Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1949)

Heft: 1106

Artikel: End unnecessary barriers to tourism

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688341

END UNNECESSARY BARRIERS TO TOURISM.

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The following article is reprinted from the January issue of the "Liverpool Daily Post" by courtesy of the Editor.

The day seems far distant when the British traveller could board the Dover boat, untrammelled by passport formalities or by outgoing Customs inquisitions, and, armed with an adequate supply of gold coins or Bank of England notes, or even with his cheque book, could roam at his will over most of the world.

That could be done up to 1914. Means of communications have vastly improved since then, but with their improvement there has been a parallel increase in impediments to travel. What with passports, immigration control, visas, and, above all, currency restrictions, most of us might as well be without the enormous advantages that science has brought to our aid in enabling us to move more swiftly from country to country.

The slump in the exchange of peoples bent on culture and recreation is one symptom of the breakdown of international intercourse. It is also a very damaging symptom, for never has a larger interchange of peoples and ideas been more needed than it is to-day.

Britain is particularly interested in this question of tourism. Normally, this country was a great exporter of tourists, or, looking at it from a balance of payments angle, a greater importer of tourist services offered by other countries. The reason was not far to seek. Britons found in the customs, cooking and licensing laws of other countries welcome respite from their own. The desire for such escapism is greater than ever to-day, but the means to indulge of it are now much restricted.

Britain, like every other country in Europe, is trying hard to swing the tourist account in its favour. In this it is meeting with some success, and in 1948 it is estimated that tourist expenditure brought Britain a net income equivalent £15,000,000, mostly in the form of highly desirable hard currencies.

The other countries of Europe are in keen competition for dollar tourists; but it is important that the traffic in tourists as between European countries should be two-way. There are some indications that every country is trying to make it a one-way traffic and that as a result many traditional channels of tourist traffic are gradually running dry.

One reason for this unnecessary stifling of tourist trade is some remnant of the principle of non-discrimination. It is absurd to suggest that because no Briton is allowed to travel for pleasure in the United States, he should not, therefore, be allowed to travel anywhere else.

That principle is no longer practised as a hard line of conduct. There are, however, some vestiges of it, as for example in the British agreement with Switzerland, which includes an unwritten understanding that as long as the limit of £35 a year per tourist is imposed on visitors to Switzerland, the figure will not be exceeded in the case of other countries.

But Belgium, on the other hand, is being discriminated against most painfully — no British tourist has been allowed to taste the joys of life *à la Belge* for rather more than a year.

The issue of discrimination — or elasticity — in authorising tourist expenditure has gained particular topicality as a result of the recent agreement on intra-European payments. Since, as a result of that agreement, Britain is virtually giving France some £50,000,000 to finance its deficit with the sterling area, why should not Britain reduce that gift by taking additional French tourist services? Why not remove all limits on the amount of money British tourists may take to France? As a general proposition this would appear to be unexceptionable.

There are, however, some serious reservations which apply more particularly to France. It is an admitted fact that not more than about 10 per cent. of the sound currency spent by tourists in France finds its way to the Bank of France. The rates paid in any hotel for dollar and sterling notes or even for travellers' cheques are not the official or even the tolerated free rates, but the black market rates.

These currencies, therefore, find their way through the black market to French holders who find in them the security which their own currency fails to provide. This means that as long as the present lack of confidence in the franc persists, greater tourist expenditure in France will fail to reduce the deficit in the French balance of payments. The dollars or sterling will go into private hands and be duly "salted" away.

The immediate impact of the French balance of payments may, in fact, be adverse, since the larger influx and expenditure of tourists will call for more imports. From the British point of view, therefore, the attempt to reduce France's deficit by sending more tourists to that country may be to increase the deficit with the sterling area, and thus to raise the gifts that must be made to France in order to finance that deficit. This would indeed be a case of throwing good money after bad.

This example helps to explain some of the diffidence with which British officials view suggestions that tourists' allowances should be increased. The case of France is, however, a very special one from which it would be dangerous to generalise.

Some of the British planners are also prone to argue that tourist traffic is the most wasteful way of spending currency abroad, and illustrate their point by measuring the amount of raw materials paid for at wholesale prices that could be imported for the counterpart of the "services" and fripperies which the British tourists buy abroad with their allocations of exchange.

The comparison is obviously an odious one. It ignores altogether the tangibles that emerge through tourist traffic.

Perhaps the British planners do consider intangibles, but of a different kind; they may feel that it is undesirable and dangerous to their planned austerity to allow too many Britons to see how life is lived elsewhere.

The British authorities are due to revise their tourist allocation in the very near future; the question is almost certain to be broached in the financial talks with Switzerland which have just begun. The rule which has been laid down in Britain is that we cannot afford to pay gold for travel.

But is should surely not pass the ingenuity of the authorities to provide for a revival of tourist traffic, even with countries like Belgium, by extending on a national scale the private arrangements for compensation between individuals which now account for a considerable part of Europe's mutual traffic in tourists.

The harsh facts of economic life will not allow all the barriers to foreign travel to be thrown down. That is no reason why we should not move those which can be safely dispensed with, and evolve devices which will encourage tourist traffic without incurring excessive losses of gold.

If there is any sincerity in our desire to recreate a real European unity, the highest priority should be given to this problem.