

Couch surfing in Mumbai

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Paranoid parents, cramped apartments and landlords who are just plain confused. CouchSurfing hosts in Mumbai have to deal with some unique problems, finds **Rachel Lopez**.

Vaibhav Wankhede lives with his parents. In Mira Road. Naturally his mum is a bit suspicious when her son invites foreigners – total strangers really – to spend the night on their sofa. Who comes to Mumbai to stay in Mira Road with people they've never met?

CouchSurfers do. Since 1999, travellers from around the world have signed up with the non-profit website couchsurfing.com to take advantage of fellow members' spare bedrooms, couches or free evenings to make the most of their trips abroad. The website helps those with time and space to connect with those who need them, in the hope that the favour will eventually be repaid by the same or another member. Tourists get free lodgings and the hosts benefit from the company. Everybody wins, except perhaps Mrs Wankhede, whose son had a hard time convincing her that someone who's "spent so much money on a ticket to India to live with us is not coming here to steal the TV".

While Mumbai is home to nearly 6,000 CouchSurfers (India has about 30,600), opening one's doors and life to visiting holidaymakers from halfway across the globe isn't always easy in this city. We have barely enough room and time for ourselves, and very few of us are content to mind our own business.

It took Wankhede some time to get his parents to understand the idea of CouchSurfing, but Vahishta Mistry still hasn't been able to. A vice president at UTV, Mistry has his own apartment in Nerul and over the last year he's given over the spare bedroom to 10 visitors, from Belgium, Spain and Greece. "My parents don't understand at all," he said. "They're not disapproving, just worried. They think I'm harbouring terrorists." Kartick Sitaraman, a film writer and assistant director, has hosted two visitors in his Matunga home this year, while marketing executive Aparna Shekhar-Roy has hosted some 200 people in five years. It's something that can make landlords, neighbours and even acquaintances uncomfortable, she says. Her neighbours would explain away her foreign visitors by assuming that she had



Surfing with the alien Mumbai CouchSurfers with travellers they've hosted

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studied abroad. "I've explained to whoever has asked that I'm not running a hostel," she said. "But people are always curious."

The fact that many Mumbaikars live in suburbs that are long train rides away from the city centre can be challenging too. Mistry's web profile does not hide the fact that he lives 32 kilometres from the tourist district. But he gives guests a lift when he takes his car to work and lends them his vehicle and driver for the day, a CouchSurfing bonus almost unheard of in other countries. Sheila Sivanand, who moderates a group for female travellers on the site and has offered her guest room and spare mattress in Seven Bungalows to older travellers from France to Vietnam, occasionally throws in free rides too. But for the most part, visitors are stuck with crowded trains and slow-moving traffic.

Local hosts say that this is less cruel than it seems, particularly since visitors tend to be interested in the oddest of things. "They are more travellers than tourists," said Shekhar-Roy. "They want to see our supermarkets and kirana stores." Sivanand says that Mumbai offers enough everyday adventures to make trips to tourist traps redundant. She's met people who've "never tasted coconut water".

Shock and awe are unavoidable, observes Mistry. "It's kind of amusing to see them because they are so out of their depth here," he said. "The people who come to Mumbai are either on the last leg of their journey or are starting off an India tour with Mumbai. They find that Mumbai is unlike the rest of the country and India is unlike the rest of the world."

The experience is often as much of an eye-opener for the local as for the visitor. Wankhede, who hosted an Austrian visitor recently, ended up seeing the Lalbaugcha Raja for the first time when the presence of a foreigner allowed the two to jump the queue. Shekhar-Roy has visited the Sassoon Docks and Dadar Flower Market with her visitors and Sitaraman sampled Mohammed Ali Road's Ramzan food only because he took a visitor there. They've also discovered that the mostly helpful city has an ugly side. Taxi drivers refuse black passengers, hawkers harass white people and neighbours assume the worst if a single woman hosts single men.

For the most part, the problems are easy to handle. City hosts explain that how much neighbours complain depends on how often and how long visitors stay and whether you rent or own your apartment. "In Mumbai, they mind their own business," said Shekhar-Roy, adding that the vendors in Bandra's Pali market, where she previously lived, were so used to CouchSurfers that they'd direct foreigners to her building when they saw them. It's not so much about opening up your room or schedule, believes Sitaraman. It's about opening your mind to something new. "It's such a rewarding experience," he said.

Visit www.couchsurfing.com. Also visit backpackingninja.com, a travel blog by Aparna Shekhar-Roy.

