

# The pioneer of value-for-money package holidays



Erna Low: launched a multi-million pound industry

Erna Low, who died of a stroke at the age of 92, was the pioneer of the package holiday.

The woman who launched a multi-million pound industry began it all when she was an impecunious student in London who wanted money to visit her parents in Austria. In 1932, she came up with the idea of putting an advert in the Morning Post saying: "Viennese undergraduate taking party to Austria. Fortnight £15."

It was a no-frills offer, but even in those days it was good value. It included

travel, ski hire and instruction, 10 days' full board, plus German lessons. Ski passes were not included, but only because there were no lifts then.

Value for money became the hallmark of Erna Low's holidays. London became her permanent base and after the second world war she expanded rapidly. She rented big country houses that enabled her to start the house party programme offering Britons the chance of a break from post-war gloom. "The house will be warm with lots of hot water

and good food," promised her 1946 brochure.

Although, in a year of harsh weather and all the privations of rationing, she added: "I am not proposing to run these parties in the manner of a luxury hotel."

Two years later, she acted as midwife to the package holiday proper, selling Alpine skiing holidays for just 38 guineas. It meant the total cost was below the £50 foreign exchange limit to which travellers were subject. She was able to keep prices so low by ensuring that some of the costs were

paid in sterling - and by assuring her clients that they could manage on as little as £10 spending money.

Erna Low had a sporting background. She was born in Vienna in 1909 and became Austrian javelin champion before moving to London to complete a doctorate in English literature. After the rise of the Nazis she became a British citizen and spent the war years monitoring German broadcasts for the intelligence services.

In 1972, she sold her company, which had a turnover of \$1.5m and 50 staff, but

bought it back again just three years later in order to protect her brand.

In 1979 she sold it again to join the travel industry, becoming the official representative for several ski resorts, before building up the Erna Low company a third time.

Having launched the chalet party holiday 50 years earlier, this formidable woman celebrated the millennium by starting a world-wide spa programme.

Erna Low never married.

Sue Cameron