in the volume of hostel reservations flowing through both of our budget travel websites, Eurocheapo and European Hostels," he said.

Australian youth hostels are also faring well. Tourism Australia's IVS (2000-2008) showed the number of backpackers arriving in Australia went up by 3 per cent each year since 2000, while nights spent by international visitors in backpacker accommodation increased 7 per cent since 2005.

"I can't see [couchsurfing] as a real problem for us now, but in a few years maybe it will be," said Brett Claxton, Vice Chairperson of the Backpacker Tourism Advisory Panel and Director of Calypso Backpackers in Cairns.

He said there was not a particularly strong couchsurfing community in Queensland. Australia currently has 52,016 couchsurfers, with an average of 1500 new members joining every month, but by many it is still considered more of a niche and adventurous way to travel. "I think the more popular it gets, the more people will accept it as a way to travel," said Claxton.



Julie Freeman from the Youth Hostel Association (YHA) Australia reported the number of nights spent by travellers in YHA Australia hostels has been increasing steadily over the past 10 years. YHA also opened four new hostels last year.

Not paying a cent for accommodation is an appealing idea for couchsurfers, and is one of the key reasons for couchsurfing's popularity, but those in the hostel industry argue there will always be a place for hostels in the youth travel accommodation sector.

"Couchsurfing is certainly an attractive option to many avid travellers who are looking to stretch

their budgets, and will likely continue its impressive growth,” said Meyers. “However staying in a ...home rather than a hostel might not appeal to everyone.”

“There have always been informal kinds of travel accommodation,” said Duncan Simpson, YHA Head of Corporate Affairs and Policy in the UK. “But my hunch is that people will continue to want the more formal offer and its associated security, safety and reliability.”

Avid couchsurfers say they wouldn't do it any other way. Twenty-nine year old Juan Carlos Cantillo has been on various couchsurfing trips, and has hosted many couchsurfers in his home in Costa Rica. He says couchsurfing can't be compared to a hotel or a hostel because the idea is to exchange cultures, ideas and make friends. “I think the type of people who couchsurf are also a special type of individual who are open and adventurous,” he said.

“You get to know the culture and the reality, you aren't a tourist anymore, but you immerse yourself in the culture and for a period of time you live there...I prefer couchsurfing to a hostel.”

In a tourism industry which revolves around guidebooks and heavily-programmed tours, some see couchsurfing as one of the only ways to interact in a meaningful way with the local culture.

“Hostel life can be oddly out of touch with [the local culture],” said Baker. “I mean how many locals go bungee jumping and white-water rafting? And yet this often becomes the big ‘experience’ that all backpackers do in a place.”

There is little doubt couchsurfing will keep growing in popularity. Together with hostels, they'll continue to make the travel scene a more interesting and diverse place to explore.

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