

Take the Couch

Sommerville – On a recent Saturday morning, five twentysomethings huddle in a cozy living room to map out their day. Two are from Montreal? Another is from
 5 Chicago. The hosts, Jesse Fento and Erin Benoit, have lived in the apartment for three years. The guests have had plans to visit for more than a month, but their only contact with their hosts has been through
 10 computer screens.

The five met through CouchSurfing.com, an online network of travelers, mostly in their 20s, who are tired of staying in hotels and hostels and who want to see the
 15 world with a free place to crash – often on someone’s couch. But what sets Couchsurfing.com apart from a bevy of similar free services such as hospitalityclub.org is its focus on its
 20 mission, which according to the group’s website “is not just about free accommodations” but about human interaction.

“It makes the world a smaller place,” says
 25 Benoit, 25, a medical technologist at Boston Medical Center. “Eventually, we’ll have friends all over the word.”

Hosts offer the use of their couches, bathrooms, kitchens, and spare beds. They
 30 sometimes provide meals and even the use of their cars. They give their guests

tips about local attractions and often show them around. [...]

Jesse Fenton’s brother Casey, a New
 35 Hampshire resident [...], hatched the idea for the website after planning a last-minute weekend trip to Iceland. Instead of booking a hotel, he e-mailed 1,500 Icelanders through the University of
 40 Iceland student directory, looking for a place to stay. Within days, he received more than 50 responses offering free digs. “When I was leaving there after the long weekend, I said to myself, “this is how it
 45 should be every time travel,” he says. [...]

Vicent Fugere, a 23-year-old graduate student from McGill University in Montreal [...], says CouchSurfing has changed his perception of the United
 50 States. “Americans aren’t as bad as the press makes them out to be,” Fugee said jokingly. “I thought all Americans carried guns – obviously that is not the case.”

“We’re still maturing as an organization,
 55 but over time we will make a difference,” Casey Fenton says. “People use CouchSurfing for different reasons, whether just to travel or to connect with people in a strange place. I think most
 60 participate to learn as much as they can about other cultures – and about themselves.”

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