The book provides unique insights into the culture of computer-mediated hospitality and how this has begun to transform contemporary tourism and travel practice. Focusing on Couchsurfing.org, one of the largest online hospitality communities worldwide, the authors explore how social relations, intimacy and trust are built in the online environment and then extended into the offline contexts of actual tourism and travel. Being active couchsurfers themselves, the authors scrutinise the candid claim by much of the online hospitality community that couchsurfing creates a »better world«. The book is key reading for anyone interested in how computer mediated communication is changing contemporary forms of contact, travel and hospitality, and the kinds of cosmopolitism it brings into being.

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1. Introduction: Couchsurfing in Lisbon, Tunis and Brisbane

David Picard and Sonja Buchberger

At the home of strangers: couchsurfing in Lisbon (David Picard)¹

One day in early June 2009, Clara² 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 sunlight 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,
investigates the host position from an insider’s perspective. In an autobiographical study on his and his family’s experiences hosting (mainly Western) couchsurfing travellers, he explores the frictions between couchsurfing practice and Siberian hospitality culture. Having been an early member of the couchsurfing movement herself, and having actively participated in the development of the community, Paula Bialska (Chapter 8) reflects on her involvement and describes how couchsurfing grew into one of the most prominent online-offline communities worldwide. Most authors combine their direct observations with more systematic approaches to the general contexts in which couchsurfing evolves, variably using historical analysis, questionnaires and interviews with targeted samples. Paula Bialska carried out a large-scale survey to study motivations to join and participate in the community, which was integrated as a feature within the couchsurfing site.

To investigate the cosmopolitan imaginings that Taiwanese couchsurfers associate with couchsurfing practice, De Jung Chen organised group workshops with members and actively participated in dedicated couchsurfing discussion boards based on shared interests.

The online environment usually facilitated these study approaches. Many interviews and surveys were carried out online using Internet telephone technology, online survey technologies and databases extracted from the publicly available information users provide online. Those researchers who investigated specific localised couchsurfing communities – Sonja Buchberger in Tunisia, Dennis Zuev in Siberia, Bernard Schéou in Vietnam, De-Jung Chen in Taiwan – computed the information that couchsurfers made available in their profiles to delimit their samples and qualitatively analyse common social, sociological and lifestyle patterns among their respective samples. This methodological strategy allowed them, for instance, to categorise their samples according to criteria such as language ability, travel experiences, age, gender and education. Most authors note an analytic ambivalence they were confronted with when analysing the meanings of specific online performances by couchsurfing members. It was usually not clear whether – say – the “mission statement” or “philosophy” an individual couchsurfer advertised on their profile page, or their participation in publicly visible chat rooms, were to be approached in terms of texts or interactions (cf. Hine, 2000:53f.). While there is an obvious co-presence of the parties involved in the rhetorical performances of public self-representation and the exchanges of publicly visible messages, there was still a separation in space and, to a lesser degree, in time. The authors in this book
have generally adopted one of two possible strategies. Tan and Buchberger applied ethnographic approaches of participant observation in forum discussions by posting themselves, and thus getting actively involved, whereas Chen, Germann Molz and Schéou used approaches based on discourse analysis to understand such performances in terms of texts.

Participant observation in and of a largely open-ended online community elicits a number of ethical dilemmas. It is far from guaranteed that all subjects investigated here were aware of the presence of researchers or had the opportunity to give – or refuse – their prior informed consent. Moreover, despite “protecting” their informants through the use of pseudonyms, all authors have publicly visible couchsurfing profiles that lead relatively easily to the proper identities of many interlocutors.

Several of the chapters in this book are based on the authors’ personal experiences as friends, researchers, tourists and travel companions. Many have been the guests of their research participants, which seems an ideal situation to observe hospitality practice as it unfolds in a normal setting. As Candea and da Col put it, hospitality is “the unavoidable condition of possibility of ethnography” (Candea and da Col, 2012:3). In most study contexts, the ethnographer is, and mainly remains, a stranger, and observes social reality from within this specific perspective. In the first stages of ethnographic work, what is usually observed is merely the persona adopted to charm or contain the stranger and check up on his or her intentions. The ethnographic strategy of progressively becoming an insider thus implies a process of becoming a more and more intimate stranger, seen from the perspective of locals (Picard, 2011). Being active couchsurfers themselves helped the authors of the book to access the field, because it provided them with an “operational” identity and a role they were expected to fulfil. Like all other couchsurfers, they had to “fit in” and face the challenges of interaction.

The methodological strategy to explore couchsurfing by adopting the role of the guest came with other inherent paradoxes, such as the constant bordering as the figure of the parasite – the unwelcome guest – challenging the sovereignty of the hosts by potentially taking more than giving back. The ethnography of couchsurfing therefore was in many ways a constant walk on the borderline, where it was not certain if the expectations of host and guest would be met or thwarted. Most authors used the relative fluidity of this situation to their advantage, to explore how the global narratives of the couchsurfing project were met and adapted to various local contexts, and to test the “solidity” of the social and moral structures governing the phenomenon.
The first and most obvious observation made by the authors of the book is that the practice and – as we shall see – underlying cosmopolitan ideology of couchsurfing pertains to a very significant degree to “modern culture”. The quasi-totality of the network’s members – called “couchsurfers” – is located in Europe, the Americas or Australia. Less than 10% reside in Asia (cf. Schéou, Chapter 6; Chen, Chapter 5). Couchsurfers are generally relatively well-educated, highly media-literate and proficient in navigating Internet websites (Bialski, Chapter 8). And they are relatively young – on average 27. Most speak several languages, and many have significant overseas travel experience. While the average couchsurfer has one couchsurfing experience per year, a hard-core of members practice couchsurfing – as host, guest or organiser of events – very frequently, often with several couchsurfing contacts per week. In this sense, the world the couchsurfing project brings into being is that of a relatively young, mainly Western, transnational middle class, with a minimum level of economic means and access to technology and international travel visas.

What brings these couchsurfers together seems to be a widely shared culture and passion for travel and the encountering of “Others”. Couchsurfing creates its own realms, and what has elsewhere been called cosmopolitan “ambiances” (Beck, 2006) and consumption practices (cf. Germann Molz, 2011). It operates in an often ambiguous and highly politicised social field marked by philosophical debates on what it means to be human (Appiah, 2006; Amit and Rapport, 2012; Rapport, 2012), how to govern world society (Dower, 2003) and which forms of sociability and social inclusions and exclusions structure the global world (Forte, 2010; Werbner, 2008). De-Jung Chen (Chapter 5), in her chapter on Taiwanese couchsurfers, argues that the emergence of cosmopolitan realms and ambiances is governed by a specific knowledge based on cultural stereotypes and conventionalised ways of dealing with difference that emanate from the Western world. She stresses that learning of stereotypes of various Others, including an exoticised Self, becomes a key for many Taiwanese surfers to participate in what they perceive as an urban global modernity. While claiming to overcome cultural differences through the encounters made during the journey, Chen suggests that couchsurfing – like most tourism practices in general (cf. Laxton, 1991) – instead candidly reinforces cultural stereotypes and a specific regime of representing and organising global cultural diversity.
Similarly, various authors working in the field of anthropological studies of tourism argue that the tour is a socially institutionalised, highly ceremonialised means to leave the familiarity of home and proactively go on a quest for an exotic Other (Löfgren, 2002). The tour and the realms encountered during the tour are framed by powerful meta-narratives (Bruner, 2005) or “modern myths” (MacCannell, 1976; Selwyn, 1996) that lead the travellers to the locales of their adventures, and that also provide them with story elements and images to make sense of the emotions and personal experiences made during the tour (Picard and Robinson, 2012). In this sense, the exotic is not an open concept, but is framed within a specific culture of expectations, associations and collective gazes (Urry, 2002). Specific people and places generally stand, here, for particular exotic realms formed within the collective mind-sets of modernist thinking. East African Pygmies, Australian Aboriginals or Alaskan American-Indians, for example, often stand for a wider imaginary of the primitive and pristine – seemingly perpetuating the 19th-century social taxonomies and racist fantasy hierarchies brought about by evolutionist ideology (Frankland, 2009). By suggesting that certain people or places represent an earlier stage of evolution, or a possible alternative to the disenchantments brought about by modernity, such ideas of the primitive become part of a powerful, explicit meta-narrative of modern time and being (Picard, 2011). The history of nature and humanity becomes embedded here within a specific “logic” and underlying moral (in Western terms, Christian) rationale. In the beginning there was almost nothing: a pristine, unconditioned nature which was subsequently populated by small-scale populations living in harmony. The imaginary realm depicted in the biblical book of Genesis arguably remains the single most influential reference for defining and qualifying this earliest realm. For the moderns, the purity of biblical nature is periodically rediscovered through the enjoyment of beaches, mountains, lakes, rivers, forests, gardens and deserts encountered during holidays and other work-life breaks. In much of modern culture, this imaginary, unspoilt realm also marks a symbolic departure point for the course of human development. Following the biblical metaphor of the loss of Eden, history is initiated as a consequence of human action and freewill; humanity stands up against the unconditionality of divine nature, beauty and perfection, and forms society according to its own ideals. Adam and Eve leave Paradise after their famous act of luscious self-determination – eating from the tree of wisdom and becoming wise like God herself. The subsequent history of humanity is
then narrated mainly through events of great discovery, great artistic, architectural and technological achievements and, also, great violence and wars.

Here again, particular people and places are made to stand for such specific events inscribed in the historical imagination of modernist thinking. Remnants of past “great civilisations” – Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Arab, for example – generate narratives of imagined filiation and cultural ancestry (Sahlins, 1993), usually without regard for the current social and cultural realities in the places in which these remnants are found. Other “great” civilisations – like the Inka or the Maya – provide allegorical grounds to tell stories of human genius, and also supply metaphors for thinking about empire and globalisation in more general terms. Accordingly, at least since the European Renaissance, modernity has thus fashioned itself within a globally extended, theatrical realm of social life (Greenblatt, 1980), where forms of invocation, contact and travel allow the moderns to playfully engage and ceremonially renew the specific plots and social roles of this world history play. In this sense, exotic Others are always related to a modern Self. The city of Lisbon and the touristically adapted Fado music dramatised in the Wim Wenders film mentioned above supply a specific image of, and realm in which to encounter, such an exotic Other. The plot is driven by a biblical quest for unconditional beauty, and eventually leads the “touristic” heroes to realise the relativity of beauty as a fantasy world that merely exists in their minds, but which is still fun to chase and bring to life.

Tourism – like cinema – thus creates its own realms which integrate “destinations” into a wider social world. The recent ethnographic works on tourism contact zones in Southern Ethiopia (Régi, 2012), Tanzania and Indonesia (Salazar, 2010) and La Réunion (Picard, 2010) show how the learning and performing of cultural stereotypes projected upon local populations by outside tourists become means for these populations to participate in the “cosmopolitan” realms of a wider, global world. The “vernacular” (Werbner, 2008) cosmopolitanisms respectively developed in these cases by the Ethiopian Mursi, the Tanzanian and Indonesian tour guides and the socially marginal populations of La Réunion respond to tourist demand and a more general imaginary of the past, the local and the exotic or the futuristic (in the case of La Réunion’s Creoles), anchored in modern culture and culture polity. Similarly, the Fado mentioned earlier, hitherto associated by many local intellectuals and activists in Portugal with the luso-romanticism institutionalised by the country’s former fascist regime,
becomes “sexy” once again through the touristic eye and the related classification on UNESCO’s list of intangible heritage. World citizenship, as the conviction that people from all over the world are part of a universal human history, is in these cases not based on a principle of equality, but of attributed social difference and theatrically performed exotic otherness. Paradoxically, performing the social role of the exotic Other becomes here a specific means for non-Western populations to be cosmopolite.

Candid hospitality and the betterment of the world

Couchsurfing claims to push tourism to another level as it cuts out the various commercial and professional intermediaries, travel agents and tour operators who would ordinarily organise tours and prescribe what to visit. Because they are enabled to access the social intimacy of hosts and their friends and families, couchsurfers often argue that they break out of the structural confines that keep “ordinary” tourists prisoners of their own expectations and therefore enable “truly” “authentic” and “meaningful” experiences. Couchsurfers often assert that they do not know what will happen once they enter the house of a host. They usually maintain that their form of tourism is not solely about the traveller, but about the contact and exchange created between host and guest. Couchsurfing in this sense is about access to social intimacy and the (usually) unseen cultural; access to realms that are – so the couchsurfers seem to believe – ontologically more “real” than the presumed “artifice” of staged tourism settings. The Couchsurfing website thus cultivates a utopian rhetoric of “sharing cultures”, of increased and rapid interconnections and global flows of all kinds. People are just not “aware” of these elements, as the Couchsurfing.org slogan, “The world is smaller than you think”, seems to imply. The “surfing of couches”, then, is depicted as a fun mode of practice to increase this awareness.

In large parts, the organisation reiterates ideologies found in most other forms of tourism practice. It might be read as yet another materialisation of what Butcher (2003) terms the “moralisation” of modern leisure travel, with contemporary travellers being preoccupied with ethical claims, personal growth and the exploration of both self and of new “peripheral” places. Lanfant and Graburn (1992) argue that this particular ideology was in a much larger context formative for the 1960s “alternative movements”
in Germany and the USA. By rejecting consumer culture and, by extension, mass tourism as something “fake”, these movements, Lanfant and Graburn suggest, set the basis for new discourses and concepts regarding “alternative” forms of tourism. The latter, it is often claimed, are founded on principles of equality of exchange, respect for the cultural integrity and authenticity of the visited, and the sustainable use of resources by the tourism sector. The same principles resurface as an ethical backbone in the couchsurfing project. Where hosts and guests become considered equals, citizens of a same world, the moral and ontological boundary between them becomes blurred.

Couchsurfing thus provides a narrative to qualify the global world it has set out to create and the means by which it is to be achieved. The “better” in “creating a better world” defines a process of social and moral transformation that the act of couchsurfing is to realise. Humanity is to move towards an ideal society of the future in which diversity is approached with “curiosity, appreciation and respect” (Couchsurfing.org, 2012). What also seems to re-emerge here and in other alternative tourism movements is the influential political philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which, since its formulation in the late-18th century, has marked all major political debates in the Western world about global governance and peace (Dowdeswell, 2011). In 1795, Kant suggested that “universal hospitality” was a condition for the creation of a world of “perpetual peace”. He explained that the “right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he [or she] arrives in the land of another” would allow “the human race [to] gradually be brought closer and closer to a constitution establishing world citizenship”. Kant’s philosophical thinking had a lasting influence on subsequent philosophers and state philosophies, and also flowed into the wider common understanding of Western culture. A prominent thinker who picked up on Kant’s ideas was the French philosopher and political activist Jacques Derrida, who proposed a hyperbolic notion of “absolute hospitality”, according to which strangers are actively welcomed without consideration of who they are, where they come from, how much money they have or how much prestige they can confer. While in Kant’s understanding of hospitality strangers should not be harmed, and must be offered protection until they move on (because they are presumed to move on), Derrida pushes the stakes higher, making hospitality not only a right to be enjoyed by strangers, but an impossible, unconditional moral ideal to guide interpersonal relations among humans in general (Derrida, 2000). The claims made by Derrida’s political philoso-
phy often come up in contemporary debates on how to “deal” with illicit immigrants in Western countries (Friese, 2009; Lenz, 2010; Rosello, 2001; Still, 2010). One common argument brought forward by the “alternative” movements is that if pure human solidarity is an end in itself, the notion of strangers and the underlying ontology of borders between humans no longer make sense.

In these discourses, the concept of boundaries is usually associated with that of “interest”, which itself is normally considered via a distinction between somehow “inauthentic” commercial and “real” human interests. Kant explained that to make a “better” world and be “truly” human, one must “do good”, which for him was defined by selflessly non-interested and, in particular, non-commercial acts. Kant illustrated his understanding of doing good through a negative example. In his 1795 text on perpetual peace, he decried the injustices – exploitation of resources, enslavement of people and indebtedness of foreign economies – committed by the European colonial states. In particular, he despised situations where commercially or politically interested actions mobilise humanity to further their ends, rather than treating humanity as an end in itself. Kant wrote with particular disgust about the English as a “commercial people” who, by means of economic exploitation and political despotism, subjugated the world to their rule. Kant’s argument that only non-commercial relations between people are morally “good” became a central maxim of the alternative movements. Implying that commercial relations automatically generate meaningless acts, many proponents of these alternative movements, including prominent intellectuals like Walter Benjamin, seemed to believe in a form of natural magic or “aura” that inhabits objects and human relations, and which disappears whenever money is introduced into the games of exchange.

Yet, it seems to us that what defines what is and what isn’t a commercial relation is essentially subject to narratives and ideology. In the field of tourism, tourists do not, in practice, “buy” experiences or “consume” places. Such formulations are part of narratives about tourism employed by developers, businessmen and pessimist sociologists, but usually not by tourists themselves. Certainly, the expenditure of economic wealth in the form of money takes place in the wider framework of tourism practice. Tourists – like all social actors engaging in social relations with others – pay to balance a form of expected reciprocity. Paying in the form of monetary exchanges, gift-giving, sacrifice or respect and recognition is part
of the touristic play (Graburn, 1983). Following this observation, a number of authors have started to study – and reconsider – the structure and meaning of hospitality practices that emerge in different more or less commercialised hospitality settings (Heal, 1990; Lashley and Morrison, 2001; Lashley, Lynch and Morrison, 2007). Studies on ordinary mass-tourists by Wang (2000), Picard (2011) and Crossley (2012) demonstrate that the mass-produced sites and products that seem to be meaninglessly “bought” and “consumed” by tourists do actually generate meaningful and often deeply transformative experiences among tourists.

What seems to drive the debates among “alternative” tourists and academics about the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of other people’s experiences is an age-old need for social distinction, observed to have already pertained among imperial Roman holidaymakers 2000 years ago, when competing over who was having the more “real” Greek lifestyle experience (Feifer, 1985). Then and now, each class of tourist claims that its respective forms of tourism and the experiences it has are superior (Adler, 1989). Like a caricature of social relations back home, Antarctic deep-time geologists feel superior to anthropologists while on their tours, who in turn feel superior to travel journalists, who feel superior to backpackers, who feel superior to mass-tourists (Cohen, 2004).

To ensure that they are not associated with the narratives of commerce and the related suspicion of superficial, inauthentic experiences and conspicuous consumption, alternative tourism movements like couchsurfing simply take the transfer of money out of their practice, or hide it where possible. By rejecting any form of commercial transaction, couchsurfers take the most extreme position with regard to this ideology. Hospitality among members remains free, and ought to be commercially disinterested; it is above all about meeting people, learning and making a better world. It is not about “consuming”, but about “learning” and “growing”.

The argument that because hospitality is free it inherently allows couchsurfers to take “cheap” holidays is actively refuted by large parts of the couchsurfing movement (as the chapters in this book discuss). Hospitality is, above all, seen as a means to achieve something different: “honest” hospitality and a “real” interest in others. It is candid because it implies an act that is carried out in a naïve but full belief in its inherent goodness, or at least the goodness of its consequences. Candid hospitality is driven by convictions about its intrinsic potential to create a better world. In this way,
couchsurfing puts the Western philosophical notion of “true” humanity in a “let’s-do-it” way into practice.

While the rhetoric of hospitality and the betterment of the world is frequently mobilised by couchsurfers and the couchsurfing project, in practice the reality is relatively far from such notions as Derrida’s “absolute hospitality”. Hospitality is, in most cases, not a right to be unconditionally enjoyed by strangers but, at best, a right to be requested by travellers, refugees or migrants (Germann Molz, Chapter 2). At a macro-level, the hospitality offered through couchsurfing is conditioned by international visa agreements, access to economic resources, computer literacy and the ability to generate trust among fellow surfers. The couchsurfing website allows members to create profile pages on which they can – naively or strategically – place signs and symbols to generate trust. Tan (Chapter 7) argues that information about language skills, previous travel experience, personal interests and knowledge of online “taboos” are cultural capitals that allow couchsurfers to advertise their inclusion in an in-group of global cosmopolites. Whoever does not possess such “cultural capital”, and who therefore is not able to provide such signifiers of inclusion and understanding of the wider “project”, or who grossly misunderstands the often humoristic undertone of the couchsurfers’ self-declared “mission statements”, will have far more difficulty in using the website to make friends and generate contact experiences. Considering its ideological frame and sociological constraints, it therefore seems that the couchsurfing project brings together, above all, a global middle-class of mainly younger people from mainly Western countries claiming to be advocates for a generalised “humanity”. Yet, the “world” that couchsurfers and other Western tourists refer to is formulated and formed to a large extent within the centres of Western societies. Just like in other forms of tourism, public representations, maps and stories here become tools to transform other people and places into a global sphere of attractions.

At the same time, far from being passive “victims” of a presumably cannibalistic global tourism system, these “local” people often become proactive players themselves, taking on the role of hosts and increasingly becoming travellers themselves (Bruner, 2005). In many contexts, couchsurfing represents a specific form of “sexy” urban global modernity in which young, aspiring people from non-Western countries want to take part (Schéou, Chapter 6). Chen (Chapter 5) demonstrates that, while for most Westerners cosmopolitanism represents a world-encompassing philoso-
1. Introduction: Couchsurfing in Lisbon, Tunis and Brisbane

...phy, for Taiwanese surfers (for example) it is a specific means to participate in a global urban modernity. Cosmopolitanism is learnt here through repetitions, like one would learn a language or an instrument; once acquired, its techniques and knowledge allow the Taiwanese surfers to navigate the global, modern world. The learning process reveals the inner contradictions of the couchsurfing movement: it claims equality and transparency, yet – in the understanding of the Taiwanese at least – is based on a complex set of cultural stereotypes projected in the imagined geographies of the world, which eventually perpetuate discriminations and differences. Drawing on her work on alternate norms of hospitality that govern relations to strangers among couchsurfing hosts in Tunis, Tunisia, Sonja Buchberger shows (in the next section) how contact with Western cosmopolite travel culture can lead to the emergence of localised “rooted” or “vernacular” cosmopolitanisms (Swain, 2001; Werbner, 2008). The story of Mehmet supplies here an entry to explore this issue.

DECEIVED KINSHIP AND THE FORMATION OF VERNACULAR COSMOPOLITANISMS IN TUNISIA (SONJA BUCHBERGER)

Mehmet had joined us at the weekly gathering of the couchsurfing community in Tunis. He was from Turkey, and had been on a three-week trip through Italy, Spain and Tunisia. He explained to me that he had brought gifts from Turkey for the hosts that he would meet on the way. All these gifts he had stored in his only luggage, a backpack that seemed so full that I thought it would burst open at any moment. He said that he had brought Turkish coffee, little cotton bags, Turkish delight and other souvenirs. Mehmet told me that while he had been travelling through Europe he had not felt well-received. He said that many of his hosts had been “unthankful” and did “not do anything for [him]”. He also stressed that he had had to send many “couch requests” before eventually finding a host who accepted him into their home. He speculated that the reason for this was that Europeans liked to use the couchsurfing network to travel abroad and find hosts in other countries, but not to host foreigners in their own homes once they returned from their travels. He wondered if any of the European couchsurfers he had hosted in his home in Turkey would, in turn, host him at their places in Europe. The Tunisian couchsurfers who had arrived were attentively listening in on our conversation. Mehmet, now centre of atten-
tion, continued his story. He complained that his European guests had not offered him any gifts as a sign of gratitude for his hospitality. The meetings of the Tunis couchsurfing community habitually took place in a renovated grand house in the city’s old town. Young Tunisian business-people had turned the building into a “cultural café” decorated with modern Tunisian paintings on the walls; they ran a book sale and organised regular jazz evenings.

That night, after listening to Mehmet’s story, a heated discussion unfolded among the Tunisian members of the network. Most agreed with his complaints; many started to tell their own stories of exploited and unreciprocated hospitality. Some of those present who had never travelled abroad questioned whether they would find any hosts when travelling in Europe, asking if they would not be subjected to “discrimination” and “racism” against Arabs. Mehmet concluded that for him there were many similarities between Tunisian and Turkish hospitality. All seemed to agree once again. What was at stake here for the Tunisian couchsurfing members was not only the “consumption” of cosmopolitanism, which is much discussed in the literature. While the Tunisian participants largely shared practices such as watching satellite TV, buying low-priced Chinese products from the souk or wearing fake Levis jeans with many people outside of the network, what set their understandings apart was their stress on the importance of “friendship” in the way they engaged with “the wider world”. According to the couchsurfing ideal, members are driven by the strong will and conscious decision to engage with real individuals from abroad – most often not only to chat with them online, but to meet them face-to-face, host them and become “friends”, maybe even lovers. In studies on urban imageries and processes of “branding” cities as cosmopolitan, it has been held that such “cosmopolitan” cities cannot simply turn inhabitants into cosmopolitans (Binnie et al., 2006; Donald, Kevin and Kofman, 2009; Diep, Drabble and Young, 2006). In a similar way, participation in a “cosmopolitan network” does not make all of the people involved enthusiastic followers of the same understanding of cosmopolitanism. Rather, what is required is to explore the range of meanings that (in this case) the Tunisian users attached to cosmopolitanism. Clearly, many of my research participants mobilised the narrative of cosmopolitanism as a framework to express their thoughts. Departing from the assumption that the relationship between the local and the cosmopolitan is highly complex, I had started to explore the ways in which “individual and collective actors in the postcolonial world make that
world by engaging with each other and with cosmopolitan ideas and movements beyond their immediate locales” (Werbner, 2008:8).

I had been living and studying in Tunis since the early 2000s, and had grown used to discussions about cosmopolitanism and the idea that Westerners were hostile towards Arab people. The topic regularly came up in small-talk conversations, for instance when I was getting to know someone new. Arguably, the most common question I was confronted with here was what I thought about Islam. I was asked if I did not regard all Muslims to be “terrorists”, or if my parents were not afraid about me travelling to a “Muslim country”. What was usually required was a long and arduous development of trust, in which I had to stress the absence of any negative feelings from my side. Many of my friends thought that Westerners were afraid of Muslims, and so felt rejected. A 17-year-old pupil and cousin of a friend from the Tunisian city of Sousse, for instance, was moved to tears when I managed to convince her that I was genuinely “unafraid” of Muslims and that I did not “reject” her. A long-standing friend in his 30s who was trying to make a living in the film industry often said that he “would like to hug” all those foreign students of Arabic language in the Bourguiba school, Tunis. What impressed him was their commitment to learn the language: a commitment which, it seemed to him, attested to their intention to approach Arab culture with an attitude of genuine interest and empathy.

Similar ambiguities were also obvious in the relations that I developed with lecturers during my studies at the University of Tunis. Some referred to the American sociologist Samuel Huntington as the most influential contemporary thinker of “the West”. In the early 1990s, Samuel Huntington had written his influential monograph *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) on the future configuration of the world political order. He predicted a coming “clash of civilizations” – in particular between what he defined as the Christian West and the Muslim Arab world. Huntington’s thesis had a major influence on American foreign policy throughout the 1990s, providing an ideological base for George W. Bush’s later “War on Terror”. My lecturers in Tunis often seemed to imply that Huntington’s ideas were uncritically taught at Western universities, thus disseminating and normalising a specific vision of the relations between Western and Arab countries among Western students.

What Mehmet, the Tunis couchsurfing group and even the university lecturers observed was that the “cosmopolitanism” claimed by many Western people is, in practice, neither egalitarian nor universal. Many West-
ern couchsurfers – so it was often argued – are cosmopolites only while on tour; once they return home, they keep their houses closed to people whom they consider completely different in terms of culture or religion. It is difficult to provide consistent proofs that would substantiate such an argument. What perhaps matters more here is that – whether translating actual realities or not – this argument and the general feeling of rejection it articulates have become part of a wider common sense within the Arab world. A common reaction that I observed among many Tunisian couchsurfers was to refer to Koranic injunctions and other Islamic sources to explain “their” openness to foreigners (Buchberger, Chapter 4). In the eyes of my interlocutors, this openness is somehow distinguished from the “open-mindedness” claimed to be espoused by many Western cosmopolites, which the respondents frequently considered to be merely a specific fashion or lifestyle among Western middle classes rather than a “genuine” interest in others. In this sense, the quest for the “real”, which – we argue – underpins Western alternative tourism movements and also much of the impetus of the couchsurfing community, is here pushed even further.

The frictions occurring in the context of couchsurfing encounters in Tunisia thus speak to the ways in which some local surfers feel socially excluded in a wider sense from the dominant cosmopolitan narrative among Western members. In a national context in which the Tunisian government had long institutionalised a narrative of Tunisia built upon its presumed European ancestry, this exclusion becomes even more “painful”. In their encounters with their presumed Western “relatives”, the expectation of reaffirming a shared kinship between Tunisian and European couchsurfers is denied. Instead, the Tunisians experience that the travels of their Western guests are to a large extent driven by Orientalist images that reaffirm the Maghreb and its inhabitants as radically different.

It appears that it is first and foremost this exclusion that leads to the emancipation of other, alternative cosmopolitanisms. The phenomenon is not new, as Edward Said (1994 [1979]) stresses in his work on the historical constitution of the “Orient” built by, and in opposition to, the West. The Orient had to compensate for the shortcomings of the modernist project and provide what was considered to be missing in the modern world. In a context of perceived or real rejection, it seems the natural thing to do to generate new forms of “vernacular” cosmopolitanism (Werbner, 2008) by mobilising religion, gender or whatever other criteria are used to define belonging (cf. Forte, 2010) as overarching reference points. The paradox and
sad irony of the contra-cosmopolitanism generated among the mostly educated middle-class members of the couchsurfing community in Tunisia is that the political rhetoric of the “clash of civilizations” noted by Samuel Huntington – which arguably has incited much of the anti-Islamic resentments in Western countries since the mid-1990s – is also used in the Arab world, to foster limits and polarise boundaries between Self and Other.

The lively discussion at the Tunis couchsurfing meeting introduced another element. Many, if not most couchsurfers said that they had a more immediate understanding of, and felt more at ease with, Muslim guests. Similarly, a frequent argument brought forward at the couchsurfing community forum “Muslim couchsurfers” is that a shared “Muslim” ethics of hospitality more easily creates feelings of closeness and familiarity among couchsurfers. This latter observation points to another dimension of couchsurfing experience and culture which goes beyond the rhetoric of cosmopolitan discourse or feelings of belonging or rejection – something that can be anthropologically analysed in terms of different “regimes of hospitality” that emerge in the field of contact with strangers.

**Regimes of hospitality and the power to dramatise one’s guest’s experiences**

Like all forms of hospitality and most forms of human relation, couchsurfing implies expectations of reciprocity that are framed within the specific cultures of hosts and guests. Dennis Zuev, in his study on couchsurfing hospitality in Siberia (Chapter 3), argues that the hosting of guests is socially regulated by what he calls “regimes of hospitality”. He explains that couchsurfing generates a cosmopolitan realm mainly for the guests and travellers, yet remains governed by localised hospitality norms and cultures for the hosts. While guests are often candidly invited to “feel at home”, they are not free to act as they please. Instead, he explains – through his own, self-reflexive account as a host in his Siberian home town – they are assigned specific locales within the private home, they are expected to visit – and enjoy – specific sites proposed by the host, and they are also expected to behave in specific ways. There are always rules and boundaries to behaviour which hosts and guests are woven into, often unconsciously (Durkheim, 1964[1938]).
Zuev gives an account of hosting the Italian Argentinean couchsurfer Marco to illustrate his frequent disappointments about the ways in which his (mainly Western) guests acted. Marco promised to cook “real” Italian pasta. Zuev could not see the point or particularity of eating pasta, which had become an ordinary dish in his town. But he accepted the gesture of Marco, who wanted to offer something in exchange for the hospitality he had received. Zuev bought ingredients to prepare the pasta and, the night before his guest’s departure, reminded him about his promise. Marco no longer wanted to cook pasta, and Zuev was not happy – not because of not being able to enjoy Italian pasta, but because of the breach of promise. In his account, Zuev explains that in his Siberian home town, hospitality used to be primarily about offering shelter to strangers – hunters, traders and run-away prisoners. A new type of stranger appeared at the end of the Cold War in the 1990s in the form of (again, mainly Western) backpackers travelling along the Tran-Siberian railway to China. For this new type of stranger, making a journey through an “odd” land had in itself become the main attraction. Zuev explains that he realised Marco’s, and his subsequent Western guests’, predispositions towards Siberia, and decided to show them an alternative, valuable and “true” image. He took Marco on a long hiking trip through his favourite landscapes. Marco became exhausted halfway through the hike, seemingly not appreciating the landscape that Zuev loved so much. He eventually left early. Disappointed by the experience, Zuev wrote him a positive – but not an “extremely” positive – review. Marco and his subsequent guests were just “normal” couchsurfers and did not produce any specific “emotional kick”. At the same time, Zuev describes how he felt like a “hero” when taking charge of his guests, becoming the conductor of the spectacle put up for them, producer of awe-inspiring landscapes, gatekeeper of intimate knowledge about local life and narrator of personalised stories and interpretations about a specific local reality.

In one of the first sociological essays on hospitality, Georg Simmel (1950) discusses how the ambivalent unity of nearness and remoteness involved in human relations is organised in the specific phenomenon of the stranger. The latter, he explains, is able to challenge notions of strangeness and possibilities of commonality among hosts and guests, and can thus either accentuate or dissipate conceptions of Self and Other. According to Hocart (2004 [1952]), in various historical contexts – such as ancient Greece, India and Fiji – strangers were seen as potentially divine messengers or returning ancestors. Because they usually belong to an “extra-ordi-
nary” world, they were, in the belief of their hosts, “suitable vehicle[s] for the apparition of the Gods” (Pitt-Rivers, 1977:101). In a similar vein, the stoic philosopher Seneca, in his *Letters to Lucilius*, proposed disregarding the social status of a stranger, who could as well be a knight, slave or beggar, and solemnly consider their soul, which may be “god dwelling as a guest in a human body” (Seneca, 65AD:Let. 31/11). To respond to the ambiguity of foreigners, gods and ghosts, most human societies have developed practices of hospitality that allow them to “exercise power”\(^4\) over these strangers and deal with their potentially harmful qualities or intentions (Graburn, 2012). Julian Pitt-Rivers (1977) defines the social logic of hospitality in terms of a double strategy aimed at both socialising and containing strangers by transforming them into guests. In his *The People of the Sierra* (1954), Pitt-Rivers explains that from the perspective of a community of villagers, anthropologists and other strangers who walk into a village behave like children, ignoring, and therefore breaking, rules, and having to be socialised. At the same time, the relative magic often associated with such strangers can help to empower the host, in particular where these strangers pertain to the mythical world of powerful foreign enemies, spirits, divinities or ancestors (Sahlins, 1995). For Claude Lévi-Strauss (1974), the symbolic and sometimes material consumption of stranger-enemies and also of dead family relatives is a method to nullify ontological Otherness (and thus to neutralise the danger of contagion this Otherness implies), and at the same time to appropriate the power of the Other in the Self.

Yet, Lévi-Strauss’ metaphor of cannibalistic consumption only provides a partial explanation. Hocart (2004) stresses that within a system of anticipated reciprocity, instead of being eaten, strangers are actually more often treated with due respect; in return (because there is an expected return), the host expects favours either immediately, or in later life from God or any other transcendental entity. The ontological difference between host

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\(^4\) The word “hospitality” is likely to stem from a combination of the Latin noun *hostis* (itself derived from the proto-Indo-European *gööstis*, meaning stranger, enemy, ghost, guest) and the Latin verb *petere* (attack, engage, exercise power over). From the contraction of the two terms are derived the noun *hospitero* (literally: the [one] “exercising power over a stranger”; practically used as “lord of strangers” or “the host”) and the verb *hospitor* (in practical usage,”to be a guest”; cf. Lewis & Short, 1879). (Cf. also Candeia & da Col, 2012 who refer to Derrida, 2000, who in turn refers to Benveniste, 1969).
and guest is here not neutralised, but kept alive and nurtured – like the Olympic flame or the bone relics of saints that are believed to maintain an “authentic link” (Steward, 1984) to their mythical origins. In this way, the ontological work of hospitality is to operate a dialectic process through which Self and Other (which in mythical time belonged to a wider whole) are separated and brought back into contact, only to be separated once again. The prerequisite condition of hospitality is the delineation of Other estranged of Self, yet possibly also as part of Self in a hidden or uncanny way (Kristeva, 1991). From this point of view, hospitality reveals itself to be a powerful social institution to maintain and renew social and cosmic order. Its study may embrace any form of practice by means of which a priori strangers and strange worlds (which may equally be people, spirits and material cultures or abstract models, techniques and knowledge) are accommodated and encompassed. A series of great examples are provided in a recent special issue of the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute edited by Candea and da Col (2012).

Dennis Zuev’s account illustrates how the materiality of travellers from Europe and North America arriving in Siberia brings to life a locally held imaginary of the “Western world”. The hospitality towards these travellers enables local hosts to engage and appropriate the “magic” associated with this foreign world, and to integrate a part of it into the social intimacy of their home. The home itself is transformed as a result of this contact and contamination. It becomes a locale that reaches out beyond the immediate contexts of the here and now and opens up possibilities for associations with a wider world beyond – not unlike religious shrines functioning as connectors to the worlds of the divine in other contexts. The hospitality towards couchsurfing strangers – similar to the hospitality towards saints and spirits – allows the host to emancipate, within a micro-local context, an identity based upon relations within a wider cosmos. It transforms living rooms into ceremonial grounds celebrating the world citizenship of their owners. Yet, Zuev explains, the magic can fade. Where foreign travellers provide no more “emotional kick”, where they become easily predictable “Lonely-planetized” tourists, they and the worlds they represent lose much of their appeal. In such cases, the power relations are inverted. The stranger is no longer imbued with uncertain, magical or potentially dangerous powers that need to be contained or socialised. Instead, the stranger is lost in translation, and is easily manipulated by the host. Zuev observes that for
the host, to exercise power over the guest by “conducting” his or her experiences can be a playful pleasure in itself.

What Zuev’s account also illustrates is that couchsurfing develops a form of touristic hospitality at a hitherto little-accustomed scale. Most forms of traditional mass-produced tourism are based on industry- or state-orchestrated regimes of tourism hospitality, carefully planned through tourism development and marketing strategies. Through the production of signage, maps and interpretation sites, the touristic strangers are (usually) successfully contained in specific spaces and itineraries within the urban or natural landscape. The strategic renovations and architectural redevelopments of the urban centres of most European capitals during the 19th and 20th centuries here provide prime examples. They became strategically produced miniatures to showcase what the specific nations wanted to be and be about. Addressing both domestic and international tourists, the rebuilt city centres of Paris, London, Berlin or Lisbon ostentatiously displayed – and touristically ceremonialised – the presumed wealth of their respective colonial empires, the genius of their respective technological, artistic and architectural progress, the stories and references of their respective imagined national cultural ancestries and their dominant values or “personalities”.

In the context of couchsurfing, hospitality practice is performed essentially at the scale of the private domestic home. The logic and the means of accommodating strangers at that scale seem to remain largely similar to those of publicly performed hospitality. Karen Halttunen (1989), for instance, observes how the traditional parlour in the front of the house of many Western households (initially used only during the mourning of the dead) has evolved into a specifically reserved space for the accommodation of and catering to strangers and guests. She argues that, with the emergence of the “transparent” person as a societal ideal in the USA in the early 20th century, the hidden back regions and secret gardens of the house (and the person) disappeared, making the living room a “transparent” symbolic, social and logistic centre of social life. In practice, the ideal described by Halttunen was not achieved; even if reduced to a more private scale, back regions, in the form of sleeping rooms, garden huts or hobby cellars continue to exist. At the same time the living room becomes a place to socialise with different types of a priori foreigners: guests, strangers, new-born babies, saints, spirits and “souvenir-relics” from the last holiday. The structure and function of hospitality observed in these cases remain
similar to the hospitality of state-orchestrated public spaces or formerly religious ones to engage the supernatural and divine. The phenomenon of hospitality thus seems able to transform and reappear at different scales of social life (cf. Candea and da Col (2012), who refer to Michael Herzfeld’s (1987) work on Mediterranean hospitality). In the context of couchsurfing, it usually evolves within spaces governed by families and local cultural norms. Bernard Schéou (Chapter 6) argues that the hospitality towards foreign couchsurfers in Vietnam evolves in the field of tension between social aspirations to participate in a “modern”, global world and the largely resilient norms of Confucian hospitality which prevent the accommodation of strangers in the domestic house. To deal with this tension, the a priori “guests” are commonly treated as, and transformed into, “friends” or pseudo-kin, which allows them to be welcomed and integrated into the family home. In other cases, couchsurfing hosts hide their activity from their wider families, conscious about breaking cultural taboos.

As demonstrated by Dennis Zuev’s story, hosting foreigners at home eventually can become a transformative experience for the hosts themselves, allowing them to realise their own cultural difference as much as that of their guests. Zuev explains that he had to learn to deal with his guests, to anticipate their expectations and deal with the disappointments when guests did not act as expected. In the end, he realised that he did not provide access to any form of “real”, Siberia, but had become the producer of a specific Siberian fantasy world that he loved, and hoped his guests would love as well.

Couchsurfing in Brisbane (David Picard)

While Couchsurfing.org is to a large extent about facilitating one-to-one contact between hosts and guests, it also provides its members with an online-to-offline community platform used to create interest groups, organise events, meet up and form friendships at the local scale. In the next and final section, David Picard will draw on his experience of couchsurfing at Gustavo’s in Australia to explore this community aspect.

Gustavo was waiting in his car outside Brisbane airport. It was three in the morning, raining and steaming hot. My girlfriend and I had just arrived from a 32-hour journey from Lisbon, with stopovers in Madrid, Dubai and Singapore. We were tired from the trip, and also excited to finally be
in Australia. We had found Gustavo’s profile page on the top of the list of the Brisbane couchsurfers, and sent him a short message requesting if we could stay at his place for a couple of days. He had agreed to our request and offered to pick us up at the airport.

When driving into town, we spoke in Portuguese and later changed to English. Gustavo was in his early thirties, a son of South-American immigrants, and had grown up on Australia’s west coast. He had come to Brisbane to work as a contractor for a mining company. We arrived at his home, an executive-style two-bedroom flat on the top floor of a newly built complex in the centre of Brisbane’s West End. The flat was sparsely decorated; most of the stuff had been put there by the property agent. Gustavo showed us “our” room, a large double bedroom with en suite bathroom, left us the house keys and went to bed. When we woke up the next day, he had left for work. We had breakfast at a coffee place outside the building. Upon our return, he was back in the flat and suggested a programme of things we could do together. We took his car to drive to a forest site just outside town, and walked up a hill with a grand panoramic view over the city. Gustavo told us about his family, who had stayed on the west coast, and his involvement in the local couchsurfing community, through which he had met most of his friends. We later went to a restaurant, had some drinks and met some of his friends in a dancing place. We were dead tired and returned to the house early to go to sleep. He had planned another programme for us for the following day – going to a local coffee house, visiting the South Bank area, going to an Afro music concert and a Latin dance night. We eventually politely declined and stayed on our own.

After moving to Lisbon, I had continued to participate in the couchsurfing community and hosted a couple of people at my flat. I also attended a dinner organised by the Lisbon group. The meeting of people who were mostly strangers to each other at first created a peculiar ambiance. Yet, the experience of sitting down together at tables, sharing a meal and later going out for drinks dissipated many of the initial tensions. I made some tentative contacts, most of whom I never met again. Some others eventually became friends to go out and hang out with. Through a friend of a couchsurfing friend, I also met my girlfriend, who joined me on my trip to Brisbane. There, we found a house-sit through the website Sabbatical-homes.org, which was to become available a couple of days after our arrival. Until then, we stayed at Gustavo’s. Throughout our stay in Queensland, we used the couchsurfing website to meet people at picnics in the park,
attend a weekend party in the private house of a Mexican-Australian couple and go on a camping trip with a French couple. Through the repetition of meetings, relations with some people became stronger; in any case, it created familiarity and a sense of community belonging. Only a few of the couchsurfing members who were part of our Brisbane friends were actually couchsurfing at that time; most were somehow displaced, and used the website to meet people and make new friendships. In the actual meetings of couchsurfers, the criterion of nationality frequently moved to the background and the shared experience of meeting people and doing things together – the emotions of transhumance that Paula Bialska (2007) talks about, or maybe more simply the emotions of feeling part of a community – came to the fore. Surfing, which initially defined the moment of riding a wave with the help of a surfboard or pirogue, seemed an appropriate metaphor to describe these emotions. Like the happiness that overcomes a surfer riding waves in the sea, these emotions were mostly ephemeral. We met many people whom we would otherwise have considered somehow “odd” in terms of their profession, lifestyle or personality – at the very least, people who, through our established social practices and friendship networks, we would have had very little chance to meet. As Dennis Zuev argues, it was certainly more interesting for us to surf a couch and to discover the exoticisms of the ordinary life-worlds of others than to host surfers who will always “just” be surfers.

It is of course a candid surfer-centric claim that couchsurfing – the “riding” of other people’s private homes and domestic intimacies – is making a “better” world. The chapters of this book show that couchsurfing is not accessible to everyone, and that its specific culture of “openness” often hides a resilient set of stereotypes which may be deeply alien and even offensive to many people. Paradoxically, in a world in which communication technologies, mobility and migration have challenged many established narratives about national, local, ethnic, religious or cultural belonging, tourism practices like couchsurfing, and the cosmopolitan ideals they mediate, rhetoric often reconfirm and reinforce such narratives. Following Theodor Lessing’s (1919) observations, made a hundred years ago, the modern idea of history and the allegory of a timeless Eden as its anchor point continue to supply a widely hegemonic, global framework to make sense of time, becoming and being in the world. According to Jean Baudrillard (1998), notions like culture, religion or nation are here no longer necessarily signs of difference, but of social differentiation within a common social space. As
De-Jung Chen shows in her chapter on Taiwan (Chapter 5), learning about this framework of differentiations and the cultural stereotypes it projects upon Self and Others becomes a means to participate in the cosmopolitan world system.

At the same time, while cosmopolitanism is often so easily deconstructed and pushed aside as a merely aesthetic garment of unbalanced global power relations, it actually proposes a pragmatic way to live together and to organise human life at the global scale. In our view, it is the preserve of the spheres of political debate and activism, not academia, to debate or judge its moral goodness – or what Peggy Swain (2009) has called the "cosmopolitan hope" of tourism. However, as social activists and as couchsurfing tourists – and not acting under the cover of a putatively ideologically neutral academia – we can state that Couchsurfing has certainly helped us to make our world “better”, to cultivate our obsession with the search for divine beauty that we know we will not find, to meet like-minded and like-mindedly odd people, many of whom continue to live in our memories. It has helped us to candidly cultivate our garden, and given birth to a beautiful little barracuda =).}

**References**


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