

## Obituaries

## Erna Low

Businesswoman who introduced package holidays to Britain in a bid to subsidise her skiing trips in Austria

ERNA LOW, who has died aged 92, was credited with creating the first package holidays offered in Britain.

"Viennese undergraduette taking party to Austria, fortnight, £15," ran her first advertisement in *The Morning Post* in January 1932; that year she managed to find five clients. Their £15 bought them German lessons, ski hire and instruction, rail travel, and 10 days' full board in Sölden in the Austrian Ötztal. Ski passes were not included in the package – because there weren't any lifts.

Her tours to Austria, France, and Switzerland quickly became successful and by the end of the war Erna Low had expanded her trips to cover the Easter and summer holidays and to include separate parties, teenagers and families. Her singles parties were so popular that they were eventually responsible for some 20 marriages.

Erna Low was born on July 28 1909 in Vienna. A talented athlete from her childhood, she was for a time the Austrian javelin champion.

After coming to England in 1930 to research a PhD thesis on Lord de Tabley, an obscure Victorian poet and botanist, she earned a basic living in Bloomsbury as a language tutor. She hit upon the idea of a travel business to finance her regu-

lar winter trips home to satisfy her passion for skiing. After the Anschluss, Erna Low set up home in England permanently, becoming a British citizen in 1940.

For much of the war she worked for the BBC in Worcestershire, monitoring German broadcasts for the Intelligence Service. The predicament of families separated by overseas service gave her the idea of organising house-party holidays at Christmas, for which she leased boarding schools and invited paying guests to stay.

In 1946 Erna Low formed two companies: one (later to become Enjoy Britain Ltd) concentrated on the British house-parties; the other, Erna Low Travel Services Ltd, organised overseas trips.

What she enjoyed best was finding "new resorts" in both summer and winter. Her clients then had these to themselves until the mass-market tour operators followed in her wake.

Skiing was a focal point of her life, and one of her specialities was running ski courses for schools. With the resumption of foreign travel after the war, and an annual foreign exchange allowance of £50, travel experts were in demand – especially those who could arrange for most of the holiday and extras to be



Erna Low: an extra 2s 6d for baths

paid for in sterling before leaving home. The true package holiday was born.

"Winter Sports are on the map again," said her 1948 brochure. "The available funds for Switzerland are limited and it really is essential to book right away."

For 38 guineas Erna Low could provide an all-inclusive fortnight in Mürren in a first-class hotel. By

ensuring that a proportion of the costs were payable in sterling, her customers could still have up to £17 spending money for their trip. "You can, however, manage on considerably less," she pointed out. "A minimum to take with you would be £10. Baths are not included and cost an extra 2s 6d."

Charter flights followed in 1954 and, acting on Erna Low's advice, skiers clumping up the airline steps in their lace-up boots and ski clothes, to save on precious baggage allowances, soon became a familiar Saturday scene at British airports.

Each weekend for the next 10 years, thousands of less intrepid clients boarded her weekly "snow-train", complete with disco carriage, for the 24-hour journey to Austria. Revellers rocked and rolled along the rail-tracks of Europe to a scratchy pre-vinyl Bakelite mix of Bill Haley, teenage Elvis, and Cliff Richard. Erna Low combined skiing with her concept of the house-party, and called it the "chalet party".

In 1962 *Housewife* magazine described her as "this stunning, dynamic woman", and carried illustrations of the "sensible walking shoes and no-nonsense Jersey suits" that she favoured.

She was always a formidable figure. Once a senior executive with a

rival company, receiving an award at a trade ceremony, turned to Erna Low and declared: "You once refused to employ me, and look where I am now." "I still wouldn't employ you," snapped Erna.

In 1972, with a staff of 60 and a turnover of £1.5 million, Erna Low sold out – only to buy her name back in 1975 when the business was foundering. She sold out again in 1979 to become a consultant to the travel industry. In this role she concentrated on the growing number of health spas being developed throughout Europe. She was the official representative in the UK of the ski resorts of La Plagne, Les Arcs, and Flaine. She was decorated for services to tourism by France, Austria and Italy.

Then, at an age when her contemporaries had long since retired, she set about building her travel company for the third time with the help of Joanna Yellowlees-Bound, her appointed successor. Last season Erna Low, the company, took 20,000 visitors to Europe.

Short and stocky, with an unquenchable vitality and enthusiasm for new ventures, Erna Low was occasionally a difficult employer, but a loyal and generous friend.

She never married, living alone in South Kensington with her dog.