

PETTY CRIMES PUT GENEVA TOURISM AT STAKE



In the City of Geneva, tourism accounts for 2.5% of the gross domestic product and 24,000 direct and indirect employments. It has been a booming industry until recently when local crime rates started to increase significantly, being highly noticeable to inbound tourists. Though petty crimes like robbery and lack of visible security personnel are but the common complaints, these have already jeopardized the industry's potential revenues and the city's image as a whole.

It is estimated that Geneva will have 10,000-15,000 less tourists this year. It is mainly due to about ten Chinese tour operators who have announced their plan to remove the City of Geneva from their travel plan for Switzerland. Philippe Vignon, Director General of Tourism in Geneva, expressed his concern on the rapidly spreading testimonies on social networking sites regarding bad experiences in the city. One of which is the tweet of Google China's CEO that he was robbed in Geneva, which was made public to his 13.5 million followers. Another is a statement from a British blogger that Geneva is not a safe place.

To add to these local mishaps are national security threats. The number of arrests made in western Switzerland border and the Ticino had been continuously rising since 2010 up to the present.

From 2,530 people, it increased to 2,960 in 2011. Recent records show 970 arrests in the first quarter of 2012 which can ultimately end up into 3,880 by the end of the year if the trend continues. Jürg Noth, head of the Swiss Border Guard said that the perpetrators were armed with assault rifles, machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. "We even had a case where criminals blew up a bank with explosives," Noth added.

In an attempt to redress the matter, flyers warning tourists against petty criminals are being distributed. About 20 employees known as the "Tourist Angels" are also deployed in the travelling public during peak seasons. However, Vignon stressed out that brochures won't assure public safety. Rather, a steady and visible presence of police at the station of Cornavin would provide this, entailing of course more funding from the government and the parliament.

Furthermore, an increased number of border guards with special training and new equipment, including body armor, are set out to affected areas. A new road-block system is also being set up to effectively stop rebel vehicles and criminals which are believed to come from Lyon, targeting Geneva, Vaud, Neuchâtel and Jura, as well as the Ticino.

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