

# Forum Schweizer Geschichte Schwyz.

## **Tourism. Destination Switzerland**

20.06.2026 – 02.05.2027

### **Tour of the exhibition**

#### **Introductory text**

The history of tourism in Switzerland is like hiking in the Alps: a gentle climb to start, followed by a steep ascent, and, now and again, a few critical stretches. Tourism is a polarizing issue, both a bane and a blessing – but how did Switzerland become such a popular travel destination in the first place? Modern tourism originated in the late 18th century and has since then grown into a mass phenomenon. The exhibition traces the critical steps that have enabled, temporarily obstructed but, in the end, fundamentally changed leisure travel. Join us on a discovery tour through the history of tourism!

#### **Discovering Switzerland**

Traders, pilgrims, and wealthy travellers have been crossing what is now Switzerland since ancient times, although usually not for the sake of pleasure. It was only during the Enlightenment and the age of Romanticism that the Alps lost much of their fearsome reputation and became a popular travel destination. One of the driving forces in the early development of Swiss tourism were visitors from Great Britain.

From the mid-19th century on, roads and railways were increasingly developed, hotels sprang up even in remote spots, and new social strata began to travel. Around 1900, during the Belle Époque, tourism had its first heyday - until the outbreak of WWI.

#### **More Comfort, Faster and More Spectacular**

The growth of tourism had a lot to do with the development of transport. Switzerland was opened up gradually, first on foot, then by coach, later by steam boat, and finally by rail. As the infrastructure continued to expand, ever more travellers began visiting the country.

Towards the end of the 19th century, new, spectacular building projects were realized, such as, in 1871, the Vitznau-Rigi line, the first European rack railway, followed shortly later by the Gotthard railway, 'a marvel of engineering'. At the same time, criticism of how the Alps were being built up and exploited grew.

#### **The Alps: A Place of Longing**

The Grand Tour is widely regarded as the mainspring of modern tourism. In the 17th and 18th centuries, young British aristocrats crossed the Alps on their educational

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trips to Italy. At the time, Switzerland was still seen as a troublesome stopover and not as a destination in itself.

This all changed during the Enlightenment and Romanticism when the alpine world became a place of discovery and idealization. Writers and artists painted a picture of Switzerland as a blissful alpine republic, thus inspiring wealthy Europeans to come and see for themselves.

## **Tourism on the Rise**

Starting in the latter half of the 18th century, tourism centres gradually sprang up in the area around the Lake of Geneva, in the Bernese Oberland, and in central Switzerland.

Travel accounts and guidebooks provided information on sights worth seeing, offered practical tips, and even warned against annoying 'beggars' and all-to-nifty locals.

The growing number of visitors saw the emergence of new and specialized local professions: guides and porters, hoteliers, chambermaids, and souvenir sellers. Echo cannons and alphorn players provided entertainment.

## **Rigi hell**

The rack railway built in 1871 meant that the Rigi became easily accessible, leading to a sharp increase in visitors and numerous new hotels. Before that, travellers had to ascend the mountain on foot, on horseback, or in sedan chairs. In the 17th and 18th centuries, people were drawn to the area by the healing spring and pilgrimage chapels, later they came to enjoy the majestic panorama at dawn and sunset.

In the 19th century, the Rigi became known as Europe's 'in-vogue-mountain'. In the surrounding towns, signs bearing the words 'Rigi hell' (Rigi bright) informed visitors that, above the fog, the weather was excellent.

## **Risks and Records**

In the 19th century, British mountaineers began conquering the peaks of the Swiss Alps. The race to be the first to climb the various four-thousanders turned the Alps into a playground for international adventurers. Local shepherds and hunters became mountain guides.

The first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865 ended in a fatal tragedy and sparked a media hype. Zermatt became a familiar name across the world and mountaineering an effective promotional tool for Switzerland.

## **Hotel Palaces**

From around 1830 onward, traditional inns no longer met the standards of the wealthy travellers. New hotels began to spring up on lakeshores, offering great views of the surrounding mountains; they were soon followed by establishments at high altitudes and in remote valleys.

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The Belle Époque saw the emergence of splendid grand hotels and spas, featuring ballrooms, sports grounds, occasionally even their own churches. These 'castles of the bourgeoisie' bore names like Palace, Majestic or Royal. The building boom turned small mountain villages into international hubs, almost overnight.

## **Invention of Winter Tourism**

For many years, the tourist season lasted from spring to autumn. The story goes that the famous St Moritz hotelier Johannes Badrutt invented winter tourism with the help of a bet: In the winter of 1864/65, he promised his English guests that he would refund their travel expenses were they not to enjoy their stay. The sunny, snowy season proved a huge success and set new standards.

In central Switzerland, hotel owner Rosa Dahinden, also known as 'Schneerose' (Snow Rose), encouraged the Vitznau-Rigi railway in 1907 to run in winter, thus opening up the Rigi for winter sports to a wider public.

## **All-Inclusive**

The British travel agency Thomas Cook organized the first 'package tour' through Switzerland in 1863. The 22-day trip took eight travellers, among them the young illustrator Jemima Morell, from London to Switzerland, where they explored the landscape on well-trodden tourist trails.

In this way, Thomas Cook made educational travel for the wealthy generally popular. Thanks to improvements in the infrastructure and falling travel costs, Switzerland soon also became more affordable for wider, albeit still affluent segments of society.

## **Turning Points**

The First World War put a stop to the golden age of Swiss tourism in 1914. Visitors from abroad stayed away for years due to the economic crisis and increasingly difficult travel conditions. It was only in the 1950s that the tourism sector recovered.

In the interwar years, domestic tourism grew in significance, strongly supported by the Swiss authorities in the form of cheap loans, tax breaks, and reduced train fares.

During the two world wars, many hotels and guesthouses were temporarily repurposed, among other things, to accommodate interned soldiers.

## **Chalets, Scenic views, and Fridge Magnets**

Swiss souvenirs range from arts and crafts to nostalgic kitsch. They conjure up a distinct image of Switzerland and serve as personal mementos.

From early on, visitors drew pictures of the places where they stayed. In the 19th century, some aristocratic guests even took entire chalets back home with them as mementos. Over the years, souvenirs became smaller and lighter.

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In certain areas, the souvenir business became a means of survival from quite early on, thus laying the foundation for living traditions such as woodcarving in Brienz.

## **Boom Years**

During the two world wars and the interwar period, tourism in Switzerland inevitably focussed on domestic visitors. The significance of winter sports gradually grew, with the required infrastructure being developed since the 1930s. Tourism recovered after WWII and took on new forms. Private cars and air travel, changing leisure patterns, and new financial capacities gradually made travel possible for many more people. Switzerland remained a popular destination but faced increasing international competition.

## **Faster, Cheaper, Farther Away**

Novel means of transport got mass tourism going after WWII: Coaches, private cars, and finally airplanes speeded up travel and made it cheaper. New and better roads, time-saving tunnels, and intercontinental flight accelerated this development.

A drive over a mountain pass on Sunday became a popular pastime for the now motorized middle class. At the same time, traffic jams at the Gotthard and queues at check-ins became more common, but so did criticism of the ecological and societal implications of increased mobility.

## **Holidays for (almost) all**

The tourism industry, which had been hard hit by war and economic crisis, received support from various social initiatives.

In 1935, Migros pioneer Gottlieb Duttweiler founded the travel agency Hotelplan, with the intention of revitalizing holiday resorts through affordable package tours, thus enabling 'holidays for a new (...) audience yet unaccustomed to travel'.

In 1939, trade unions, employers, and tourist enterprises reacted by establishing the Swiss Travel Fund (Reka) to promote social tourism and offer families with small budgets affordable holidays.

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## **Holidays at Last!**

Ever since the 1950s, more and more people have been drawn to the south, to Italy and the Ticino, thereby turning them into places of longing for many Swiss German people. But it was the Federal Labour Act of 1966 that guaranteed the long-fought-for two weeks of holiday for all and got the masses really moving.

Thanks to automobility, holiday apartments began to boom and camping became a low-cost means of getting away. Tent holidays promised proximity to nature and offered an enjoyable alternative to everyday urban life.

## **Everyone on Skis**

In 1963, Vico Torriani's hit 'Alles fährt Ski' (Everyone on Skis) celebrated Switzerland's self-image as a skiing nation. The fact that skiing became a Swiss national sport in the first place was the result of targeted campaigns by tourism advocacy groups and politicians in the interwar period.

In the 1930s, cable cars and ski lifts helped to make ever more alpine peaks accessible, and mountain villages became year-round destinations. From the 1960s and 1970s onward, outspoken resistance against the intensive tourist development of the Alps began to be voiced by environmentalist groups.

## **Standstill?**

On 16 March 2020, the Federal Council proclaimed an 'extraordinary situation' due to Covid. The pandemic shut down tourism across the world, borders were closed, and Switzerland came to a standstill. After the first lockdown, domestic tourism recovered surprisingly quickly: the Swiss rediscovered their own country during Covid. In the summer of 2020, a few tourist resorts even saw more visitors than before the shutdown.

After 2024, the number of international visitors passed the pre-Covid record, showing that the love for travel lives on, unrestrained.

## **The World on the Move**

International tourism has been growing steadily for decades; many identify travelling with a modern lifestyle. For some, tourism makes up part of Swiss identity, others see in it a social and ecological challenge.

The experience of the pandemic didn't change people's travel behaviour; rather, it accelerated the trend toward 'more often, farther away, and shorter' instead.

Digitalization has made travel planning easier and travel more accessible to many, but it also has its downsides including crowding and overtourism. Additional challenges are brought about by armed conflicts, pandemics, and climate change.

## **The Right Balance?**

Today, Switzerland is as popular as ever before as a travel destination and keeps on setting new records in terms of visitor numbers. In this respect, social media

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play a key role; Instagram, TikTok and the like spread images by the million while rating platforms such as TripAdvisor are supplanting traditional travel guides. Hotspots hyped by influencers are being overrun. Tourist destinations are now trying to manage the onslaught, for example, by introducing turnstiles, prohibition signs, parking fees, or online reservation systems.

## **Climate Change**

Tourism is facing a dilemma: it is heavily dependent on climate, yet, at the same time it is driving CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, largely due to the growth of air travel. Intensive travel has a noticeable impact on the environment.

One of the sectors most heavily hit by climate change is winter tourism. Today, over 50 per cent of ski slopes rely on artificial snow. Ski resorts below 2,000 metres altitude are being forced to seek alternatives to skiing and switch to year-round tourism.

## **Living Space is Becoming Short**

In many Swiss tourist regions, second homes remain empty for most of the year, with the average occupancy at merely 8 weeks. These so-called 'cold beds' are aggravating the shortage of affordable housing. Many locals and people with low-paid jobs are forced to move away which, in turn, means less skilled workers at hand.

In urban areas, too, short-term rentals through online platforms are driving up rental costs. Attempts are being made to regulate the holiday apartment market in favour of local residents through political initiatives.

## **Digital Idyll vs Reality**

In ads and selfies on social media, popular tourist sites are made to look almost deserted: perfect nature and picturesque old town centres. Reality is usually very different – and these 'out-of-the-way' places packed with people.

Most of us are also tourists, travel to famous places, and capture them in photographs. What about you?

## **Where Do We Go from Here?**

Since the beginning, tourism in Switzerland has responded quickly and flexibly to crises, disruptions, and changing social conditions. In order to meet the challenges of global warming, digitalization, pressure on the housing market, and possibly further pandemics, tourism will have to adapt and further develop in the future. Already today, stakeholders in different fields are addressing the question as to what tomorrow's tourism will look like. The current consensus is that, worldwide, more and more people will travel - with Switzerland likely remaining a popular tourist destination.

What is your take on this?