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They argue that the main reasons for the closure are the static nature of the exhibition, the slow involvement of local tourism and the stock exchange decline between 2001 and 2003.

“Mystery Park needs extraterrestrial saviour” and “Career dreamer Erich von Däniken pulls back” were just two of the sarcastic headlines journalists made in a long series of negative reports.

The criticism stepped up in 2005 and was particularly heavy in the spring of 2006 when the park had to ask for a delay in bankruptcy proceedings and protection from its creditors.

It all began in 1997 with ambitious plans. Best-selling Swiss author Erich von Däniken announced he wanted to open a theme park devoted to unsolved (extra-)terrestrial mysteries on the site of the former local military airport.

As an international personality and mystery expert whose books have been translated into numerous languages, von Däniken appeared to be a guarantee that the park would be managed professionally.

But Hannes Imboden, the former Bernese Oberland tourism director, said the communications department of the Mystery Park did not correct the one-sided UFO image that most people have of von Däniken.

A similar assessment comes from the current director, Fritz Zemp, who has been at the mystery park since April 2005.

“The marketing segment to target was not systematically approached at the outset,” Zemp said. “What was more important – entertainment, focusing on the UFO element of the hard core of von Däniken followers, or learning and education aspects?”

After critical financial questions, the park opened its doors in May 2003. As the banks declined to provide money, the finances came from a group of private investors and the public who bought shares at a low par value despite the troubles at the stock exchange.

“Von Däniken was unable to put into place what he’d really wanted,” Thomas Vaszary, a lecturer at Lucerne’s tourism college, told swissinfo.

“It seemed a bad realisation of von Däniken’s ideas. It lacked life and interaction.”

At the beginning Imboden had advised that at least a third of the park’s exhibition should be changeable, a strategy that might have encouraged people to make return visits.

Zemp also felt there was a lack of life in the park. “Technically it would have been easy to change the software and hardware to counter the statics of the exhibition,” he said.

Christian Laesser, deputy director of the St Gallen Institute for Tourism, criticised a lack of innovation after the park had been built.

He said that successful parks were those that continuously developed – like, for example, the Europa-Park in Rust, Germany. “Only that [kind of development] maintains a steady flow of visitors,” he told swissinfo.

Zemp said there were many professional providers of tourist services in the Bernese Oberland – the Jungfrau Railways, many hotels, adventure firms and tour operators – that would have been possible partners for the park.

He said the Mystery Park had only begun very late to offer packages that included meals and overnight stays.

The park's financing ran into difficulties and was not helped by falls at the stock market. There were also groups of small and large shareholders that had different interests, according to Zemp.

The fate of the Mystery Park now lies with the liquidator, who Zemp feels will probably put forward a number of proposals at next month's meeting of creditors.

Insolvency proceedings are due to end on January 10. If none of the suggestions is accepted by the creditors, the park will be auctioned.

swissinfo, Alexander Künzle

Key facts



The Mystery Park in 2006



Chronology





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Park's future remains up in the air

Sep 8, 2006 • Entrepreneur Jakob Dietiker had been due to sign a SFr16 million (\$13 million) deal on Friday but pulled out at the last minute, claiming his acquisition plans had fallen too much in the public spotlight. The last-minute decision means that the theme park in the Bernese Oberland will close at the end of the summer...

White knight rides to rescue of Mystery Park

Aug 21, 2006 • On Monday it was announced that a Zurich-based businessman has offered to pay SFr16 million (\$13 million) for the Mystery Park in the Bernese Oberland. Entrepreneur Jakob Dietiker has said he is also prepared to cover any losses until the end of October and to retain an undisclosed number of the 64 full-time staff. Mystery...

New mysteries for Interlaken theme park

Nov 17, 2004 • The speakers took part in the World Mystery Forum that coincided with the opening of a new exhibition, “Unsolved Mysteries”, at the Interlaken theme park. “I wanted to create a place where scientists and laymen – as long as they are reasonable and not crackpots – can come to inform the public about their discoveries...

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