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The friendliness factor will make all the difference in 2010
 Nikolaus Eberl

A GERMAN tourist who lost her way in Paris asked a newspaper vendor for help. "Where is Starbucks?" she said in halting English. "No idea," he replied in French with a bad-tempered shrug - even though he knew the nearest Starbucks coffee shop was only 50m away.

Paris recently ranked as the world's third-most attractive city (behind Sydney and London) in an international opinion poll, but came only 52nd out of 60 for friendliness.

Tourism in Paris is worth more than R138 billion a year and employs 150 000 people.

Recognising the massive cost of unfriendliness, French tourist officials declared July 9 this year the first Paris Tourist Day, encouraging local residents to be polite, welcoming and helpful for 24 hours.

For a long time, unfriendliness was the reason why Germany's tourism ratings were poor. Before the World Cup, Germany ranked 15th in the Nation Brand Index, virtually at the bottom of the "safe" destinations - in fact, below two that were not usually chosen by the risk-averse, Brazil and Egypt.

This was why the German Tourism Board launched a nationwide friendliness campaign aimed at empowering service champions at every conceivable touch-point that World Cup visitors might experience.

In the five months leading up to the 2006 World Cup, the German Tourism Board trained 100 000 touchpoint providers - all the way from airport handlers to taxi drivers to hotel staff and waiters - on how to adopt a friendly attitude.

If unfriendliness is left unchecked, the cost can be significant. The United States has suffered a dramatic reduction in foreign visitors from more than 26 million in 2001 to just 21.7 million in 2006, resulting in R789 million in spending and tax revenue lost and 194 000 jobs foregone in tourism.

According to a recent survey, more travellers are concerned about being harassed by US immigration officials than about the threat of terrorism in the US.

The latest destination to join the friendliness competition has been China, which recently announced guidelines for Beijing police to clean up the city's image ahead of the 2008 Olympic Games. Police officers are under new orders to lose their arrogance and clean up their foul language.

In an era of globalisation, where many a destination can boast beautiful sights - it is the people-to-people dimension that makes the difference.

For 2010, a national friendliness campaign is required that will unlock the massive potential South Africans are known for.

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