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Full steam ahead on the snow train



CELEBRATION OF A LIFE...

ERNA LOW
pioneer of package skiing holidays

DYNAMIC:
During childhood in Vienna, right, Erna learnt to ski and kept it up until late in life



ERNA Low, who has died aged 92, was the doyenne of the British travel industry. As a pioneer of package holidays, she helped make cheap and easy foreign travel available to millions.

Shortly after the Second World War, Erna launched a weekly "snow train" to the Alps, making it possible for ordinary people to enjoy the skiing holidays that until then had been the preserve of the upper classes.

Born and educated in Vienna, she attributed her ability to build businesses from nothing to her father, who arrived penniless from Czechoslovakia and created a thriving postal education school. At eight, wearing her brother's discarded sportswear, she became a passionate skier. While studying at Vienna University, she also became Austrian javelin champion.

In 1930, aged 21, she came to London to work on a PhD thesis about an obscure Victorian poet, Lord de Tabley. With characteristic determination, Erna traced his grandchildren, who invited her to stay at their stately home near Knutsford in Cheshire. Carrying a rucksack, she arrived at the top of the estate's long drive after more than an hour's walk from the station. The de Tabley family were amazed: "No one has ever walked up the drive before," she was told.

Erna showed the same spirit when she needed funds to visit her sick mother. In January 1932, she advertised in the Morning Post: "Viennese undergradette taking party to Austria, fortnight, £15." Everything was included in her package except ski passes - there were no lifts then. Her first skiing

party consisted of five men and a female chaperone, and Erna found time to slip off and see her family while setting a pattern for a flourishing future business.

After Germany annexed Austria in 1938, she decided never to return home. In 1940 she became a British citizen and changed her name from its original Löwe. During the Second World War she monitored German radio broadcasts for British Intelligence.

After the war, Erna needed money to pay for a new car and began organising house-party holidays, leasing British boarding schools and inviting paying guests to stay. To ensure a happy atmosphere, she interviewed each potential customer individually.

FOREIGN travel was difficult because of strict foreign-currency laws which allowed travellers to take only £50 a year out of the country. Erna got round them by asking her customers to pay in sterling before leaving home.

Under the slogan "Sun and Snow with Erna Low", her first trip, to Murren in Switzerland in 1948, cost 38 guineas all-inclusive, leaving customers with £17 spending money (although Erna warned that baths cost an extra 2s6d). The package holiday was born.

Each weekend for the next 10 years, scores of clients boarded Erna's snow train for the 24-hour journey to Austria. In the disco-carriage, revellers rock-and-rolled along the rail tracks of Europe to a scratchy mix of Haley, Presley and Richard.

She later combined the ski trips with her house-party concept and called them "chalet parties", an idea quickly copied by every tour company. And she ran school trips. One teacher warned her to expect "a girl with a special mother" - but when Princess Anne arrived late in Davos, the best beds had already been taken, leaving only

camp beds. Incredibly dynamic, Erna loved discovering new holiday destinations before the mass-market operators. Soon, her firm began offering summer holidays to Corsica, the Algarve and the Adriatic.

Short, stocky and always smartly dressed, she had an unquenchable enthusiasm for life and travel, and clients often became lifelong friends. "People take a lot of time, but they are my hobby," she said.

Staff at her South Kensington offices regarded Erna (always referred to as Miss Low) as a hard taskmistress, with a legendary zeal for saving money. "But she could also be incredibly generous," recalls her co-director, Joanna Yellowlees-Brown. Her way of admitting colleagues had won an argument was to present them with a cake.

In 1972, with a staff of 60 and a turnover of £1.5million, Erna sold out, only to buy her name back in 1975 when the business was foundering. She sold up again in 1979 to become a consultant to the travel industry, touring Europe in search of new destinations. "I remember her in her seventies climbing a mountain in Italy," Yellowlees-Brown recalls.

Erna set about building her travel company for the third time. By now, however, she was suffering poor health and in 1995, aged 85, she handed the company to Yellowlees-Brown. Her choice of successor was another canny decision - company turnover has gone on to increase sixfold and last season Erna Low Travel took 20,000 visitors to Europe. Two years ago, she entered the British Travel Industry's Hall of Fame, the trade's highest accolade.

Colleagues remember Erna as "more English than the English", although she spoke all her life with a strong Austrian accent. She never married, living alone in South Kensington with her dog, but had numerous godchildren, including actress Emily Lloyd.

● Erna Low, ski-tour pioneer, born Vienna, July 28, 1909. Died London, February 12, 2002.



FLYING HIGH: Erna led the way in package holidays

JULIA LLEWELLYN SMITH