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Couchsurfing: Exploring the World

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(Activity report)

Abstract—Couchsurfing is a hospitality exchange and social networking website, which provides a platform for members to "surf" on couches by staying as a guest at a host's home, host travelers, or join an event. We are active members of this service and on the holidays before current semester has started, gratefully to the service we have been to France, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands, ~~Spain and France~~. We considered this experience a brilliant idea for Portfolio and are looking forward to share, why it is something that every student must do when he or she is making the way towards future career and discovering the world while having low budget. We explored beauty and variety of cultures as well as learned how to communicate with people as well as improved our knowledge in logistics. We received big amount of references and vouches - indicators of trust establishment, what can be considered as a great success and recognition.

Index Terms—Couchsurfing, travel, communication, logistics, time management, people.

1 INTRODUCTION

EVERYTHING started in 1990 when a young man Casey Fenton occasionally bought very cheap ticket for a plane going from Boston to Iceland. He did not have any friend there to visit and was not a big fan of expensive hotels, ~~so~~ he decided to contact students of the University of Iceland with request to stay in their house, providing them with information about him and his trip. He sent about 1,500 random e-mails and was positively surprised as 50 people ~~respond~~ with offer of accommodation. On his way back he began to develop the ideas that would underpin the Couchsurfing project. The project became a public website in January 2004. Nowadays it has grown to a global community of 7 million people in more than 100,000 cities who share their life, their world, their journey. Couchsurfing connects travelers with a global

network of people willing to share in profound and meaningful ways, making travel a truly social experience.

2 COUCHSURFING SYSEM

Couchsurfing opens great opportunities to people who travel on low budget:

- **Staying with locals** in every country on Earth. You will be able to travel like a local, stay in someone's home and experience the world in a way money can't buy.
- **Meeting travellers** to rediscover your city. There's a community of Couchsurfers in almost every city. Many of them have weekly meetings, language exchanges, hikes, dinners etc.
- **Opening your home to travellers** - hosting a person will enable you to learn about a new culture first-hand or practice a language.

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2.1 How it works

To register on the service, it is necessary to fill an imposing profile form. You have to provide all the information about you and your accomodation status as well as add

(1.0) Excelent (0.8) Very Good (0.6) Good (0.4) Fair (0.2) Weak	ACTIVITY					DOCUMENT						
	Objectives x2	Options x1	Execution x4	S+C x1	SCORE	Structure x0.25	Ortogr. x0.25	Gramm. x0.25	Format x0.25	Title x0.5	Filename x0.5	SCORE
	1.6	0.7	3.2	0.5	6.0	0.25	0.2	0.2	0.23	0.5	0.5	1.88

photos. *The more ...* More information you provide, more chance you have that community people will find your profile trustworthy enough to be their host or guest. Registration is free of charge as well as the usage of the system.

Homestays are consensual between the host and guest, and the duration, nature, and terms of the guest's stay are generally worked out in advance. No monetary exchange takes place except sometimes for compensation of incurred expenses (e.g. food). It is common practice for guests to seek non-monetary means to show their appreciation, such as bringing a gift, cooking a meal or teaching a skill.

Couchsurfing provides groups where members may seek travel partners or advice. Members organize activities such as camping trips, bar crawls, meetings, and sporting events [1].

2.2 Establishing trust

As this network is based on inviting strangers into private homes, the safety is a primary concern. **Couchsurfing!** (**Couchsurfing!**) provides three mechanisms claimed to increase security and trust, all of them are visible on member profiles and unremovable:

- 1) **Personal references** which members may leave to comment their experience of hosting or staying with person. Reference can be positive, neutral or negative and it is taken very seriously. Negative references sometimes can be removed by the site if there is a prove that it was left in a retaliatory or unfair manner. People tend to rely heavily on references when trying to determine whether another user is "safe" or not.
- 2) **Credit card verification system** (*optional*). The system encourages members to "verify" their name and mailing address by making a credit card payment and entering a code that Couchsurfing mails them with a postcard. The verification program is the principal source of revenue for Couchsurfing.
- 3) **Personal vouching system** whereby a member that had been vouched for three

times — originally starting with the founders of the site — might in turn vouch for any number of other members. [1]

3 ACTIVITIES REALIZED

We start to plan our trip by choosing the countries we wanted to visit. Our first criteria was to choose some country where neither of us have been before, the second one — spend money as less as possible. The prices of tickets are continuously changing whether for availability, promotions or the date. In order to buy the cheapest tickets, we have been regularly checking the prices trying to understand the pricing policy. We find out that we have more chances to book cheap ticket if to clean all browser data and search in the nighttime. Thus, we agreed on a certain limit of the price we would pay and started to hunt. As there were many countries we were interested in, we also split the search range into areas by countries. We were drawing graphs and analyzing the map: João was looking for flights to Denmark, and Norway; Aliaksandra was riffling through various offers for The Netherlands and Greece. The cheapest one appeared to be for the plane from Lisbon to Amsterdam and we bought it without thinking long as the prices on low costs may change every 10 minutes. The same happened to ticket back, however, this time it was from Brussels to Lisbon. The first step was done. Having the first and the last "node" of our travel graph, we started to send Couchsurfing requests. We aimed to stay around 3 days in each city, so a lot of requests had to be made. Again, we split the work. However, it was important instantly communicate with each other as sometimes we had to send requests for the same place and it would be impolite to send two similar requests to one person. As people were accepting our requests, we were modifying our graph and adding/removing places according our hosts availability. In total, João sent 32 requests to 7 different cities (Amsterdam, Brugge, Rotterdam, Delft, Hague, Leuven and Antwerp), the first five are in The Netherlands and the last two

in Belgium. Aliaksandra sent a total of 52 requests to 8 different cities (Paris, Valencia, Madrid, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Delft, Belgium). Some of these requests had to be sent on our way to some city. This happens due the human factor: despite of having planned everything, there is always situations of last minute changes as people can confuse or forget things. We were accepting challenges and seeing it as new opportunities. As an example, we would mention one situation: our stay in Rotterdam ended and we had no host for the next night and considering asking for one more night as impolite. However, our host understood what is going on and to evict our stress he gave us a contact of his friend that he characterized as the best host in Rotterdam. When we arrived to the new place, we understood why: the new host lived on a ship in one of the channels of Rotterdam. We would miss a unique experience if everything went according to our initial plan.

3.1 New Year trip

Right before exams we did our first Couchsurfing team trip. As it was very short we do not talk much about it here. We stayed with CouchSurfers three days in Paris and three days in Madrid. The most significant thing for us was that in Madrid a PhD student from Sri Lanka accepted our request for dates 30 December, 2013 - 1 January, 2014. It was very interesting experience.

3.2 Amsterdam

Amsterdam was the first city of our second Couchsurfing team trip. We stay there two days and loved city as it was very simple and beautiful. There were no high buildings neither highways. It is a very different city concept from what is familiar to us: small and friendly houses, small streets, inside the city people use more bicycles than cars. And windows... Big transparent perfectly clean windows without curtains. It is something very special for us in Dutch life. On our first day, we visit the Rijksmuseum, a Dutch national museum dedicated to arts and history. The second day

we simply were enjoying the city. It was very easy to get lost, however people there are very friendly and always eager to help with directions.

3.3 The Hague

After Amsterdam, we were took a ride from a driver that took use from Amsterdam to The Hague.

From one side the Hague is the seat of the Dutch government and parliament, the Supreme Court, and the Council of State. From another, a sea city, which get flooded with tourists in summer. We stayed with Joline, a young detective-police worker. She told us a lot about Dutch law and her internship in Interpol in Germany. In fact, she was speaking perfect Portuguese as in the past she have been living in Lisbon. She took us to a Couchsurfing meeting. Thus, we were able to meet local community of hosts. It was an interesting experience especially because we met a few Portuguese fellows, former students of Instituto Superior Técnico who moved to the Netherlands.

3.4 Rotterdam

Rotterdam was an unforgettable experience. As Desiderius Erasmus was born in Rotterdam, this visit was very special for Aliaksandra who is studying in Portugal via Erasmus Mundus programme named in his noble.

Firstly we stayed with Daniel and Oliver, they were very attentive hosts. Dutch and Lebanese representatives, they explained us a lot about cuisine traditions in both cultures. We rent bicycles and were able to explore the whole city as Dutch people. We were simply amazed by how much respect car drivers and other people have for the cyclers. Another surprising thing was that youth do sports in underground tunnel that connect two sides of the river as it was winter and the tunnel is long enough to run sprints. Dutch people care a lot about their health. We also found a monument of Peter the Great, the Russian king. It inspired us to look up for this fact on the Internet.

Rotterdam, like many Dutch cities, has multiple channels and some people live on the anchored ships. After Daniel and Oliver, we have had

an amazing opportunity to stay with Pieta, a woman who lives on such ship. It was very interesting night: we were talking almost the whole night asking her lots of silly questions about the life on a ship such as: "How do you have electricity and water?", "Where is your mailbox?", "Can you sail the ship?". She answered all of them with patience and we learned a lot about navigating at sea.

3.5 Antwerp

After Rotterdam we took a train to Antwerp, we were surprise about how cheap was to travel between countries by train. If you are youngster underage of 26 you are able to buy all the train tickets for 6 EUR. As did we. Our host in Antwerp, Bart, was a Senior Software Engineer so with him we also had long conversations related to our study area and future opportunities.

We learned that Antwerpen literally means "Throwing hands" due to the city legend about evil giant who was controlling the bridge on the river and cutting hands of people who could not pay for it. We visited cultural history museum, MAS (Museum aan de Stroom). Since we were in Belgium, a famous beer country, we went to a bar to try a couple of them.

3.6 Brugge

We came to Brugge from Antwerp by train. Brugge is the capital and largest city of the West Flanders province in the Flemish Region of Belgium. It is considere The Venice of the North. A lot ouf tourists discovered this city after watching a movie "In Brugge". Here we stayed with Hendrick, and if our last Rotterdam host was in love with everything about ship, Hendrick had the same passion to rails. He was working on the local railway station and his hobbies were collecting models of trains and steamers. He told us about his trip via Trans Siberian train. As a railways worker he had to get up very early so need we as we did not have keys. Thus, our last day we had to leave at 4.30. But he gifted us an amazing idea to visit Gent. It was very nice.

3.7 Gent

In Gent we did not stay with any host, however we visited this city with an offer of our host from Brugge. Medieval flemish town early in the morning with no tourist offices open it is also a challenge. We were exploring the city until late afternoon and moved forward.

3.8 Brussels

Brussels was our last point. Our host was an American girl moved to her fiancée in Brussels. They were very spiritual people. They also were vegans. It is always nice that you meet very different people. We were cooking together and discussing the habits, comparing America to Europe. We enjoyed our stay as well as enjoyed the city, its architecture and just the fact of being in the political heart of European Union.

Nowadays, it is becoming easier and cheaper to travel. This raises amazing opportunities to do what some years ago was not that simple to do, traveling around the world.

4 CONCLUSION

This trip was 14 days long and we were able to visit two countries and seven cities. During that time we met completely different people with different costumes and traditions. Not everything went as we expected but part of the fun and the experience comes from being able to take decisions.

There were times when we had to carry our bags for a long period of time, specially between hosts. Also since we spend a short period of time in each city, we wanted to use or all the time we had to visit it. This quickly becomes very exhausting.

It was a very positive experience, we made very good friends and the way we met them was different from the traditional. We aim to do another trip in the future, within the same style, the motivation and the same passion.

REFERENCES

- [1] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CouchSurfing>
- [2] <https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/about>
- [3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cycling_in_Amsterdam

In this type of document (Technical) The conclusion should start with a Summary of the subject addressed and then highlight the results.