

ROAD TRIP

Switzerland Tourism touts 1,600km Grand Tour

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Dawn of a new journey. Pictured here, the Tremola portion of the Gotthard Pass (STST-STTP)

Five alpine passes, 13 UNESCO sites and 22 lakes – a new “Grand Tour” of Switzerland takes in dozens of natural and cultural highlights. But how marketable is the concept, and will it appeal to visitors?

From the 17th to 19th centuries, it was popular for wealthy young Englishmen to spend a couple of years on the continent doing a “grand tour” of its cultural pearls. They’d typically start in Paris and work their way to Rome – via Switzerland, of course.

Fast forward to the present day, when far more people are travelling. Switzerland Tourism hopes to bring them here, and has developed a 1,600km “Grand Tour” of the country’s top 100 highlights, like the old town of Bern with its terracotta rooftops, or the long, snowy ribbon of the Aletsch Glacier.

“We have a lot to offer in Switzerland – the variety on a small scale is amazing. In Switzerland if you travel an hour, you speak a new language, you experience a new scenery and culture. And so we said Switzerland is perfect for touring,” Switzerland Tourism Director Jürg Schmid told swissinfo.ch. It took three years to develop the tour in cooperation with all the project partners.

One target audience would be travellers from the United Kingdom – the inventors of the original Grand Tour. Gavin Tollman is the CEO of Trafalgar Tours, which created its “Secrets of Switzerland” package in cooperation with Switzerland Tourism.

“There’s no doubt it is something that – if packaged correctly – could resonate everywhere in the world. It’s a great combination of the known as well as the unknown parts of Switzerland, and I think that’s what customers are looking for,” Tollman told swissinfo.ch.

‘If you can’t be cheaper...’

But there’s one feature that certainly isn’t an attraction: the Swiss franc. After the national bank dropped the exchange rate cap on the euro in January, the destination became more expensive. So this Grand Tour will come at a grand price – especially for eurozone visitors.

The [KOF Swiss Economic Institute](#) predicts a 1% drop in overnight stays this coming summer on account of the Swiss franc.

Tourism director Schmid doesn’t seem too worried.

“If you can't be cheaper, you have to be better. We have to live with the Swiss franc, which has been a strong currency for the past 50 years. People who visit Switzerland know that this is not a bargain. They know that Switzerland has a price, but they expect top quality. We really focus on increasing the quality of the experience,” Schmid said.

Rory Byrne of luxury tour operator Powder Byrne in Grindelwald says Switzerland is an easy destination to sell. As he told swissinfo.ch, his customers know it would be cheaper to arrange their own ski holidays, but they’re willing to pay a premium for his company to do it.

“I was surprised this winter that we didn’t have any client mention how expensive Switzerland was. Especially during February, which is our peak month. But no, people just got on with it – bought their Swiss francs, paid on their credit cards and went home.”

In terms of quality, Byrne has seen progress in Switzerland over the past few decades.

“Switzerland has really improved its ‘software’ over the past 30 years. Even 25 or 20 years ago, the Swiss service was known as very sharp, and wasn’t as friendly – notoriously – as the Austrians. I think that’s changed a lot in Switzerland – it’s become friendlier. The staff

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are generally very good.”

But on the hardware front, he’s not convinced. “I think Swiss hotels spend too much on renovations. The culture in Switzerland is to do it for the long term,” Byrne said, meaning that rooms might be solid and serviceable, but no longer modern or stylish. “They spend too much money in the wrong areas, such as massive infrastructure like spas, but they don’t bother with the bedrooms.”

‘OK for 2015’

Nice rooms or not, the concept of the Grand Tour means people won’t stay in any single hotel for very long, anyway.

“It’s a grand idea,” quipped Thomas Harder of Swiss Brand Experts, a Zurich-based consulting company that develops destinations. While he agrees that Switzerland has a lot of variety to offer within a small area, he wonders whether the Grand Tour involves too much moving around – thus discouraging visitors from getting to know a particular area better.

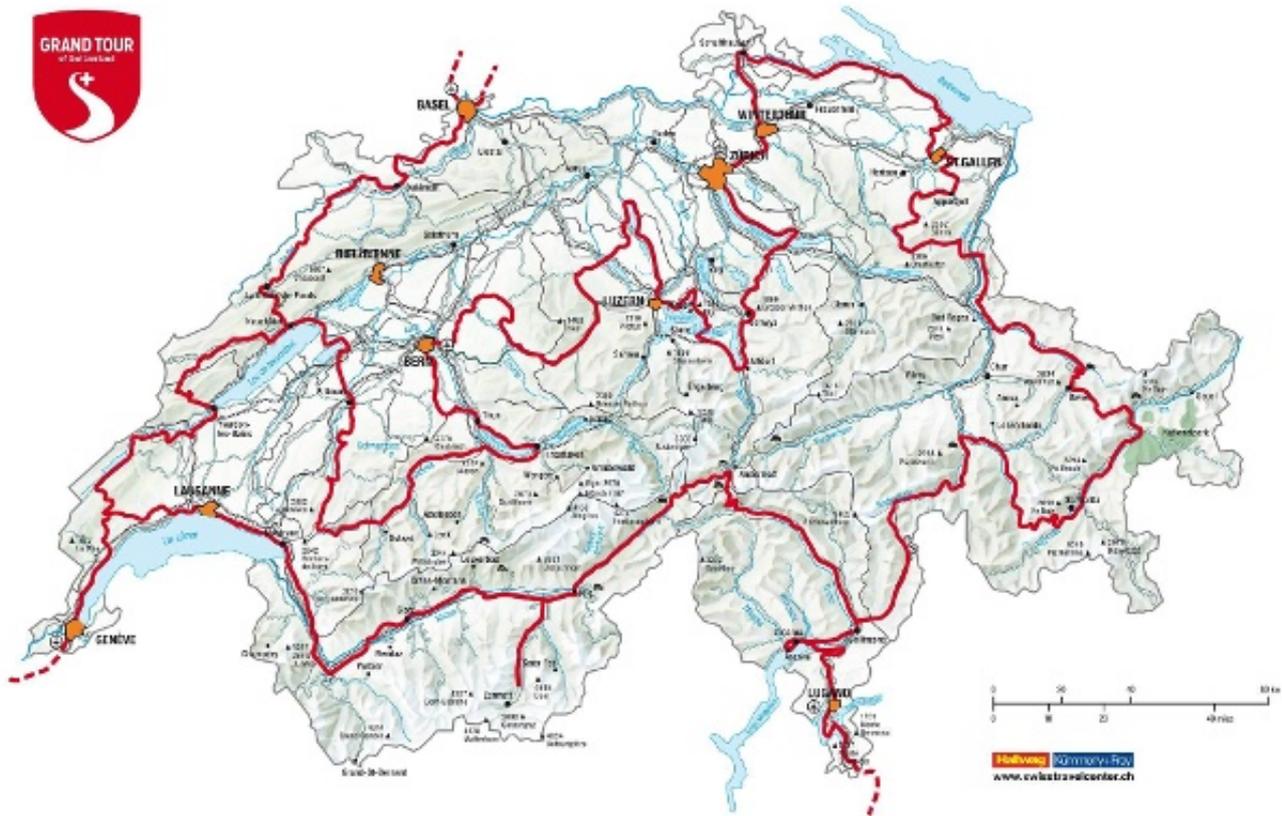
“Every day, people sleep in another city. Launching the Grand Tour is one thing, but it’s also important to think about what offers we have to make people stay longer in one place,” Harder told swissinfo.ch, suggesting that more emphasis be given to hiking holidays – where people could enjoy a number of trails from a central base.

Remi Walbaum, entrepreneurship professor of the hotel school in Lausanne, isn’t convinced that the Grand Tour is compelling enough to drive people to Switzerland in the long term.

“I think it’s OK for 2015. It’s something for a community of people who wish to travel together and share things, but people will want things designed for themselves individually. You can already tell that with some of these young Chinese people who are coming to Switzerland on their own. They’re no longer a part of groups, and that’s a big risk for them because they don’t speak the language,” Walbaum told swissinfo.ch.

He noted that the popularity of posting travel photos online was fuelling the desire for more unique experiences.

“People want to take pictures that will make them feel very different. If I’ve been on the Grand Tour and everyone sends the same pictures, then I’m not going to be seen as different. So I think people will want to be seen as individuals, and as a consequence, they’ll want to escape from the Grand Tour and go off the road,” Walbaum predicted.



The official Grand Tour of Switzerland map
(ubs.com)

Not so green

Environmentally minded critics say the whole “road trip” concept is unsustainable, anyway. As Urs Scheuss of the Green Party told the Swiss News Agency, “We find it incomprehensible that Switzerland Tourism advertises with pristine alpine images yet encourages road traffic in the mountains”.

A few pages of the Grand Tour brochure promote a “Grand Train Tour of Switzerland”, but except for Montreux, it doesn’t cover the French-speaking, western part of the country.

For that matter, some of the nation’s most popular attractions are absent. After the route was introduced in April, those left by the wayside voiced their dismay in the Swiss media. For example, the Jungfrau and Schilthorn mountain destinations, traditionally quite popular with Asian tourists, didn’t make it onto the route.

“It’s scandalous,” Philippe Sproll, head of the Jungfrau-Region tourist board, told the Tages-Anzeiger and Der Bund newspapers. “Two of Switzerland’s biggest attractions are being neglected here.”

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