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# City sets sights on international tourism for 2012

## Chicago seeks to improve its rank as 10th among U.S. cities in overseas visitors

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Noonie Kantiya, a tourist originally from Thailand, stretches out on the Ledge of the Skydeck at Willis Tower, a favorite of visitors to Chicago. (Chris Sweda, ChicagoTribune / December 13, 2011)

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Willis Tower, 233 S Wacker Dr, Chicago, IL 60606, USA

By Erin Chan Ding, Special to the Tribune

December 19, 2011

Zeineb Houki sprawled out on the **Willis Tower Skydeck**, her hand propped under her head as if she were sunbathing, with just a pane of thick glass separating her and the street 1,353 feet below.

Her daughter, Naz Houki, stuck a tentative toe onto The Ledge last week before pulling back with a little shriek.

"Oh, my gosh!" she said. "How do you do this?"

Zeineb Houki, 65, and her husband, Zein Houki, 72, had traveled to Chicago from their hometown of Rabat, Morocco, for a weeklong visit to see their daughter graduate and to take in the city — and they are exactly the type of people Chicago tourism officials want to lure in 2012.

The Chicago Convention & Tourism Bureau is taking

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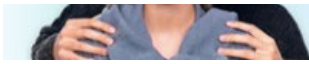
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an aggressive approach to increasing the number of visitors to Chicago with the start of a regional television and online campaign and plans to open several overseas offices. It goes into 2012 buoyed by

the anticipation of the city's hosting of the **G-8** and **NATO** summits in May, as well as by numbers showing that hotel bookings for next year are up.

That optimism marks a turnaround from just a couple of years ago, when the total number of visitors to Chicago fell significantly, to 39.2 million visitors in 2010 from a prerecession 46.3 million in 2007.

Chicago also lags a number of other major U.S. cities when it comes to international visitors, according to the **U.S. Department of Commerce**, with 1.1 million overseas visitors in 2010, or 4.3 percent of all international visitors to the United States. That places it 10th in overseas tourists, behind cities like Las Vegas and Boston as well as New York, which led all U.S. cities with 8.5 million, or 32.1 percent, of all international visitors.

"They're coming to Chicago, and they're transferring to other cities," said Don Welsh, CEO and president of the tourism bureau. "What's going to make them stay is some very proactive marketing, talking about all there is to do in Chicago and the region."

A bulk of that marketing consists of opening international offices, which means contracting with general sales agents to work with tour operators, media, travel agents and airlines in specific countries. In September, the bureau brought in a sales agent in **England** called Hills Balfour. The **United Kingdom** supplies the most overseas visitors to Chicago, but the number dropped 22 percent, to 158,000, in 2010 from 203,000 in 2009. The goal for 2012, said Warren Wilkinson, the bureau's senior vice president and marketing of communications, is to recapture that 22 percent.

Jonathan Sloan, managing director at Hills Balfour, said Chicago's competitive hotel rates, nonstop flights from the United Kingdom (there are nine daily) and "the fact that city has been undervisited over the last few years from the U.K." should create demand from **British** visitors.

One of those visitors, Juliette Smith, of **Nottingham**, England, said all she knew about Chicago before her 10-day visit this month is that "it's the Windy City, and it's freezing, and **Al Capone** lived here." Looking out over the city's vastness from the Willis Tower Skydeck last week, Smith called the city "wonderful. There are lots of bright lights. ... And your lake is, like, insane. It's like half the size of my country. It's mental."

Randy Stancik, a vice president at U.S. Equities Realty and the general manager of Willis Tower, said international tourists like Smith are "incredibly important. When they go home, they can tap a whole market. Can I go and reach her wherever she lives? No, I need her to be my evangelist."

The bureau, meanwhile, is doing its part to help. Overall, it will allocate about \$750,000 of its \$17.8 million annual operating budget to international marketing, Welsh said, compared with about \$300,000 in years past.

In January, the bureau will open an office in **Mexico City**, and then in Toronto in the spring of 2012. (Meghan Risch, spokeswoman for the bureau, said it ran offices in **Mexico** and **Canada** from 2001 to 2004.) By 2013, the bureau plans on having offices in **Brazil**, **India**, **Germany** and **Japan**. It's an effort to catch up to the marketing efforts of cities such as New York, which operates 18 international offices.

Laurence Geller, president and CEO of Strategic Hotels & Resorts, which owns the InterContinental Chicago and Fairmont Chicago, said that "what's happening with the marketing of the city is right for the first time in a long time."

Geller, who's from England but lives in Chicago and sits on the bureau's board, adds that the fiscal crisis in Europe should not detract from the city's marketing strategy.

"If the banks are down in Europe, we're going to have a lousy year, but I don't worry about it for the long term," he said. "We have to spend with the long term in mind, consistently and boldly."



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Wilkinson estimates that for every dollar spent on international marketing by the bureau, which is funded by a combination of airport departure taxes, state-directed grant funds, memberships and private sources, the city will get at least \$50 back. He adds that international tourists tend to spend three times as much as domestic tourists.



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Welsh, the bureau's CEO, said he's encouraged that hotel bookings are up by 265,000 rooms for 2012 compared with this time last year. The G-8 and NATO summits in the spring, the first time the meetings have been held back-to-back in the same city since London in 1977, are expected to bring 10,000 international visitors to the city, according to the Chicago G8 NATO **Summit** Host Committee spokeswoman Jennifer Martinez, as well as unprecedented global attention.

Even without the summits, the response of visitors from **China**, where the bureau opened offices in Shanghai and Beijing in 2009, aided by an annual \$250,000 grant from the Illinois Office of Tourism to promote Chicago, has been positive.

Visitors to Chicago from China increased to 97,000 in 2010, from 72,000 in 2009, according to the bureau. John Chikow, the president and CEO of the Greater North **Michigan Avenue** Association, which represents hundreds of Michigan Avenue-area businesses, noted that 114 Chinese visitors bought packages specifically for this year's In-Fashion: The **Magnificent Mile** Shopping Festival, a two-week event.

He said these visitors, as well as those from Brazil, Germany and the United Kingdom, are critical to the economic health of the city's tourism industry.

"They're not bashful about spending on retail," Chikow said. "They're not bashful about spending on dining. They're not bashful about spending on what I would call attractions: museums, plays, concerts. ... They're going for the full experience."

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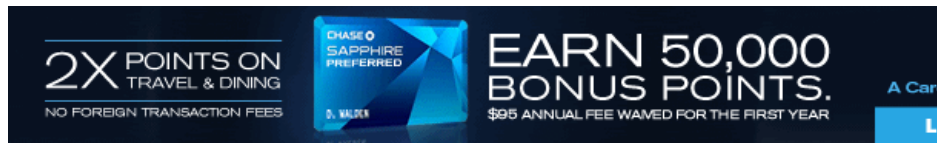
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