

Can UK match Swiss holiday standards?

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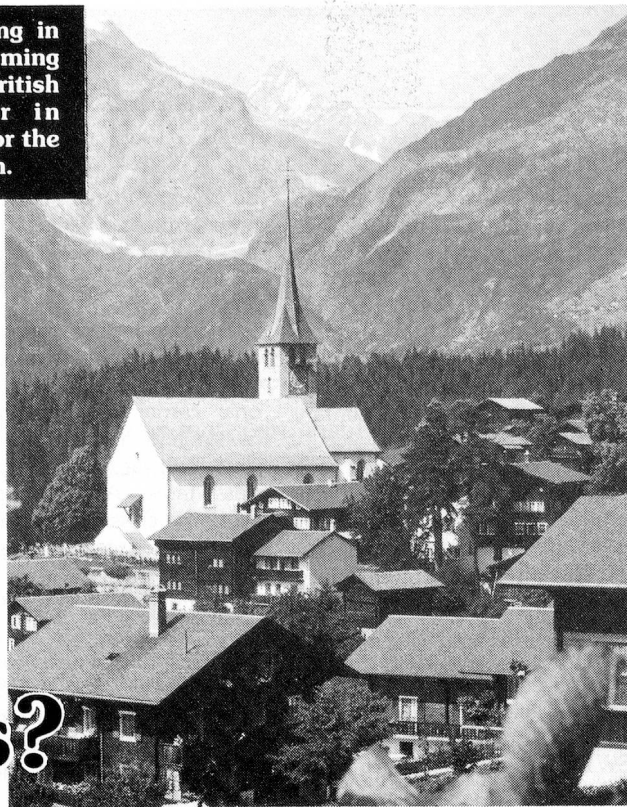
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MORE Swiss tourists are holidaying in their own country – and fewer are coming to Britain. VAUGHAN JAMES, the British Tourist Authority's manager in Switzerland, explains the reasons for the end of the boom in travel to Britain.

Can UK match Swiss holiday standards?



THE late seventies were boom years for Swiss travel abroad. The franc rode high, negligible domestic inflation did little to erode disposable income, and there seemed no limit to the list of destinations which Swiss tour operators were not only adding to their already bulging programmes, but effectively selling. In short, abroad was both a desirable bargain and heavily in demand. Almost anything went.

But over the past year things have been rather different. The franc has weakened, while price increases outside Switzerland over last few years have been universally higher than those at home.

It has thus no longer made the same automatic sense for the Swiss consumer to cross the nearest border or board the next available charter flight out of the country to get maximum value for his holiday franc.

He thought twice, and tended to switch to nearer holidays, shorter holidays, less expensive holidays.

He considered staying in Switzerland (there has been a healthy increase in overnights by Swiss nationals at Swiss hotels) and he hesitated before taking a second holiday. He arguably also made less use of the travel trade, hoping to save money by going it alone to destinations easily accessible by car.

How has this affected traffic to Britain?

In 1980 we weathered the Swiss domestic shower ("storm" would be too strong a word)

WHILE Swiss tourism to Britain is declining, the number of British visitors to Switzerland has continued to rise. Provisional statistics for 1981 show that British tourism to Switzerland increased by about 30 per cent over the previous year.

remarkably well. The Department of Trade's International Passenger Survey recorded 365,000 visits to Britain by Swiss residents, giving us an encouraging average of 1,000 arrivals per day.

But last year Swiss tourists were in somewhat shorter supply. It is easy to blame the pound, which cost a whole franc more in February when people were planning their summer holidays than it had twelve months previously.

The situation hasn't been helped by Britain's increasing reputation for inflationary price increases (in sterling terms alone), extensive media coverage of our social and economic difficulties, or the decline in second holiday taking from Switzerland – affecting our significant short-stay London business.

All these factors will inevitably have contributed to an unwelcome decline in 1981 Swiss tourism to Britain.

But if short-term prospects for the expansion of Swiss tourism to Britain may look a little bleak, the medium and long term picture is considerably brighter.

Firstly, after a couple of comparatively lean years the Swiss travel trade is now adopting a more aggressive stance. Swiss tour operators are axeing the dead wood from their programmes and building on those products which they are uniquely placed to offer their public.

We are witnessing a more creative approach to London while looking forward to, for example, the appearance of more than one new Scotland programme on the market this year.

Secondly, we can still, in our promotional work, call upon the considerable resources of goodwill towards Britain which exist here. Those elements of our product which attract Swiss visitors – be they the countryside, the history, the people, or even its peculiar "Britishness" – are as available and as potentially persuasive as ever.

This should, however, give us no cause for complacency. Although the Swiss consumer is quality-orientated, he will continue to take an ever more critical look at the price tag attached to the holiday products he is invited to purchase, and will increasingly calibrate his value-for-money yardstick with home data.

Switzerland itself has always been rather good at getting the quality/price equation right. Our potential Swiss visitor will expect the same of us – but will compute "value" according to his rather than our standards.

The challenge for Britain, now, is to try to match these Swiss standards.

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