From après-ski to après-tourism: the Alps in transition?
Reflections based on the French situation

Philippe Bourdeau
From après-ski to après-tourism: the Alps in transition?
Reflections based on the French situation

Philippe Bourdeau

EDITOR’S NOTE
Translation: Accent Mondial

1 The world of mountain tourism in Europe is marked by numerous uncertainties and structural crisis factors which climate change reveals and often accelerates: competition from other tourist destinations, the growing divide between large and small resorts, new recreational practices, the ageing of the tourist population, more stringent environmental quality requirements, the social question of seasonal work and risk management (Bourdeau et al., 2007). For many observers, the winter-sports-based tourism system inherited from the second half of the 20th century has for a long time been based on an "exhausted" model (Knafou, 1991) and is facing a far-reaching recomposition that involves drastic adaptation. But if, "the mountains no longer have a strong appeal," as more and more observers are conceding, this is perhaps also because the industrial tourism model characterised by standardisation of the offering, seasonal specialisation, dependence on the real-estate market and trivialisation of the landscape and of the experience is reaching limits in terms of sustainability. The contribution of other more flexible, diversified, creative and sustainable models should thus be examined.

A "white dream" that is fading?

2 In Western Europe, skiing is these days no longer an indicator of higher social status as it was in the 1960s and 70s. The winter sports are increasingly becoming a tourism "niche"
reserved for an international clientèle or skiers living in the vicinity. This situation is adding to a severe critical balance which is accentuated by the particular characteristics of the French situation in comparison to countries such as Switzerland and Austria (Moreau, 2004), both in terms of the development options chosen and the highly peripheral status of the mountains and skiing. The strategy of growth in value (moving upmarket, increasing ski-pass prices, etc.) favoured by tourism operators over a growth in volume of visitor numbers is accentuating the elitist character of winter sports. Thus, in France the percentage of people who go on a winter sports holiday is less than 8% of the population, and between 2 and 3% of skiers "consume" 70 to 80% of the skier-days (Berlioz, 2006). In this context, the operators concerned, whether privately or publicly owned, seem to have given up on the "accessibility to all" of mountain tourism that they proclaimed in the 1970s, and this is confirmed by the de facto expulsion of the different forms of social tourism (holiday centres, camps, school groups) by the majority of large resorts caused by pressure on land and real estate and overzealous regulation. At the same time, the ski-lift stock (more than 3,800 lifts) is considered to be fairly elderly and is not being renewed at a sufficient rate – particularly in the medium-altitude resorts – and in many cases local authorities are repeatedly approached to help fund the work being carried out.

In addition to this observation, we must of course ask ourselves questions about the almost permanent characterisation of winter sports as crisis-ridden, which has been offered to us for more than thirty years by journalists and research scientists and more recently from within, by an increasing number of operators. Against a background of climate change and the end of cheap oil, at a time when the demographic and social basis of winter sports is dwindling and when their geographic spread is shrinking to fewer locations, this eschatological view of skiing as a "tradition under threat" and of the skier as "an endangered species" is undeniably gaining ground and is more than a blatant effect of the familiar theme peddled by the media.

Repositioning issues: drifting on with the industrial model or reviving the cultural and territorial model?

Structural evidence of the "tourism industry" in the Alps is clearly shown by the extent to which constructions are springing up regularly all over winter sports resorts and valleys in mountainous areas: real-estate developments, modern funiculars, giant cable cars, "aquadomes", etc. Of course, the creation and management of winter sports resorts according to the rules of rationality and efficiency prevailed as early as the 1960s and 70s, particularly in France. But it was with the growing significance of the issues of competitiveness and quality, together with the increasing importance of the international clientèle and the rise in investment in artificial snow-making and ski lifts in the 1990s and 2000s, that Alpine tourism became industrialised and involved in high finance. And yet, despite the ideological, economic and media power of the industrial model of tourism, its limits (a minority of resorts concerned, standardisation of the offering, seasonal specialisation, dependence on the real-estate market, inflexibility in the face of changing demand, etc.) give us cause to look once again at cultural and
territorial references in order to rethink the question of innovation in tourism with a view to increased sustainability:

- thinking in terms of practices and experiences and not solely in terms of facilities and consumption in response to tourism demand;
- giving importance (once again) to non-commercial processes such as social practices and factors of creativity;
- conceiving "competitiveness" in a global way in terms of environmental quality (Leïdner, 2004), the quality of the visitor's experience and the quality of life of tourism professionals and inhabitants;
- posing the question of limits (definition, management, etc.) in the normalisation, standardisation and commoditisation of recreational areas; and not limiting the spatial representation of tourism solely to resorts.

On a geo-cultural level, a press review of the specialist skiing and snowboarding magazines unsurprisingly turns up countless icons and slogans full of promises of powder snow and excitement, etc. But a closer examination reveals a growing geo-cultural fragmentation between the representations of urban boardsports culture (wall riding, omnipresent references to buildings and industrial structures: concrete, tarmac, trucks, quad bikes, helicopters, etc.) and representations of travel and exotic destinations such as Kashmir, Kamtchatka, British Columbia and Australia. With the exception of a few advertising spaces devoted to them, winter sports resorts seem to be adopting an increasingly low profile in the media landscape. This relative decline in visibility manifests itself firstly in the prominence given to equipment brand names in resort advertising and editorial material and in the use of top-level riders for promotion. But it can also be seen increasingly in a process that results in hybrid sport-and-festival events being based in urban areas, such as Air & Style in Munich, which brings together snowboarding, motocross and music concerts on the same stage, and also the Imperium & Technine Harbour Rail Jam organised in the port of Antwerp. Thus, climate is not the only variable of mutation in the world of winter sports. A change in the mythology of tourism is also under way, introducing new ways of using space and practising snowsports not only in resorts but also between and outside them. There is evidence of this also in the many adventure races, camps and touring circuits which ostensibly present themselves as superior to the static world of winter sports resorts while occasionally relying on them.

The idea of the resort as a unity of place, time and action based on the functional coherence of the triptych "accommodation-ski lifts-slopes", can thus end up being circumvented or deviated by new interpretations of the mountain playground. One example is the striking contrast that can be observed between the race to create vast resorts through the expansion and interconnection of ski areas, and the spatial micro-scale on which the emerging practices of young boardsports enthusiasts seem to be situated. A feature in a snowpark, but also increasingly an ordinary slope, an "improved" bump, a rock, a tree trunk, a snow-covered flight of steps or the door of a building, become possible means of expression centred on set moves and shared emotions, in which "tailor-made" shaping and ad-hoc changes to the terrain using simple tools such as one's hands or a shovel gain importance in their own right, while the need for ski lifts becomes of secondary importance or superfluous. These selective or alternative games using the standardised resources provided by resorts, which favour proximity, simplicity and take place in alternative locations - and quite happily adapt to a lack of snow – also correspond to the aspirations of many visitors to get off the pistes or look between the
pistes for new fun places in which to express themselves, on skis, on snowshoes or on foot.

In this context, the issue of innovation in mountain tourism is not limited to providing resorts with a new way of engineering entertainment but also involves rethinking the role of skiers and visitors in the on-site experience that they have, reconsidering what place culture should have compared with amenities, and beyond that restoring the meaning of recreational practices with a view to creative spontaneity and increased autonomy. At the same time one must keep in mind that a tourism destination cannot be reduced to its geographical (landscape, climate, etc.) infrastructural (accommodation, ski lifts, pistes, etc.) and organisational and functional qualities (hospitality services, ski schools, etc.). It is also shaped by history, epics and myths, by its sense of belonging in a particularly area, by the interplay of cooperation and tension that involves inhabitants, professionals and visitors. It relies on an "atmosphere" which gives it an identity (Corneloup, 2007). It is in this sense that the cultural and territorial model of tourism has a strength based on the notion of heritage, structural substance, an openness and a functional flexibility which give it a number of advantages over the industrial model. One of the most interesting is that it is better able to move out of the insular, or even extraterritorial, logic in which winter sports resorts tend to shut themselves away: interaction between recreational practices within the resort and outside the resort, "bridges" between activities and operators, seasonal complementarities, relationships between winter sports resorts, valleys and villages, the ability to accommodate a permanent population, the capacity for economic diversification, etc. It is then not so much a standard as an anti-model that is created, to the extent that it is the particularities of each destination that are the centre of the relationship that it forms with its visitors.

Environmental quality: recent "revelation" or slow revolution?

It was as a result of pressure to pay more urgent attention to tourism quality in the context of the crisis in tourist numbers of the late 1980s that the issue of the environment slowly emerged in the world of mountain resorts. In the French Alps, throughout the whole of the 1990s the reaction of tourism operators was limited to neo-patrimonial repentance in the form of window dressing (Wozniak, 2006): resorts were given a face lift and mock "old Tyrolean-style" chalets sprung up, while cladding, "old-style" timbers and copper gutters were grafted on to the façades and roofs of existing buildings. Despite considerable pressure from non-governmental organisations, it was not until the mid-2000s that the environmental question acquired real legitimacy. Against a background of a poor snow record, winter 2006-2007 thus took on a "time-of-Revelation" character: events devoted to environmental issues (the first international Wintersports Resorts for a Better World forum in Avoriaz, the Planetworkshops in Courchevel, etc.); renewable energy sources used to supply several French winter sports resorts (Chamrousse, Serre-Chevalier); the environmental certification schemes ISO 14001 and Quality, Safety, Environment (Les Menuires, Montgenèvre); completion of greenhouse-gas emission audits. Even if the credibility of these schemes is often questioned and characterised as nothing more than "greenwashing", the launch of the National Charter for Sustainable Development in Mountain Resorts by the National Association of Mayors
of Mountain Resorts (Ski France, 2007) appears to indicate that a willingness to consider the environment is now irreversible, even if it is inevitably subject to tensions and controversies.

For all that, the consensus on the environmental quality requirements of winter sports is not exempt from major contradictions, the thorniest of which can be described as CRS (Car-Real Estate-Snowmaking) syndrome. In mountainous areas as elsewhere, the car, the major vector of the extension of tourism to the masses and the preferred means of transport to winter sports resorts for more than 80% of bed-nights, is a paradoxical source of freedom of movement but also of constraints and impacts. In addition to the question of the seasonal saturation of resort access roads, the problem of the car’s place in resorts (traffic, parking, noise, pollution, its relationship with pedestrians, etc.) is today a major challenge in both summer and winter. The second "driving force and curb" of winter tourism is real estate. It is commonly acknowledged by the observers and operators concerned that for forty years the real-estate construction industry has provided external finance for investments in ski lifts (Berlioz, 2006). Some 20,000 new beds are built every year in the Northern French Alps, despite the fact that there is increasingly less of a connection between the numbers of active tourists and the real-estate market. This headlong rush by the real-estate market is broadly connected with the perverse effects of tax incentive measures, as shown by the example of the rural revitalisation zones (ZRRs) introduced in 1995: more than half of the loans granted for the period 2000-2002 were concentrated in six communes in Maurienne even though 20,000 French communes were eligible (Mountain Wilderness, 2004). And this does not even always solve the problem that winter sports resort management companies have, which is to compensate for the large numbers of beds leaving the rental market due to obsolescence or speculative strategies. Industrial snowmaking is the last problem-solution of the "CRS" triptych. Almost the sole palliative measure chosen to deal with a lack of natural snow, it is also apparently increasingly becoming a source of the environmental and socioeconomic impacts that are now being recognised by most observers, (OECD, 2007; CIPRA, 2004; 2006): the increased artificialisation of ski areas caused by the installation of snowmakers and piste redesign, with consequences for biodiversity and overconsumption of energy and water. The question of providing a water supply for snowmaking facilities, a very controversial topic that features prominently in the media, is particularly emblematic of the global nature of the problems posed, whether they concern the modification of the flow rate of mountain streams and rivers and the resulting reduction of biodiversity, the construction and filling of the increasing numbers of larger and larger retaining reservoirs, competition with drinking-water supplies or water loss through evaporation. But the conditions for the industrial production of snow are also increasingly problematic in ecological and energy terms, particularly where making snow at above-zero temperatures is concerned.

In the face of this accumulation of structural and functional handicaps, recourse to "green" communication solutions is frequently observed: advertising, labels that are self-proclaimed and never evaluated and certifications that are rather unambitious despite being good for public relations. All the same, there has been a significant increase in the level of demands from the public, the media and the operators themselves, with the latter finding themselves increasingly either drawn in or having their hand forced by the position of willing player that they are forced to show outwardly.
The Alps as a laboratory of post-tourism experimentation?

While city destinations are becoming more attractive again thanks to urban ecology and are making themselves more exotic – from snow domes to Paris-Plage – it appears that the tourism utopia and uchronia (Bourdeau et al., 2006) are being called into question against a background of multiple crisis factors: demography, climate, energy, economics, identity (anxiety-provoking "betweenness", guilt) and security (attacks in tourist destinations).

It is in this context that one of the phenomena that manifests itself is the resurgence of a more open attitude to close-to-home recreation, illustrated by numerous local and regional communication campaigns in which slogans such as "No need to go far to feel good" and "Madagascar? No, the Jura!" are becoming commonplace. Similarly, in Swiss Railways' "Explore Unusual Worlds" campaign, images of the Alps are mixed up with images of astronauts, the Loch Ness Monster, King Kong in New York, etc. This mixing up of geographical references, which plays with bridging the traditional divide between the spaces, times and practices of ordinary life and those of the out-of-the-ordinary, constitutes a growing hybridisation of a sedentary and mobile existence, work and leisure, residential, productive and recreational functions, close-to-home tourism and staying away from home, visitors and the visited. This movement also corresponds to the multiple reinterpretations of close-to-home space and time, which transfigure their ordinariness and lead to the (re)discovery of a host of experiences. On a more conventional register, the revival of many very small winter sports resorts in the French Alps appears to be just as telling. Despite their heralded disappearance and a lack of interest on the part of most privately and publicly owned operators, these modest destinations, which for a long time have been barred from the world of "big-time skiing", have seen a revival of visitor numbers since the beginning of the 2000s. Cheaper, less commercial and less urbanised and artificialised than the "competitive" resorts, they offer snow-lovers more convivial experiences that are partially emancipated from issues of social class and which above all are closer to home, even if the snow is sometimes lacking. An example of one of these rediscovered and in some cases reinvented destinations is the Col de Porte near Grenoble, where for several years a group of students associated with a local operator breathed new life into a place central to the history of skiing in France by creating a festive and counter-cultural destination.

Of course, it is possible to interpret such mutations in terms of tourism in crisis, and to show that they are leading to the development of crisis tourism, particularly based on the as yet uncertain beginnings of a relocalisation of the relationship between Here and Elsewhere. But it is even more interesting to analyse them using the imperfect and temporary framework of interpretation that is post-tourism. In addition to phenomena of transition and residential reconversion of resorts and tourist regions, post-tourism provides an explanation of a change in status of tourist practices and destinations in the context of globalisation and territorial post-modernity: amenity migration (Perlik, 2006) and residential transition to tourist destinations (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 mixing together of times, places and activities (professional, cultural, social, etc.), the
transformation of ordinary urban and rural places into tourist destinations, experimental tourism and neo-situationism, new relationships between town and mountain in the context of metropolisation, renewed popularity of urban daily life, the transcending of unity of time, place and action embodied in the notion of the resort, the rise in demand for recreational practices close to home, the increase in the number of days of holiday spent at home, renunciation behaviour and "elective" refusal to go away on holiday, etc. This widespread acceptance of post-tourism therefore refers to moving beyond the framework of tourist thinking, structuring and practice both because of the evolution of society as a whole and the evolution of the recreational sector. For the observer, this presupposes the mobilisation of new heuristic perspectives and new indicators: the transition from staying in a place to living in a place (Lazzarotti, 2001; Stock, 2004 and 2006), from a tourist-based economy to a presence-based economy (Davézies, 2008), from tourist to "recreresident", who is both a resident and a permanent visitor (Lajarge, 2006).

Moving away from all-out skiing, all-out snow or all-out tourism?

Like any profound change, the one that Alpine tourism is undergoing is a mixture of permanent features and changes. The first half of the 20th century witnessed a space-time revolution in tourism: the seaside became the dominant summer destination while the mountains established themselves as the most popular winter destination, in other words a complete reversal of the geographical and seasonal polarity in tourism compared to the initial situation in the 18th and 19th centuries. This turnaround, which was to do with essentially geo-cultural factors (the rise of sun-worshipping (heliotropism), the evolution of our relationship with our body, the development of skiing, the spread of recreational practices to the masses, etc.) did of course place great demands on the ability of operators and tourist destinations to adapt. Although it forms the basis of contemporary tourism, it is obvious that this geo-seasonal balance cannot be considered to be an immutable fact. Moreover, careful observers are clearly suggesting that the climate change currently under way, acting as a catalyst in the structural mutations of tourism, (Elsasser, 2001), could eventually lead to a new space-time repolarisation (Figure 1). We would therefore witness a sort of "back-to-square-one" situation in tourism, with summer flows directed towards the mountains as a natural "air-conditioned area" and winter flows draining to seaside destinations offering a wide variety of activities such as swimming, boating and wellbeing.

Such a phenomenon, which has been occurring over several decades, broadly explains the effect of uncertainty that has been affecting mountain tourism for twenty years. Itself a vector of an economy that has replaced farming and mountain industry, the tourism sector is now faced with the limits of its own stability, indeed of its continued existence. Without losing sight of either the diversity of local and regional tourism offerings or the host of variables that will influence the future of this sector, it therefore appears to be high time that we move beyond a certain number of certainties or routines. This "side step" cannot be satisfied with a simple tactical aggiornamento, in terms of marketing and communication for instance, but must constitute a real strategic about-turn. The preoccupation with diversification connected with mitigating the effects of climate change is therefore based not only on an offering of new recreational activities (of which there are already many), but also on the interest given to new spaces, new publics, new
times, new meanings and new methods of cultural and territorial intelligence in tourism (Bourdeau et al., 2007). This is due to the assertion of the legitimacy of a multiplicity of actors and operators, of working methods, of choices of professional life, of everyday life and recreational models, which a purely industrial and marketing-based model of tourism would not be sufficient to stimulate and integrate.

Faced with the significance of the issues involved and the factors of mutation to be taken into account, the multiple processes at work in the sphere of tourism constitute different margins of action: impetuses for territorial and cultural anchoring, regulation by the public players and civil society, environmental quality demands, carefully considered risk management, vitality and creativity in the non-commercial sector, summer-winter complementarity, the virtues of multiple activities both within and outside tourism, affirmation of the in-between recreational-residential status, the role of the outsiders (small resorts and lower mountainous areas), the rise of the sporadic nature of tourism (years with and without snow), the revival of sightseeing- and heritage-based tourism, the renaissance of climate-based tourism and the new spa tourism (wellness), etc. In these conditions, the way out of "all-out skiing" can be confidently envisaged as a way out of "all-out snow" and even "all-out tourism".

Figure 1. Towards a new seasonal reversal of tourism polarities?

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


BOURDEAU PH. (Dir.), 2006. – *La montagne, terrain de jeu et d’enjeu*. Ed. du Fournel, L’Argentière-la-Bessée.


Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine, 97-3 | 2009
From après-ski to après-tourism: the Alps in transition?


NOTES


ABSTRACTS

Winter sports occupy a prominent place in European tourism, not only because of their economic importance in mountainous areas but also due to their major symbolic significance in the "leisure civilisation". Yet the world of winter tourism is full of uncertainties connected with climate change and also with evolutions and structural breaks that call into question the development model on which it is based. This context of profound change gives us the opportunity to question the limits of the industrial model that has governed the development of the Alps for the practice of skiing and to examine alternative future scenarios to "all-out skiing" and even "all-out tourism".

Les sports d’hiver occupent une place de premier plan dans le tourisme européen, non seulement du fait de leur poids économique dans les régions de montagne, mais aussi par leur forte dimension symbolique dans la « civilisation des loisirs ». Pourtant l’univers du tourisme hivernal est parcouru par de nombreuses incertitudes liées au changement climatique, mais aussi à des évolutions et des ruptures structurelles qui remettent en question le modèle de développement sur lequel il repose. Ce contexte de mutation permet d’interroger les limites du modèle industriel
qui a présidé à l'aménagement des Alpes pour la pratique du ski et d'examiner des figures d'avenir alternatives au « tout ski » et même au « tout tourisme ».

INDEX

Mots-clés: Alpes, post-tourisme, stations de sports d'hiver, tourisme
Keywords: Alps, post-tourism, tourism, winter sports resorts

AUTHOR

PHILIPPE BOURDEAU
Institut de Géographie Alpine, UMR Territoires-PACTE, Université de Grenoble,
ph.bourdeau@free.fr