

'Couchsurfing' new way to see the world

Monday, 08 February 2010

<http://www.peninsuladailynews.com/article/20090914/news/309149989>

While many people tout travel Web sites as the way to go for finding cheap lodging, millions of people around the world have discovered a form of lodging that is both free and enriching. It's called couchsurfing, and it's an international trend that has gone local.

The North Olympic Peninsula has a large contingent of people who have opened their homes to visitors from around the world, and visited the homes of couchsurfers on their travels.

The major couchsurfing Web site, www.couchsurfing.org, lists 33 in Port Townsend, 22 in Port Angeles, 2 each in Forks and Chimacum and one each in Clallam Bay, Nordland and Port Ludlow.

Accommodations offered range from a guest bedroom to trailers and tents, and of course, couches.

Dominic and Naomi Svornich welcome couchsurfers on their 9 acres outside of Chimacum in Big Valley.

They first tried couchsurfing last March while on an extended trip to the East Coast.

"We stayed with people in Boston, Vermont, Toronto, Buffalo, Montana -- it was a fantastic way to go," Naomi Svornich said. "They were all really nice."

Guests can stay in their home, camp in tents or stay in the couples' converted school bus.

The couple hosts a lot of musicians heading to play in Port Townsend, or guests attending one of the many festivals.

"We tend to get couchsurfers when Port Townsend is full," she said.

The Svorniches are part of a rapidly growing trend in a worldwide system of homestays with strangers in which no money is exchanged.

Web site connects travelers with hosts

While couchsurfing can be an economic necessity in some areas, or a derogatory term for a person mooching off of friends, the travelers' type is much more symbiotic.

Travelers find hosts online that match what they are looking for, and then contact them via the Web site.

The site enables members -- it's free to join -- the opportunity to search for free accommodations in 231 countries around the world. There are currently more than 1.3 million people signed up as hosts and guests.

All hosts and guests list references from other guests, hosts and friends, but there is no regulation of individual hosts.

According to the Web site, the overall strategy is that "individual people change the world. It's individual people that are creating real cultural exchange all over the world. Likewise, it's people that create the systems that are needed to support our community."

Founded in 2004 by Casey Fenton, the Web site is funded by donations from members, with most of the staff volunteering their time.

"Instead of a cash salary, our staff is provided with their basic needs and the unique and inspiring life experience afforded by our international work/live model," the Web site says.

It's a system based entirely on word of mouth and trust.

As Tom Nash of Port Angeles put it, "they are friends you haven't met yet."

He and his wife, Amy Nash, fell into couchsurfing almost by accident.

Lodgings in Australia

They found themselves in Sydney, Australia in the winter of 2006, searching in vain for inexpensive lodging.

"Even the hostel was \$80 a night," Tom Nash said. "Amy had been telling me about couchsurfing for some time, but I was leery. But we tried it and it was great."

The couple ended up staying with a young Australian man that they found on the Web.

He offered a hideabed and a tour of Sydney, complete with beers at the local pub. They ended up such good friends that the couple will visit him this winter when they return to Australia.

Since that first positive experience as guests, the Nashes have hosted more than two dozen visitors in their Port Angeles home.

"They've all been really good experiences," Nash said.

Some guests are happy to have a place to lay their heads at night, then take off sight-seeing during the day, while others like to spend time with their hosts as tour guides.

Nash said he tends to cook for his guests, but only because he likes to cook.

The Nashes clicked with an Australian couple who stayed with them recently, and will be visiting them in Australia later this year.

"It's the way we prefer to travel now," he said.

First meeting for Peninsula hosts

Daniel Heintz, a Sequim business owner, recently hosted the first known official gathering of couchsurfers on the Peninsula.

Via the Web site, he invited couchsurfers from across the Peninsula, from Forks to Port Ludlow.

Heintz said he organized the event at the request of a couple from Mexico who were couchsurfing with him.

The guests were a representative cross section of the millions of couchsurfers who use the site -- young, old, students, retired, blue collar and professionals. Although they had never met, they shared an instant bond in their desire to reach out to the larger world, from this far left corner of the country.

Animated discussions of travel destinations mixed with hosting and couchsurfing experiences, with several hosts discovering they had hosted the same foreign guests.

One couple shared stories of their travels on the Camino de Santiago "Pilgrim's Road" in Spain, while a young woman told of her recent stay in Morocco.

Two young women discussed their experiences with "weird" food in Japan, while others offered differing opinions on the Korean national dish, kim chee.

Heintz got his start couchsurfing on a trip to New Zealand several years ago.

"I was blown away by the concept," he said.

He has also couchsurfed in Australia and Peru, although in the latter his sister was not comfortable staying with strangers, so they met up with local hosts for sightseeing.

At his home in Sequim, Heintz has hosted people from around the world, including his hosts from New Zealand and travelers from Hungary, Germany, France, Mexico and Afghanistan and throughout the United States.

Heintz advises people who may be considering hosting or surfing: "Let go of your American paranoia and jump in with your heart -- let your faith be restored.

"People on the whole are pretty amazing and considerate --go for it."