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Autor: Lachat, Denise
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Switzerland gets the travel bug

Covid brought tourist traffic to a virtual standstill, but now travel has bounced back to record-breaking levels. Demand for plane and train travel in Switzerland is high.

DENISE LACHAT

Now that the Covid blip is behind us, the Swiss are keen to get back to flying. During the first half of 2024, over 14.5 million people travelled via Zurich Airport, the largest airport in the country, dwarfing Geneva and Basel-Mühlhausen. That is 11 per cent more people than in the same period last year and almost as many as in the first half of 2019, before the Covid pandemic. Zurich expects to see 31 million travellers pass through by the end of 2024, and Zurich Airport was already reporting record profits at the end of August.

The airline Swiss is also showing record results, with demand for flights up by 12 per cent in the first half of this year (8.5 million passengers). Making up for the mandatory break imposed by Covid? Markus

year, however, long-haul flights were more in demand; the Swiss are drawn to warmer climes. Kuoni media spokesperson Flick knows their favourite destinations: Phuket, the Maldives and Mauritius. The Dominican Republic, South Africa and – a little closer to home – Gran Canaria are also popular. Fortunately for travel agents, airlines have beefed their offer up again after having had to pare it down during the pandemic, says Flick. The winter half of 2024 could prove even better for Kuoni than 2023.

Higher flight prices being accepted

This newly awakened passion for travel is not unique to Switzerland: it is being observed all around the

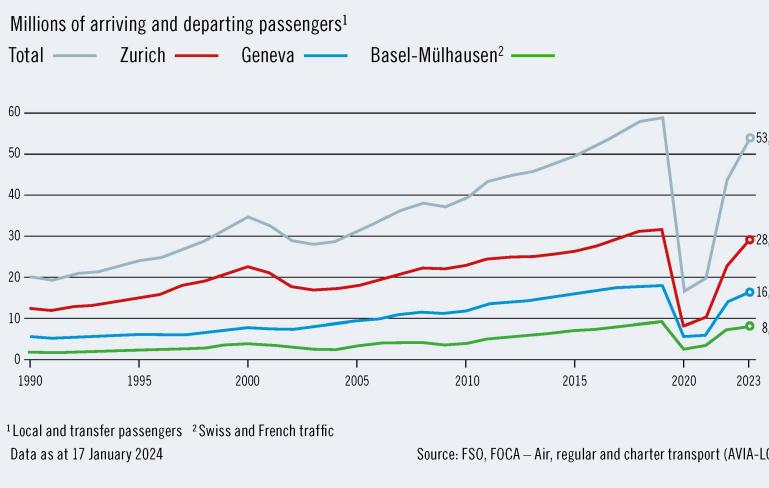
measure was rejected by Swiss voters in summer 2021, along with the rest of the CO₂ Act – but because airlines have raised prices for the diminished offer available. Kerosene has also become more expensive, leading to air travel costing up to 30 per cent more in 2023. Prices in 2024 were still slightly higher than before the pandemic, in spite of a slight decrease.

Many Swiss are willing and able to afford these prices. This is shown not least by the growing trend for independent travel, as travel agency Hotelplan has reported. Clients are looking for something special, whether they are travelling to the seaside or on city breaks. Package tours are also increasingly being tailored to meet clients' needs, according to media spokesperson Muriel Wolf. However, this is true only to a certain extent for families: their holiday budget in 2024 is feeling the pressure of higher prices for accommodation and activities. Families are therefore often opting for travel with a set upper budget limit or for destinations that have not raised their prices since the pandemic. Somewhere like Tunisia, for example, where Hotelplan Suisse has witnessed a “two-digit increase in bookings”.

The train as an alternative: beloved and beleaguered

Flying is not the only mode of transport on the up. Rail travel is also popular. The record figures from 2019 were repeated last year. Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) transported 1.32 million passengers... every day. Rail travel across borders even witnessed a new record: 12.3 million people travelled internationally by train in 2023 (2022: 10.7 million). 600,000 people took night trains. The SBB and its European partners are struggling to organise enough departures to meet the

Airline passengers travelling on regular and charter flights



Flick, media spokesperson for traditional Swiss travel agency Kuoni, calls it a “normalisation”, since Covid was a few years ago now.

Just as before, the most frequent destination for Swiss travellers is Europe. This is shown by the latest figures from the Federal Statistical Office. In December and over the new

world. According to figures from the International Air Transport Association (IATA), flight traffic over the past year reached 94 per cent of pre-Covid levels and achieved an all-time high in July 2024. At the same time, flying has become more expensive, including in Switzerland. This is not due to any Swiss aeroplane ticket tax – that



massive demand. Now, ironically, they have had the brakes slammed on by the Swiss transport minister: Federal Councillor Albert Rösti (SVP) has blocked the 30 million Swiss francs that was to have subsidised night trains from 2025 onwards. This meas-

sharply to this "undermining of rail transport as a sustainable alternative", and an attempt was made to question the legality of the decision. In the end, parliament adopted the new CO₂ Act, which includes the subsidy for night trains. This Act will come into force in January and governs climate policy until 2030. However, if Rösti's decision is upheld, the new night train connections from Switzerland to Rome and Barcelona will remain, at least for the time being, wishful thinking.

Switzerland as a destination

Switzerland itself is a popular travel destination. Industry organisation Switzerland Tourism has described the almost 42 million overnight hotel stays in 2023 as an "all-time high" and is relieved to report that Swiss tourism has recovered since the Covid pandemic.

A glance at the countries of origin of these travellers shows that, alongside South-East Asia, it was primarily guests from the United States who contributed to this record. They spent over 3 million nights staying in

hotels in Switzerland, a 33 per cent increase over the previous year. Travellers from Great Britain were also numerous once again (+ 23.6 per cent). Visitor numbers from the Gulf states have been rising steadily for years. Travel from China witnessed another dramatic surge, rising by over 300 percent between 2022 and 2023.

The growing numbers of visitors to Switzerland have reignited discussions of "overtourism". A study published in summer 2024 by Switzerland Tourism and the Conference of Regional Tourism Directors of Switzerland showed that tourism centres in particular were taking the problematic aspect of (mass) tourism seriously: littering, harm to wildlife and the environment, shortages of accommodation, traffic disruptions and a certain lack of respect from tourists were all evoked. However, according to Switzerland Tourism, international tour operators are already warning of a cooldown. Apparently, the money that guests from the US had put aside during the pandemic for overseas travel is gradually running out.

As though nothing had happened: the throng at the Swiss airline check-in counter (2023).
Photo: Keystone

Flying is not the only mode of transport on the up. Rail travel is also popular.

Financing, however, for night trains in particular, is proving a challenge.

ure is part of the extensive savings programme planned by the Federal Council to restructure the national budget (see also the "Review" of October 2024). Left-wing, Green and centrist federal parliamentarians reacted