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REJUVENATION OF SWITZERLAND'S TOURIST INDUSTRY

by DR. P. RISCH,

Director of the Tourist Research Institute, Berne University

The year 1965 has been christened "The Year of the Alps". This is an excellent publicity idea on the part of the Swiss National Tourist Office; and it is fully warranted by the occurrence during the present year of several centenaries in well-known Swiss Alpine holiday resorts. Among these are, for instance, the arrival of the very first winter visitors in St. Moritz and Davos a hundred years ago, the first ascent of the Matterhorn in Zermatt about the same time, etc.

But these anniversaries should not eclipse the fact that the origins of foreign tourism in Switzerland go back much further than a single century — to mediaeval times and, in some degree, even to antiquity. Indeed, the forerunner of present-day tourism was primarily based on the spas and watering places of the Middle Ages so delightfully described in Henri Mercier's "Badenfahrten".

In this "Year of the Alps", which focuses attention on the excellent features of Swiss Alpine climate, rambling in the mountains and the salutary effect of the pure, rarefied air on body and mind, the first "propagandists" and "publicists" of foreign tourism in Switzerland must not go unmentioned. In his unique book "The Alps" the Bernese physician Dr. Albrecht von Haller sought to awaken in his contemporaries a proper approach to Nature; in particular, he succeeded in banishing some of the awe and dread of the mountains so prevalent in those days. But numerous great foreign writers — Goethe, Schiller, Lord Byron, etc. — also did much to bring the sublime Alpine world closer to their many readers everywhere and to implant the desire to see and experience it at first hand.

Tradition and Progress

This brief glimpse of the history of Switzerland's foreign tourist industry might perhaps create the impression that the facilities offered travellers in this country are not merely old but antiquated in view of the fact that Swiss tourism goes back, as it were, through the ages. However, a visit to any of the well-known and well-frequented holiday resorts soon makes it clear that the Swiss tourist industry has grown young rather than old over the last century. Nearly everywhere the resorts have managed to adapt themselves to the constantly changing requirements and the wishes of the visitors. Needless to say, this was not always easy; and it cost heavy financial sacrifices.

Tourism's Changing Image

The changes that have taken place in the structure of tourism can be traced back to the last century. But they have never been so profiled or drastic as in the past fifteen years. Hardly had war-wounded Europe tottered to its feet from the ruins, when the urge to travel became so widespread and so vigorous that nothing like it had ever been seen before — even in the best years prior to the first world war, or before the world economic crisis. Whereas, up to shortly before the second world war taking holidays abroad was the exclusive privilege of the very wealthy, in the 'fifties the general increase in private incomes and the improved social amenities (e.g. legal claim to paid holidays) enabled ever wider sections of the population to join the legion of tourists. But the increase in the volume of tourist traffic also brought a change in the needs of the travelling public. This was primarily expressed in the greater demands made on the hotel trade, where for a time it proved almost impossible, for instance, to cope with the requests for rooms with baths. The fact that nowadays practically everybody has a bath-tub in his own home makes it obvious that no-one cares to dispense with this comfort when on holiday.

Modernising Hotels

Every possible allowance was made for this public demand as ever more hotels were modernised. In the course of the last few years thousands of private bathrooms have been installed in existing hotels, at great expense, thus taking the edge off the shortage. Meanwhile, many of the old hotel buildings were being given complete modernisation treatment with a view to increasing their guests' comfort still further. As innumerable examples in Switzerland show, an old hotel building originally planned on lavish lines can, after renovation, provide its guests even now with more space and greater comfort than newly-built hotels which, in view of the tremendously increased construction costs, are necessarily restricted to narrower limits than was the case fifty or eighty years ago.

Today it can be stated with conviction that the hotel industry has kept up with the times and done its utmost to adapt itself to the more exacting wishes of its clients by modernising and expanding its premises and facilities at substantial expense. The annual growing proportion of occupied to unoccupied beds and the consequent higher

"payload" prove that the clientèle are appreciative of these amenities and have remained faithful to Swiss hotel hospitality.

Sensible Price Policy

Another reason for this may of course also be the moderate charges which have been maintained right down to the present time. An attempt to compare hotel charges and their counter-values in terms of services rendered would of course be futile on the international plane. True, prices can be compared, but the services and facilities which they cover cannot be assessed objectively. Yet hotel visitors have a very fine "nose" when it comes to estimating prices against what are commonly called "facilities". The innumerable visitors from abroad who return to Switzerland every year for their holidays and in doing so pass a vote of confidence in the Swiss hotel trade, provide a more tangible proof than all the most intricate statistics that — on the international plane — the Swiss hotel and catering trade is fully competitive in the services it renders and the facilities it offers, and that it has a definite pricing advantage. Worthy of special mention are the "services rendered" by Swiss hotel cuisines and cellar. Here the standards are quite exceptional.

Wide Choice of Accommodation

The "wind of change" in international tourism has also created, during the last fifteen or twenty years, a greater demand for non-hotel accommodation. In this connection, Switzerland today possesses a quantity and assortment of holiday quarters which is positively unrivalled. An almost infinite number of holiday flats, chalets and quarters in so-called apartment houses are now available to visitors both Swiss and foreign. Such accommodation is preferred mainly by families with children; families with several children are apt to fight shy of "hotel holidays" for understandable reasons. The popularity already enjoyed by non-hotel quarters can be assessed by the large proportions already attained by this type of tourism. According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Bureau, the person-per-night figure for non-hotel accommodation now totals fifteen million, which comes to about fifty percent of the relevant figure for hotels and pensions. Numerous resorts already have more beds available in holiday flats, private apartments and chalets than in the hotels proper. The upsurge of this non-hotel tourism has thus substantially extended the capacity of the Swiss tourist trade as such — not merely in volume but in terms of price and quality as well.

Modern Resort Facilities

The holiday visitor does not come just to sleep, he wants to do and see all kinds of things in the resort of his choice. Here, too, considerable changes have taken place. In former times, a holiday of several weeks was mainly spent resting, rambling and "making conversation" in the Victorian-style lounges; but the tourist of today is more keen on indulging in some form of sport or physical exercise. Thus even a beautiful park surrounding the hotel is no longer adequate. The resort must provide facilities so that the visitors can somehow enjoy the variety of activities which they crave. This calls for numerous public facilities, such as swimming pools, artificial ice-rinks, conveyances in the form of ski-lifts, chair-lifts, funiculars, etc., golf courses and tennis courts, riding paths and even more children's recreation grounds. The demand for all these facilities and amenities involves heavy commitments on the part of the Swiss resorts; some of them

cannot even be made to pay their way. But difficulties are there to be overcome and it is gratifying to note that in the past ten or fifteen years decisive advances have been achieved in this connection.

Switzerland's Mountain Railways

Even a brief glance at the development of the transport media serving tourism in Switzerland reveals that between 1952 and 1964 the number of aerial cableways rose from 30 to 150. Ski-lifts increased from 112 to a total of over 400. This means that the Alpine holiday resorts have opened up for their visitors a host of excursion points and ski-runs hitherto difficult or impossible of access, and thus substantially increased the nation's tourist capacity. The very reasonable tariff policy of these mountain railways should be emphasised in this regard. Visitors from abroad are always commenting to Swiss how inexpensive it is for a keen skier to make the very most of the famous ski-runs in the Swiss resorts by taking a skiers' season ticket. One of its main benefits is derived from the fact that these "seasons" are a joint effort on the part of several independent transport companies in the same region, so that the same ticket is conveniently valid for all.

Mention must also be made of the numerous new facilities available to the summer visitor. Among them are the new swimming pools installed in recent years, some of them artificially heated; the various new or extended golf courses and other summer sports and recreation grounds. Needless to say, in developing and installing all these new facilities particular attention was paid to preserving the natural beauties of the holiday centre. The present period of prosperity, which is also apparent in the tourist regions, has in the last ten to fifteen years enabled innumerable structural renovations to be carried out which have vastly improved the image of these centres. The cleanliness of Swiss holiday resorts is still proverbial, and still appreciated by visitors from abroad.

The Pioneer Spirit Revived

Summarising, it can be stated that in every sector of the Swiss foreign tourist industry successful efforts have been made to meet the evergrowing and more exacting wishes of the visitors and to build up a faithful clientèle by giving good value for money. And it really would seem as if something of the pioneer spirit of the old founders of Swiss tourism were really at work again and to be regarded as a definite pledge for a gratifying future in this, to Switzerland, extremely important economic sphere. Its importance, actually, is now realised by practically all strata of the population, a fact which may make the visitor even more aware than before of how welcome the foreign tourist is in Switzerland.

In addition to all this, in recent years the most strenuous efforts have been made to recruit more young Swiss for service in the hotel and catering trade — another contributory factor in maintaining the special character and high quality standards for which Swiss hotels have long been famous. The aim of all these endeavours, from modernising the hotels and enlisting new Swiss recruits for the catering trade, to enlarging the holiday resorts and providing additional attractions — all is backed by the desire to offer the millions of visitors who stream into the country every year on pleasure bent, a really enjoyable, beneficial and in every way rewarding stay.

"Swiss Industry and Trade."