

More

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time in Spain affordable.

Couch surfing

Two websites were particularly helpful in making her trip a reality. The first — www.workaway.info — offers travelers the opportunity to find temporary work around the world. She secured three jobs, one painting a hostile in Granada, Spain, for a week, another teaching English to a couple of girls in Bergos, Spain, and the third running a bed and breakfast in Valencia, Spain, for a month.

The second helpful website in McArthur's preparations was www.couchsurfing.org — a site that provides a network of people around the world who are willing to open their homes free of charge to travelers, offering them a spot on the couch, in a guest bed or on the floor.

"You never know what you're going to get," McArthur said of the couch-surfing accommodations. You do, however, have the opportunity to screen out the potential places to flop and select something that makes you comfortable. The idea, however, made McArthur's parents decidedly uncomfortable, at least in the beginning.

"I thought, this is crazy stuff," Tom McArthur, Keena's father, says of his initial reaction to her plan to couch surf her way through Spain.

Although Tom said he was very supportive of the idea of his daughter seeing the world and experiencing a variety of cultures, he had his concerns about her traveling by herself. But after observing her during some of their trips together, he was impressed by her use of good judgment, setting his mind a little more at ease.



Mohamed Chekroune, his mother, two sisters, a brother and Keena McArthur are pictured enjoying a special Moroccan tea time in Chekroune's home. Keena McArthur met Chekroune during her trip to Spain. SUBMITTED PHOTOS

"I'm really high on travel," Tom says. "I think everybody should have the opportunity to travel and hopefully live in a foreign country for a time."

In order to ease herself, and her parents, into the idea of couch surfing and solo female travel, Keena decided to open her St. George home to the couch-surfing network and see what kind of experiences she might have on her own turf. That decision immediately proved very positive and opened her mind even more to the idea.

Her first two guests were a pair of 60-year-old women who had been couch surfing for quite a while. They told her that staying with people in their homes had "renewed their faith in the American people."

Next, Keena hosted a woman, followed by a single man, the latter of which made her a little nervous in the beginning.

She had someone at her home with her when



Keena McArthur poses in the City of Science and Arts in Valencia, Spain.

he arrived to make sure it was going to be a safe situation. In the end, the two completely "hit it off" in a great friendship.

"It's a cultural exchange," Keena said of opening her house to these travelers. "I can have that international experience here in St. George."

Although there are no expectations placed on the hosts in the couch surfing world, Keena enjoyed providing an occasional meal for her guests and offering suggestions for places to visit while in the area. Between her own hosting and her time in Spain, she has had 17 couch-surfing experiences, all of them positive.

Cultural immersion

Armed with minimal luggage and a cell phone, Keena arrived in Spain, and her adventure began. During her four-month stay, she made her way through most of the country by bus and train, staying longer in some areas than others, depending on the accommodations and the jobs she had arranged for herself through Work Away.

Though she had no intention of meeting anyone special during her trip, Keena smiles as she reflects on what she likes to call her "summer sizzle."

His name is Mohamed Chekroune, and she met him while couch surfing at his house in San Sebastian, Spain. She had originally planned to stay in San Sebastian a few days, but "we hit it off really well," Keena says. She ended up staying two weeks.

The two saw the sights in San Sebastian and took day trips to France. When Keena left to work at a bed and breakfast in Valencia, Chekroune was

able to join her for the latter two weeks of Keena's assignment. Then, after giving the matter considerable thought and discussion, Keena agreed to accompany Chekroune to his home town in Morocco for two weeks.

That portion of Keena's adventure had her parents especially worried.

"It's a little different animal, for me at least," Tom says. "She was going to be somewhat isolated."

Although Keena kept in contact with her parents throughout her trip, there were days when she didn't check in, during which time Tom says he and his wife "just prayed harder."

The Moroccan experience proved to be extremely valuable to Keena.

"The simplicity there ... it was beautiful," she says. "I realized there were more things in common to our culture than differences, and that surprised me."

Some of the highlights included an overnight desert experience in the Sahara and interacting with Chekroune's family.

"To see the stars in the Sahara at night, that opened up the universe," Keena says.

Coming home

Keena's adventure concluded with a stop in Israel, meeting up with her parents for a business trip to Petra in Jordan. Her parents joke that they had to come

"Being a couch surfer made it hands-on. When you just become a tourist, it becomes lonely."

KEENA MCARTHUR
World traveler

retrieve her or she might have stayed forever.

"I wasn't ready to come home," Keena says.

She learned a lot during her travels, including the difference between being alone and feeling lonely. "Being a couch surfer made it hands-on," Keena says. "When you just become a tourist, it becomes lonely."

She also learned the true benefits of overcoming fear.

"I heard a quote that essentially says, 'The more you travel, the more you realize that fear makes strangers out of people who should be friends,'" Keena says. "I 100 percent believe that."

Since she has returned to the United States, Keena has had many people remark that she is very lucky to be able to take such a trip, but she says it's all a matter of prioritizing and working hard to make your dreams a reality.

"I did this," Keena says, emphasizing the fact that this trip didn't just happen; it took a lot of effort on her part.

In the end, Keena's four months abroad cost her less than it would have to stay home for that time. The total for her trip was around \$3,100, including everything except the flight in and out of the United States.

For now she is happy to be home and in a routine, but it is something she would definitely consider doing again.

"Travel like this makes you grateful for the things you have, but it makes you realize we don't have all the answers, and that's OK," Keena says. "It really puts you out of your comfort zone but you realize that maybe comfort isn't all it's cracked up to be."

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