

# Dump the hotel bills

*“What better place to put up your feet than a comfy couch owned by a friendly local”*

It's the holiday break and you're desperate to get away. Problem is where do you go and what do you do if you don't want to go the usual student travel route?

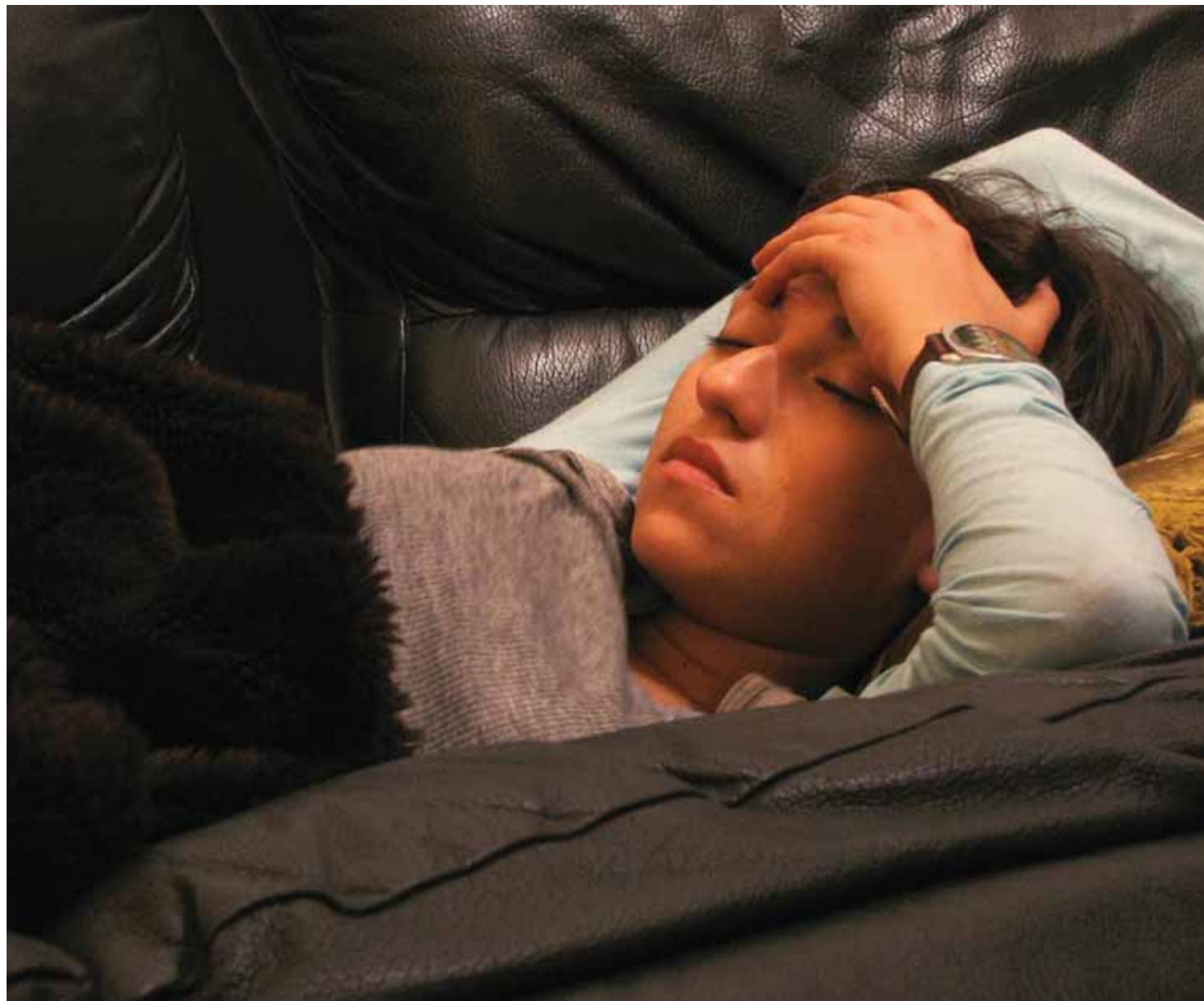
For those with airfare money and a love of the unusual, couch surfing might be the thing.

Far from being a sport involving waves and upholstered furniture, couch surfing is an online service offered by a vast network of users across the world. Operating from numerous websites, this community consists of both travellers and hosts who are willing to undergo the experience of sharing a living space with someone they've never met and without a cent being exchanged.

To people who've had bad experiences with housemates, it may sound like a recipe for disaster, but what better place to put up your feet when travelling than a comfy couch owned by a friendly local.

The system is simple – by registering as a user on the service's website you're automatically connected to other couch surfers, in cities spread across 230 countries. After creating a profile, you can join discussion groups and chat with other users about your area of interest or get started straight away by searching for a place to stay in regions that interest you. Using a number of search filters like age, gender, and proximity to the city, you then place a couch surfing request and wait for the offers to roll in.

Melbourne University alumni,



Julien Bocobza has couch surfed three times and lived to tell the tale. His experiences took him to New Zealand and Tasmania.

“My best time was in Tasmania where I was travelling with a fellow international student. He was German and we found a German family in Hobart.

“It was great, they were very excited to have some Europeans over, and they made a big German dinner and were very nice hosts.”

Couch surfing can be a fantastic way to get to know the place you're visiting from the point of view of a local. At the very least you'll immediately make an on-site connection with someone in the know. If you're lucky and you've taken the time to get to know your host online before you arrive, you might really hit it off and have a tour guide who can also hook you up with an instant social life.

Safety is always a concern when travelling, but the site provides different levels of security. You might choose to only connect with hosts whose names and addresses have been verified by the site.

French student Caroline Lai has travelled throughout Asia using couchsurfing.com.

“I mostly stay with other women because I think it's just logical and more safe,” she says.

“I've met great people (and) I've opened up my apartment in Paris several times to couch surfers and never had a bad experience.”

It may not be for the shy or for those who value their private space but in terms of quirky travel ideas on a shoestring, you could hardly find a more embracing community of users.

If your travel budget doesn't stretch to heading overseas, stay local and create some great

moments by enjoying one of the numerous tours Melbourne has to offer. Tours around Melbourne take in everything from chocolate, shopping, to middle-eastern bakeries on Sydney Road.

And then there's the notorious Haunted Melbourne Ghost Tour.


It starts at the Haunted Bookshop in Melbourne's seedier side of town. When we did it recently, there were the occasional nervous laughs and jocular comments from those who didn't want anyone to think they believed in ghosts. We noticed also some people swigging vigorously from their bottle of soft drink enhanced with 'dutch courage'.

Our host appeared in the doorway, dressed in a long black duster and black hat. Drew Sinton is an occultist and former grotto master with the Australian Church of Satan, who claims to

have experienced paranormal phenomena. He also has a puckish sense of humour revealing he prefers getting hand written mail from people who feel that his soul needs to be saved.

“People just email these days, it's not the same.”

Sinton told us our tour would follow a death march and like a ghoulish pied piper with his black duster billowing behind him, we followed into Melbourne's haunted past. Standing atop Burial Hill (Flagstaff Gardens) dodging the bats and keeping a wary eye on the possums skittering about, we were prepared to see spectral beings from days of yore wandering the park.

We may not have seen any ghosts, but we certainly learned a lot about Melbourne's haunted past. 

**Catherine Paris and Louise Pellew**