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CHEAP TRAVELING - RICH EXPERIENCES
A guide to Couchsurfing

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ABSTRACT

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Name of thesis CHEAP TRAVELING - RICH EXPERIENCES A guide to couchsurfing		
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<p>The aim of this thesis was to make people more aware of what Couchsurfing is and how it works. Nowadays it is so easy to travel and what travellers do not know, is that there are other options for accommodation than hotels. Couchsurfing gives you the opportunity to meet people from all over the world and to learn from them. You are able to see and experience a new country from a local's point of view.</p> <p>The chapters were focusing on safety issues when surfing and/or hosting and how to get started by creating a profile on the webpage for Couchsurfing.</p> <p>The main goal was to make a guide for old and new Couchsurfers and to keep it short and simple.</p> <p>The research part was done by a survey to gather and analyze couchsurfer's opinions and ideas for better couchsurfing experiences – for both new and old surfers and hosts.</p>		
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ABSTRACT
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1 INTRODUCTION

It is much easier and cheaper to travel to your dream destination now than ever before. The travel agencies, the internet traveling companies, and the air transportation companies are constantly competing with each other and trying to give their customers the best deals, which show in affordable travel packages and cheap flight tickets. (Before It Is News 2012.)

The most common mistakes travelers do is that they book flight tickets too early or too late. Prices vary a lot and with more research before the booking could make you save a lot of money. Always compare the prices at different air companies. Another thing to keep in mind is that if you are willing to travel during off-season it might also be cheaper. It is also cheaper to choose a flight with more stops than a direct flight. Some people prefer to travel comfortable and choose to pay a higher price to get a direct flight to their destination. (Pascarella, SmarterTravel Staff 2010.)

There are so many different options for travelers nowadays. One thing that has become a big hit among adventurous travelers is Couchsurfing. This is something that would change the world and make it a better and more open-minded place for everyone to live in.

The aim of this thesis was to make people more aware of Couchsurfing; what it is and how it works. The thesis is written so that it is in a relevant structure starting with the basics: What motivates people to travel and about traveling alone. The following chapters are focusing on Couchsurfing; what it is and how it works, how to get started, about safety issues and negative experiences and what/who the biggest competitors of Couchsurfing are. The last part of the thesis were focusing on the research that was made through www.surveymonkey.com to gather couchsurfers opinions, ideas and experiences. The link to the survey was posted on Facebook on the fanpage of Couchsurfing which was an easy way to reach out to couchsurfers.

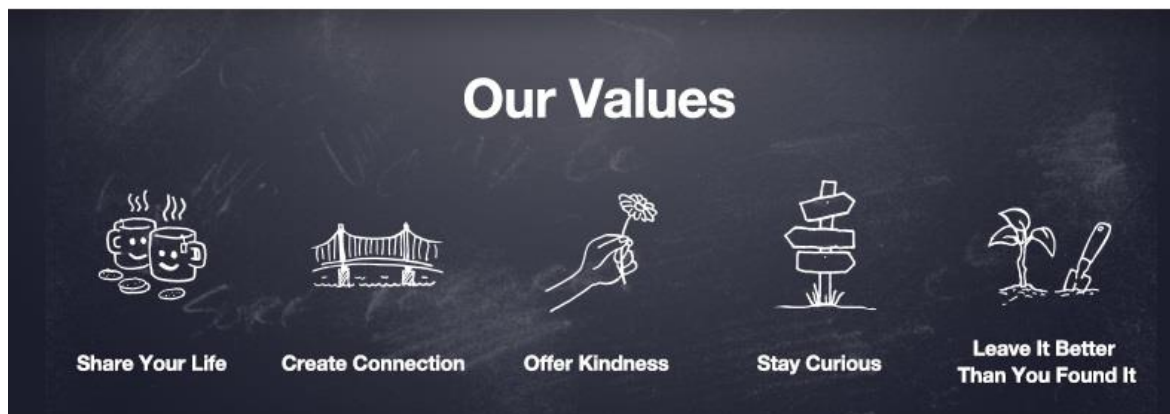
2 COUCHSURFING – WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT WORKS

Couchsurfing is a website online, where you can find people in every single country on this Earth. The main idea is that you, while traveling, can get in touch with people from the countries and/or cities you are visiting and stay for free at their place during your visit. This webpage has at this point 7 million members and they are spread out in over 100.000 cities all over the world. (Couchsurfing 2013.)

Couchsurfing was an idea that Casey Fenton, Leonardo Bassani da Silveira, Sebastian Le Tuan and Daniel Hoffer came up with together in 2004 when Fenton were planning a trip to Iceland. He needed a place to stay and sent e-mails to students in Iceland asking for a room, or even a couch to stay on for his upcoming visit. When he came back from his trips he gathered his friends to make the idea of Couchsurfing come true. Other people have thought about this too, so Couchsurfing have competition from other organizations such as The Hospitality Club, Global Freeloaders and BeWelcome, which pushes them to work even harder to make Couchsurfing have the best reputation and also have the best experiences for its members. According to the team at Couchsurfing, strangers are friends that you have not met yet, which is a much known statement among couchsurfers. (Moran 2011, Entrepreneur.)

Couchsurfing is not just about free accommodation; it is so much more than that. It is about getting connected with travelers, to experience a new place from local people's eyes, it is about being open-minded and understanding, about showing respect to other people and their cultures, about growing as a person and become a better person than you were yesterday (Couchsurfing 2013.)

When logged in on the website it is possible to leave your story along with pictures so that other surfers can read about you and your new friends that you have made and about all the places you have visited and things you have experiences in a new place. This is a relatively new thing for the website that was launched in the beginning of 2014 and has been very appreciated by the members. (Couchsurfing, 2014.)



PICTURE 1. The values of Couchsurfing (adapted from Couchsurfing.org 2014).

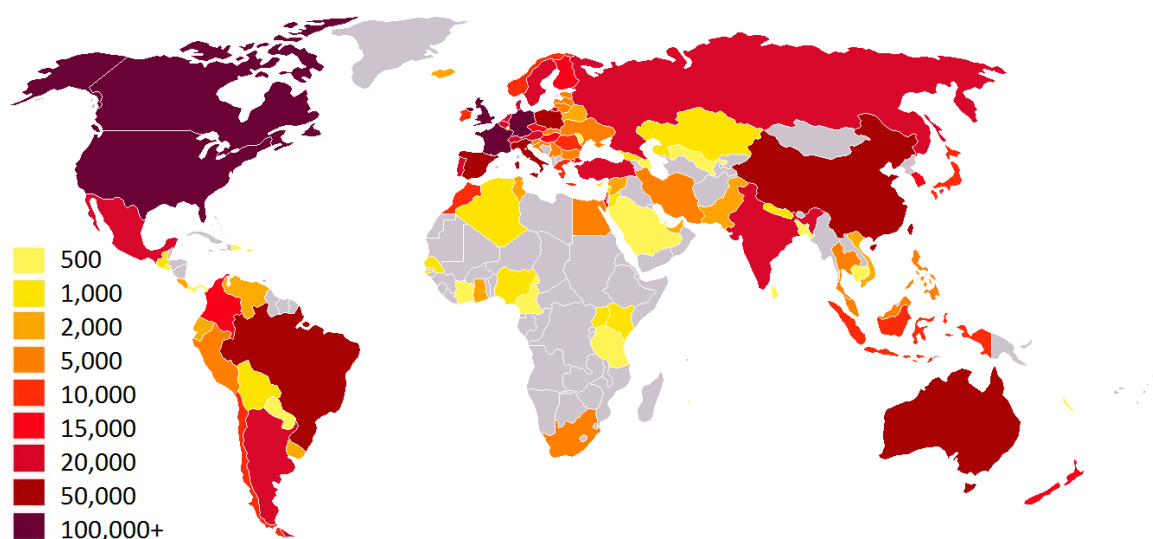
2.1. Couchsurfing provide jobs

Couchsurfing is not only leisure and traveling, it is also providing jobs. During 2004-2011 there were only volunteers working for Couchsurfing and it was a non-profit organization. Today there is a whole team working for this organization to make it better, safer and more fun for travelers. They are doing everything they can to make the world a better place. When working for Couchsurfing you will get the chance to couchsurf yourself and get paid for it, you will get competitive salaries and they will provide you with health insurance, equipment needed, and, a membership to a gym. (Couchsurfing 2013.)

3 HOW TO GET STARTED

The first step in the process of becoming a Couchsurfer or a host is to create a profile where you put as much information about yourself that you feel comfortable with, for example: what your hobbies are, what your dreams are, your Couchsurfing experiences, what kind of movies, books and music you like, what languages you speak and if you have are willing to let travelers stay on your couch or not. Your friends, people who have Couchsurfed at your place or people you have met during your journeys can leave feedback about you on your profile for other members to see. It is important for both hosts and Couchsurfers to leave feedback about each other. It is not mandatory but it helps other people to get an idea about you and/or the host. If you are in a life situation where you are not able to host someone at the moment you can update your Couch-status to “traveling”, “not right now (but I can hang out)”, “no”, “yes” and “maybe”. (Couchsurfing 2013.)

There is a Couchsurfing app available for smartphone users. It is free of charge and easily helps you connect with other travelers and to find events in the area you are visiting. You can use this app while traveling if you do not have access to a computer. (Leo 2013, LA Times.)



PICTURE 2. Couchsurfers by country (Adapted from Couchsuring.org 2014).

As the picture above shows the most users are located in The United States which is a popular country to travel in, both for the American residents and for non-Americans.

3.1 The verification process

The verification process means that if you pay \$25.00, the team working for Couchsurfing will send you a letter to your home address with a code that you have to insert when you log in. Depending on where in the world you live it might take up to several weeks to get your verifying code. Because of this money there is no advertisement on the website (Couchsurfing 2013.)

The verification process is a way to make sure that the information about you is correct. After this process there will be a green check-mark next to your name on your profile. This way other Couchsurfers will feel safer to contact you and it is also a sign that you take this seriously. This also makes you able to put your couch available for last minute Couchsurfers which is not possible if you decide not to verify your account. If you move, you just ask for a new code to be sent home to your new address. However, you pay the \$25.00 only once. (Couchsurfing 2013.)

3.2 Common sense and safety while Couchsurfing

Always have a back-up plan in case your or your host's plans suddenly changes. It is good to have a back-up host where you can stay if your current host suddenly gets change of plans and remember, even if you want to travel cheap, make sure you always have some extra money in case you need to get a room from a hotel or hostel.

Make sure to read the host's profile carefully before deciding whether you want to stay with this person or not. Read the references that other Couchsurfers have left for this person and get familiar with the area if possible and follow your instincts.

When contacting another Couchsurfer, try to be as personal as you can, and tell him or her why you got interested in his or her and why you should be welcome to their house. Do not exchange numbers and addresses before you feel fully comfortable with each other; use the private messaging on the website. Make sure your profile is complete; that you have filled all the empty space on your profile with text and pictures. This makes your profile attractive to others and it is more likely that you will find a host for your trip.

Gather as much information as you can about the country, culture and lifestyle before you travel. While visiting another culture you are required to follow their rules and show respect to their lifestyle.

As a good Couchsurfer you clean up after yourself, and it is a good manner to ask if you can help your host with cooking or any other household duties. Change the sheets before you leave, bring presents with you from your country, be friendly and open-minded and be respectful; you are in someone else's home! (Johnson 2011.)

If there were some complications with the host/hosts during your journey, please let the Trust and Safety team at Couchsurfing know about it. They are working hard to make this safer for everyone. (Couchsurfing 2013).

3.3. Common sense and safety while hosting

Your address and phone number is not shown in your profile. You choose whether you meet up with the Couchsurfer before you show him or her where you live, or if you want to give this person your address in advance.

If possible, pay \$25 and get your verifying code. As a verified member, with a lot of positive references and interesting information about yourself with clear pictures is going to make Couchsurfers interested in staying with you. Include information about the city you live in; about the happenings and events going on, what kind of tourist attractions there are and other things that would be good to know for a tourist visiting.

Tell the Surfer in advance about your house rules, how many people there are living in the house, about the area you live in, how many Surfers you have hosted, if you allow the guests to use the kitchen and other things that might be of importance for the Surfer. (Couchsurfing 2013).



PICTURE 3. The official logo (Adapted from Couchsurfing.org 2014).

4 NEGATIVE COUCHSURFING EXPERIENCES

Everyone has unfortunately not had a pleasant stay while Couchsurfing. There are horror stories about Couchsurfing as well. A 29-year-old Chinese girl who had been Couchsurfing in different countries throughout Europe decided that she wanted to visit a city called Leeds, in England. Even this time she used Couchsurfing to find someone to stay with and found a 34-year-old Moroccan guy who seemed nice. He ended up raping her twice and threatened to kill her and himself. She however got the chance to escape and contacted the police. (Brook 2012, Dailymail).

Sadly, some people have started to think that Couchsurfing is turning in to sexsurfing; that they only create a profile in hope to find someone to have sex with. This is not how Couchsurfing works, and this is something that the team behind this idea is trying to work against. It is very common these days that people who are hosting asks if the Surfer is interested in having sex with them, because in many cases they think that it is what the Surfer is after, if the traveler is of the opposite gender. This is something Surfers need to be aware of, and to be very careful, especially when traveling alone. It can easily turn out to be a very dangerous situation. (Walewinder, A. 2013.)

Very often you can read about negative couchsurfing experiences in anonymous blogs. A female blog writer decided to meet up with a guy to go for a couple of drinks. They met on Couchsurfing.org and she was happy to meet up with him. After several drinks he became rude and she decided to go home. He started texting her calling her "slut" and threatened her. Luckily she got away, and he eventually stopped texting her, but she was scared that something bad would have happened if she would have stayed. She wanted to warn other people of this through her blog post. (<http://theblondtravels.com>.)

There is unfortunately a dark side about Couchsurfing, and it does not always work out like planned. Therefore it is always safer to travel together with someone, or try to find a host that has lots of good references, information, clear pictures and who is a verified member. All negative experience should also be reported to the

care team at Couchsurfing as well as to the police. Like mentioned before, they are working hard trying to make this concept as safe as possible (Couchsurfing 2013.)

5 THE RESEARCH

The objective of the research was to find out what couchsurfers think of couchsurfing, and how they think they could make it better and safer. They also shared their thoughts and experiences through a survey that was made. The questionnaire was uploaded to www.surveymonkey.com for two weeks, from 05.08.2014 to 19.08.2014, and the link to the survey was shared to several social media pages, such as Facebook and Twitter. The target group were young adults, from all over the world, who have participated in couchsurfing, either by hosting a couchsurfer or by couchsurfing him or herself. Some of the participants have also both surfed and hosted.

5.1 Quantitative research

The method used for the research part was quantitative research method. The basic point of quantitative studies is that the results should be generalizable. Quantitative researches are usually made by questionnaires with answers to choose from and it is usually on paper or on the web. It is important that the questions are asked in the right way, from the perspective of the information requested. The quantitative research method is relatively cheap and it is easy to reach many people from the target group for example via mail, email or phone. A web-based survey combined with a paper-based survey often helps to increase response rates. The disadvantage of web-based surveys is that the respondents need access to a computer which is not always possible. A positive thing about paper-based surveys is that usually the researcher or some other person involved in the research is there and can help with understanding the questions if the participants find something unclear or hard to understand. (E-delegationen, 2014.)

5.2 Surveymonkey

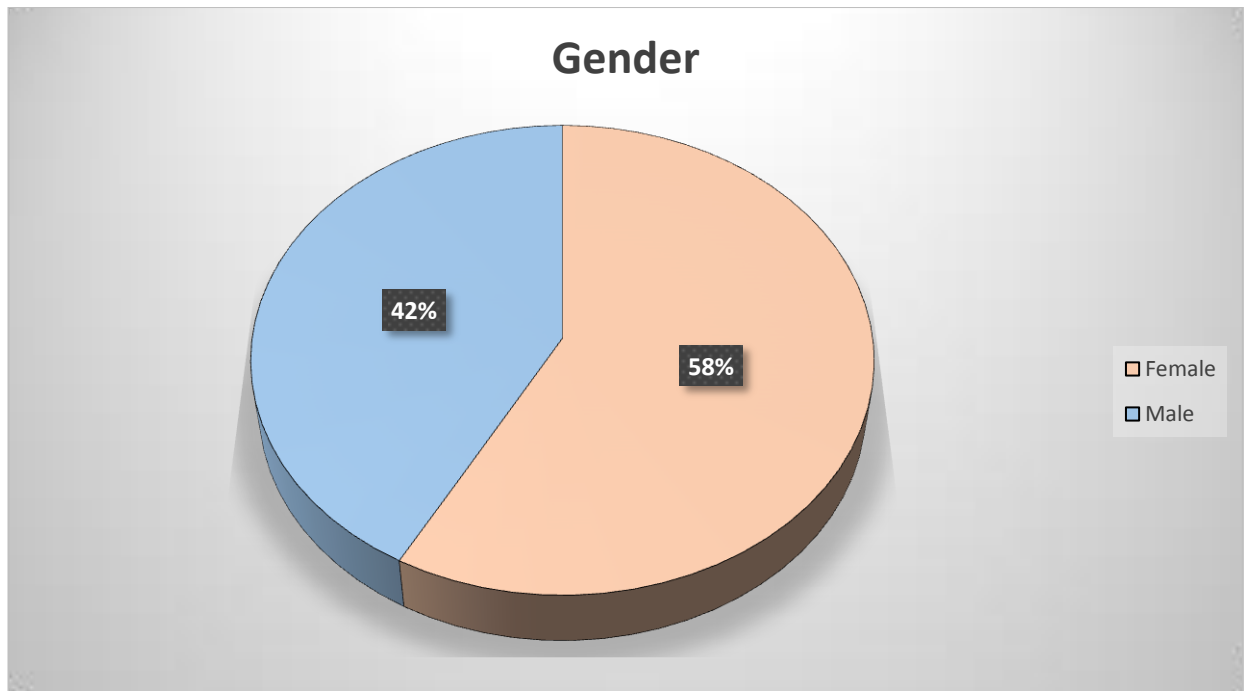
“We're the world's leading provider of web-based survey solutions, trusted by millions of companies, organizations and individuals alike to gather the insight they need to make more informed decisions.” – Surveymonkey.com

SurveyMonkey is the most popular online survey software in the world today. The webpage is translated to several languages which makes it an easy tool to use for companies and individuals all over the world and it is used by millions of people. Through the website it is easy to make your survey look professional and you are allowed to log in and make changes any time. There are video tutorials that helps people with the process to a professional survey. The most popular reasons to use this webpage is to gather customer satisfaction, employee performance reviews and also for students to use for their classes. (Surveymonkey 2014.)

6 RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

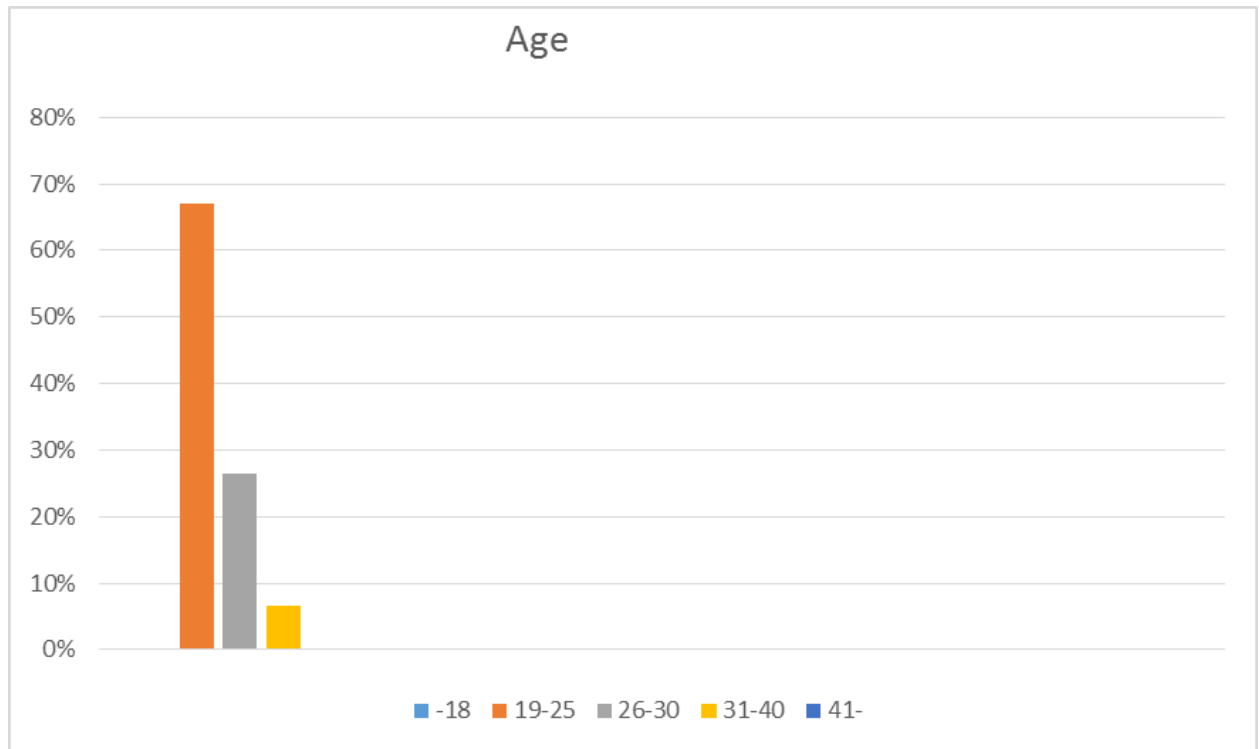
The questionnaire was made in English only and all of the participants were 100% anonymous. The expected number of people answering the questionnaire were 30 but it ended up being a total of 64 participants, which was surprising. It was highly appreciated that these people took 10 minutes of their busy lives to fill in the questionnaire.

Some graphs and tables from the research are presented and explained. There were a few personal questions, such as age and which part of the world they come from. Most of the answers for the questions had options to choose from, but the participants also had a chance to write their own opinions and ideas.



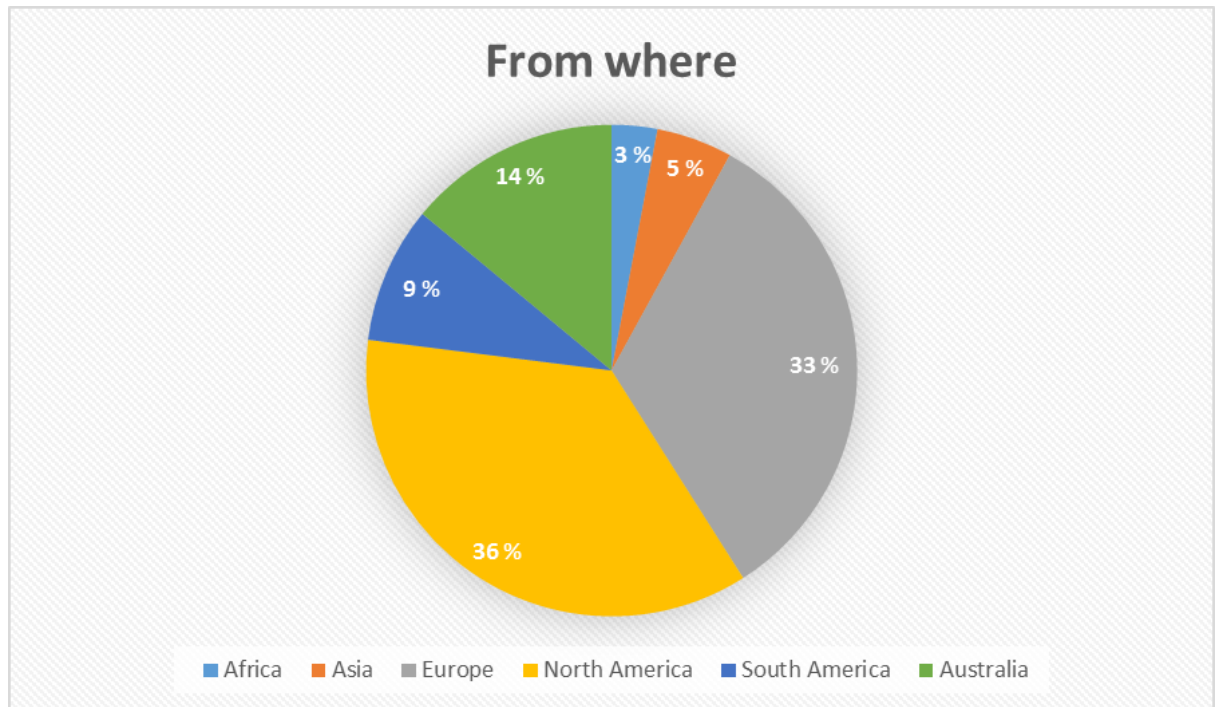
GRAPH 1. Gender

The first question in the questionnaire asked the participant to state their gender. In the graph above we can see that out of the 64 participants in the survey 42% of them were males and 58% were females.



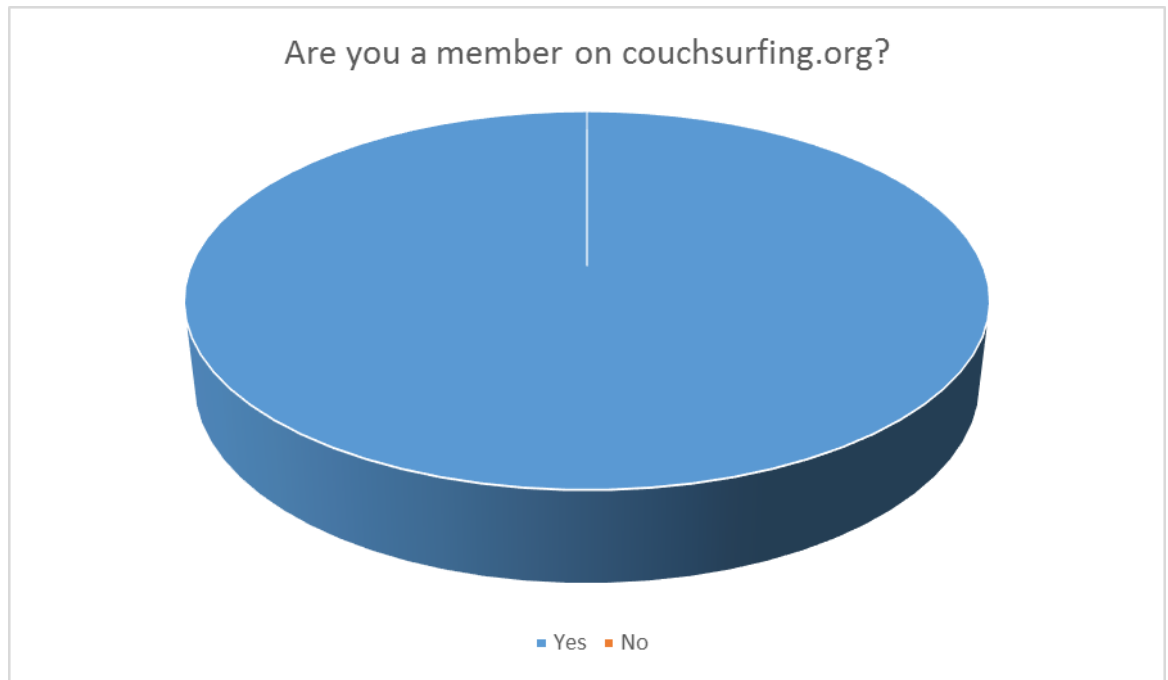
GRAPH 2. Age

As shown in graph 2, none of the participants were 18 years old or younger. It is preferred to be 18 or over to be a couchsurfer. Furthermore, 43 people, which is 67%, were between 19-25 years old. 26,5% of the participants were between 26-30 years old and only 6,5% stated that they were somewhere in between 31-40 years old. According to this couchsurfing is popular among young adults in the age range of 19-25.



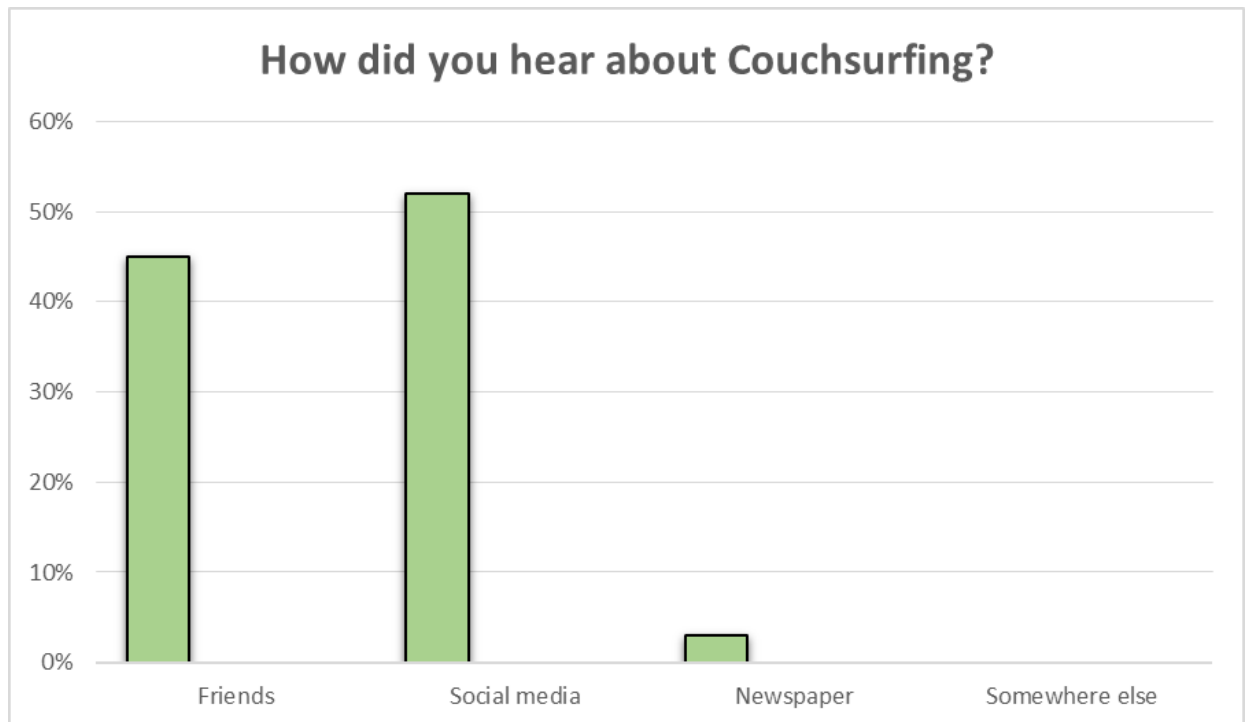
GRAPH 3. Where the participants are from

The next question was to state from what continent the participant were from. In graph 3 we can see that the majority of the people were from North America, where couchsurfing was founded and where it is most used. 33% of the people were from Europe, 14% of the people from Australia, 9% from South America, 5% from Asia, 3% from Africa and unfortunately 0% from Antarctica. Couchsurfing is becoming more popular among Europeans. Especially when backpacking or interrailing on a budget it is very helpful for travelers to stay for free at someone's couch and experience the new culture with help from a local person or family.



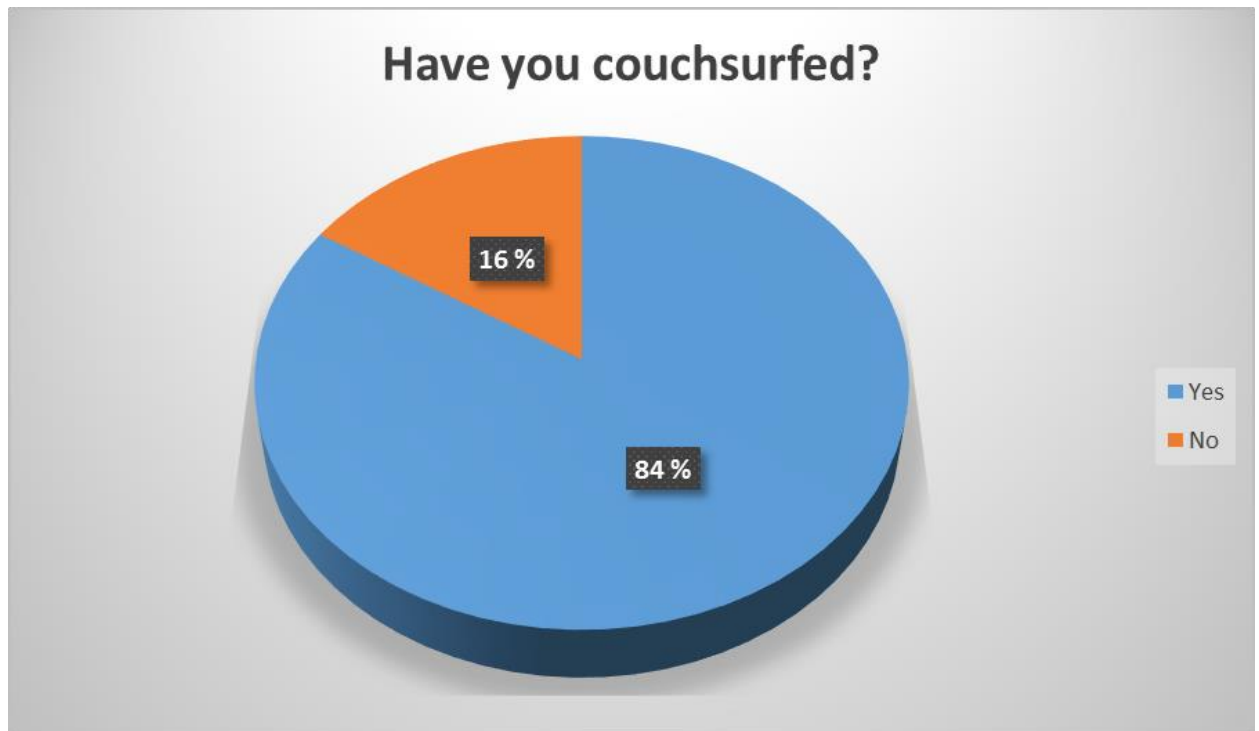
GRAPH 4. Member on couchsurfing.org

Question number four was a yes or no question. Surprisingly, all of the 64 people who decided to take part in the survey answered “yes” on the question if they are members on the website www.couchsurfing.org. That means 100% of the participants have signed up and are using this website.



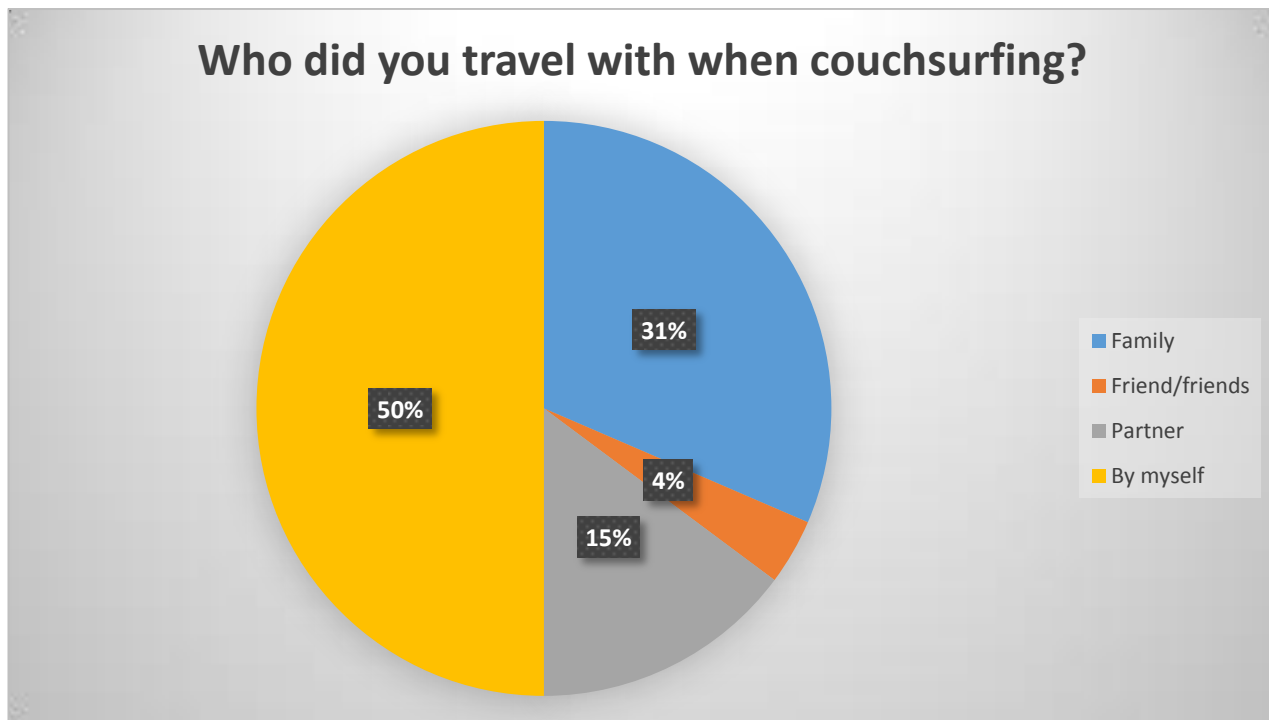
GRAPH 5. How did you hear about Couchsurfing?

People were asked how they heard about couchsurfing for the first time. Most of the people, 52%, answered that they heard about it from the social media, which is an easy tool for marketing nowadays. 45% answered that they heard about this option of traveling from friends. 3% read about it in a newspaper. The fourth option was "from somewhere else".



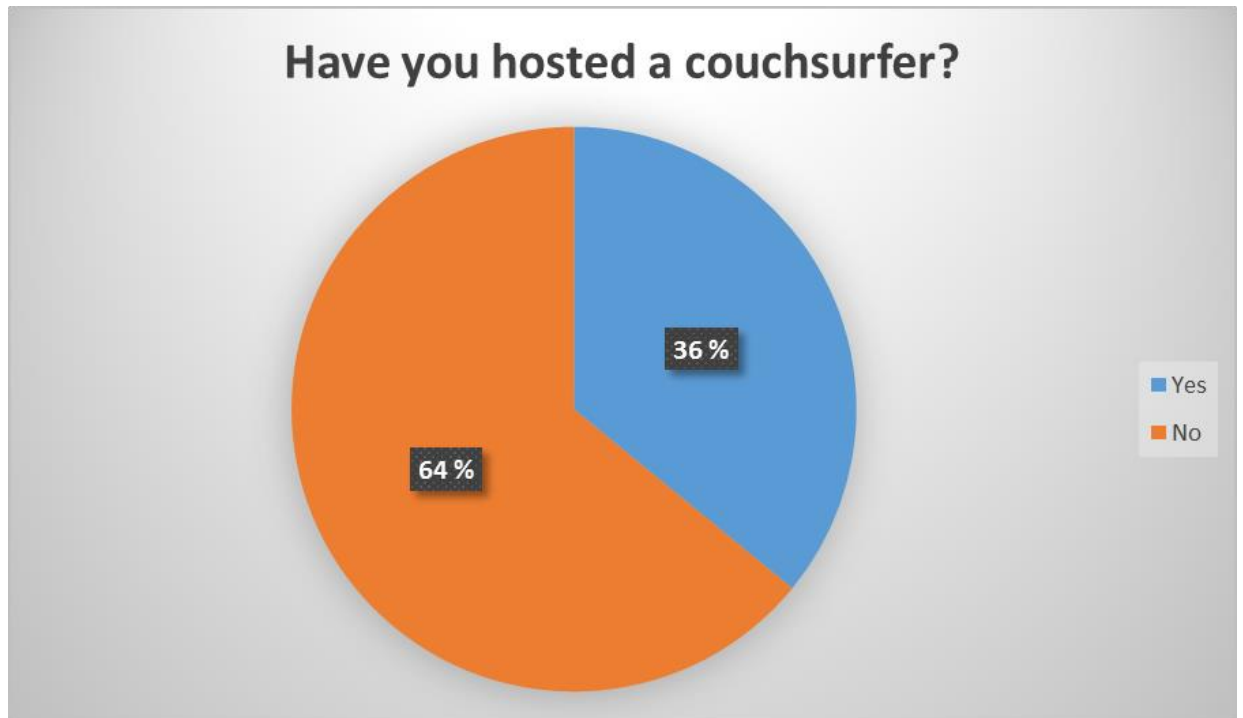
GRAPH 6. Have you couchsurfed?

The majority of the people who took part in the survey have tried couchsurfing at least once in their lives. Only 16% stated that they have not tried it yet. Many people do not have the chance to travel that often, so instead they offer a place for others to stay at.



GRAPH 7. Your travel companions

As we can see in graph number 7, it is very common nowadays that people are traveling alone. However, it is always more safe to travel together with someone, especially if you are couchsurfing. 50% of the people who stated that they have couchsurfing traveled alone. This might also be because it is easier to find a place to stay if you are traveling alone because people who offer their couches usually have room for one or two people, but rarely more than that. 31% of the participants in the survey said that they tried couchsurfing together with a family member; could a sister or a brother, a cousin etc. 15% couchsurfing together with their partner and, surprisingly, only 4% surfed with a friend or a group of several friends.



GRAPH 8. Hosted a couchsurfer

It takes a lot of courage to invite strangers to one's home. Especially if the owner does not have time to stay around the house all of the time. Only 36% of the participants stated that they have offered travelers their couches to stay on. 64% answered that they have not hosted a couchsurfer yet. Some of the members on couchsurfing.org only surfs, they do not want to host, which is completely fine and up to everyone to decide what they want to do. The website gives you the chance to choose whether you want to host or surf, or both.

From the survey for this thesis we can draw the conclusion that the majority of the couchsurfer's come from North America. The most common age is 19-25. It was also surprising that all of the participants, 100% were members on the website couchsurfing.org and the majority had heard about it from the social media.

The results would be different if the survey would be done again.

7 CONCLUSION

Writing this thesis has been fun and interesting. For me it was important to choose a topic that was close to my heart, it kept me motivated and busy for almost a year. I have been couchsurfing myself and I find it very fascinating that it is so easy to make new friends from all over the world in such a simple way as staying at someone's couch. With some help from the website www.couchsurfing.org I have met many good friends that I still keep in touch with.

My goal with this thesis was to keep it short and simple and to make it easy to read and understand. I hope that this thesis will be seen as a guide that can help you as a new couchsurfer to get started and to take the step towards a better and safer world. It is an amazing world we live in and remember; the strangers you meet on the streets are friends that we have not got the chance to know yet.

Couchsurfing is going to grow bigger and become more popular in the future. It is a great way to meet like-minded people in all ages from all over the world; families, couples, singles. Furthermore, it is a very good thought behind the idea of Couchsurfing and it is very impressive that people are getting together and trying to make the world a better place with less racism and judgmental people. Couchsurfing is an excellent way to get to know different cultures and to experience a new country from a local's point of view. You learn a lot from other people and you grow as a person.

Even though there are negative sides with Couchsurfing there are more positive aspects than negative. There should be more marketing of this idea so that people could become more aware of it.

If you as a traveler prefer luxury and comfortable beds Couchsurfing may not be the best option, since you usually sleep on people's couches or on a mattress on the floor.

Based on the survey that was made among surfers and hosts the participants are very happy that there is an option like couchsurfing.

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The purpose of this survey is to map out the interest in Couchsurfing. All the answers are highly respected. All the answers will be handled with absolute confidentiality all through the process. This questionnaire is done as a part of the thesis for Degree Programme in Tourism. The questionnaire will take around 10-15 minutes to fill out. Please mark your answer with a cross [X]. Your participation is highly appreciated. For further information, please contact:

Degree Programme in Tourism

Jenni Määttä – jennimartinamaatta@gmail.com

1. Are you a male or a female?

Male

Female

2. Please state your age

-18

19-25

26-30

31-40

40-

3. Where are you from?

Africa

Asia

Europe

North America

South America

Australia

Antarctica

4. Are you a member on Couchsurfing.org?

Yes

No

5. How did you hear about Couchsurfing?

- Friends Social Media/internet
 News paper Somewhere else, where? _____

6. What were your thoughts about Couchsurfing when you heard about it for the first time?

- Nice and fun idea Dangerous
 would be fun to try No thoughts
 Other, what? _____

7. What are your opinions about Couchsurfing now when you are more familiar with it?

8. Have you couchsurfed at someone's place?

- Yes No

If yes, where?

- Africa Asia Europe
 North America South America
 Australia Antarctica

9. What do you expect from a host?

10. Who did you travel with the first time you Couchsurfed?

- Friends Family Boyfriend/Girlfriend By myself
 With someone else, who?

11. Have you hosted anyone?

- Yes No

If yes, where did they come from?

- Africa Asia Europe
- North America South America
- Australia Antarctica

12. What do you expect from a traveler staying at your place?

13. What can you offer traveler that are coming to your area? (You can have several answers)

- Leisure (shopping, relaxing, sport activities etc.)
- Culture (art, history, festivals, religion etc.)
- Adventure (bungee jumping, mountaineering expeditions, rafting, rock climbing, diving, wind surfing, paragliding etc.)
- Well-being (massages, body treatments, facial treatments, exercise facilities & programs etc.)
- Wild life
- Other, what? _____

14. What is the best thing about couchsurfing?

- Free accommodation New friends
- Adventure To learn new languages
- To see a new place from a local's point of view Other, what?

15. Your best memories?

16. Have you had any bad experiences?

- Yes No

17. What would you do to make Couchsurfing even better? Any ideas?
