

Surfing for new experiences abroad, at home

By Faima Ramirez

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It's less than 40 degrees outside and a sort of static electricity is in the air in downtown Carrboro. In almost every bar, restaurant and living room, people are sitting at the edge of their seats, eyes fixated on the television screen, one hand holding a drink and the other hand getting another nail bitten off. It's not just any Wednesday night when UNC-Chapel Hill plays basketball against its archrivals from Durham.

Meanwhile, there is a smaller group in town that gathers around a very different shared passion — CouchSurfing.

CouchSurfing.org (CS) is the largest traveler's community with almost six million members worldwide. On the official website, it is described as an organization that offers users free hospitality exchange and social networking services.

Casey Fenton established Couchsurfing.org in 2003. Fenton got the idea for the site in 1999 after emailing 1,500 students from the University of Iceland asking if he could stay with them during his stay in the country. He received more than 50 offers for accommodation. From that experience, Fenton envisioned a hospitality network that matched travelers with local hosts around the world.

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"Hospitality exchange suggests that it is all about free accommodation, when CS is much more," says Alicja Dabrowska, 27, the local host of the first CS social gathering in Carrboro this year. "It is hundreds of strangers helping each other all around the world and exchanging help, ideas, experiences and cultures."

How CouchSurfing Works

Most people join CouchSurfing.org



CouchSurfers from all over the Triangle area gathered for Wasabi Wednesday, one of the weekly CouchSurfing blitz potluck dinners. This time the social gathering took place on Smith Level Road in Carrboro on Wednesday, Feb. 13. (Staff photo by Faima Ramirez)

after hearing about it from friends or reading about it in the LonelyPlanet guide. Once they set up an account, they can use the CouchSearch feature on the website to find hosts in the area they are visiting.

The quest for the perfect accommodation starts by browsing through the host profiles. Lauren Margolin, 33, from Chapel Hill, N.C., joined CS in 2011 when she was planning a trip to South America. She says when looking for a compatible host, she considers what they say about themselves, the references other surfers have written about them and how long they have been CouchSurfing.

"I have only stayed with girls or couples, it is more comfortable as a single female traveler," says Margolin.

Once the traveler has narrowed down to between five and eight potential hosts, the surfers send a CouchRequest to each candidate. The request can be sent out any time from several months in advance to the night before. Usually the request indicates the traveler's plans and why he or she wants to stay with that particular host.

The host then has the option to accept or decline the request. If the host accepts, he or she includes an address and a telephone number with plans to meet the surfer at an agreed time and place. The surfer then stays with the host for an agreed upon number of

days and leaves without ever paying the host a dime.

Although members' identity and address can be verified by the organization for a \$25 fee, most members rely on the positive, neutral or negative references of former travelers to decide what hosts they feel most safe staying with.

Some CouchSurfers say they have heard travelers having uncomfortable experiences with a host because of their schedules, their living arrangements or because they thought of CS as a dating site.

"It is customary to give a thank you gift, cook a meal for the host, or buy him a few drinks," says Adam Kelleher, 28, from Charleston, S.C. Kelleher has been a CouchSurfing member in Carrboro for five years.

The CouchSurfing experience not only includes hosting travelers, but feeding them, giving them advice, showing them around town (including the "less-touristy" attractions), introducing them to friends and family, and whatever else time and willingness allows. After the stay, the host and surfer may never meet again or may stay friends for years. Dabrowska says she is still in touch with the first CS host whoM she met more than eight years ago in Norway.



Jake Palmer (left) and Adam Kelleher (right) try different Japanese-inspired dishes that all guests helped to prepare. “I love these people, they are so open to meet random strangers,” Adam says about the event. (Staff photo by Faima Ramirez)

CouchSurfing Groups

As of Jan. 2012, CouchSurfing members represented more than 80,000 unique towns in 250 countries and territories. Above finding a place to crash, Couch Surfing is about “having deep and meaningful experiences everyday,” says Fenton in a documentary on the movement, launched on Jan. 5, 2013.

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The CouchSurfing experience is not limited to travelers from foreign countries, but also includes communities of CouchSurfers living in the same area. The CouchSurfing-Carrboro community is a subgroup of the larger North Carolina Triangle group, which encompasses Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill. This group was founded in December 2005 and has 1,749 members. The groups work as a forum, where members suggest different activities, such as Latin-dance nights, playing tennis, beer tasting, Spanish conversation partners, and information on subleasing apartments.

Down Smith Level Road, in one of The Villages of Chapel Hill apartments, Mark McHugh, 27, from Greensboro and Dabrowska hosted Wasabi

Wednesday, the third CouchSurfing blitz potluck of the month in the Triangle. Twenty-seven people from the area gathered to roll their own variations of sushi between 7 p.m. and midnight Wednesday night. At least seven nationalities were represented with surfers from Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Spain, the Philippines and Poland. With such a diverse crowd, it is no wonder that the fillings ranged from traditional avocado and cream cheese to southern sweet potato.

Dabrowska moved to Carrboro a month ago from her hometown of Wroclaw, Poland, to live with McHugh, her fiancé. The couple met three years ago through CouchSurfing when Dabrowska helped McHugh getting around Wroclaw during his first weeks studying abroad.

“Every time I move to a new place CouchSurfers are usually the first people I seek out,” says Dabrowska. She says that with the rise of social media, people feel more comfortable joining an event that is posted online rather than approaching someone at Weaver Street Market and introducing themselves.

Dabrowska was part of the almost 10,000 member CS group in Wroclaw. “It is the most active group in Poland, you can do something with CouchSurfers almost every day,” she says. “The idea of hosting an event here came naturally.”

Even though Carrboro is a less active subgroup of the larger Triangle group,

Dabrowska says she sees potential for it to grow. “[Carrboro] has a lot of initiatives,” she says, “there are a lot of students, artistic, easygoing, open-minded people. Despite being such a small city there is something happening all the time.”

Jake Palmer is one of the people who started the social gatherings for CouchSurfers in the Triangle. As a moderator of the group he welcomes new members and tries to keep the group active. “[Wasabi Wednesday] is the third blitz potluck out of seven events,” says Palmer. “We plan on having one every week on a different day to accommodate everyone’s schedule.” Three weeks ago, the blitz potluck was Meatless Monday, followed by Taco Tuesday the following week, both in Durham. This week’s event is Thirsty Thursday, and will be hosted by another moderator of the group in Raleigh. The event will feature traditional beverages from around the world.

Dabrowska says these kind of group events are the best way to get introduced to the CouchSurfing experience because it makes it easier to understand why it’s “not a crazy idea going to a stranger’s house, staying for free and them not wanting something in return.”

Kelleher says it takes trust in other people to get into CouchSurfing. “People that are curious about others experiences and sharing their own stories.”

The average CouchSurfer, both at Wednesday’s event and in the worldwide community, is 28 years old, Caucasian and college educated. However, Kelleher says that age is not a limitation. “We have had a 75-year-old surfer come join us at a meeting who was just about to go CouchSurfing in South America.”

MORE ON COUCHSURFING

To learn more about CouchSurfing, visit the site at CouchSurfing.org. Here you can also find information on local chapters and events.