

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 31 (2004)
Heft: 5

Artikel: Tourism : "Our only chance lies with quality"
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906827>

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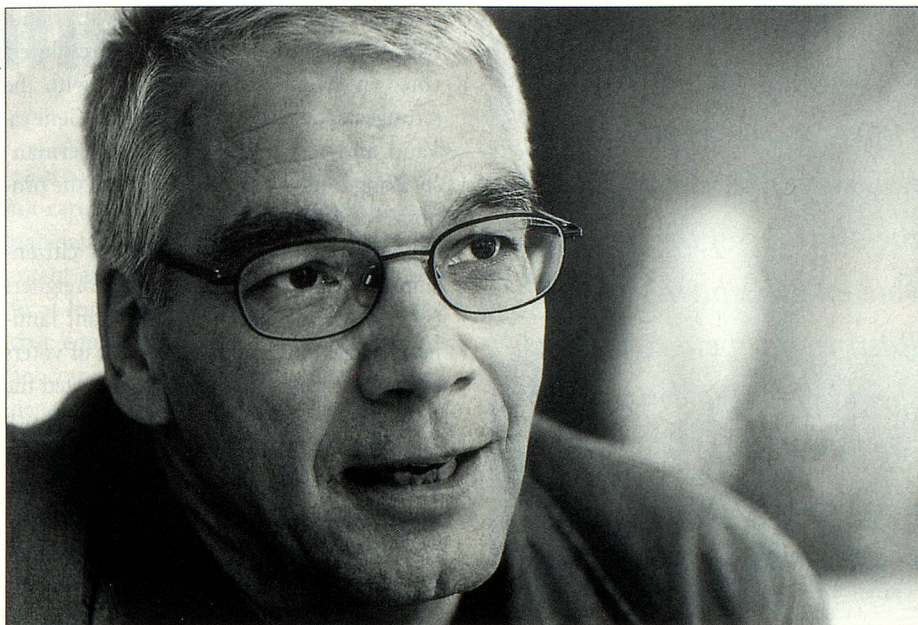
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"Our only chance lies with quality"

According to Hansruedi Müller, head of the University of Berne Institute for Research into Leisure and Tourism, any attempt to bring tourism back on its feet through discount arrangements is a no solution for the future. What the Swiss tourism industry needs is quality.

fif, Uni Bern



Hansruedi Müller, University of Berne.

Swiss Review: Overnight hotel stays in Switzerland fell to a new low of 31.2 million last year. Is the end of the slump in sight?

Hansruedi Müller: In the mid-1990s the Swiss hotel sector suffered a major crisis, along with the entire Swiss economy. It recovered a little between 1997 and 2000, but over the past three years it was badly affected by fears of war and terrorism, economic crises, the SARS epidemic and other factors. All the forecasts point to a recovery, but the Swiss hotel sector will continue to face problems in this highly competitive environment. Some areas are booming, for example day-tripper tourism and second home tourism, but no concrete statistics exist.

What are the main causes for the ongoing crisis in Swiss tourism?

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, Swiss tourism suffers from major structural problems. The hotel sector is heavily in debt, based on too small structures and under increasing pressure from the growing market for holiday homes and second homes. Some mountain railways operate in isolation and are at a disadvantage due to the lack of snowfall in their particular area. Many tourist organisations are too small and under-funded to launch any effective marketing campaign.

Apart from four-star and luxury categories, Swiss hotels are poor revenue generators and have too little capital to invest effectively.

The poor earning power of many Swiss hotels is the core problem. While there is no lack of innovative ideas, the lack of funds impedes their realisation. In recent years, however, a great many courageous and forward-looking investments have been made. Those who are not able to keep abreast of developments must bow out of the market.

Is the solution to concentrate an entire region's hotels, railways and leisure facilities under one umbrella?

The willingness of all service providers to cooperate is one of the key challenges. Players in the tourist industry must merge to create larger, more efficient units. A certain degree of shakeout must be permitted.

What do you think of the idea to limit the international marketing of Swiss tourism to around two dozen top destinations?

This idea has largely become a reality already in foreign markets. Switzerland boasts a large number of destinations which are popular with Swiss visitors, a few which are internationally known, and only a handful which are successful on the global market.

How should the Swiss tourism industry position itself on the international market?

The cost structure in Switzerland prohibits any form of low-price strategy. Quality in all its dimensions is the only option available to the Swiss tourist industry to position itself successfully.

What advantages of Switzerland as a holiday destination should be emphasised in a marketing campaign abroad?

The key strategic success factors are its unique natural heritage, the wide variety of activities and experiences available within a small area, a relatively high level of safety, and the fact that Switzerland works.

Which foreign markets should be canvassed in particular?

Switzerland Tourism differentiates the various markets very clearly. India and China are unquestionably promising growth markets, but we cannot pin our hopes entirely on this emerging Asian market. It accounts for only five per cent of all hotel visitors to Switzerland.

Interviewer: Rolf Ribi