

The Alps in the age of new style tourism: between diversification and post-tourism?

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Introduction

The world of mountain tourism is marked by numerous uncertainties and structural factors of crisis, revealed, and often accelerated, by climate change: “market maturity”, loss of shares in the tourist market in the Alpine countries throughout Europe, competition from other tourist destinations, the growing economic and territorial divide between large and small resorts, new recreational practices, the ageing of the tourist population, demands for a quality environment, the transcending of the notion of resort, the social issue of seasonal work, the management of risks etc. For many observers the tourist system based on winter sports as it has come down to us from the second half of the 20th century, is from now on based on a “worn-out” model and is condemned to a deep-reaching reconstruction which will involve drastic adaptation. But if *mountains no longer inspire dreams*¹, it may also be because the industrial model of tourism – characterised by the standardisation of what is offered, seasonal specialisation and dependence on the property market – is reaching their limits. And other models, more flexible, more diversified and more creative have to be reckoned with.

Geo-cultural mutations

If we read specialist skiing and snowboarding magazines regularly, we will not be surprised by the omnipresence of icons and slogans containing a great number of promises about powdery snow and sensations... But, digging deeper, we discover that there is a growing geo-cultural fragmentation between the pictures of urban surf culture (*wall-ride*, omnipresent references to buildings and industrial structures: concrete, tarmac, trucks, quads, helicopters etc.) and the pictures of travel and “exotic spots” (Kashmir, Kamchatka, British Columbia, Australia etc.). On the other hand, with the exception of a few advertising spaces devoted to them, the winter sports resorts seem to have a very low profile in this media landscape. This obliteration is first of all shown by the prominence given to brand names of equipment in their advertising and editorial content, as to the figuring of high level *riders* as promoters of these brands. But this can also be seen increasingly in the urban rooting of dynamic sport and festive hybridisations such as *l’Air & style* which brings together on one and the same stage snowboard, motocross and music concert etc. in Munich, or again the “*Imperium & technique harbour rail jam*” organised in the port of Antwerp. The climate is therefore not the only variable of mutation in the world of

¹ Montagne Leaders n°202, August 2007

winter sports. A change in the mythology of tourism is also at work and is bringing not only into the resorts, but also between them and outside of them, new ways of using space and practising snow sports. The many raids, camps and walking and cycling tours which ostensibly triumph over the static world of the resorts also give evidence of this.

The idea of the resort as a unity of place, time and action, based on the functional triptych “accommodation – ski-lift – slopes”, can thus be circumvented or deviated by new readings of the mountain playground. One example we can mention is the striking contrast observable between the race to gigantic proportions in the expansion and interconnection of ski areas, and the micro-scale of space on which the new sports practised by young snow surfers seem to be played. The module of a *snowpark*, but also increasingly a mundane slope, an “improved” bump, a rock, a tree trunk, a snow-covered flight of steps or the door of a building, become the possible mediums of an expression centred on movements and shared emotions, of which creating a “tailor-made” activity ground, fashioning it and putting it together with simple tools (hands, spades, *snowboards* etc.) is an integral part, whereas the need for ski lifts becomes of secondary importance. These selective or alternative games with standardised resources given by the resorts and which favour proximity, simplicity, openings and deviations – and quite happily adapt to a lack of snow – also correspond to the desire of many visitors to get off the slopes or to seek between the slopes new types of playgrounds, on skis, on snowshoes or on foot.

Compared to the power of the industrial model of tourism, cultural and territorial references do not seem to carry a lot of weight. They nevertheless deserve our renewed attention in order to rethink the issue of innovation in tourism:

- thinking in terms of practices and experiences and not only in terms of equipment and consumption to tackle tourist demand;
- restoring importance to non-market processes as social practices and factors of creativity
- thinking “competitiveness” in a global way in terms of quality of the environment, the quality of the visitor’s experience, the quality of life of the inhabitants;
- asking about limits (defining, managing etc.) in the normalisation and standardisation of recreational areas.

It appears crucial to remember that the sustainable management of mountain tourism also involves reflecting on the conditions of its renewal. The history of leisure, of tourism and of sport is in fact to a vital extent the result of creative deviations, turnarounds and circumventions linked to out of bounds, fringe, or unlikely practices: innovative “do-it-yourself” (paragliding, *hydrospeed*, *snowboard*, mountain bikes), relaunching and reinventing (*telemark*, snowshoes, luge, *snow-kite*), and even transgressions (road jumps, night activities, bivouacking).

In short, the ones who, on the ground, have constantly invented and reinvented their practices and codes and the meaning attributed to them are the tourists, mountaineers, skiers, climbers, hikers, paragliders, kayakers themselves, insofar as geographical and social openings allowed them to do that and to experiment with “situations” in the sense of Guy Debord and the Situationists. Here we can find

the significance of the equation professed by the philosopher Ernst Bloch “*free time = free spaces*”. Whatever preoccupations concerning safety or environmental regulations and economic development institutional and professional operators have, they should therefore have the caution and wisdom to treat with consideration the part played by geo-cultural autonomy in the cultures of recreation which makes them “practices” before being possible “products”, for it is inherently re-creative.

The Alps as a post-tourism field of experimentation?

While towns are rejoicing once more and are becoming exotic thanks to urban ecology (for example: Paris-Plage), tourist sites and practices seem, on the contrary, stricken by a sort of end of tourism utopia and uchronia against a background of population crisis (ageing population), climate crisis (greenhouse effect), energy crisis (“the end of oil”), economic crisis (precarity), identity crisis (alarming otherness, guilt feelings), sanitary crisis (pandemics) and security crisis (attacks on tourist destinations) (Bourdeau et al. 2006). In this movement we can see the idea of a wavering in the geographical utopias mentioned by Bernard Debarbieux on the subject of the impact of the 2004 tsunami on the tourist imagination (Debarbieux 2005). While becoming central to the economy, the culture and the lifestyles of “developed societies”, tourism seems thus to dissolve and to shy away increasingly as an autonomous practice and object, as several authors point out or suggest (Urry 2002 or Viard 2006).

In this context recreational practices close to home are being relaunched, among other things. This is illustrated by numerous local and regional communication campaigns in which slogans like “*No need to go far to feel good*” (Rhône-Alpes Regional Tourism Committee 2005) or “*Madagascar? No: the Jura!*” (The Jura Départemental Tourism Committee 2008) are becoming common. In the same way, in the “*Explore Unusual Worlds*” campaign (Swiss Federal Railways, CFF 2008), pictures of the Alps are mixed with those of astronauts, the Loch Ness or King Kong in New York etc. This transcendence of the traditional divide between the spaces, times and practices of the everyday and the uncommon constitutes a growing hybridisation between taking root and mobility, work and leisure, residential, productive and recreational functions, close-to-home tourism and tourism involving a stay away from home, visitors and visited. This movement also corresponds to multiple re-readings of close-to-home spaces and times which transfigure their triviality and lead to a (re)discovery of a multiplicity of experiences. The three-week hike “Here becomes Elsewhere” organised in 2002 in the Grenoble urban area by a group of artists and related in a work entitled “The Scenery was Exceptional” (Ici-même 2004), as if it were an exploration of the ways urban space is used, is symbolic of this approach: camping in public spaces, accommodation with a family, “performances” and get-togethers at markets, collecting and broadcasting sounds and images etc. Here we are getting close to an “experimental” tourism, served by an unbridled, playful creativity (Antony et al. 2005).

On a more classic note, the *revival* of many very small winter sports resorts in the French Alps seems just as revealing: despite their predicted disappearance and the lack of interest on the part of most private and public operators, these modest destinations, long disqualified from the world of “grand skiing” have had a growing number of visitors since the beginning of the 2000s: less expensive, less marketed, less urbanised and less artificial than the “competitive” resorts, they offer snow lovers more convivial experiences that are partially freed of the games of class distinction... and above all closer to their homes, even if the snow does not always arrive on time. Among these rediscovered and sometimes reinvented destinations we can mention le Col de Porte near Grenoble, where a group of students associated with a local operator have breathed new life into a historical venue of French skiing by means of a dynamic festive and countercultural activity etc.

It is, of course, possible to interpret such mutations in terms of a tourist crisis and to show that they are leading towards the development of “tourism of crisis” based particularly on a relocalisation of the relationship between Here and Elsewhere. But it is even more interesting to analyse them in terms of post-tourism. Beyond the phenomena of transition and residential reconversion of tourist resorts and areas, post-tourism provides an account of a change in status of tourist practices and destinations in the context of globalisation and post-modernity: amenity migrations (Perlik 2006) and new residential practices (Viard 2006), a calling into question of the tourist utopia and uchronia, a search for continuity between holiday practices (recreational, social, cultural, spatial etc.) and everyday practices (Urry 2002), the touristification of ordinary places, experimental tourism and neo-situationism, new relationships between town and mountain in the context of metropolisation. This widened sense of post-tourism therefore refers to a working outside the frameworks of tourist thinking, structuring and practices because of the global evolution of society and the sectorial evolution of the recreational area. It invites us to renew our social sciences “tool box” by mobilising new notions and references: the transition from staying there to living there (Lazzarotti 2001, Stock 2004 and 2006), from tourist-mode economy to presence-mode economy (Davézies 2008), from tourist to “recreresident” (Lajarge 2006).

Conclusion

The first half of the 20th century witnessed a space-time revolution in tourism: the sea became the dominant summer destination while mountains established themselves as the most popular winter destination; that is to say, a complete reversal of geographical and seasonal polarity with regard to the initial situation in the 18th and 19th centuries. This overturning of habits which is linked to essentially geo-cultural factors (increase in heliotropism, evolution of our relationship with our body, development of skiing, mass recreation etc.) has of course made great demands on the capacity to adapt of tourist operators and destinations. While it is at the origin of contemporary tourism, it is obvious that this geo-seasonal balance cannot be considered as an immutable fact. Moreover, close observers are not failing to sug-

gest that the current climatic shift, acting as a catalyst in the structural mutations of tourism (Elsasser 2001), could eventually lead to a new space-time repolarisation. We would therefore witness a sort of “back to square one” of tourism with summer flow turned towards the mountains as a natural “climatised zone”, and winter flow drained by the coasts offering a large selection of various swimming, sailing and wellness activities etc.

A phenomenon of this type occurring over several decades throws considerable light on the impression of uncertainty which has been hitting mountain tourism for the past twenty years. Itself a vector of an economy of substitution with respect to agriculture and mountain industry, from now on the tourist sector finds itself facing the limits of its own stability, indeed of its durability. Without losing sight of the diversity of regional tourist topologies and destinations, or of the multiplicity of variables which influence the future of this sector, it therefore seems urgent to advance beyond a number of certitudes. This “step to the side” cannot be satisfied with a simple tactical *aggiornamento*, in terms of marketing and communication, for example, but it must constitute an authentic turnaround in strategy. The preoccupation with diversification linked to the attenuation of the effects of climate change does not therefore rest only on an offer of new recreational activities, (of which a very rich variety already exists), but also on the interest shown in new spaces, new publics, new times, new meanings etc. This thanks to the assertion of the legitimacy of a multiplicity of protagonists and operators, of working methods, of choices of profession life, of everyday life and recreational models while synchronically intensifying respect for the environment. Subject to this condition, the way out of “*all ski*” can be serenely contemplated as a way out of “*all snow*” and even of “*all tourism*”. And in the future the living Alps can hope to assert themselves as mountains of the “four seasons” (winter, spring, summer, autumn), of the “four spaces” (resorts, villages, high mountain, market town centres), of the “four activities” (agriculture, crafts-services, recreation, New information and communication technologies) and of the “four economies” (production, public, residential, social).

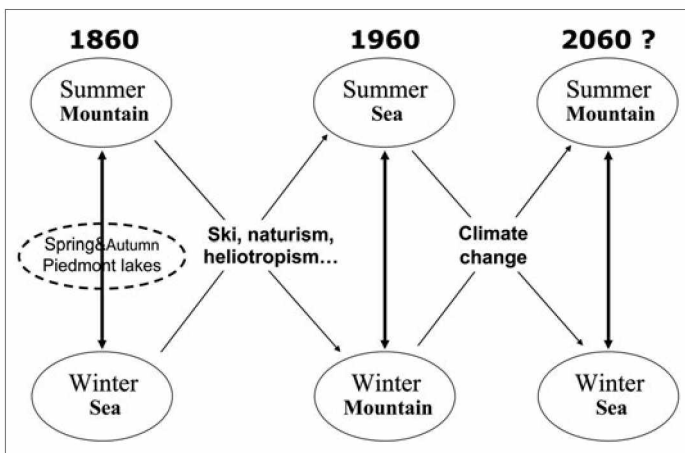


Figure 1: Towards a New Seasonal Turnaround of Tourism Polarities? (Pb. Bourdeau 2008)

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