



## SWISS Serves Media Well on Brand-Awareness Fam Trip

By Dan Schlossberg

The invitation came via an innocent e-mail from a source I did not know.

Swiss International Airlines, a 10-year-old carrier that had succeeded the bankrupt SwissAir, was inviting me to join a small group of American journalists on a four-night trip that would include one night on the plane and three in Swiss hotels.

With fading memories of my only previous press trip to Switzerland, I jumped at the chance, joining two women and one other man in an adventure so full that it seemed at least a week had elapsed.



The medium-sized airline features planes painted in red capitals reading SWISS plus a tail fin that resembles the white-on-red cross of the Swiss flag. It also has plush lounges for both first and business-class passengers; exemplary on-board service; and such a close association with the idyllic nation that its on-board menu changes every three months to feature a different region.

The 'Taste of Switzerland' doesn't only apply to the food but the ambiance of the airliner itself.

Unlike most legacy carriers in the United States, SWISS prides itself on doing the little things right. It doesn't pack passengers in its planes. It staggers seating in first and business class to allow seats to convert from vertical to horizontal positions so that passengers can sleep. And it provides a vast selection of music, movies, and television channels – all in the four official languages of the country (German, French, Italian, and English).

Best of all, each business class seat comes equipped with a myriad of switches and buttons only slightly less advanced than those found in the cockpit. One of them even provides a back massage!

Press one button and the leg-rest slowly rises. Try another and turn on the entertainment menu. Press another and the seat returns to proper position for landing.

Nor does anybody have to hurdle a sleeping passenger to beat a hasty retreat to the restroom. All but five of the seats in business class have aisle access.

And SWISS flight attendants are well-trained, not only in adhering to every request but in running more miles per flight than any of the Super Bowl participants. They brought SWISS cheese, served a choice of hot meals, and even added Movenpick ice cream for passengers who opted to watch on-board movies (a word of advice: avoid CONTAGION).

As a parting nice gesture, the staff stood at the door with open boxes of Swiss chocolate, leaving a sweet taste in the mouths of the U.S. journalists.

From there, we were in the capable hands of Jackie Pash, chief of corporate communications and publicity for SWISS in the United States. She ushered our group to the Renaissance Tower in West Zurich for a two-night stay, made dinner arrangements, and handled with aplomb such minor problems as the inability to find Facebook or the international edition of USA TODAY.

After exploring both the hotel and the old town of Zurich, the journalists regrouped for a full day at Zurich International, one of the cleanest and most reliable airports in Europe. Because it is the main base for SWISS, the airline staged Brand Awareness Day by blending the American group with more than two-dozen journalists from other countries, including the Netherlands, Greece, Turkey, Dubai, and Lebanon. Most spoke or understood English, as did the SWISS executives who made presentations at the airport.

In fact, all SWISS flight attendants are required to speak at least two languages. They should try that in the U.S., where it seems that some in-flight staffers (at least on the alleged legacy carriers) haven't mastered one!

Brand Awareness Day featured several power point demonstrations, including one by Chief Commercial Officer Dr. Holger Haetty, who came to SWISS from Lufthansa (Swiss International is part of an airline consortium called the Lufthansa Group). The day featured guided tours of a plane, a business lounge, and even the vast backstage area where food and drink of all descriptions are prepared for passengers.

To be sure, it was a learning experience. After dizzying note-taking, I learned that SWISS served 72 destinations in 38 countries with 89 planes that average 11.4 years old. In 2011, it made 150,000 flights, served 15.3 million passengers, and – the best part – served 14 million chocolate bars on board.

The airline employs 7,600 people, including 1,200 pilots, 3,500 flight attendants, and 2,900 ground staff. And it's growing, adding 500 new employees last year and planning to add 10 new planes in the next three years.

For business class passengers (and certainly for those in first class), flying SWISS is almost like taking a luxury cruise. Each seat not only uses new air-cushion technology superior to foam but also allows passengers to regulate the firmness or softness. A typical configuration is eight seats in first class, 45 in business, and 183 in economy.

The airline's product development team gets more than 1,000 items of feedback per month from cabin personnel, who are also encouraged to visit a product hub exhibit that presents all elements of SWISS inflight product and service.

In addition, the carrier keeps in close touch with its core customers, whose opinions are highly valued.

They all agree on at least one thing: Zurich Airport may be last in the alphabetical list of world-class airports but it is first in almost everything else. It's not only a strategically-located hub with a remarkable record of punctuality but also a model of design and engineering where passengers are pampered before they board. The security entrance was moved forward in December so that people leaving the airport would have time to browse the shops and lounges without worrying about waiting in line.

The vast European railway network bisects the terminal, allowing passengers to get to or from Zurich in less than 30 minutes -- and to many other points both in Switzerland and beyond. The city also has trams, trolleys, cable-ways, boats, and even a funicular that makes mountain goats jealous because it makes climbing steep heights so simple.

SWISS flies from eight North American cities -- Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, Newark, New York, and San Francisco -- and is bringing its three-class service to Newark Liberty in March.

During my trip, which departed from John F. Kennedy International, the spotlight was on the Bernese Oberland region, featuring the five-star Lenkerhof Alpine Resort in Lenk. Another day or two at that spectacular Alpine retreat would have been great, especially since meals turned into Spielberg productions with special effects, lots of show-and-tell, and more questions than David Gregory throws out on Meet the Press.

Somehow, I still found time to ride the gondola to the top (for picture-taking), swim in an outdoor pool heated by sulphur springs, tip-toe through an adults-only area that boasted seven different saunas but prohibited bathing suits, and luxuriate in a corner suite that faced the slopes on one side and the village of Lenk on the other. Having shrimp for breakfast the final morning, followed by a scenic three-hour bus ride back to the airport, left lasting good memories of a heavenly few days.

As a veteran of hundreds of press trips -- some of which I hosted during my days as a publicist for Princess Hotels and the Colorado Sunterennial Resorts (with M. Silver Associates in the '70s) -- this was one of the best. I had always associated the word Swiss with clocks, banks, chocolate, and cheese. Now I have another pleasant memory as well.