

Sofa so good? It's not the height of comfort but it can save a fortune in rent

Susannah Butter finds an innovative lifestyle choice where you'll always meet new people



Sleepover: Ed Hewitt, who has couchsurfing all over London to raise money for Guy's Trust (Picture: Tony Buckingham)

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When the lease on Ed Hewitt's Putney flat expired he took an unusual step. Instead of plunging back into the murky world of letting agents and flatshares, he decided to have an adventure in his own city. Hewitt, 27, recently couchsurfing with strangers for a month. In 30 days he stayed with 11 hosts, ranging from students on houseboats to bankers in their mid-fifties offering west London flats, and saved £1,147. His rule was not to spend more in the entire month than £1,050 — the “astronomical” amount he used to spend on rent.

Hewitt saved this with the help of couchsurfing.org, a website that links up travellers with those offering a bed for the night. Founded in San Francisco by a group of friends, it now has more than five million members worldwide. It's free to sign up, and you can either list your couch as available or say you are looking for somewhere to stay. It's possible to put in your request and within an hour be having dinner at your host's house. No keys are exchanged — it's meant to be like going to stay with a friend.

But English people can be sceptical. “Everyone is instantly suspicious,” says Hewitt. “The most common reaction is why would someone want a stranger in their house? I never felt anything dodgy. Couchsurfing is a great way to meet people who incorporate you into their lives.”

Ed was working in the corporate world and kept three bags under his desk. “I pitched up every night at a different house with a toothbrush.” He had just started dating someone too. “We're still going out but it was strange having to say to her, ‘so I'm off to a sofa now’.”

One host lived on a houseboat on the Thames. Another lived in a beautiful house in west London, overlooking the garden where Notting Hill was filmed. “The hotel next door was £1,000 a night. The guy who owned it worked in banking. There was another couchsurfer there who was in London for a job interview at an investment bank, which he got.”

So why do people give up rooms in their houses to complete strangers? “They are genuinely nice people. If you put yourself in a position where random acts of kindness happen it can lead to amazing experiences. There are lots of families on it who like to introduce their kids to people from all over the world.”

However, there were awkward moments. “One guy I stayed with was listed on the site as ‘clothing optional’. He turned out to be one of the most interesting people I stayed with. On the second day he opted not to wear clothes in the house — I wore mine.”

Hewitt has since left his job — he flies to Bangkok soon, before travelling back overland to Birmingham, where his parents live. It will raise money for the charity Guy's Trust and help Dromomaniacs, his online travel business. Would he give up his couch? “Of course. I owe the couchsurfing community a lot.”

Follow Ed's journey on bangkok2birmingham.com and dromomaniacs.com