

# Ski pistes go for a song

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## Nostalgic chairlifts – no longer wanted

Plans to dismantle the last two chairlifts of their kind have met with protest from heritage groups and nostalgia buffs decrying the end of an era. They say these wooden lifts should be recognised



Two of the last passengers go for a ride in Kandersteg

as cultural assets and kept in operation, in the same way 100-year-old steamboats have remained in service on Swiss lakes. A ride aboard the "nostalgic chairlifts" either in the resort of Kandersteg in the Bernese Alps or in the Jura

Mountains near Solothurn is a short, but memorable journey. Sitting sideways and suspended only a few metres above the ground, passengers can be forgiven for feeling they are "floating by" mountains and meadows, as promised in the Kandersteg brochure.

Yet, the owners of the nearly seventy-year-old Oeschinensee lift in the Bernese resort are in the process of shutting it down for good. Work has begun on the installation of a multi-person gondola to replace it. The Weissenstein company near Solothurn plans to follow suit. Not only will the new, closed-in lift double capacity, but the annual operating costs will be considerably lower than the price tag of maintaining the old chair system, which includes ensuring it meets the latest safety standards.

The Swiss government has sent out mixed signals: The Federal Heritage Commission has recognised the Oeschinensee chairlift as

a monument of national importance, while the transport authorities have issued a license for the new gondola.

With construction well advanced, the Swiss Heritage Foundation – a non-governmental organisation – stepped in and issued a formal appeal to put the work on hold. The heritage society argues that the two facilities represent a unique part of Switzerland's mountain lift history and insists the authorities have not done enough to clarify the possibility of keeping them operational.

According to Switzerland's mountain lift and railway association, there are 650 companies in the sector, which operate 2'400 lift facilities. They generate an annual turnover of about SFr 840 million of which 84% is done in the winter session. Companies invest around SFr 200 millions annually in maintaining and upgrading their stock.

*from swissinfo*

## Ski pistes go for a song

For those in the market for a ski resort, Erner Galen (VS) has an extremely attractive price tag: It's free. But there's a catch – the new owner is expected to keep on 12 staff and pay for renovations. The main reason the commune - or



Erner Galen's ski area

rather its ski lift company - can no longer afford to run the operation is because it needs to invest SFr1.5 million to renew its equipment. Health and safety regulations require the chair lift to be regularly upgraded. And repairs have to be carried out if the area wants to renew its operating license. This alone will cost SFr700'000.

The idea to give away the commune's 20 kilometres of pistes, four lifts and snow machines has already borne fruit - five potential buyers were due to meet the Company president. Some are private individuals, who want to help save the resort. Then there are others who think it's a simple way of earning money and lastly a firm which wishes to invest in tourism in the region.

The business usually makes enough to cover its costs but is not a money-spinner, especially as snow has been thin on the ground throughout Switzerland. Not that the resort was affected by a lack of powder; its pistes are located between 1'200 and 2'300 metres above sea level. What the missing snow in other parts of the country did was to dampen tourists' enthusiasm for winter sports in general, and Erner Galen was caught in the fallout. Losses last season amounted to about SFr200'000. *si*

### ...Latest news from Erner Galen

Summerleaze is extending its involvement with the leisure sector somewhat. Following a report in The Times in April on the imminent closure of the Erner Galen ski resort in the Valais region of Switzerland, Summerleaze has committed to provide the funds necessary to enable the resort to open again this winter. It has been putting together plans for the upgrading and extension of the lift-system and development of hotel facilities in the resort, with the intention of securing the long-term future of the area. The objective is to combine the ambience and style of the beautiful, existing, traditional Swiss villages with a ski area designed from the ground up for families, beginners, and mixed-ability groups, and a range of leisure facilities (besides skiing) for summers and winters.