

Rail Tourism In Switzerland

A TRAVEL REVIEW



Foreword

The purpose of this review is to give a critical analysis of Rail Tourism in Switzerland based on a rail journey that took place on Sunday, 3rd February, 2019. Rail travel has become a popular form of travel for many visitors to the region and as a result, it has evolved as a lucrative niche market to the Swiss Tourist Industry. However, to spite its popularity, tourist numbers in general have been in decline in recent years. This report will aim to look at some of the reasons behind this decline and consider the government strategies as well as the marketing and tourism development plans that are being used to improve this figure. It will also look more specifically at rail tourism as a niche market vs. mass tourism and consider some of the potential issues that may arise from these two markets. In conclusion, strategic recommendations will then be made to help improve the management and performance of the rail experience for future visitors to the region. The rail itinerary used for the purpose of this review is as follows:

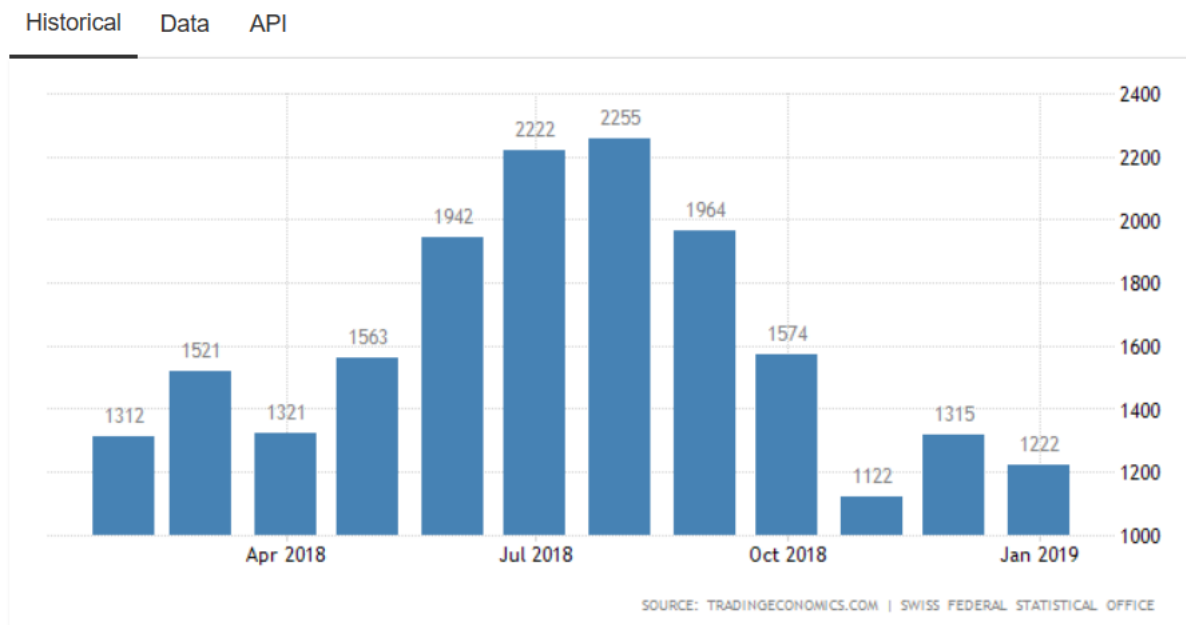
➤ ***Geneva-Montreux-Zweisimmen-Interlaken-Lauterbrunnen-Jungfrau.***



Introduction to Switzerland

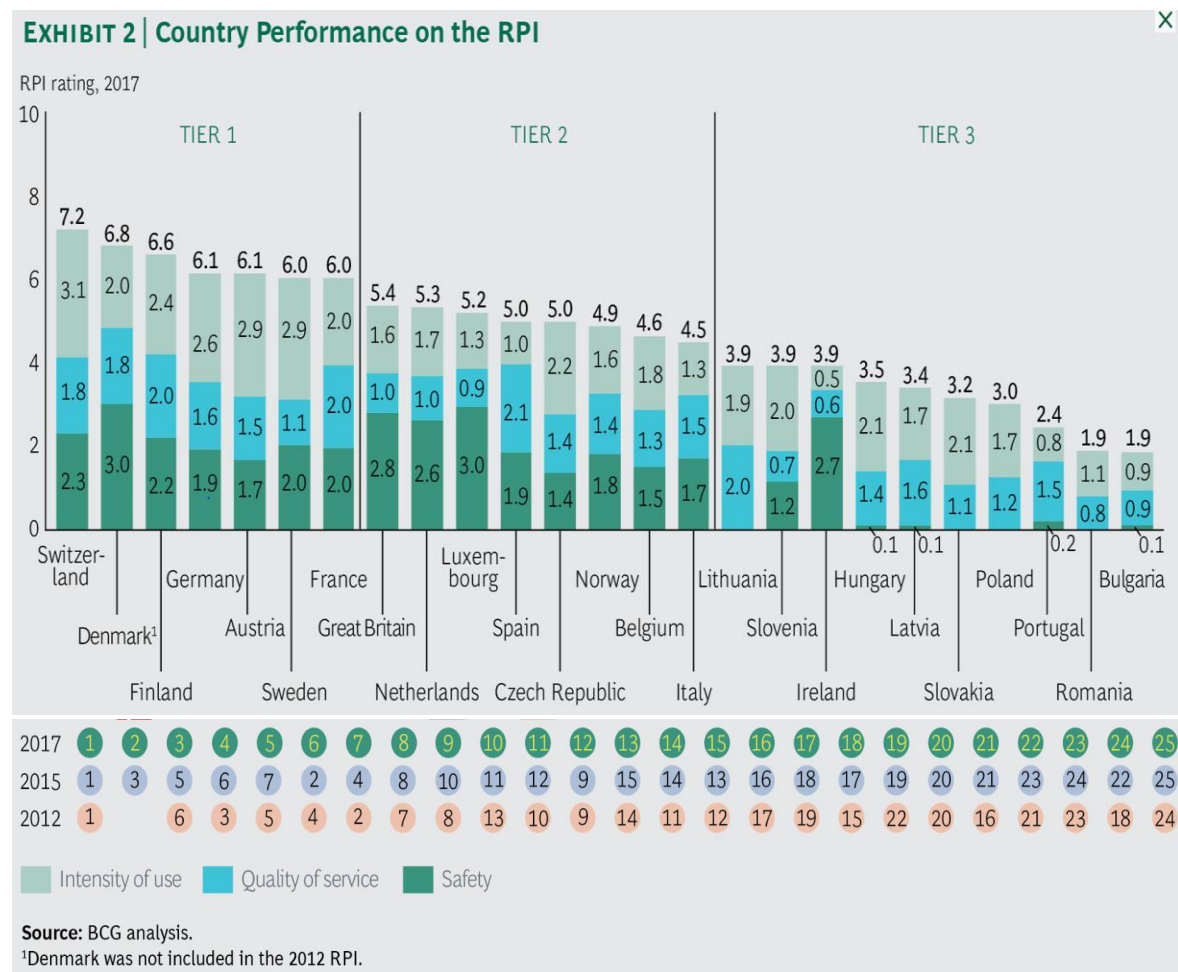
Without a doubt, Switzerland is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. With its green valleys, picturesque villages, turquoise lakes and snow-capped mountains, it's no wonder that this destination is on the bucket lists of many. It also has a reputation for having one of the most efficient rail services in the world, which has made it popular amongst tourists. According to Swiss Travel experts (STC.co.uk, 2019), rail travel in Switzerland is much more than just transport, But an experience that can't be missed. It is by far the best way to experience the beauty of Switzerland all from the comfort of your seat. For this reason, rail travel has evolved as a niche market to prospective visitors.

In 2014, the Federal Statistics Office recorded tourism as the key source of Switzerland's income and was the sixth biggest export industry, creating 4.3% of Swiss jobs. However, visitor numbers to the region have since been on a decline in recent years. The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) showed that arrivals had stagnated during the period 2013-2015 and that ski resorts were experiencing a decline due to the erratic weather season during 2016. As a result of this, Switzerland was demoted from 6th to 10th place by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in its annual tourism competitiveness report (swissinfo.ch, 2017). More recent figures (Fig.1) indicated that tourist arrivals in Switzerland were still in decline showing a decrease from 1,315 thousand in December, 2018 to 1,222 thousand in January 2019 (Tradingeconomics.com, 2019).



(Fig.1) Switzerland Tourist Arrivals

Although the number of tourist arrivals are down, the Rail Performance Index (RPI) for Switzerland remains in first place against its European counterparts (Fig.2). The RPI measures the Railways performance in terms of 1. Intensity of use 2. Quality of service and 3. Safety. This clearly indicates that Rail travel in and around Switzerland is a popular mode of transport whether it be for business or leisure.



(Fig.2) Railway Performance Index (RPI)

As a result of these statistics, an opportunity had arisen for local tour companies to develop rail tourism as a niche market. Niche tourism refers to how a specific tourism product is tailored to meet the needs of a particular audience/market segment. Novelli (2005) describes the location as being just as important as the niche product whereas Godfrey and Clarke (2000) say “it is as much to do with the attractions and services as it is about marketing and promotion”. It was evident from our journey between Montreux and Zweisimmen on the Golden Pass Panoramic Train that the train itself was the niche product while the scenic train route was considered to be the niche location. The only criticism I had was the price of some items onboard the train were quite expensive and limited.

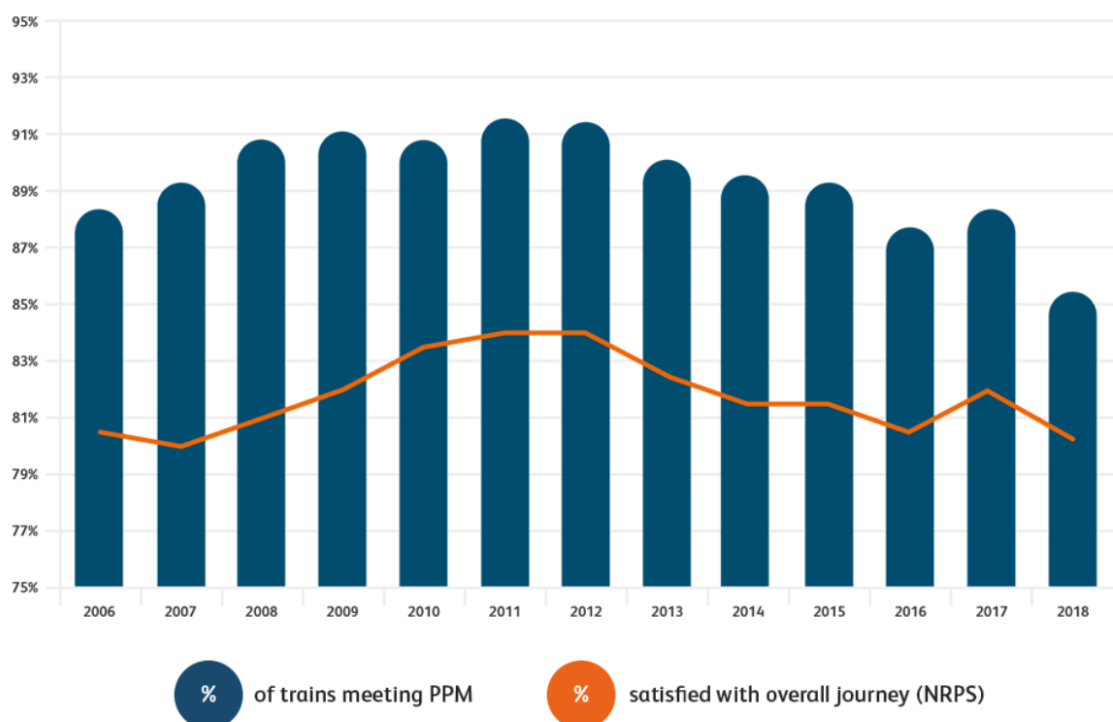
In contrast, mass tourism can be seen as a threat to a destination with overcrowding, inflated pricing in local shops and environmental degradation. It is a form of tourism that involves tens of thousands of people going to the same resort often at the same time of year. It is the most popular form of tourism as it is often the cheapest way to holiday and is usually sold as a package. It is unlikely that mass tourism will disappear but will be replaced by 'a more responsible and more realistic variety of mass tourism, where price is no longer a critical factor' (Knowles & Curtis, 1999, p.95). One of the main threats of mass tourism is the number of Asian middle class visitors to the country. According to a news article in the daily mail (Kitching, 2015), a Swiss Rail firm has launched a separate train for Asian tourists after locals accused them of poor behaviour due to spitting on the floor inside the carriages and crowding corridors. This incident highlights the continued tensions between locals and Asian Tourists as cultural differences have been challenging. The Rail company has also introduced special signage on certain train services in an attempt to educate foreigners about Western Toilet Etiquette. (Kitching, 2015). Chinese social media users criticized the rail company for being discriminatory. With the recent introduction of new visa requirements, Asian visitors have been discouraged from visiting Switzerland where it was reported that a 20% decrease was recorded during the month of February, 2016 (D Shao, 2016). This could be a government strategy in controlling Asian visitors to the country.



Mt Rigi Train Service near Lucerne. (Image Credit: Alamy).

Evaluation of Experience & Performance

The rail journey used for the purpose of this evaluation took place on 3rd February, 2019 and the train itinerary was as follows: Geneva-Montreux-Zweisimmen-Interlaken-Lauterbrunnen-Jungfrau. A variety of train providers were used and was covered with the use of one ticket; an Interrail Pass. It soon became clear throughout our journey as to why the Swiss Rail system had such an excellent reputation for being extremely efficient. Not only that, but the whole public transport system seemed to integrate with one another where buses, cable cars, mountain railways, boats and even paddle steamers, were only minutes away which meant you avoided lengthy waits before catching your next mode of transport. This made a pleasant change to the British Rail Network where it is very common to experience delays and/or cancellations. According to Network Rail (2017), UK passengers want a more frequent, reliable train service with more seats and ticket prices that offer value for money. It can be seen in (Fig.3) that customer satisfaction is well below the companies public performance measures. As it was, our group had experienced a 2.5hour delay in the United Kingdom due to the late arrival of the inbound train from Paris because of bad weather. Whilst this is beyond the companies control there was no obvious contingency plan in place for these unforeseen events.



(Fig.3) PPM-Public Performance Measure/NRPS-National Rail Passenger Survey

For this reason, it was difficult to criticize the Swiss Rail service when comparing it to the British Rail service. It was excellent value for money where the use of the Interrail Pass allowed you freedom and flexibility to travel between different regions (subject to terms and conditions). Like many others, it is definitely the best way to see Switzerland and the efficiency and punctuality of the service is second to none. It was also clear to see, that on certain trains, the tourist was the main consideration. For example, the Golden Pass Panoramic Train was definitely designed with the tourist in mind with its large panoramic windows which allowed uninterrupted views throughout the entire journey.

In order for Rail Tourism to remain a niche activity in Switzerland, strategies need to be implemented to stay ahead of the competition in a market that is becoming globally competitive. Many companies usually start with a niche market at the initial stage of their life cycle. However, in order to remain competitive as their product develops and rival competition come into existence, then companies need to become innovative and creative by reinventing their products.

In some cases, niche tourism has been associated with environmentally sustainable practices (World Tourism Organisation and World Travel & Tourism Council in Novelli, 2005). This can be seen as having a positive effect on tourism as more people become more environmentally conscious and aware. SBB is one of the leading rail companies in sustainable practices and uses an average of 90 percent hydroelectricity to power its railways along with a fully electrified network (Company.sbb.ch, 2019). This goes hand in hand with Switzerland's image of being a clean, green and eco friendly destination.

Promotional strategies should also be considered to enhance customer knowledge and create an identity of a place. An image has to be created that will trigger a favourable place association (Keller, 2003) which ultimately contributes to building a strong brand identity. Various marketing and advertising methods such as tourism exhibitions, PR events, tv advertising, websites and social media platforms should be used to promote the destination. It has become apparent that the Swiss don't tend to market themselves well and rely on word of mouth. Therefore, more advertising and marketing is needed if Swiss Tourism is to draw the crowds. (Eagan, 2017) Furthermore, the development of a regional brand is ongoing and should be a continuous process of improving quality levels.

Niche tourism also tends to attract higher spending amongst its visitors which therefore may generate higher sales profits in relation to mass tourism.

Conclusion

It is evident from the information above that a niche product and a niche destination go hand in hand. In this case, Rail tourism can be considered the product where as the various train routes in and around Switzerland are considered the niche destination. However, niche tourism can be characterized by a complex series of issues (Novelli, 2005, p.248) that can have both a positive and negative implications and pose challenges for the host destination. To overcome these challenges, the key is to remain competitive by being creative and innovative.

Rail Travel is by far one of the best ways to see Switzerland where the train system is organised and offers a service that is organised and efficient as well as unprecedented scenery. Therefore, it is no wonder that new visitors are attracted to Switzerland to enjoy a lifetime experience and is also why visitors return year after year to the region.



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