

# CATCHING THE COUCH-SURFING WAVE

## Web site connects travelers and hosts willing to offer place to stay

Originally published in The Blade on Sunday, October 29, 2006

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Zachariah Griffirin went couch surfing not too long ago and had a blast.

"The whole experience was awesome," he said.

The 2004 Monroe High School graduate happened to try it in Toronto, but it could have been anywhere. There are more than 125,000 registered couch surfers around the world.

For these surfer dudes, it's all about catching the perfect ... couch. Or air mattress. Or, if you're really lucky, a bed.

They're using the CouchSurfing Project, [www.couchsurfing.com](http://www.couchsurfing.com), an online community that connects travelers with hosts who are willing to offer a smile and a free place to stay.

In Toronto, Mr. Griffin was just looking for a cheap way to visit another town, but he got a lot more. His host gave him a tour of the city, a comfy air mattress, and generally showed him a good time.

"It's a good way to make friends," said Mr. Griffin, who lives in Trenton, Mich. "I plan on using it again."

The free Web site started three years ago and aims to aid culture exchange and understanding as well as help globetrotters save a buck.

Users register on the site, identifying their location and provide other information. Then travelers can do a search to find hosts are in the area where they will be visiting and make contact. To help vet users, there is room for feedback and referrals from friends.

Jim Stone, 29, an administrator for the project, has stayed with some 130 people using it. He recommends trading a few e-mails with a potential host or traveler or giving them a call before meeting them for safety's sake.

"If you see someone who's verified, has a few friends and references, you can get an idea who's trustworthy," Mr. Stone said. "Use street smarts. You're meeting somebody new. Treat it like that."

The west Texas native said he's had a great experience using the site.

"What I like about it, it's like you get to a new town, you just have a new best friend right away," Mr. Stone said.

He's had lots of memorable visits - like the "really, really, really small" apartment he stayed in while in Paris or the beach house a guy loaned him in Florida.

"The idea's catching on in a big way," he said. "What I'd like to see is just more cultural understanding."

CouchSurfing.com isn't the only site bringing travelers together with free places to stay.

Hospitality Club ([www.hospitalityclub.org](http://www.hospitalityclub.org)), for example, got off the ground in 2000 and has more than 200,000 members in its worldwide network. Its methods and mission are similar.

"It is a good way to travel because it allows the traveler to interact with the people and culture they are visiting," media coordinator Florian Kaefer wrote in an e-mail from the United Kingdom.

"Also, because staying at other members' places is free, members from poorer countries may be able to afford traveling, which widens their horizon and personal development."

Molly Friesenborg, a junior at Bowling Green State University, signed up for Couch Surfing after a friend

recommended it.

"I love the idea," she said. "The idea of a global university and learning from somebody's culture, crossing international boundaries. I'm very interested in that."

During a recent trip to Europe, she used it to meet up with a member at a local cafe for conversation and a croissant, though she didn't stay with the woman.

Back in the states, however, a couple of her roommates put the kibosh on hosting any travelers at their place.

"My roommates freaked out," Ms. Friesenborg said. "They were not into having a stranger around."

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