

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 46 (2019)
Heft: 5

Artikel: Tourists everywhere
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907174>

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A quick stop in Lucerne: the city in central Switzerland is extremely popular with tour groups from China. This is not universally welcomed by the locals

Photo: Keystone

Tourists everywhere

Overtourism is not restricted to the famous Italian city of Venice – Swiss destinations such as Lucerne and Interlaken are no strangers to the phenomenon either. However, other Swiss localities are still struggling to attract visitors as hotels go out of business.

SUSANNE WENGER

Switzerland is an attractive holiday destination blessed with spectacular alpine panoramas and exceptional towns and cities. The country's hoteliers recorded 38.8 million overnight stays in 2018 – more visits than ever before. This record high shows that Swiss tourism is back on track after some difficult years. First the financial and economic crisis

broke out in 2008, then the currency shock compounded matters four years ago. Following the abandonment of the minimum Euro exchange rate by the Swiss National Bank and the subsequent appreciation of the Swiss franc, Switzerland had become too expensive for European guests in particular. Tourism leaders feared the worst. But visitor numbers are climbing again – so

strongly in some places that the locals are up in arms.

Lucerne – situated on the lake, with its mountain views and famous wooden footbridge – is particularly popular. Well over 20,000 guests visit the small city each day during the high season. Many are American, while a sizeable contingent are Asians travelling in tour groups. In May of this year, some 12,000 Chinese ar-

rived in Lucerne at virtually the same time. It was the biggest single group of holidaymakers that Switzerland had ever seen. According to a study by the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, such an influx has economic benefits. In 2017, organised sightseeing generated added value worth 224 million Swiss francs alone at the watch, jewellery and souvenir shops situated on Lucerne's central square where all the tourist buses stop. This is remarkable even by Swiss standards.

Response from local parliament

Revenues are buoyant, but traffic and overcrowding in the city centre have become a bane for residents who com-

plain that their local shops now only cater to tourists. Lucerne's politicians are on the case, with the city parliament having recently approved a motion from the Green Party that includes drastic measures such as controls over pricing and a limit on hotel beds. The city council must now draw up a report detailing how it sees tourism in 2030 – because visitor numbers will probably continue to rise. "Global growth in tourism is the main cause of mass tourism," says the Lucerne-based tourism expert Jürg Stettler in an interview with "Swiss Review" (see page 8).

Situated not far from Lucerne is the popular Mount Rigi – another destination heaving under the weight of tourists. Last year, the Rigi Railways transported almost one million people up and down the mountain – again a new record. Mount Rigi is popular not only with the Swiss but also among tour groups from China and South Korea. The Rigi Railways want to expand, but this plan has met resistance. Thousands of people, including local celebrities such as cabaret artist Emil Steinberger, submitted a petition calling for an end to the "Disneyfication" of Mount Rigi (see also "Swiss Review" 4/2018). This effort paid off when local citizens, municipalities and tourism leaders recently signed the Rigi 2030 charter that commits to securing a sustainable future for the iconic mountain.

Generous spending

Interlaken in the Bernese Oberland has also seen significant tourism growth in recent years. First you have the Asians who like to take the scenic ride by cog railway to the 3,000-metre Jungfrauoch, a Unesco World Heritage site. Secondly, the popular destination between Lake Thun and Lake Brienz is a magnet for affluent visitors from the Gulf States who like to travel independently. Arab visitors cough up 420 francs on average each day, hotel

not included – whereas the Chinese contribute around 380 francs and the Swiss spend a relatively miserly 140 francs. Almost 90 per cent of Interlaken's workforce make a living from tourism. Hence little wonder that they are so accommodating to the lucrative Middle East market.

But a saturation effect is in evidence here as well, according to a study by the University of Berne. Fully veiled Arab women strolling through town have become a conspicuous addition to local life. Unlike Ticino, the canton of Berne has not banned women from wearing the niqab face veil in public.

Chinese tourists

Economic growth and relaxed travel regulations mean that increasing numbers of Chinese are travelling abroad. The effects of this are apparent in Switzerland, where Chinese tourists accounted for around 17,500 overnight stays in 2005 – and approximately 147,300 in 2018. Tourism experts expect this trend to continue, because only ten per cent of China's 1.4 billion population currently own a passport. (SWE)

However, the garment is still a bone of contention. The Interlaken tourist board tries to foster communication on both sides of the cultural divide to prevent misunderstanding. Tourism providers receive special training, while Arab guests unfamiliar with Swiss customs now have their own dedicated contact point as well as an information guide to explain things like the Swiss highway code – because visitors from the Middle East often drive around in hire cars.

"A sporadic phenomenon"

Thanks to the power of social media, even remote locations are no longer immune from international attention. Take Berggasthaus Aescher-Wild-

“They all want to visit the same beautiful places.”

The growing Asian market, the role of social media, and the behavioural patterns of tourists – these are the causes of mass tourism, according to Lucerne-based tourism expert Jürg Stettler.

“Swiss Review”: Does Switzerland suffer from overtourism, Jürg Stettler?

Jürg Stettler: Some destinations are experiencing similar visitor patterns to those seen in the oft-cited hotspots of Venice, Barcelona and Amsterdam, albeit not to the same extent. However, we lack an objective means of defining overtourism. Indicators such as the ratio of tourists to locals might help, but overtourism is a very subjective concept. It all depends on your point of view. On the one hand, locals will say that Lucerne or Interlaken are no longer the places they used to be. But then you have the people running the souvenir shops who will say something completely different.

Saturation, overcrowding, souvenir shops everywhere. These are the symptoms. Isn't that what overtourism essentially is?

They are all relevant, for sure. But even they are subjective. The same applies to the notion of “wall-to-wall tourists”. I was at a conference in Venice in the summer of last year. Venice in peak season? A nightmare, surely, if you believe what the media tell you. And it was indeed pretty crowded in certain places at specific times of the day. But what I didn't expect to find were deserted, tranquil spots just 100 metres away from the hustle and bustle.

Is overtourism a media exaggeration then?

No, but we tend to oversimplify the conversation instead of looking for facts. We lack the data to make a qualified judgement. I don't want to play down the issue, but we need to look at it from more than one angle.

What are the causes of mass tourism?

Global growth in tourism is the main cause. More and more people from big markets such as China and India can now afford to travel. And they all want to visit the same beautiful places. There is nothing unusual about this. We Swiss do exactly the same. But the issue here is the volume of tourists. Then we have social media. Whether it be snap-happy Instagrammers on the one hand or travel bloggers on the other telling us about their bucket lists – the end result is that even more people travel to the same destinations.

What is the most effective way to manage this phenomenon? Charge admission fees? Raise parking costs? Manage crowd flow? Restrict Airbnb?

Many measures simply don't work in historic cities, or their impact is limited. Essentially, tourist destinations need to have an idea of what type of tourism they want in future. All stakeholders need to be involved, so that everyone is pulling in the same direction at a later stage. Lucerne's director of

tourism may well want to promote high-quality tourism in the long term, but nothing much will change if the local mountain railway or watch company strikes advantageous bulk deals with Chinese tour operators. Making sure that everyone is reading from the same page is far from easy,



Jürg Stettler is professor at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, where he heads the Institute of Tourism

but I don't see any alternative. Otherwise, tourists will feel the backlash sooner or later – from the local population or from politicians. And we will then have to resort to hard measures, such as banning Airbnb.

Which destination off the beaten track would you recommend to Swiss Abroad who wish to have a holiday in Switzerland?

Any place that you can only reach by foot or by bike is very likely to be a hidden gem at certain times of the day. If I were to give you one name, it would be Fräkmüntegg on Mount Pilatus – situated on the cantonal border between Lucerne and Nidwalden. Get up there before sunset to enjoy the tranquility and the view. But please don't post anything on Instagram!

kirchli in the canton of Appenzell-Innerrhoden for example, which has been photographed by Instagram tourists from around the world. The most recent managers of this tiny guest house hung up their tea towels after the crowds got too much for them. Stories such as this have led to the term “overtourism” being increasingly used in public discourse about

the negative impact of mass tourism in Switzerland. The Swiss Tourism Federation, which represents the interests of the sector, even published a position paper on overtourism not so long ago. However, federation spokesman Robert Zenhäusern is at pains to play down the report. “It's a sporadic phenomenon in Switzerland, confined to a small number of hotspots.”

Zenhäusern says that tourists are unequally distributed across the country. Mountain communities in Valais and Grisons are off the traditional tourist trail and do not attract enough guests. Demand among Europeans is still not what it used to be. This is a situation that Zenhäusern wants to change, because the flip side of overtourism is only too real



in certain parts of Switzerland. According to hotelleriesuisse, the Swiss hotel association, around 100 Swiss hotels go out of business each year. Drastically shrinking margins seem to be the main problem. There are also not enough investors willing to give some localities the facelift they need. Whenever a mountain region loses a hotel or a railway line, this can have a significant economic knock-on effect. Politicians are calling for greater public funding. How-

ever, tourism experts believe that Switzerland also needs to ready itself for the growing influx of travelers from around the world. The tourist sector is trying to manage the inundation more effectively in order to reduce visitor bottlenecks and avoid eroding goodwill among local communities. Measures also include selling autumn as a separate season instead of advertising Switzerland solely as a winter and summer destination.

Global fame through Instagram: the small Berggasthaus Aescher in the Appenzell Alps

Photo: Keystone



The closed spa house at Schwefelbergbad shows the downside of the boom: 100 hotels are closing every year in the peripheral regions.

Photo: Danielle Liniger

The “Fifth Switzerland” – they love to travel

Not everyone who visits Switzerland is looking for a new experience. Many are going back to their roots, or to put it another way – going home. Tens of thousands of Swiss Abroad who visit Switzerland are renewing ties with their homeland. There are no precise figures as tourist statistics include visitors’ country of origin but have no information about their connection to Switzerland.

However, a survey by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) covering 35,000 people does provide some valuable indicators: 68 per cent of respondents said they visit Switzerland at least once a year. Just under a third said they visit Switzerland at least three times a year, with ten per cent travelling there five times or more per year. An extrapolation of these findings to the 760,000 Swiss Abroad suggests that they form a significant visitor group.

Holidaymakers from the “Fifth Switzerland” are major contributors to the tourism industry. While foreign tourists spend fewer than three nights in Switzerland on average (2017: 2.1 nights), Swiss expatriates like to take their time. The resounding majority stay for eight or more days and one quarter spend more than two weeks in the country. They also like the traditional souvenirs: chocolate, cheese, wine and watches in particular. Their influence on the hotel sector is less pronounced, as most Swiss Abroad prefer to stay with friends or relatives.

The survey also emphatically shows that Swiss Abroad believe the best way to strengthen their connection to Switzerland is to keep going there regularly. Their second most important link is incidentally the “Swiss Review”. Number three is the opportunity for political participation, although the survey was conducted before electronic voting was called into question.

MARC LETTAU