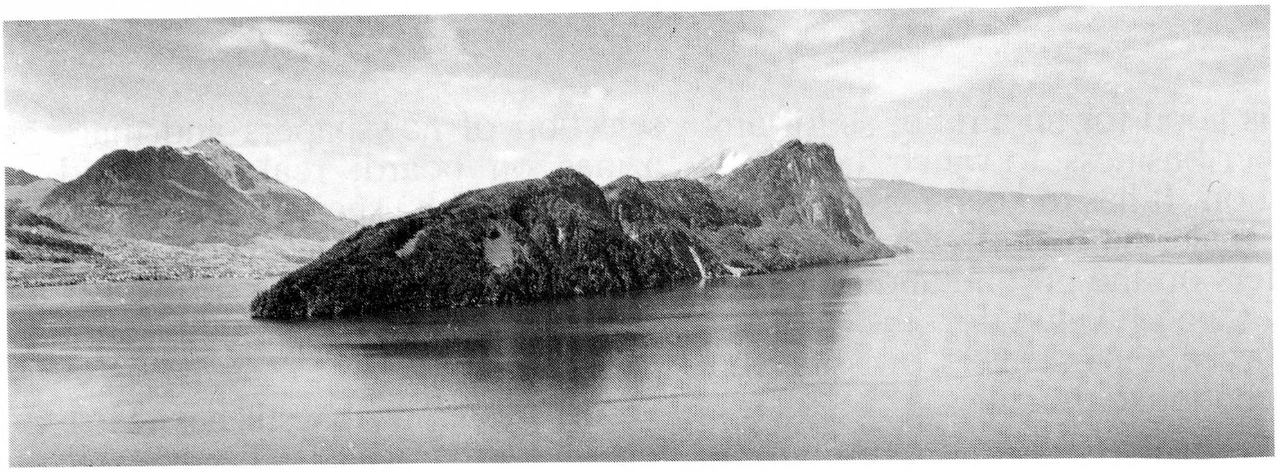

The changing face of Swiss tourism

IN 1981 Switzerland attracted more tourists than ever before; in an international comparison the Swiss tourist industry also came off well.

This encouraging trend of the last two years can be ascribed primarily to our efforts at maintaining the quality of tourist facilities, as well as to a sensible pricing policy. However, one should not allow the pleasing picture for 1981 to obscure the weighty problems that will face this sector of the economy in the future.

Notwithstanding the gratifying results produced by Switzerland's tourist industry in the past few years, it must be borne in mind that the long history of this sector is strewn with setbacks, and that the trade has constantly had to adapt to the changing needs of visitors.

Over the last 30 years alone the following remarkable changes have taken place in the Swiss tourist sector:

- Winter sports have brought far-reaching changes to the vacations market. The winter season's share of total overnight stays has risen from 33 per cent in 1950 to around 45 per cent today. For some time now the winter season has been bringing in as much revenue as the summer.
- Hotels have lost ground to other types of accommodation. Holiday flats, camping sites, etc. now account for more than half the overnight stays.
- Swiss tourists now account for a much larger percentage of overnight stays: their share has risen to 55 per cent, from 48 per cent in 1970.
- Growth in car ownership, rising standards of living, shorter working hours and urbanisation have led to new forms of tourism, such as day and weekend trips.

Owing to the unsatisfactory economic situation in a number of western industrial countries, an average inflation rate of 10 per cent in the OECD, and the sharp increase in energy costs, it will be rather longer than the OECD experts originally predicted before we see an upturn in the economies of those countries which send large numbers of tourists to Switzerland.

One phenomenon that became apparent as early as the mid-1970s recession is increasingly in evidence now. Holidays, wherever they might be spent, have become a consumer item that cannot be lightly dispensed with.

If belt-tightening becomes necessary, it usually affects length of stay, distance travelled (and consequently transport costs), as well as other holiday expenses. Tourists are becoming increasingly price conscious and are reacting more sharply to inflation and exchange rate fluctuations in the country of destination than they did in previous years.

Switzerland has little or no influence on the numerous factors affecting tourism – world economic growth and energy prices to name but two.

It may, however, be noted with some satisfaction that Switzerland's tourist sector has so far been able to count on a favourable social, economic and environmental framework, of which the following are among the main ingredients: political and social stability, cultural diversity, efficient public services, a well-developed infrastructure, a wide range of tourist facilities, a qualitative edge over competing countries, good value for money, attractive and largely unspoilt scenery, and proximity to centres of population.

By Dr BERNARD MÜLLER, Director of the Economics Department of the Canton of Berne

Owing to its location at the heart of Europe, Switzerland is benefiting from the trend towards holidaying closer to home. Moreover, Switzerland's price image has changed for the better: it no longer has the reputation of being an expensive country for holidays.

With the European economic scene more or less gloomy, one may nevertheless count on the competitive strengths of the Swiss tourist industry enabling it to hold its own in both the domestic and international holiday trades, even if the gloom were to deepen. It remains the duty of the tourist authorities to reinforce Switzerland's positive image as a tourist country both at home and abroad.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the building boom in holiday flats and second homes is a growing cause for concern to many a holiday area. Is the non-hotel sector gradually becoming the black sheep of the holiday accommodation business?

One thing is for sure: the possibility of selling land or finished apartments to foreigners has been a major factor contributing to the excessive level of activity in the building trade in many holiday resorts. The relatively modest occupancy rate of let holiday flats (around 50 days) and second homes (under 30 days) might – to put it plainly – raise a somewhat heretical question along the following lines: should we build for investors, for the building trade, or for the tourist industry?

Where the level of building activity is concerned, one should not go from one extreme to another, even if the thesis of zero growth does have a large following these days. National political considerations demand that an upper limit be set at the federal level to the amount of land that may be owned by foreigners.

The criterion for determining whether the level of foreign ownership is excessive or not must first of all be based on land area, and then – if necessary – also on the value of the real estate. At the same time, however, care must be taken to ensure that no undue advantage accrues from the creation of excessively large building zones in past years.

Furthermore, the upper limits would have to be established so as not to jeopardise the planning principles of decentralised development. In other words, further development of locations unsuitable for tourism should be avoided, even when foreign investment capital is available.