

THE SWISS HOTEL INDUSTRY IS NOT AFRAID OF BREXIT



Brexit does not disturb the Swiss hotel industry, nor the tourism authorities: loyal and enthusiastic British customers are expected to continue to flock to the Swiss Alps, particularly thanks to the fact that Switzerland has taken the political leaders with the United Kingdom.

"I see a rather positive impact linked to Brexit," Ambassador Nicolas Bideau, Director of Presence Switzerland, said. **"We are one step ahead (of the European Union) because we have concluded early bilateral agreements with Britain,** which will guarantee, for example, the free movement of (British) people immediately after Brexit."

Switzerland Tourism Board agrees and expects a 1.5% increase in British overnight stays in 2019, after the 2.3% gain recorded in 2018. "Switzerland is considered a haven of peace because the British public is generally aware of the agreements concluded between the United Kingdom and Switzerland," Bideau specifies.

The presence of UK visitors is appreciated by the circles concerned. After Germany and the United States, Great Britain represents the third largest source market of foreign tourists to Switzerland, with 720,000 hotel guests for a total of 1.65 million overnight stays in 2018. This is a quarter more than the visitors from France, for example, despite being a neighbor.

Moreover, the British spend the most, with an average of 210 francs per day/person.

Important for Valais, "they are very present in resorts such as Verbier, Zermatt, Saas-Fee or Crans-Montana," remarks Damian Constantin, Director of Valais/Wallis Promotion. Geneva airport's strong connection with the United Kingdom (notably via EasyJet's strong presence in Cointrin) encourages this influx, but Sion airport also records direct arrivals and aims to develop its relations across the Channel, despite the technical constraints that remain to be overcome.

UK visitors are more than any other winter sports enthusiast: two out of three go to Valais for skiing, compared to an average of one out of two for tourists from other countries. Switzerland's reputation "is slightly better in Great Britain than in countries such as Germany, France or Italy," notes Bideau.

The skeptics who predicted a fall in overnight stays after the Brexit vote in June 2016 were not correct. At first, "the number of English tourists fell, but the fall was quickly absorbed," says Véronique Kanel, spokeswoman for Switzerland Tourism.

The drop in the pound sterling following the vote had an initial negative impact, but since tour operators had built up foreign exchange reserves, the business quickly recovered. This year, once Brexit is confirmed, it should not be any different.

In addition, Hotelleriesuisse and Suisse Tourisme jointly argue that if the pound sterling were to devalue further, British travel would also increase to EU destinations, or even more so because the differential would be greater against the euro. The outlook of the Swiss hotel industry is thus

positive.

Switzerland's destination has so far sold better than the eurozone destinations in the coming months, as shown by a survey conducted by Switzerland Tourism among the main operators marketing travel in Switzerland.

Switzerland is prized by the British for its Alps but also as a business destination, particularly Geneva and Basel. Historically, the two countries have had close ties: the British were the first to develop tourism in Switzerland, with the influx of British visitors in the 19th century, which led to the creation of the Swiss Alpine Club (SAC). And **it was the British tour operator Thomas Cook who organized the first package tours in Switzerland in 1858.**

The only potential fear raised for the coming years would be related to a scenario of a global collapse of the British economy in the aftermath of the Brexit. But the hypothesis is far from being favored by Swiss tourism players.

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