

## 150 YEARS OF A BRITISH-SWISS LOVE AFFAIR

In the 1860s the British middle classes turned Switzerland into the first mass tourist destination, thanks to two men – one British one Swiss – who helped them fall in love with the Swiss countryside all year round.

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WINTER AND SUMMER  
SOON DEVELOPED HAND  
IN HAND, GIVING THE SWISS  
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It started with a Swiss bet, which doesn't sound too likely given the Swiss reputation for being cautious. But this was a bet like no other, and with an outcome to remember. The 'it' in question was the tradition of British winter breaks in Switzerland. And the bet? That was made by a canny Swiss hotelier to his British summer guests.

In 1864 British visitors to the Swiss Alps were already becoming as easy to spot as the brown cows. The idyllic landscape had always attracted a smattering of writers, artists, mountaineers and anyone else with time and money to spare, but that trickle had become a flood the previous year. All because of Thomas Cook. His first conducted tour of Switzerland in June 1863 started a British passion for Alpine holidays that has lasted ever since. His success was so immediate that for his second season, in 1864, Cook offered four different Swiss touring routes and brought hundreds of middle-class Brits to the Alps. In the following years it was thousands. This peaceful British invasion – and there weren't many of those in the 19th century – changed both Switzerland and travel for ever.

But that was all during the summer months; in winter the snowflakes fell on empty chalets. Cue Johannes Badrutt and his famous bet.



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## A wintry wager

Badrutt, a hotelier in St Moritz, knew that his British guests would enjoy winter in Engadine as much as summer but needed a way to entice them there. At that time the train only reached as far as Chur, so tempting visitors away from the more accessible Bernese Oberland required a cunning plan. In the autumn of 1864 Badrutt wagered with some British guests that if they came back to his hotel in winter and didn't like it, he would pay all their travel costs. But if they were happy, they could stay as long as they wanted. They came for Christmas – and stayed until Easter. Winter tourism had begun!

In hindsight, it's clear that it was a bet Badrutt could not lose. Who wouldn't want to swap the damp smoggy winters of newly industrial Britain for sunshine and fresh air? It was a brilliant marketing coup because, of course, the Brits went home and told everyone about their amazing winter in the sun and snow. The Victorian version of going viral on social media.

## The snowball effect

Over the next few decades the winter months became an essential part of Alpine tourism, especially for the British. Downhill skiing wasn't initially popular, so to keep themselves busy the Brits brought their curling stones and invented the bobsleigh. Some even threw themselves headfirst down a frozen tube at 120 km/h on a thin toboggan (aka the Cresta Run); the rest skated around more sedately, or indulged in wacky races like blowing eggs across the ice.

But it wasn't only fun in the sun that was the selling point – the health benefits of escaping Britain were top billing in Cook's first winter sports brochure, launched in 1908. That featured eight resorts, including Adelboden which could only be reached by a two-hour sleigh ride.

Winter and summer soon developed hand in hand, giving the Swiss two seasons to make money and the British two reasons to spend it. It was a relationship that suited both sides.





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TOP OF THE WORLD

150



THE ORIGINAL IN  
WINTER TOURISM  
SINCE 1864



ENGADIN  
St. Moritz



## A lasting legacy

This year-round influx of British tourists had a profound effect on Switzerland, particularly in the poor rural regions where the landscape was the attraction but the locals lived off that land. Tourism turned rags into riches for many, providing jobs and security especially during the long winter months. Hotels were built with the latest modern comforts to keep the visitors happy, and freshly-opened railways carried eager Brits both under and over the mountains. Without the guaranteed income from tourism, many of today's wonderful Swiss train lines might never have been built. Not a nice thought.

Fifteen decades of British tourism in Switzerland has seen as many peaks and troughs as the landscape, enduring the wars and enjoying the booms. This unusual love affair between an island monarchy and the Alpine republic looks set to last another few decades at least. Badrutt and Cook must be smiling in their graves.



### About the author

*Diccon Bewes is a British travel writer who has lived in Switzerland for ten years. His first book, Swiss Watching, became a No1 bestseller and a Financial Times book of the year. His latest work, Slow Train to Switzerland, retraces the first Thomas Cook tour to Switzerland. More information: [www.dicconbewes.com](http://www.dicconbewes.com)*

