

Can Couchsurfing turbocharge last-minute bookings for 2010?

 By [Dr Nikolaus Eberl](#)

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When the International Travel Bourse (ITB) held in Berlin declared the 2010 edition closed on Sunday, 14 March 2010, the unanimous conclusion was that last year's downcast industry mood of recession has been replaced with buoyant hopes of a sooner-than-expected recovery, as 187 countries, including South Africa, vie with one another to lure European visitors to their parts of the world.



[Said Malaysian tourism](#) director Azizan Noordin, "The early indications for 2010 are very good." Taleb Rifai, the secretary general of the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), [added that](#) recuperation and growth in international tourism was occurring earlier and at a stronger pace than initially expected for 2010.

"A strong desire to attend"

As one delegate put it, "there is a strong desire amongst ordinary Germans (and Europeans, for that matter) to attend the 2010 [FIFA] World Cup in South Africa, if only we can afford the cost of travel." Pointing to the recent recovery of the German job market, she added that most of her friends are prepared to set some of their savings aside for making the trip, if it were within their purses' reach.

A recent study by Grant Thornton on the "average soccer tourist spend" revealed that the single biggest ticket item in the shopping basket of 2010 visitors will be accommodation (25%), followed by transportation (18%) and food and shopping (each 15%).

Clearly, affordability has become key to activating last minute bookings for the world cup, and innovative offerings are called upon in order to maximise the destination branding opportunity of 2010. One such innovation was recently showcased at the world's single biggest political event, the US inauguration of President Barack Obama.

"Why not throw the doors open wide?"

Members of a social hospitality network, www.couchsurfing.org, opened their doors to inauguration-goers, providing them with a roof over their heads and the opportunity to get to know Washington the way local residents do.

"We read about the people who are renting their houses for US\$2000 a night, and we thought, 'That's so in contradiction to what we believe,'" [Gil Glass said](#). He and his wife, Nancy Rosenbaum, were hosting 16 travelers in their three-bedroom, three-bath house. "We figured, why not throw the doors open wide and take as many as we can?"

Glass and Rosenbaum made it clear that their house was not a bed and breakfast. They were motivated by the opportunity to participate in a unique cross-cultural experience and the possibility of a cultural exchange. "Our non-couch surfing friends think that we're out of our minds. We've invited them to come and witness the spectacle," [Rosenbaum said](#).

A once in a lifetime experience

[Said one of their guests](#), Drew Hood from Midland, Tennessee, who drove 12 hours to witness the inauguration, "We really wanted to come. It's a once in a lifetime experience. As soon as Barack Obama was elected, I knew I wanted to go to D.C."

Another couchsurfer of Glass, Mary Bolling from Melbourne, Australia, [concurred](#), "I'm here to see the 'real' America and meet some of these awesome people who voted for Barack. It's very exciting to be part of history and part of the huge celebration."

Since July 2007, Glass and Rosenbaum have played couchsurfing hosts to more than 100 people from every continent except Antarctica. "We made some really great friends," [Glass said](#). "We loved them so much we threatened to adopt them."

Another Washington-area host, Tarek Maassarani, described the inauguration as the perfect backdrop for a couch-surfing experience. "People are coming here for an incredibly historic event but also a D.C. event. As a six-year resident, I feel a certain pride for showing people what to check out," he said.

“Participating in creating a better world”

The CouchSurfing Project is a free, Internet-based, international hospitality service. It was started by 30-year-old American Casey Fenton in 2004, seeking to connect with locals while travelling, which may or may not include free accommodation.

[Says Fenton](#): "Couchsurfing isn't about the furniture - it's not just about finding free accommodations around the world - it's about participating in creating a better world. We make the world a better place by opening our homes, our hearts, and our lives. We create deep and meaningful connections that cross oceans, continents and cultures."

As of this week, www.CouchSurfing.org has 1 742 114 members from 236 countries, representing 71 146 cities. The average age of members, who post their profiles online for prospective hosts to see, is 27. The US has the largest number of members (149 906), followed by Germany (74 835) and France (61 799). South Africa has currently 1775 members listed. According to Fenton, to date CouchSurfing has generated 2 021 685 friendships and 3 218 023 positive experiences, with 99.799% of all member experiences ranked positive.

Herman Schoonbee, a 42-year old management consultant from Auckland Park, Johannesburg, has already listed his house for the world cup. Says Schoonbee, who is offering one couch for a member of each competing continent. "I want to host a Visitor World Cup and take my team around the country to show them the very best South Africa has to offer. After all, you will never know a place until you mingle with the locals."

Replicating the 'boomerang effect'

The implications are clear: affordability is key for activating last minute bookings for 2010. Secondly, if social media is engaged to promote this event as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that allows visitors to partake in a common cause that will make this world a better place, the 'boomerang effect' experienced by the previous World Cup hosts, Germany, could be replicated - after all, this is what prompted more than 900 000 football fans in 2006 to spontaneously join in the World Cup Experience, in addition to the one million visitors who had already booked their ticket to the destination.

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