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ROUNDABOUT SWITZERLAND

DEREK MEAKIN'S monthly review
of tourist activities in Switzerland.

This is Swiss Mountains Year. You didn't know? Then you cannot have heard of the Swiss National Tourist Office's decision to make the attractions of Swiss mountains 1951's main propaganda point.

This decision was taken on March 20th. What has been done since then to impress on prospective tourists the scenes of beauty and grandure that await them among the Swiss mountains? As far as I can see, precious little.

Yet the opportunities are there in plenty. The other day, for instance, I received a card from Verbier, that up-and-coming resort in the rugged Bagnes Valley which I hope (for it is one of my favourite holiday spots) will be even more popular soon. The postmark showed two cows charging each other, but how many Britons would know it depicted the traditional Alpine cow-fight? This is something novel, something that could never happen in Britain, something that ought to be worth a little more publicity.

And why could we not have had a Festival of Zermatt on July 14th, the 86th anniversary of the great day when Englishman Edward Whymper first climbed the Matterhorn? Yes, I know the feat ended in tragedy, but Whymper's success is remembered more than the disaster that accompanied it, and it is still one of the classic Alpine climbs on record. A Festival of Zermatt could have united climbers of international repute from all over Europe and America — a gathering to be talked about for years afterwards.

Admittedly some move to popularise the mountains was attempted. The Swiss Government, worried by so many foreign visitors storming formidable peaks without guides, announced that it would subsidise mountain climbing by reducing the fees of guides by 30 per cent — a noble move which will greatly help the climbing fraternity but not the majority of tourists.

Even this, however, came too late. The announcement was made on July 10th, at the start of this year's climbing season. While it will assist climbers who had already decided to visit Switzerland this year it will do little to persuade others who by July 10th had undoubtedly fixed their 1951 holidays.

Yet this need not have been the case. The decision to reduce fees must have been taken months ago. At least I assume this from the excellent poster announcing the 30 per cent reduction, obviously prepared well in advance, which appeared about the same time as the official statement. Delay has lost all chance of the reduction being really effective.

These are not intended as criticisms of the London end of the Swiss National Tourist Office, which is doing a fine job of work despite the fact that it is short-staffed and, compared with the huge sums lavished on London offices of tourist organisations from other countries, is badly short of money.

More to blame, in my opinion, are heads of local tourist offices in Switzerland who have not taken advantage of a glorious opportunity to engage in some really outstanding publicity that would make their regions much better known to people from other countries.