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From a world of glaciers to a fun park

Swiss tourism is going through hard times. The strong franc is deterring many of our traditional visitors from Europe, while new offerings are needed for our new, largely Asian, customers.

By Hubert Mooser



The Jungfrauoch, 3,471 metres above sea level, boasts Europe's highest train station and the gateway to a world of glaciers and mountains that even non-alpinists find impressive. The throng of people on sunny days is huge. To prevent visitors from stepping on one another's toes, the Jungfrau Railway lets no more than 5,000 people per day ride up to the "Top of Europe". Up there, between the Mönch and the Jungfrau, growing trends in global travel are clear to see: while the Japanese have long since become commonplace on the mountains, the number of visitors hailing from India, China and the rich Gulf States has been growing in recent years. These countries, along with Russia, Brazil and Australia, represent the new

growth markets for Switzerland Tourism. Asian guests are being touted by the media as saviours of the tourism industry – during the first six months of this year, they contributed 7.4 percent more overnight stays for the Swiss hotel industry. The number of overnight stays by Chinese tourists rose a whopping 22 percent. However, these success stories stand in sharp contrast to the current mood in winter sports resorts where business with the traditional, affluent clientele from EU countries such as Germany and France is sluggish.

The climate factor

Urs Eberhard, Vice-President of Switzerland Tourism and Head of Markets and

Meetings, knows better than anybody just how important guests from Europe are for the tourism industry: "These guests still generate by far the largest percentage of overnight hotel stays," he says. In 2012, guests from Australia, Brazil, China, the Gulf States, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand accounted for around 10 percent of overnight stays in Swiss hotels. Tourists from neighbouring countries, the Benelux countries and Great Britain, on the other hand, made up over 30 percent in 2012 and the Swiss around 45 percent. The strong franc has prompted many tourists from these countries to choose other more affordable destinations in recent years. The total number of overnight stays has seen a decline of nearly 7 percent since 2008, and this drop has hit alpine holiday tourism particularly hard.

Even more alarming to the promoters of Swiss tourism are other developments, such as climate change. When glaciers melt, tourist attractions are lost. A striking example of this is the Rhone glacier at the top corner of the canton of Valais. It has been shrinking in volume year after year, reducing the certainty of snow in resorts at lower levels and increasing the potential threat of natural catastrophes. Diminishing interest in skiing is



No longer satisfying tourists: the magnificent alpine panorama at the Gornergrat in the top photo and the pristine ski slopes

another worrying development. Norbert Patt, CEO of Titlis Rotair in Engelberg, says that the market is tough and shrinking – partly due to demographic trends. With the baby boom generation entering retirement age, hiking and golfing, not skiing, are the activities of choice. The vast majority of mountain railways, however, depend on winter tourism for their survival; most of them generate 90 to 95 percent of their revenue during the winter. “We will have surplus capacity in future since skiing regions will not close even though there are fewer skiers,” says Patt. In addition, quality expectations among guests have risen and competition from rivals in other countries is becoming fiercer. Acceptance of the second home initiative in March 2012, which limits the construction of holiday apartments, has further exacerbated the structural difficulties of alpine holiday resorts.

Support from the Federal Council

This means there are difficult times ahead for alpine holiday resorts and mountain railways. How to help is a question being considered at the highest level. Federal Councillor Johann Schneider-Ammann, Switzerland’s Economics Minister, wants to spend 200 million francs on giving the industry a helping hand. He believes the Swiss tourism industry, by international comparison, is too expensive and organised too locally. There are in fact 561 organisations throughout Switzerland working to promote tourism and 90 percent of the hotels have fewer than 50 beds. In the tourism industry, responses vary widely, from morale-boosting calls to friendliness campaigns to demands for radical cuts. Roland Zegg, CEO of the Tourism Forum for Alpine Regions, recently said in an interview that winter sports resorts had to learn to live with the fact that “core markets are stagnating or even on the decline”. Anybody claiming that skiing simply wasn’t “in” anymore should be ignored, he said. New packages were needed, offering something sexy and innovative, enjoyment and relaxation – especially if you do not have a Matterhorn.

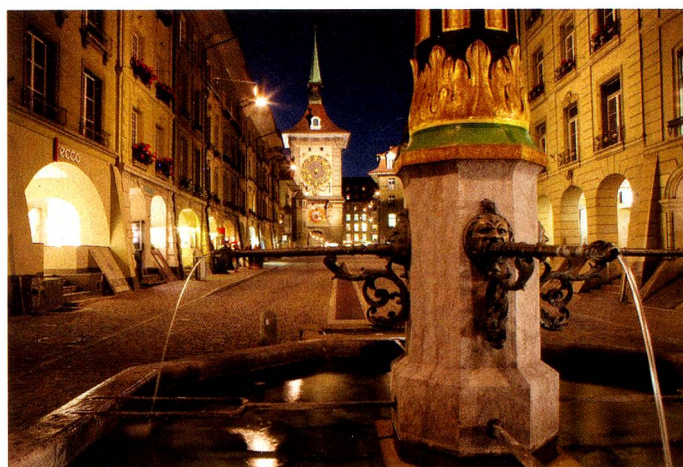
Nobody is very worried in Zermatt, where the Matterhorn stands. Resort director Daniel Luggen does not expect that “we will have fewer skiers in the short or even medium term”. Some 1.2 billion francs is set to be invested in infrastructure expansion over the course of the next ten years. Peter

Bodenmann, former President of the Social Democratic Party and National Councillor, and now a hotel owner in Brig, says that the state should obligate the owners of hotels and holiday homes to purchase annual tickets for the mountain railways. Not only would that fill beds and skiing regions, it would also make skiing holidays cheaper. Guglielmo Brentel, President of Hotelleriesuisse, openly expresses his criticism of the industry: “We have a few lousy hotels here and they have to go.” Switzerland Tourism

is trying a different approach: a hospitality Oscar has been created, which will be awarded to the most customer-friendly hotels in Switzerland.

Nature was once adventure enough

Brothers Johann Rudolf and Hieronymus Meyer were most likely unaware of what kind of avalanche they would be causing when they climbed the Jungfrau’s 4,158-metre peak on 3 August 1811 together with their guides, Joseph Bortis and Alois Volken.



Tourists from Asia usually want to see as many attractions as possible in a short space of time – almost all tours include visits to the cities of Berne and Lucerne and a trip to the Jungfrau

NATURE PARKS PROVING POPULAR

The Binn Valley is known the world over for its minerals. This sleepy side valley in Valais, where Swiss director Claude Goretta filmed Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz's novel "Si le soleil ne revenait pas" (If the Sun were Never to Return) in the 1980s, relies on sustainable tourism. For example, the Hotel Ofenhörn, which dates back to the Belle Époque, has been reno-



vated with great attention to detail. Today it is a listed building. The Binn Valley's recognition as a regional nature park in 2011 was a stroke of luck for the hotel. This attracted both national and international attention. "In the past six or seven years we've managed to double our turnover," says Andreas Weissen, president of the organisation Pro Binntal, which revived the guesthouse years ago. For the past few years Weissen's main job has been as director of the Swiss Parks Network. He says that while parkland may present an opportunity, you still have to make something of it. He sees the greatest potential for the future in nature and cultural tourism. A new study also reveals how worthwhile these parklands are: 16 percent of the guests in Entlebuch, which also has a nature park, visited the region because of this reserve. The national park in the Lower Engadine was also the main attraction for 35 percent of visitors. Apart from the national park, there are currently 14 regional nature parks and one nature discovery park that are subsidised by the federal government.

That climb was akin to the start of alpine tourism in Switzerland. The real boom began 40 to 50 years later with English alpinists like Edward Whymper, who became the first person to stand atop the Matterhorn in 1865. Yet, there was not big money to be made from mountain climbing alone. Ways and means were also needed to transport non-climbers to regions high in the Alps. The idea of building a railway leading up to the Jungfrau was first proposed in 1869. The timing was right since at that time Switzerland was in the grip of a delusion that everything was possible, spurred on by railway development linking the alpine valleys. Railway projects were springing up all over the place: in Lucerne, work began in 1886 on a railway from Alpnachstad to Mount Pilatus. 1896 brought the start of construction for a railway to the Gornergrat in Zermatt, and in Martigny, in Lower Valais, the Martigny-Châtelard railway was built to connect the wild Val de Trient to the French resort of Chamonix at the foot of Mont Blanc. In their new function as stopovers between the Rhone Valley and Chamonix, sleepy mountain villages such as Finhaut were suddenly transformed into fashionable holiday destinations with luxury hotels. Towards the end of the 19th century, Finhaut became a meeting point for England's upper crust. Back then, experiencing nature and being close to the mountains was adventure enough. Finhaut's rapid decline began when skiing gained in popularity after the Second World War and summer tourism was relegated to a sideline business.

Importance of summer is growing

Ski tourism now seems to have passed its peak as well. Switzerland Tourism is seeking to make skiing attractive to guests from the new growth markets. "We have defined China and Brazil as potential source markets for Swiss winter sports," says Vice-President Urs Eberhard. "There are around five million active skiers in China alone." Switzerland enjoys an extremely good reputation in China and is the number one foreign winter destination on people's wish lists. At the moment, Brazilians who enjoy winter sports are more likely to be drawn to France. "But we anticipate opportunities for us there, too." The potential exists, he says. According to Eberhard, however, there are signs that summer tourism will play a more prominent role in the future, in part because of the new growth mar-

kets but also as a result of looming climate change, says Eberhard. The Alps have not lost their fascination, and climate change could even bring additional guests to higher mountain regions if the cities start to get too hot.

For the time being, however, guests from these new faraway markets only visit a few locations in Switzerland. They breeze through the well-known sights: Zurich, Lucerne, Mount Pilatus, Mount Titlis, Interlaken and the Jungfrauoch, then the "Zytglogge" tower in Berne and on to Zermatt. Hotel owners in Zurich and Lucerne are delighted. Zurich Tourism reported a 20 percent increase among Chinese guests during the first half of 2013. In the Lucerne region, guests from China rose 8 percent during the same timeframe. This development does, however, have some drawbacks: there is growing displeasure in Lucerne about the many coaches clogging the streets and blocking the squares. At the moment, these group trips are largely motivated by "showcase products", as Eberhard calls Switzerland's well-known sights. Much like a visit to Paris would be inconceivable without seeing the Eiffel Tower, touring Switzerland without visiting Lucerne and Mount Titlis or Interlaken and the Jungfrauoch would be unthinkable. There is also a growing number of more seasoned guests, and the call for originality and authenticity is growing louder. Switzerland is challenged to create new destinations, routes and showcase products and add these to tour operators' catalogues.

This brings a certain pressure on hotels and guesthouses to adapt. "If guests come from new cultural environments, some changes have to be made to the products and services offered," says René Klopfer, President of the Interlaken Hotel Association, which has a number of years' experience with guests from India and the Middle East. It used to be that hotels had to adapt to the English way of life. "The British tradition of 'afternoon tea' was also once unknown in Switzerland." Now the new guests hail from India. That means more vegetarian options in the breakfast buffet, like tomatoes, eggs and cucumbers, says hotel owner René Klopfer. Chinese guests, on the other hand, need a lot of hot water for preparing their own herbal blends from home, and German guests still appreciate coffee and cake when they return from a hike. Other hotels go

even further: the Hotel Metropol laid a carpet with an in-built compass so that Muslim guests would find it easy to know which way to face for Mecca during their prayers. A conference room can also be converted into a prayer room on request. "Accommodating several cultures under one roof is a huge challenge," says Klopfer. Sometimes it is a nearly impossible balancing act.

Ice caves and spectacular suspension bridges

Changes also have to be made up at the top – in the mountains. Simply transporting a few Indian tourists to the peak without a tailored offering for them is not enough, says Patt of Titlis Rotair. "Indian tourists do not want to go downhill mountain biking or hiking, they come to Switzerland to experience snow in the mountains." Titlis Rotair is focusing on the concept of "feeling snow". One such initiative decades ago was the creation of an ice grotto in the glacier – and this cave has been such a success of late that the perspiration of the multitude of visitors is causing the glacier to melt. Now machines are needed to keep it cool. Another attraction was created with the construction of Europe's highest suspension bridge, the "Titlis Cliff Walk", which traverses a 500-metre deep abyss at an elevation of 3,020 metres. The purpose of this is to attract additional visitors.

People like Otto Steiner of Nidwalden are working hard to come up with fresh ideas for the holiday resorts. He creates so-called worlds of experience for resorts throughout Europe with the goal of boosting summer tourist figures. Steiner is a man in demand. He has designed a new visitor trail on the Jungfrauoch for the Jungfrau Railway and a spectacular observation platform for the Fiesch-Eggishorn aerial cableway.

Not everybody is happy about these developments, however. The Swiss Foundation for Landscape Conservation has been observing the Alps' transformation into a fun park with growing concern. With the number of skiers down and in an effort to fill mountain railways, tourist towns have been almost feverishly looking for new ways to attract visitors, says Anita Wyss, Project Manager at the Swiss Foundation for Landscape Conservation. "It seems as though suspension bridges are considered some sort of miracle cure at the moment," says Wyss. People think if they have a suspension bridge the



Special attractions: the "Titlis Cliff Walk" at 3,020 metres, the highest suspension bridge in Europe, and the 180 km² Binn Valley nature park in Valais

visitors will come as well. That might be true in the short term. Wyss doubts, however, that suspension bridges will generate a long-term increase in the number of visitors. In fact, one might wonder why anybody would come back to a valley multiple times simply because of a suspension bridge.

Even a sure-fire tourist attraction like the railway to the Jungfrauoch is planning additional investments in the next few years – to carry even more guests up the mountain.

New shuttles are planned to transport people to Europe's highest train station even more quickly. There were 833,000 visitors in 2012. Following this expansion, if not before, the annual number of visitors should hit the one-million mark. At least the Jungfrau Railway does not have to worry much about the future.

HUBERT MOOSER is an editor at the "Tages Anzeiger". He comes from Valais and lives in Berne.

FIGURES AND TRENDS

The Swiss hotel industry recovered somewhat during the first half of 2013. Compared with the same period of the previous year, the number of overnight stays rose 1.2% to a total of 17.1 million. Domestic guests accounted for 7.6 million of those, 0.5% more than in 2012. There was an increase of 7.4% or 107,000 nights in the number of overnight stays by tourists from Asia. China (excluding Hong Kong) was up 22% (+62,000). That is the highest rate of absolute growth among all the various countries of origin. Good news for the Swiss hotel industry: overnight stays by guests from Europe (not including Switzerland) rose by a total of 29,000 (+0.4%) despite the fact that fewer guests came from the main tourist countries: Germany -2.7%, the Netherlands -3.2%, Italy -1.2% and France -0.6%. The Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO) reported a 2.9% increase year-on-year in overnight stays for the months of October to December 2012. Overnight hotel stays reached a high of 35.6 million in 1990, a figure that has only been exceeded once since then, namely in 2008.