

How International Is Your Field of Dreams?

Felipe Candiota

Basic tips for attracting foreign tourists and improving your hotel business

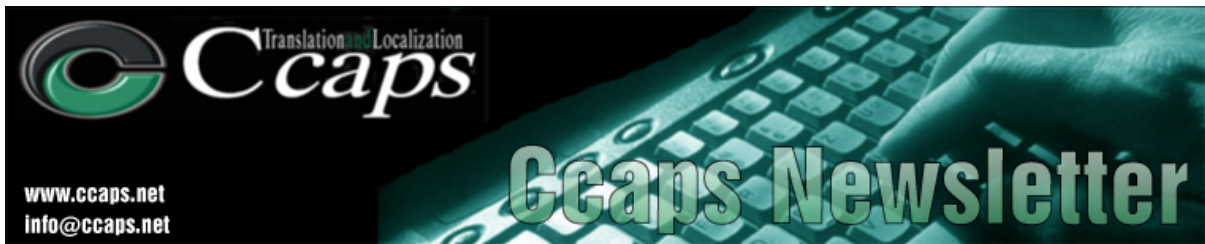
You are used to traveling, whether on business or leisure. You already know the inner workings of the airline companies and airports, you like to design your own schedules and you know how to search online for exclusive destinations and interesting hotels. You decide that you are going to travel and you choose Thailand, for example.

You book the ticket on a tourism website on Thailand and find a destination and hotel that suits your taste. There is a small description in English about the area and hotel. There is also a link to make reservations and another link to the hotel website. However, the hotel website is written entirely in Thai and you cannot find the little British or U.S. flag on the home page. You think: maybe they didn't have time to translate the website yet... You click the reservations link and set everything up; after all, you loved the way it looked and have already traveled many a foreign land. You pack your bags and head off happily to travel half way across the world and enjoy an exotic place.

Airport, taxi, tips... Finally, you find yourself at the reception desk of that beautiful little hotel at the shores of a beach in paradise. When you address the receptionist in English (unless you know a little Thai), you discover she has a very basic vocabulary, yet finds your reservation and sends you off to your room. That's when the problems begin.

The instruction folder explaining how to use the hotel services is written entirely in Thai. You look in the drawers and find nothing in English. No problem... But now you want to know what time dinner is served. You dial 9 or 0 for the operator or reception desk. And here things really start to get absurd! The woman who answers your call does not understand the question, tries to respond in Thai and you obviously give up. You imagine that 8:00 p.m. would be a safe time to go...

You take a shower and go down to the restaurant to have dinner after an exhaustive day flying across half the globe. While sitting on a spectacular veranda, a pleasant breeze blows. Bamboo and candles make the environment even cozier. You begin to "de-stress" from the urban grind and long plane trip when a waiter soon appears. You open the menu and find to your surprise that everything is written in Thai. Because you are "well-traveled" and your adventure has only just begun, you don't even sweat it. You close the menu, flag down the waiter and ask him whether there is a menu in English. He looks straight at you, but has no idea what you are saying. Embarrassed, he calls the chef, who is usually the one who helps in such situations. The chef is French and also speaks no English. Not only that, he assumes that anyone arriving to his establishment should know how to speak French. After all, the French shall be French!



You decide to risk it all, point to a plate on the menu and order a beer (anyone can understand that). Luckily, you chose correctly and the food is delicious. However, you could have made a bad choice. Imagine that! And what if you had eaten something to which you were allergic? Your trip would have been over right then and there.

Before going back to your room, you stop by the reception desk to schedule some trips for the following day. You remember that the receptionist only knows how to say *check in, checkout, bedroom, airport, dollars, keys* and another handful of words that she learned listening to the former receptionist. There is a pamphlet describing daily activities for guests, but it is only written in Thai.

I won't drag on describing all of the different inconveniences tourists suffer when they are unable to obtain quality information in a universal language like English. We are talking here about the so-called "independent travelers" who normally do not purchase packages, prefer exclusive destinations and hotels, have deeper pockets than most and are excellent customers for the hotels that fall in this category.

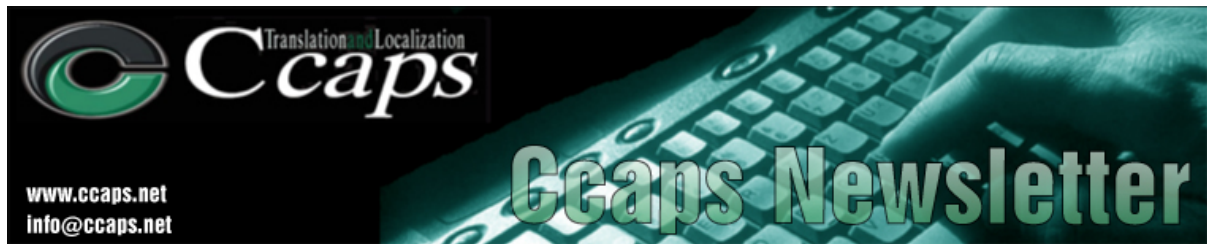
It may seem unbelievable, but certain Brazilian hotel owners believe they are ready to welcome foreigners without having even the minimum service infrastructure for such. The truth is, if we want to welcome tourists to some of our most interesting destinations, our independent hotels must pay attention to certain basic requirements, such as:

- A website translated into English (and if possible also into Spanish)
- Bilingual employees (at least at the reception desk and restaurant)
- Translated service instructions
- Translated visual communication (signs and notices)
- Translated menu
- Outsourced services with bilingual personnel

As someone responsible for the selection, inspection and recommendation of independent hotels and inns in South America for an international guide designed precisely for the independent travelers, I have to pay attention not only to the basic infrastructure (accommodations, bedding, furniture, equipment, etc.), but also to the quality of the services provided for this public.

I try to put myself in the shoes of a foreigner when I visit a hotel. When I feel that the establishment does not have the means to accommodate tourists who do not speak Portuguese, I do not recommend it. Obviously, having this quality of service is not a sufficient condition in itself, but it is necessary to start filling the premises with foreigners.

Besides this infrastructure, our independent hotels need to increase their visibility abroad through publications (guides, magazines, catalogs and websites), tourism fairs and strategic partnerships. Joint initiatives and government support should also be encouraged, but this is subject for yet another article.



To conclude, in the hotel business, the expression "If you build it, they will come" from the movie *Field of Dreams* does not apply. It is necessary to have more than a beautiful property with paradisiacal scenery to attract foreign tourists. Or a star like Kevin Costner to welcome guests at the entrance with a *caipirinha* drink in one hand and a smile on his face. However, I guarantee you that this will be much more expensive than hiring a professional translation service!

Felipe Candiota is responsible for selecting and inspecting hotels in South America for the Condé Nast Johansens Guide, which is distributed annually in Europe and the United States and includes more than 1,200 independent hotels recommended in over 40 countries.