

Profit drive blamed for Swiss canyon tragedy

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It appears that Swiss authorities are attempting to find scapegoats for last week's canyoning tragedy, in which 21 young people lost their lives. A criminal investigation has been opened against four tour guides who survived the raging flood that on July 27 swept down the narrow Saxetenbach creek gorge, near the central Swiss resort of Interlaken.

They face possible charges of causing death by criminal negligence. Yet former guides have spoken out to accuse the tourism company involved of persistently pressuring guides to take groups into the gorge in bad weather.

Those who died were in a group of 99 taking part in the adventure sport of canyoning, organised by Adventure World, under a contract with the international travel group, Contiki Holidays. Canyoning involves swimming and sliding down fast-flowing rivulets wearing padded wetsuits, life jackets and helmets, as well as abseiling down cliffs alongside waterfalls.

Despite a series of official local warnings, and the well-known dangers of flash flooding, the Adventure World tourists were led into the gorge at about 5pm amid rain and thunder. They were swept to their deaths when a two-metre wall of water and debris came rushing down the jagged rocky ravine.

Their injuries—smashed heads, torsos and limbs—were so terrible that their bodies were often initially unidentifiable. A police spokesman said they had been battered beyond recognition. "We found a lot of bruises on the faces of these young victims," Ulrich Zollinger of the Swiss Forensics Institute told reporters. "They also had traumatisation of the brain and abdomen." He compared the injuries to those suffered in an air crash, and said it might take up to three weeks to identify all the bodies.

In an effort to confirm the death list, Interpol dispatched police officers to the victims' homes to dust for fingerprints and obtain DNA samples. Grieving family members planning to fly to Switzerland were asked to bring the dental records of their loved ones.

As of August 3—a week after the tragedy—two bodies had still to be identified. Lake Brienz, into which many bodies were swept, was still being searched for a missing body. Of the 17 named victims, 10 were Australian, two South African, two British, two Swiss and one New Zealander. Among them were three tour guides.

The authorities moved quickly to single out the surviving guides as targets for criminal prosecution. Public prosecutor

Michel-Andre Fels told a July 30 news conference that the guides were under judicial investigation for criminal negligence. "Based on the information we have up to now, we will mainly discuss whether the offence has been committed by negligence, which means causing negligent death," he said.

Fels said consideration might be given later to investigating the role of the organisers. Well before any investigation, however, Swiss officials and the two companies, Adventure World and Contiki, had declared that the fatalities were simply the product of a freak accident that they could not possibly have predicted.

The Swiss government sent condolences to victims of the "nature's wild behaviour". Adventure World manager Georg Hoedle said: "Something absolutely extraordinary, incomprehensible and unforeseeable must have happened, because our guides know every centimetre of the river."

Company and Swiss officials asserted that the rush of water must have been caused by the collapse of a natural dam formed by debris higher up the stream. Peter Balmer of Adventure World said: "The water must have come like an explosion. No-one could have predicted that." He also described the company's staff as "thorough professionals".

This scenario was contradicted by accounts given by local officials and survivors, however.

One survivor, whose husband perished, said she did not believe that the groups should have proceeded. Kelly Swanson-Roe, who saw her husband Jon swept away, said: "It was thundering and lightning before we left, and it was raining, and I believe we shouldn't have been in that canyon." Speaking at a media conference, she described her experience as "horrible". "We heard the sound of thunder, I turned around and looked up the stream, and we saw a wall of water coming straight for us."

Markus Gerber, commander of the fire and rescue services in the Wilderswil area where the tragedy occurred, said he had sent one of his officers to warn the guides not to proceed. Under an emergency plan, formulated three years ago after a similar incident, the local fire department was on high alert by 4.30pm. By 5.10pm, Wilderswil's chief fire officer had alerted his Interlaken superiors that all villages bordering Lake Brienz could expect an imminent surge in water and debris.

The officer sent by Gerber was Martin Seematter, a local councillor and civil engineer. He found the group getting ready to go into the water and spoke to the guides. "I said: 'Don't go

in the creek. There is some bad weather up there at the moment.' They replied that they had enough experience to know when to call it off," he told the *Melbourne Age*. "It was obvious that it was raining and it was obvious that it had been raining up on the mountains for some time," he said, adding that the rainfall took 30 minutes to sweep through the gorge.

Acting police commander Sefan Blaettler told the *Neue Zuericher Zeitung* that a warning system had been established after the Saxetenbach had caused flooding and devastation downstream in 1987, although it was not designed specifically to warn canyoneers of water surges.

Because of the fire brigade's storm warning, a rival company cancelled a canyoning trip at the same time as the Adventure World expedition. Alpine Raft is run by Heinz Loosle, the man credited with introducing canyoning to the Swiss Alps 10 years ago. "We had reservations for the evening but our office said we must cancel because of the weather," Loosle said. "For us, there was no question of going into the canyon at that time."

The most revealing statements came from two former Adventure World guides. The first, David Eriksen, now living in New Zealand, told the *Age*: "You really have to ask the question why they [the group] were there if there were such advanced heavy weather warnings and if the other operators decided that it was going to be bad enough that they didn't want to be in there."

Eriksen left Adventure World in 1996 because he became concerned that the company was hiring inexperienced guides and pushing them to take risks in bad weather. He said he understood that seven of the eight guides who took to the canyon on July 27 had less than one year's experience.

He later told the *Australian* that he walked away in 1996 because money had become "quite important" to the owners of Adventure World and "I felt there was a disaster waiting in the wings".

"They were pushing younger, inexperienced people into the canyons to work there. An experienced guide knows when to get out. An experienced guide is able to withstand the pressure from the organisation as well and say no. We experienced a little bit of pressure and that's why I left, so I didn't have to get involved in that. I saw it coming."

An experienced Swiss-born river guide, Marty Henzi, who worked for Adventure World in 1995 and 1996, backed Eriksen's comments. A veteran of some 500 canyoning trips into the Saxetenbach gorge, he said the river guides were under pressure to take risks to maintain profits. "It is basically a classic case of profit over safety," he told the *Age*.

He said Adventure World had been trying to get the Contiki contract for a long time. The guides were under pressure because a big Contiki group might be in the area for only a day. Cancelling would cost Adventure World a lot of money, with tourists paying \$90 to \$100 a head. "You can turn over a huge amount of people there. When I was there, in one season we put somewhere in the region of 7,000 to 8,000 people down the

canyon."

He was concerned that Swiss officials might be under pressure from the tourism industry to whitewash the episode. There was already talk of freak accidents and flukes, he said, and that was rubbish. "Basically with a storm warning those people had no business taking a group that large down there."

Hoedle, the manager of Adventure World, admitted that the guides had undergone only two weeks' training for canyoning, in addition to their mountain guide education. Louis Salzman, a canyoning pioneer and president of the Alpine Rescue Commission, told Swiss television he believed the training was insufficient.

British experts said a lack of formal training in mountaineering may have meant that the guides had insufficient knowledge of how changing weather conditions could affect safety. In Britain it takes two to three years to become a fully qualified mountain guide.

Adventure travel is big business in Switzerland, yet it is mostly unregulated. The only safety rules and requirements are those drawn up by the companies. Despite the tragedy, their spokesmen said self-regulation was still the best system.

Moreover, a Contiki representative immediately defended Adventure World. "They have a clean record and we have no problem with them," he said. Contiki's chief, David Hosking, said Adventure World was the premier company in the valley.

Contiki, founded in 1961, has offices in 35 countries and hosts 80,000 clients a year. It is a leading operator in adventure tourism, which has become the fastest growing segment of the international travel industry in the 1990s. The market is estimated to be worth up to \$500 million annually in Australia and billions of dollars worldwide.

Contiki and other companies create enticing tour packages to attract young people who are seeking thrills, ranging from parachute and bungee-jumping to riding rapids on rafts. STA Travel, which specialises in the 18-to-25s market, has published an "Adrenaline Rush" brochure and the Lonely Planet publishers devote entire chapters to adventure experiences.

The companies have found ways to make large profits from young tourists, but they carefully protect themselves from legal liability in the event of injuries. Gordon Dirker, Contiki's European sales director, could not confirm whether or not clients were advised to take out specialist travel insurance to cover them for canyoning. But he was sure that the Interlaken tourists would have been asked to sign a waiver saying that they were aware of the dangers and were taking part at their own risk.



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