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AND FROM COLIN FARMER IN BERNE . . .

SWISS HOTELS — IS THE WORST OVER?

This summer could be moment of truth for Switzerland's troubled hotel industry.

After the record-breaking year of 1972, when overnight bookings climbed to an all-time peak of almost 37 million, business slumped 13 per cent in four years. Last year's bookings totalled just over 32 million — only slightly above the 1969 figure.

Major reason for the slide was the soaring value of the Swiss franc in relation to the ailing United States dollar and pound sterling and just about every other major world currency.

This made Switzerland too expensive for most foreign tourists. And many Swiss themselves have been lured abroad by favourable exchange rates on package tours costing little or not more than a holiday at home.

Even many of those tourists staying loyal to Switzerland were able to do so only by economising and switching instead to non-hotel accommodation such as camping grounds, youth hostels and self-catering chalets and apartments.

To make matters worse, cities like Geneva and Basle saw the opening of big new hotels — planned and financed when business was booming — with the result that too many hotels have since been chasing too few tourists.

Swiss hotels have also been facing an acute labour shortage, without enough personnel to look after even those guests they did have. And there has also been the general world economic recession, reducing the flow of tourists even further.

According to Mr. Franz Dietrich, director of the 3,500-member Swiss Hotel Association: "The last four years were without doubt the most difficult for our hotel industry since the end of the second world war."

PEGGING PRICES

But now there are encouraging signs that the worst may be over.

Figures for the opening months of 1977 indicate that this year could perhaps see not only an end to the fall in bookings, but even an improvement over the 1976 results. Provisional figures for January to April show an increase of 4 per cent over last year's bookings — and the hotel overnights for February were the highest figures for that month ever recorded in Switzerland.

Much of the credit for the improved situation must go to the Swiss hotels themselves, most of whom have displayed remarkable price discipline over the past four years. Fighting hard to stay competitive, they have either pegged their prices completely or have kept any increases to the absolute minimum.

Says Mr. Dietrich: "It is a policy which is beginning to pay off — particularly if one considers the huge price increases now being reported from

other parts of Europe, including so called 'cheap' holiday countries."

Mr. Dietrich cited in particular recent trade press reports of "massive" 21 per cent hotel price increases in Norway, "fast rising" hotel rates in London, "soaring hotel rates and ridiculously high food prices" in Spain, and "inflated prices" in Greece.

Individual hotel groups are also optimistic of better times ahead.

Switzerland's biggest hotel group, Ambassador Service Hotels, links eighty privately-owned, individually-managed hotels nation wide, and accounts for 6 per cent of all hotel overnights throughout the country. An A.S.H. spokesman said this week that the group had had its best winter results "for many years", and for the whole of 1977 was hopeful of a 5 per cent increase in bookings.

Equally confident is the Leading Hotels of Switzerland, which groups the nation's most luxury establishments. A survey of its 36 members revealed only one hotel expecting a further decline in bookings during the current year.

'WE LOVE CHILDREN'

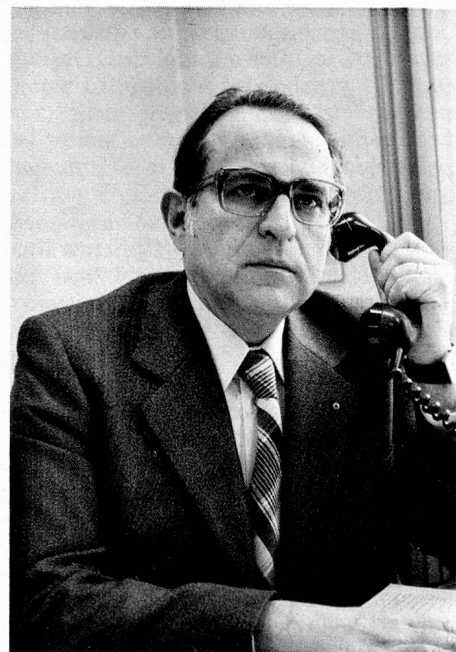
While the recession of recent years has resulted in keener competition on the one hand, it has also brought many Swiss hotels closer together in a spirit of co-operation on the other.

The Leading Hotels and Ambassador Service groups already mentioned have been part of the Swiss scene for many years. But most others have been established only since the beginning of the seventies. Chic Hotels have grown to twenty members, and last year saw the launching of the thirty-five-strong Welcome Hotels organisation. And during the opening months of 1977 two new groups made their appearance — Romantic Hotels (currently six members) and a group linking twelve hotels with special facilities for children. The last group was launched after a survey among families revealed that the Swiss hotel industry had a reputation for being "anti-children".

There has also been increased co-operation on a regional basis, with rival hotels in the same cities or resorts getting together to participate in budget-priced package programmes compiled by their local tourist office.

The industry is still lacking sufficient personnel. But with rationalisation — shoe-shine machines and drinks automats are now an accepted feature in many hotels — the shortage has been cut drastically from 30,000 in the early seventies to about 12,000 now.

Still heavily dependent on non-Swiss labour, the Hotel Association campaigned strongly against a recent nationalist party proposal to reduce the country's foreign worker population — and Swiss voters heavily defeated the move in a nationwide poll.



Mr Franz Dietrich, Director of the Swiss Hotel Association: "Signs that the worst may be over".

Photo by Colin Farmer

BRIDGE & SAUNA

The Beatus Hotel in the Swiss lakeside resort of Merligen is this year repeating its holiday courses for bridge players.

The six-day courses in the Bernese Oberland are for beginners and advanced players and cost Sw.Fr.570 per person — including full pension and unlimited use of the hotel's indoor swimming pool and sauna.

The courses will continue until early October.

A CELEBRATION

Mr. Reg Burnell, British Rail's deputy general agent in Switzerland, this year celebrates thirty years of service with B.R.'s Basle headquarters.

Mr. Burnell, who is 56, joined British Rail in 1939, working with what was then Southern Railways in Jersey.

After the war he worked in the continental department in London (Victoria), before moving to Paris and then Basle.

NEUCHÂTEL — WINE HARVEST FESTIVAL

The traditional Neuchâtel "Fête des Vendanges" will be held this year during the weekend 1st/2nd October. While Saturday evening is devoted to the usual popular festivities and dancing in Neuchâtel's streets, Sunday afternoon will see the Grand Parade and Flower Displays, for which tickets will be on sale.



Photo by Colin Farmer

ST MORITZ LAUNCHES "ALLEGRA" CLUB

The Swiss resort of St. Moritz has launched a new summer holiday sports programme called "Allegra".

Holidaymakers booking a one-week "Allegra" arrangement pay from Sw.Fr.179 to Sw.Fr.583 for seven days' hotel accommodation and half-pension. And they also receive an "Allegra" club card for free or reduced price facilities throughout the alpine resort.

The programme has been launched in co-operation with Switzerland's Club Intersport.

Sports facilities and instruction courses at St. Moritz include tennis, swimming, archery, table tennis, clay pigeon shooting, acrobatic ski-ing, wind-surfing, sailing, ice skating, horse riding, golf, hang-gliding — and yoga.

The "Allegra" programme also includes special facilities for children, reduced-price child minding services, and reduced-price botanical and geological excursions.

Holidaymakers in the St. Moritz region not booking an "Allegra" arrangement, can still obtain "Allegra" club membership for Sw.Fr.50 per person or Sw.Fr.30 per child up to twelve years.

500 SULZER LOOMS IN SWEDEN

A few months ago, the 500th Sulzer high-speed loom to be delivered to Sweden by this Swiss firm was installed in

a Swedish cloth mill. There are at present some 1,200 Sulzer looms in the Scandinavian textile industry as a whole, divided almost equally between factories using cotton, wool and fibres.



EUROPCAR GOES MINI!

The Swiss rent-a-car company, Europcar, has added the British Mini 1000 to its fleet of French, German and Italian cars — "to attract the budget-minded motorist in Britain".

Helping to get the Europcar message across is mini-clad blonde model Brigitte Kral from Berne. And if beautiful Brigitte isn't enough to boost business from Britain, the company has just announced that it plans no price increases for the 1977 summer season. A company statement this month confirmed that this summer's rates would be maintained at their "extremely competitive" 1976 level. Photo by Colin Farmer.

THANK YOU

As another Financial Year ends for the *Swiss Observer*, we would like to take this opportunity of once more thanking all of our readers and advertisers who have given us such valuable support during the period. Many of our subscribers have taken the paper for several years as also have certain of the advertisers; without them the *Swiss Observer* would not have survived.

A very special "thank you" is extended to those subscribers who generously add sums to their normal subscriptions by way of donations to help to defray the costs of producing the paper. These sums are of tremendous assistance as, is well known, such costs are continually spiralling upward. The paper, which is run on a non-profit making basis, is kept going largely by the Editor (part time) and Staff loaned from other Companies as their other duties permit, thus no monies received are wasted but in the main channelled into producing a paper which we trust you find of a reasonably high standard both as regards format and interest.