

LIFESTYLE

A tanned young Italian woman in a flowery summer dress sits on her luggage at an exit of the Tai Wai MTR station.

A young Chinese woman in a blue blouse, jeans and slippers approaches her. This is the first face-to-face meeting between Jolie Ho In-peng and Martina Ielpo, and the two 24-year-olds exchange two kisses on each cheek in typical Italian fashion.

Neither of them is a stranger to this kind of meeting, as both women have been “participating in creating a better world” by requesting a couch overseas (surfing) or offering their own couch to travellers (hosting) through an international platform: *CouchSurfing.org*.

While surfing seems more realistic for Hong Kong people who live in a small and crowded city, some of them are offering their own couch to surfers from around the world.

“It is about friendship and meeting people,” said Miss Ho, an associate professor at the City University of Hong Kong, and one of the 1,000 CouchSurfing(CS) members in Hong Kong.

Hosting is not compulsory for CS members, and just over a tenth of Hong Kong’s CS members have registered as willing to offer their couches. But Miss Ho decided to become a host in order to pay back to the project after her own memorable surfing experiences during a seven-week trip to Europe last year.

For example, she once lost her bag in Belgium and her host woke up at 6:30 a.m. to accompany her to the police station. “She knew I was unhappy,” said Miss Ho.

CouchSurfing: Around the World by Couch

by Lina Leung





And when she was in Madrid, her host insisted on offering Miss Ho her own bed, even though she was sick. "She said I would have to give her my bed when she visited me," Miss Ho recalled laughing.

Living in a 400 square foot flat with her boyfriend, Miss Ho can offer surfers a sofa bed and a sleeping bag. This summer she hosted six guests from Germany, Peru, Taiwan, Italy and the Netherlands. They shared food and personal experiences, exchanged cultures and hung out together. "Now I have the chance, I want to share this amazing project with others," she said.

With CouchSurfing, members are expected to give, but not to get paid. According to the its website, the growing online community is a non-profit organization created by three Americans and a Brazilian in 1999, and is funded through donations. It is sustained by 1.4 million members from over 230 countries and territories with the mission "create inspiring experiences: cross-cultural encounters that are fun, engaging, and illuminating".



Despite the fact that less than a third of members say "Yes" to providing a couch, charging someone to surf a couch violates the network's values.

"In CouchSurfing, you don't charge people. You can't," said Miss Ho's Italian guest Martina Ielpo. She has been hosted by more than 300 people, and has herself hosted more than 150 people in her hometown, Calabria in southern Italy.

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She said without CS, she could not have travelled as much as she has and that hosting is just like travelling. "They (guests) tell you stories and they do things, and it's like you get to know

their culture as if you were visiting their countries," said Ielpo. She is also the CS ambassador of her hometown.

That view is shared by another Hong Kong host, Sharon Lam Lee Ka-wai, "If we could host somebody from every country in the world once, it would be equal to having travelled around the world once too," said Mrs Lam.

She and her husband Lam Ho, together with their one-and-a-half-year-old son, had their first experience with CS as hosts last August. They just found the website and signed up for fun.

Soon after creating a profile, which is compulsory for those who want to be CS members, they received a couch request from a German man. The couple hesitated to host him at first. But after reading his profile and his message, they decided it was not that dangerous.

"If they have heart and have written a personalised message that targets you, and you feel that they want to make friends with you sincerely, then we would be interested," said Lam, a cardiologist who had enjoyed a previous trip to Germany.

This first experience was good and fun. "The German guest had never tasted soya sauce mixed with garlic. He thought it was delicious and finished the whole dish. But he did not know what it was," Lam said laughing.

"CouchSurfing is not just for backpackers, but also for people who want to experience other cultures," said Mrs Lam, adding that their guests had brought them new perspectives towards Hong Kong.

"I don't feel like Victoria Harbour is so special, but they're like 'Wow! So impressed', they say they've never seen such a beautiful skyline", she said.

Also, the German guest considered the tall buildings of their housing estate

a tourist spot because he had never seen buildings as tall as them. "Hong Kong people call them 'walled buildings' instead," she said.

"My travelling experiences have taught me that yes, the scenery is beautiful around the world, but what really makes me remember a place is the people and their culture," Mrs Lam said. She believes that all people have their own qualities. "The more people you know, the more qualities you can learn from others."

That is why the Lam's treasure the friendships they have made and hope they will be long-lasting. They have kept in touch with an Indian guest by email after he returned to India and read his blog online.

"And we feel that we get to know him a little bit more every day because he really opens up and wants to 'exchange' with you," Mrs Lam said.

The Indian guest has read many books and they share their opinions on a lot of topics. "He's very knowledgeable and we have learned a lot just by chatting with him," she said.

"That's what

I mean by 'a life influences another life'."

Although there are guests dropping in on their lives, the Lam's have not changed their lifestyle for them. "When we host somebody, we are inviting them to enter our lifestyle. We do not have to fit our lives around them as we are not running a five-star hotel," said Mrs Lam. The most important thing is for the family to spare Sundays to show their guests around as they have to work during weekdays.

And it is worth doing. "If the experience continues to be this enjoyable, we will go on hosting," said the couple.

However, being a host is not such an easy task for Jacqueline Ip Yuen-ting. As a university student, she cannot afford a flat or even a couch. Instead, she hosts surfers by showing them around the city. She usually plans an itinerary depending on their preferences and time.

The 20-year-old said she had her headaches. "You'd always worry if they'd enjoy the places even though they said they have no preferences."

She also worries if her guests do not talk to her. There

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was once a French guest who was not very eager to communicate. "It felt like I'm taking you out but you don't talk, then what's the point of it?" she said. "If you come out and don't talk, you could have just as well come by yourself."

But it is difficult to have a perfect match. "Even if you're with friends, if you're not on the same channel, you won't become very good friends, let alone with someone you don't know," she said.

"Sometimes it's inevitable. It's a reflection of society: a mixture of people with different characters," she added.

Still, Ip takes these situations as challenges and prepares before hosting. She believes it is important to be flexible because a guest's character may not be as you had imagined. She said it is better not to have any expectations, citing a French guest who only had HK\$100 and expected her to pay for everything. "I didn't expect to pay. I didn't say anything about it."

Apart from the worries and challenges, what kind of people are suited to be hosts? Ip said those who are open-minded and keen on sharing are perfect candidates.

She said a host should be truly willing to participate and contribute.

"If you're not genuine please don't come and ruin the platform. I am really against that."



"That's what I mean by 'a life influences another life'."