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200 years of tourism in Switzerland

Poets call, tourists come

About 200 years ago, rich city dwellers discovered Switzerland and its mountains as a place to stop and stay. This was the beginning of tourism, today one of the most important industries of the little country in the heart of the Alps. A reason to make merry but also to pause for thought.

«Except for the spectacle of a mountain spitting fire and a glimpse of the sea, I would know no natural scene, no beauty of nature, that the wanderer in Switzerland could lack» wrote Johann Gottfried Ebel in «The Traveller's Guide through Switzerland» which first appeared in 1793 and went through several editions and translations. It belonged in the baggage of all those well-to-do travellers who began to tour Switzerland before 1800.

The early voyagers answered the summons of the poets: in 1732, in his poem «The Alps», the Bernese Albrecht von Haller (portrayed on the Swiss 500-franc banknote) had sung the praises of this unspoiled world of mountain herdsmen to city dwellers weary of civilization. Thirty years later, in his novel «Héloïse», the Geneva-born Jean Jacques Rousseau glorified the Alps as a cure – of medicine and morals. And in 1804 Friedrich Schiller lauded Swiss freedom in «Tell».

So, whatever the tourist was looking for, at Lake Geneva, in the Bernese Oberland or on Mount Rigi, was all there: unspoiled nature, health-giving air, a free people. And also adventure, for in 1787, just 200 years ago, Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, a native of Geneva (his picture is on the Swiss 20-franc note), succeeded in climbing Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps. Although this was a third ascent of the mountain, Saussure's feat heralded the birth of Alpinism.

The British Alpinists

Other Swiss naturalists were soon to climb up to the highest summits, but the real conquest of the Alps did not in fact take place until adventurous Englishmen, together with local guides, sounded the attack on the Eiger, Mönch and Matterhorn. The mountain above Zermatt became a symbol for the whole country – not by coincidence does it today grace «Toblerone». In 1865 Edward Whymper and his six companions stood at the summit of the most famous mountain in

the world, but only three of the party came back down into the valley. The tragedy shocked the world, and Switzerland turned it to account.

In point of fact it was not the Alpinists who were the good tourists, but the half-mountaineers who wanted to get to know the beautiful, dangerous mountains without wishing to forgo comfort, consumables and chitchat. And for this the demi-Alpinists had everything they needed: hotels of distinction, health-giving spas, folklore spectacles and other diversions like the music-playing Kehrli family in Giessbach and the «beautiful boatwomen» of Brienz who entertained their elegant gentlemen passengers with their singing.

Then, lake steamers soon assumed their appointed functions but did not really get under way (in the tourist-trade sense) until the end of the 1850s and in the 1860s. The

railways took the English and, increasingly, other nationalities too, quite cheaply and quickly to the natural beauties of Switzerland. In 1862, Dr. Alexander Spengler discovered the curative effect on tuberculosis of the Davos air – health tourism was born. In 1863, Thomas Cook organized the first Swiss tour, for 130 participants – mass tourism had come to stay. And in 1864, a hotelier, Johannes Badrutt, persuaded a handful of Britons to spend the winter in St Moritz – winter tourism had set off on its headlong «schuss». Finally, in 1871, a rack-and-pinion railway chugged up the Rigi for the first time – the mechanization of the Alps had got off to a good start.

Thus tourist traffic was fast becoming one of the most important factors of the Swiss economy. In 1912 there were 12,640 hotels with 384,44 beds in Switzerland – figures which were not exceeded until some 20 years ago, since the two world wars were not exactly conducive to tourism. Indeed, as unconducive as unexpected events today: in 1986 the absence of American tourists who avoided travelling to Europe because of Chernobyl and terrorism caused Switzerland a loss in tourist income of between 270 and 300 million Swiss francs.

Warning voices

The poets called. And thanks to the tourists who came in answer to the summons, the country on the Gotthard has become pros-



The Swiss mountains: public magnet of the first order. Our aerial photo shows the mountain chain of the Bernese foothills and alps. At top right, the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau can be seen (Photo: SVZ).



The «Beautiful Boatwomen of Brienz», a main tourist attraction in the 19th century, were young girls who, singing songs, rowed their passengers across the lake of Brienz to the Giessbach Falls (Photo: SVZ).

perous and dependent on them. Every tenth employee in Switzerland has the tourist industry as a boss; and in the mountain regions, which after all comprise two-thirds of the country, it is even every third gainfully-employed person. Between St Moritz and Montreux every fourth Swiss franc is earned in or from tourism. In 1984, 74.8 million overnight stays (more than half of them, of Swiss visitors) were registered in the 282,000 hotel beds and the 375,000 beds in holiday and second homes. Twelve rack-and-pinion railways, 48 funiculars, 475 aerial cable railway sections and 12,00 skilifts carry tourists into the heart of the once untouched world of the mountains. In theory, the existing tourist transport facilities would suffice to

No mountains, no tourism; no mountains, no homeland. The image of Switzerland is powerfully associated with its alps, and Switzerland promotes this image abroad with the Matterhorn – with the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau. But also many Swiss abroad think of the mountains when they think of the homeland. And the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad has its HQ in the Alpenstrasse in Berne. A coincidence? Hardly.

take the entire Swiss population up into the mountains in winter in barely five hours. Yet critics have also sprung up – with warnings that we shall soon no longer be able to see the mountains for the ever-greater number of railways and buildings. This would indeed be disastrous, for almost 90% of visitors regard the quality of the Swiss environment and landscape as of first importance. The alarm signals are increasing. Davos, for example, which first gained fame thanks to its health-giving climate, often has greater air pollution in winter than Zurich, all because of tourism.

«We destroy what we are looking for as soon as we have found it», writes Jost Krippendorff in his book with the ominous title «Alpsegen – Alptraum» (Alpine Blessing – Nightmare). This Berne professor of tourism and the tourist industry has been pleading for years for touristic development in harmony with mankind and nature; often to no avail, for the (short-term) economy still triumphs over the (long-term) ecology. «Ski Heil – Berg kaputt» is how Krippendorff paraphrases the fact that tourism still, indeed increasingly, erodes its own earnings. There is a glimmer of hope none the less. We must

look after the environment with a caring and careful hand, is the call of the Swiss National Tourist Office who coined the slogan «200 years of tourism in Switzerland – a future for our visitors» in 1987. In the same year, however, a topical successor to Ebel's travel-book classic came out: the title of Jürg Frischknecht's new book is simply «Wander through Switzerland while it's still there».

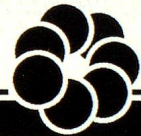
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