

# If You Can't Travel the World, Bring the World to You

words & photos by Lester Lee

To me, Couchsurfing is the best travelling idea ever. I still have vivid memories of my first experience Couchsurfing. We were stuck in Bangkok's infamous traffic, and our host was left waiting alone for an hour. Four men, fresh out of National Service, lost and late for dinner with a stranger who had graciously agreed to host us for the next four nights – I felt sorry for shaming all Singaporean men.

The next morning, we found ourselves next to a Swiss who was also 'surfing' in the same house. He was rolling his own hashish, blasting loud electronic music, and grooving to the rhythm. It was surreal. The best I could do was to awkwardly nod my head to the beat.

Despite being embarrassed and socially awkward, I got an insight into how a local in Bangkok might live, and made a few friends along the way. I realised that people make a place, and from then on, I was sold.

I came home and immediately started envisioning myself as a host in Singapore. How could I better the experience of the travellers who were going to cross paths

with me? How would I convince my parents? We had seven people and one dog living in a five-room apartment – where were they going to sleep?

It wasn't long before I received my first ever 'couch request' from Shamal, a British Indian. On the night of his late arrival, I picked him up from Changi Airport in my family's Toyota. Shamal told me that if I hadn't picked him up, he would have taken the \$9 airport shuttle service to a hotel in the city and then the 6N nightrider to my house at midnight. He shared about the perks of our nanny state and political system, and asked me many other things about Singapore that I did not have answers to. I was incredibly impressed by the homework he had done. Conversations with him made me realise how little I knew about Singapore and inspired me to understand my country better.

Since then, I've hosted over forty couchsurfers from twenty-three countries in two years. With each individual, I've discovered common values and ideals, while learning about the differences between us. Below are three couchsurfers who left a deep impression on me.



inspired by the people in Thailand selling things near the junctions where the cars were halted.

The night he left, my Dad showed me an article on *Lianhe Wanbao*, asking if the Caucasian juggling on the road was Jeff. It was. Later that week, my sister shared a Stomp video with me of Jeff. While we constantly seek interesting content to share, Jeff created his own. With \$800 in his bank, he left Singapore for Australia on a holiday working visa.

## Jeff, the Juggler

One morning, my American surfer Jeff told me that he was going to busk in town. I warned him that it was illegal and that he would need a license to do so. After work that night, he asked me, "Lester, how much does the guy at 7-Eleven earn in one hour?" I wasn't sure but I estimated, "about \$6." He smiled, revealing that an hour of busking in Orchard had earned him \$50. Wow, I hadn't thought Singaporeans were that generous. Maybe it was the tourists.

The next day, Jeff told me he had earned \$120 from busking for two hours. He said that he had chosen a traffic junction in Little India, juggled for the drivers, and then gone up to them for donations. Jeff said that he had been



### *Hiroshi, the B-Boy*

Having travelled to more than sixty countries, Hiroshi insisted that the number of countries doesn't matter; it's the friends you make on the road that count. With his mature, sensitive, and charming nature, Hiroshi quickly warmed up to my father, my senile grandmother, and everyone else in the family.

He asked me if there was a place in Singapore where dancers met, and I mentioned \*SCAPE since we were conveniently in town. The moment we reached the third level of \*SCAPE, music beats and the screeching of shoe soles could be heard. I saw many teenagers strutting their dance moves. Hiroshi stepped forward and exchanged "hey

yo wassup's" with the fellow b-boys there, while my girlfriend and I stood in the corner, trying to make ourselves comfortable. Hiroshi changed into a rugged-looking Allen Iverson jersey, revealing some impressive eight-pack abs, which raised a few eyebrows. I'm sure my girlfriend was excited too. The 28-year-old went on to do some neat footwork, followed by kicks, drops, hops, spins, flips, and freezes. Then, the head spin! All eyes were on Hiroshi by that point. I was just proud that he was my friend. No one dared dance after him. The other dancers were talking among themselves, but Hiroshi went up to them, and before long everyone was practising the moves that he shared.

During Hiroshi's three years of travelling, he took part in several breakdancing competitions around the world, teaming up with fellow travellers. He plans to continue his travels for another two years before he returns to Japan. As for now, he says, let it be.

### *Cherwin, the Cyclist*

After cycling for ten months from the Netherlands to South Korea together and then taking a ferry to Japan, Cherwin and his girlfriend went their separate ways. Cherwin flew to Singapore to continue his journey through Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, before returning home to Rotterdam.

The 23-year-old former Marine Corps arrived at Changi Airport and waited for his check-in bicycle to clear customs. He asked for directions to the Pan Island Expressway (PIE), and was warned that he was not allowed to cycle on the PIE. But he cycled anyway. On the PIE, he was stopped three times by the police. Each time he apologised, and asked if he should go back or continue forward towards his destination. Forward he went.

I invited Cherwin to a friend's birthday celebration. He later thanked me for that wonderful experience, and shared that he hadn't had the chance to sit down and talk to friends much since he started cycling. He left that night at 3 AM – he planned to cycle to the Woodlands checkpoint, and then to Malaysia before the sun got directly above his head.

For every couchsurfer that I have invited into my life, I have always been at the receiving end. I have been enriched by their stories, their knowledge, their struggles, and of course, their happiness whilst travelling; they have affirmed my love for travelling and meeting new people. Christopher McCandless was indeed right: "Happiness is only real when shared." 🍷

You can find his travel videos at [www.vimeo.com/rolesta](http://www.vimeo.com/rolesta) or contact him at [www.couchsurfing.com/rolesta](http://www.couchsurfing.com/rolesta).

