Couchsurfing Cosmopolitanisms
Can Tourism Make a Better World?
David Picard, Sonja Buchberger (eds.)
Couchsurfing Cosmopolitanisms

Culture and Social Practice
For the beautiful little barracuda

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Content

1. Introduction:
   Couchsurfing in Lisbon, Tunis and Brisbane
   David Picard and Sonja Buchberger | 9

2. Cosmopolitans on the Couch:
   Mobile Hospitality and the Internet
   Jennie Germann Molz | 43

3. Hosting Marco in Siberia:
   Couchsurfing Hospitality in an “Out of the Way” Place
   Dennis Zuev | 65

4. Rooted Cosmopolitanisms, Deceived Kinship
   and Uneasy Hospitality among Couchsurfers in Tunisia
   Sonja Buchberger | 83

5. Learning to Perform the Exotic: Cosmopolitan Imagination,
   Participation and Self-Transformation
   among Taiwanese Couchsurfers
   De-Jung Chen | 107

6. Allures of the Global, Gender and the Challenge
   to Confucian Hospitality among Vietnamese Couchsurfers
   from Ho Chi Minh City
   Bernard Schéou | 123
7. Cosmopolitanism as Subcultural Capital: 
   Trust, Performance and Taboo at Couchsurfing.org 
   *Jun-E Tan* | 141

8. Online to Offline Social Networking: 
   Contextualising Sociality Today Through Couchsurfing.org 
   *Paula Bialska* | 161

9. Anthropology and Couchsurfing – 
   Variations on a Theme (An Afterword) 
   *Nelson Graburn* | 173

List of Contributors | 181

Index | 185
One day in early June 2009, Clara was occupied with the preparation of a promotional event that her employer, a national communication agency, was organising. She left the office well after 8pm, and I met her at the entrance to the train station. She had rich brown hair; she was tanned and slim. She looked straight at me with an open smile. I found her very attractive. After kissing hello, we walked to her apartment, a couple of hundred metres from the station. We spoke in English about Lisbon, about my trip there and about her current work project. I told her that I had been offered a research job, and wanted to visit the city to see what the environment and my colleagues would be like. I had spent the first day walking around town, and had also met my potential line manager. She could not say anything more specific about the job, and recommended I meet the head of department of the university where I was to be hosted the next day.

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2 | All names of couchsurfers in this chapter are replaced by pseudonyms.
Clara suggested that we have grilled sardines and potatoes in a fairground a couple of minutes’ walk from her house. Lisbon was in the festive period, she explained, and going to the fairground was what people tended to do. The fairground was built in a valley near the train station. The different stands were selling lots of different things – sweets, bread, grilled food, bags, cloth and exotic handicraft products. Half a dozen stalls selling grilled sardines and potatoes were arranged in a large circle at the furthest end. Music came from loudspeakers, and a couple of children were dancing on an improvised stage. We were sitting down on white plastic chairs at a white plastic table. Clara ordered a dozen sardines, boiled potatoes and beer. Our conversation turned to memories of past travel, countries we had visited and projects for the future. Clara had been volunteering in a primary school in Mozambique three years before. The experience had transformed her, she said. She had realised that she could not take her life and commodities for granted.

I had met Clara through Couchsurfing.org, an online hospitality community site that allows its members to offer their “couch” or guest bedroom to other members and, vice and versa, to contact members in other places to request their hospitality. I had learnt about the site through a friend in England, and had used it for the first time. Before sending Clara an official “couch request”, I had spent quite a lot of time browsing through the profiles of different members in the Lisbon area, checking their preferences, their jobs, their age, their travel experiences, their interests and their “mission” in life. On her profile page, Clara had declared that she was “still looking for [a mission] ... Can you help?” There was further information: about her profession, language skills, interests and past travels. I had thought that we were somehow compatible, and I added her to my “favourites”. I created my own profile page and sent her a message requesting to “surf” her couch for a couple of days. I explained that I was working as an anthropologist at a university in England, and that I was to visit Lisbon for this length of time. I told her that I had never been in Lisbon before; neither had I been to Cuba or China (I had learnt from her profile page that she had travelled to these countries), but that I knew Madagascar and Reunion Island quite well. I also told her that this was my first couchsurfing experience, that I spoke English, French and German, and that I would be happy to meet her, exchange ideas and stay at her place. Two days later she replied, saying that she’d be happy to offer hospitality and also make suggestions of things to do to discover the city. She had pasted her mobile
phone number in the message, and proposed to meet up at the train station on the evening of the day of my arrival.

That night, after dinner, we went back to her place. I asked her about Fado music, which was about the only thing I “knew” about Portugal. She liked Fado, she said. She had a large collection of CDs in her living room, and later played some of them, telling me stories about the different singers. I told her about my affection for the music of Madredeus, a Portuguese band that had been featured in a 1990s film by Wim Wenders called Lisbon Story. I liked the tonality of the voice and the guitar music. For a couple of years I had had a tape by the band, which I frequently played at home. I thought that Madredeus’s music sympathetically translated the plot of the Wim Wenders movie into the realm of sound. The film was about two German filmmakers existentially trying to capture what they conceived of as unconditional beauty. The old town of Lisbon, with its popular quarters, bright sun light and yellow tram carriages, is used as the visual backdrop for this quest, and for the movie itself. In the film, one of the filmmakers, a sound engineer, is tantalised by the subtle reverberations of the city and the beauty of the voice of a woman he meets in his neighbourhood (the then lead singer of Madredeus, Teresa Salgueiro). The other filmmaker, frustrated by his hopeless quest for absolute beauty, has by then disappeared into the city. Both filmmakers eventually find each other once again and conclude that, while there is no unconditional beauty to be discovered out there (all beauty is created in the human mind, they realise), one can still have a lot of fun chasing the idea. The film ends with the two filmmakers using a hand-operated camera to shoot scenes of the enigmatic yellow tram driving through the winding streets of Lisbon’s old town. At the time, it was one of my favourite movies and plots. But Clara said that, although Madredeus was nice, it was not really the original Fado. She later gave me bed sheets and opened the fold-up sofa in her living room. She also left me a pair of keys so that I could get into the house during the following days.

The copy of the work contract I received during my meeting the following day contained the heading “of uncertain duration”. The head of department convinced me that this was just a formality and that I was not to worry, that there were no problems. The job was paid much less than the one I had in England, and I was not sure if I should sign. My friends and colleagues back in England had warned me not to give up my tenured position there.
I eventually stayed at Clara’s house for two more nights. We spent a considerable amount of time together, talking, cooking, listening to music, going out, watching a movie and meeting her friends for a barbecue. During the day I walked aimlessly around Lisbon, discovering some of its neighbourhoods. I did not find the city and ambience depicted in Wim Wenders’ film. All looked fairly run down. The walls were full of graffiti, many houses were in ruin and there was rubbish in the streets. I found that many people looked unhappy; they talked in low voices, avoiding eye contact, and many had deep wrinkles around their mouths. The sofa-bed at Clara’s place was uncomfortable, and my back hurt. But I liked her company and our conversations about the world, and about what we would do in life. She firmly believed in God. I was intrigued by this religious conviction, and maybe even more by her generous hospitality. I asked her if she was not scared to let strangers stay at her house and leave them with the keys. She wasn’t, she said: people return the trust and confidences they are offered. Or at least she hoped so. She smiled when she said that. After returning to England, I wrote her a “positive” reference, which appeared on her couchsurfing profile page. I wrote, “Clara was the first person who ever hosted me via this network, and if all couchsurfers are like her, I predict the near end of capitalism as a way to organise human relations; a new era of transhumance based on kindness, trust, friendliness, and, of course, grilled sardines. I still smell like [a] dog, feel my back ache, and am unsure about my faith in materialism; Clara will transform you. Be nice to her”. She reciprocated with a “positive” reference, writing that, “David has a life history that makes envy to any human being! I hope one day you can hear it, and see the film he produced. As a ‘surfer’, I only can praise [him]: always [in a] good mood (he had even lunched with my crazy friends and a crazy dog, always with a smile). A very interesting, intelligent, focused and funny person. Until September, David!”

I had been looking forward to living and working in a sunnier place, and I signed the contract some days later. I started the new post in September 2009.

INVESTIGATING COUCHSURFING CULTURE

Since the early 2000s, the emergence of computer-mediated communication and online hospitality community platforms has transformed many accustomed practices of doing tourism and organising hospitality. Instead of booking packaged tours and accommodation through a travel agent,
many travellers have started to create direct contact with possible hosts, travel companions or local guides. At the same time, private hosts are increasingly able to open their homes to what were once total strangers from around the world, integrate them into the spaces of their everyday lives and, often, also earn considerable sums of money by renting out rooms or private apartments. In this new digital era, in order to prepare the logistics of the journey both hosts and guests initially interact within the online environment and then meet up, hang out and even host each other in the offline context of actual travel. Cutting out most of the traditional professional tourism and travel agents, computer-mediated hospitality generates new realms of hospitality and tourism where hosts and guests interact directly, in private and, in many cases, outside the de facto reach of any publicly sanctioned governing body, chamber of commerce or other means of control. Why and how does it work? Why would people let complete strangers stay at their houses, often leaving them with the keys and not charging them a penny? What is the ideological force driving such practices, and what forms of social relations and society do they bring about in the contemporary world? Does the popularity of couchsurfing indicate the near end of capitalism, giving rise to new forms of organising human relations?

To this date, academic research attempting to explore these questions is only about to emerge. Some recent contributions include a special issue of Hospitality & Society edited by Jennie Germann Molz (2011) and two monographs by Paula Bialski (2007, 2012). The aim of this book is to provide fresh data from a greater range of ethnographic settings in which online-to-offline hospitality exchanges take place. To achieve this aim, the contributors focus in particular on travel and hospitality practices that have evolved within and around the online hospitality community site Couchsurfing.org. This has become one of the internationally most visible and – with

3 Commercial hospitality community websites such as AIRBNB strongly recommend that their members respect the national legislations of the countries in which they live, especially with regard to tax regulations for short-term rentals. However, for national and local tax agencies, it is usually technically difficult and economically hardly viable to trace the large amount of relatively low private-to-private payments made in the online-to-offline hospitality community sector. In the USA, the professional hotel and hospitality sectors increasingly accuse sites like AIRBNB of encouraging tax evasion and flouting local regulations on short-term rentals. The controversy is on-going at the time of writing this book.
more than 4 million members worldwide – also one of the most successful online hospitality community sites. Because it imposes as its principal rule that hospitality be granted free of charge, it is, in a way, also one of the most “extreme” sites of its type. Couchsurfing.org’s operational premise is that the exchanges between hosts and guests take place outside the realms of commercial tourism transactions, a stipulation which – so it is claimed by the site owners – constitutes a basic condition for promoting “a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places we encounter” (Couchsurfing.org, 2012). Until a recent legal status upgrade that transformed its formerly tax exempt, not-for-profit status and turned it into a more operational – and potentially profit-generating – business corporation, the site’s official slogan was to “create a better world, one couch at a time”. Even after this update, the core mission of the site remains structured around the objective of generating intercultural exchange and learning, “to explore, learn and grow” – ultimately as a means to create a “better world”. For a social scientist, this stated objective, and the suggestion that travel and hospitality are the means to achieve it, provokes a number of exciting interrogations. Why and how would travel and hospitality create a “better world”? What defines the extensions and internal structure of such a “world”? And what defines its “betterment”?

To explore these questions, the authors of this book employ different approaches and methods; many – including ourselves – using their own experiences as hosts, guests and community organisers to feed their analysis. Most use a combined approach focused on couchsurfing contexts and practices that are evolving both offline and online. Their “insider” position as active couchsurfers has allowed many to draw extensively on the ethnographic method of participant observation, which seems the natural choice to study one’s “own” culture (Powdermaker, 1966; Okely, 1996). Sonja Buchberger (Chapter 4) spent some years in Tunis in Tunisia, first as a university student and then as a PhD researcher investigating narratives and practices of couchsurfing among various members of the local couchsurfing community. Jun-E Tan (Chapter 7) spent a three-year period investigating couchsurfing practices in Singapore and other places, hosting couchsurfers on 50 occasions and surfing herself 28 times. Similarly, Bernard Schéou (Chapter 6) participated actively in the local couchsurfing community in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, observing the relation between the global couchsurfing format and localised cultures of gender and domestic hospitality. Using his own hosting experiences, Dennis Zuev (Chapter 3), who grew up in Siberia,