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# Your Couch or Mine? Hospitality Exchanges Make Backpacking Even Cheaper

Web-based hospitality exchanges let budget travelers and cultural immersion junkies see a destination in a new way and return the favor when they're back at home.

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I checked my watch nervously, as my travel companion frantically tried to pick up a cell signal so we could call and alert Vincent to our delayed arrival. After difficulty in navigating Paris' complex transportation system, we just missed our southern-bound train and didn't want our host to sit out in the cold at Marseilles' uncovered station for hours waiting on us to find our way.

In retrospect, it now seems a bit odd (sketchy even perhaps) that we had never before met Vincent, but were taking a risk and staying with him anyway. I didn't know even know the most basic things about him: his place of birth, pets' names, setting of his first kiss -- things I generally knew about even the most casual of my acquaintances. But not Vincent. No, Vincent was just a fellow member of an online travel group of which I was a part. I stumbled across his profile while researching ways to finance a month-long assignment in France. The most interaction we had prior to our meeting on his turf was an e-mail exchange or two. Yet, he was retrieving us at the station and taking us to his secluded [Provence](#) villa for four nights. The setting for a made-for-TV, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*-esque slasher flick perhaps, but we were edgy girls accustomed to taking risks. On the contrary, had my mom back home in my conservative Tennessee town known what I was doing, she might have croaked.

That was the reaction I initially got -- and often still do -- from many friends and acquaintances when they hear I am using "backpackers clubs" like **Hospitality Club** ([www.hospitalityclub.org](http://www.hospitalityclub.org)) and **Couch Surfing** ([www.couchsurfing.com](http://www.couchsurfing.com)) as means of budget

travel. My former roommate referred to the travelers I would meet up with as my "Match.com dates," when in reality that couldn't be further from the truth.

Hospitality Club stresses that it is not a dating service (Match.com enthusiasts, read no further), and should you try to use it as such, your messages to other members will not be delivered. Through an extensive application process -- including a background search that requires you to submit your passport number -- Hospitality Club volunteers screen each person who is admitted, as well as scan every e-mail sent through the website to make sure all content is appropriate. It may seem too Big Brother for some, but after receiving a marriage proposal or two via Couch Surfing, I welcomed Hospitality Club's stricter policy. (Disclaimer: It should be said that I have had only positive experiences using Couch Surfing, as well, but have gotten a questionable e-mail or two to which I didn't respond.)

Both organizations are completely free of charge. They were started with the intent to unite the globetrotters of the world and those who thrive on exploring it. Anyone can join, and it can be used for as little as getting recommendations when visiting a new town to finding a free place to sleep or a local tour guide.

Vincent turned out to be a wonderful host and someone I would like to get to know better. After hitting a home run with him, my friend and I moved eastward along the Cote d'Azur, staying each couple of nights with a different Hospitality Club member or Couch Surfer. A month later, we had spent no money on accommodation and gained several new friends.

I continued to use these convenient services throughout the duration of my time living abroad. When I finally returned to the United States, I fell into post-travel depression. No longer could I pick up on a whim and fly to Morocco or hop a train and be in Germany in an hour. Grounded by a real job and lack of travel funds, I sadly changed my profile status on each web group from whatever exotic locale it had previously said back to New York.

That's when the e-mails really started pouring in.

I had never before thought of using these sites from my home base to get my travel fix. When you're in Europe, you get used to meeting backpackers everywhere you go. In the States, it's generally just the overly obnoxious tour groups and retired couples who block your path, not the fun-loving Aussie or pint-drinking Brit backpackers you so frequently encounter around every corner in other countries. Because the United States is so big and we lack an array of transcontinental transportation options (i.e. cheap cross-country trains, budget air carriers), I couldn't really envision someone "backpacking" across it. However, much to my surprise I discovered that the backpacker community does, in fact, live on in my own country -- and dominantly at that.

Excited by my influx in correspondence, I began reading through my inbox. Among others, there was a Korean businessman coming to town for work, a Finnish guy who wanted to ditch his parents and see the real New York, and two Canadian girls just border-hopping for a weekend of fun. I eagerly replied to each e-mail, and before I knew it my social calendar was full for the next three months.

That's not to say I haven't had a strange experience or two. Due to the law of probability, with every barrel of apples, you're likely to find a rotten one. Tim from New Zealand was the worm in my barrel of otherwise untainted fruit. He showed up at my apartment, joined my friends and I for a night out, and proceeded to offend everyone but perhaps the bartender by his lack of tact and opposition to American foreign policy. We all have our opinions, but someone should have explained to Tim the significance of the expression "when in Rome" -- particularly when he was openly bashing the very country he was visiting.

Luckily for me, those Tim occurrences have been few and far between, and I chock them up to cultural differences. Now, two years after delving into the world of online travel, it's not out of the ordinary for a normal week to include lunch with an Icelandic couple, coffee with a Chilean and after-work drinks with a bunch of unruly Greeks. Emma, an Australian Couch Surfer, and I hit it off so well that she's even looking at moving to New York and taking up residence in my spare room. Although, each and every time I make these new friends, I can't help but envy their freedom and nomadism. Still, I know one day my time will come, again, and for now, it's just nice to be able to give back.

**What type of alternative accommodation have you used while traveling? Talk to other Frommers.com readers on our [Hospitality Exchange Message Boards](#) today.**