

Swiss tourism goes up in the world

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A little piece of Switzerland has disappeared from central London. The beautifully panelled Swiss National Tourist Office shop in Swiss Court has become a ladies accessory shop!

I always found the staff there most helpful and if they were unable to immediately provide brochures or timetables for my journeys they would order them from Switzerland and, thanks to the wonders of the internet, a few days later a thick package would plop through the letter box, post-marked Luzern.

The services formerly provided there are now dispensed from the reception area of Swiss Tourism, on the tenth floor of the Swiss Centre and accessible by lift from the entrance to the left of the Bally Shoes shop.

Knowing how busy the office could be at times, I fear that the space allocated upstairs may prove inadequate, and whilst the staff are as helpful as ever, the surroundings certainly do not have the same ambience.

Over 100 years ago, in May 1893, the Syndicat des Intérêts de la Suisse Romande et du Jura-Simplon-cantons opened a London office at 11B Regent Street and, after a referendum voted to nationalise the main Swiss Railways in 1901, the office began to market journeys all over Switzerland.

At about the same time Dr Alexander Seiler led a campaign in the Swiss parliament for a central organisation to market tourism and the London office took on its present rôle. At the outbreak of war in 1939 most of the staff returned to Switzerland, the first floor offices were taken over by the Red Cross and the basement became an air-raid shelter.

After the war the increasing number of UK travellers wishing to make arrangements to visit the country necessitated a move in April 1949 to larger offices in the Strand, near Trafalgar Square. These visitors were nominally entitled to a travel allowance of £25, but only a limited amount was allocated each month by the Treasury, issued on a first come-first served basis, and intending travellers often queued overnight at the nearby Swiss Bank to claim their Swiss francs.

The SNTTO public counter has been open at the Swiss Centre since 1966 and the glockenspiel over the door, whose 25 bells ring each day, was presented to the City of Westminster in 1985. The bells still peal above the door of Claires Accessories, but intending travellers will in future need to visit the tenth floor of the Swiss Centre. Perhaps they should install a cable car!

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