



Arbeitsgemeinschaft
Tabakprävention Schweiz

Association suisse pour
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Associazione svizzera per
la prevenzione del tabagismo



The real price of a pack of cigarettes in Switzerland

Fact sheet

What does a packet of cigarettes cost in Switzerland? It is often said that cigarettes are expensive in Switzerland, citing only the highest allowable prices. In this analysis we intend to show that the actual price of a packet is far lower than what is commonly believed: less than CHF 7.

The real price of a packet of cigarettes in Switzerland and the myth of the high price

How much does a packet of cigarettes cost in Switzerland? The question looks simple, even banal, and one could expect that the response would be simple as well. Not so. It is important to understand the real price of a packet of cigarettes in Switzerland. Too often, people have had the impression that cigarettes are expensive, and this plays into the hands of the tobacco industry, which has always fought against any taxes on its products. A heavy and well-enforced tax would help many to quit smoking and reduce the profits of this industry, which has the highest profit margins in the world. The prices most often used to establish comparisons are the high prices of “premium” brands, but these are not the average price. What’s more, especially when used for international comparisons, prices should take into account the standard of living and purchasing power in the countries concerned. These elements are particularly high in our country, which makes real prices especially reasonable here.

Estimating the cost of a packet of cigarettes in Switzerland turns out to be much more complicated than one would think. The price comprises the portions that go to the manufacturer and to taxes. In the following analysis we have tried to gather all the elements of the answer to this question. Our answer is simply: **less than CHF 7**. Not only does the Coop official brand name give its price as CHF 5.50, but cigarettes sold in airports have an average price of around CHF 5, with the lowest price being CHF 4.30.

The “reference price” of the Federal Office of Customs and Border Security (OFDF)

For years, the Federal Office of Customs and Border Security (it was called the Federal Customs Administration (AFD) up until December 31, 2021) has been using a computer graphic to illustrate the tax rate on packets of cigarettes. As a basis for this graphic, it illustrates the price of a packet of cigarettes, which is “among the most popular brands.” In 2021, the price of such a packet, often used as a reference, was CHF 8.80, whereas the preceding year, the same graphic indicated CHF 8.60. Why this increase (considering that the taxes on cigarettes have not increased by a single centime since 2013, because of the parliament's price freeze)? We don't know what this class of “most popular brand” cigarettes is. Is this type really the “most popular”? In that case, what is the market share of that brand (5%, 10%, 20%)? Does it really make sense to refer to a specific brand? Why adopt this price as a

reference rather than using an average price, then clearly explaining the methodology used to calculate it? The OFDF gives no explanation on its website of the reasons for its choice. An easy-to-read graphic is certainly useful, but it is not enough to replace explanations and more complete analyses.

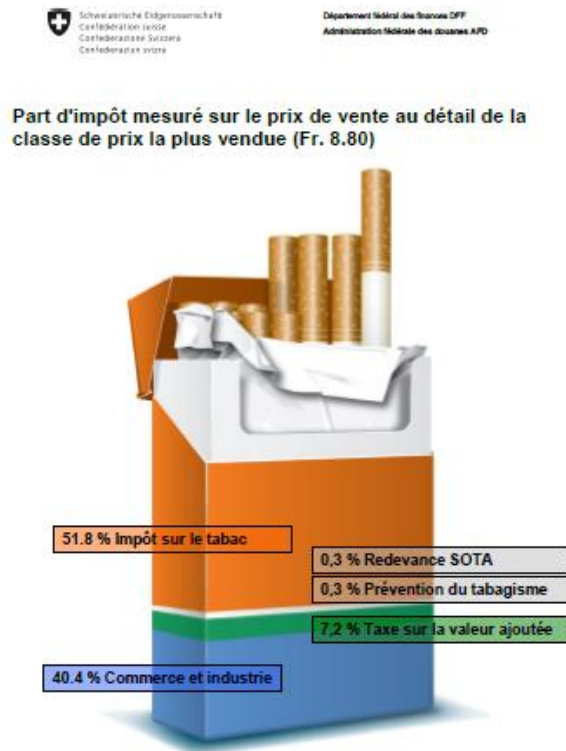


Image 1: Proportion of taxes on the "most popular" cigarettesⁱ

An internet search will turn up numerous sites that compare prices internationally using for reference a packet of Marlboro Reds. Marlboro Reds are a dominant brand and are available in nearly every country in the world, which makes them an ideal candidate for price comparisons. These cigarettes can cost in Switzerland, depending on the city and the way they are purchased, up to CHF 9. However, using this price is misleading, because it is precisely a maximum price, even though it is often falsely given as an average price.ⁱⁱ In any case, it seems to correspond fairly well to the price adopted by the AFDF as the "price range of most popular brands."

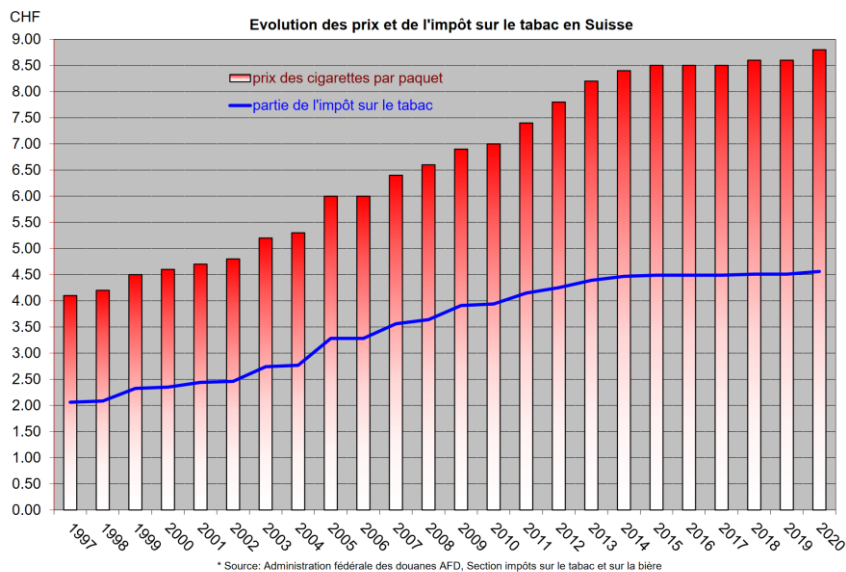


Image 2: Changes in the price and the taxes on tobacco in Switzerland, Federal Customs Administrationⁱⁱⁱ (Red bars are price of cigarettes per packet; blue line is portion of price due to taxes)

According to the preceding graph, the price is said to have increased by CHF 0.60 between 2013 (the last year in which taxes increased by 10 centimes) and 2020. This means that the price increase during that time was entirely composed of profit for the industry.

In 2020, 9,306 million cigarettes were sold, the equivalent of 465 million packets, since a packet is required by law to contain 20 cigarettes. This represents the first increase in the quantity of cigarettes sold in over 10 years, and an increase of 4% when compared to sales in 2019.^{iv} If we use the price of CHF 8.80, the sales of these packets should have bought in the sum of CHF 4,094,640,000, of which 51.8% would have been tax, or CHF 2,121,024,000; however, the OFDF states elsewhere that it received 2,031 million Swiss francs,^v or 90 million less than this estimate. Besides which, we note that the tobacco tax does not only concern cigarettes, but – albeit at a much lower tax rate – also bulk tobacco, cigars, HTPs, etc. Thus, clearly the average selling price of a packet of cigarettes is significantly lower than the reference price adopted by the OFDF.

The OFDF is said to have all the elements necessary to calculate an average price. They know the price of each brand, as producers are required to declare the price per packet for each product for the coming year, and they also know the quantities sold for each brand, since all these figures must be declared for tax purposes. If it is possible to publish the number of each make of car sold in Switzerland each year, it is hard to see why publishing the exact quantity of each brand of cigarette sold should be

detrimental to the commercial interests of the cigarette industry. But the OFDF does not make these data public. This lack of detailed information does not help the transparency of the system.

In a press release dated November 4, 2021, the OFDF underlined the fact that exports of Swiss cigarettes had fallen by 53% since 2010, declining from 42.5 billion cigarettes to 19.9 billion in 2020. Less emphasized was the mention that imports rose between 2010 and 2020 by 15%, going from 838.7 to 966 million cigarettes. Exports correspond to a transfer of production facilities overseas, but have nothing to do with domestic consumption. However, imports feed into local consumption. The press release specified that Germany and Poland especially dominated the import market in 2020, with a combined total of 716 million cigarettes. That said, it would be helpful to know which brands and types of cigarettes are being imported there, but this information is also lacking.^{vi}

Are Swiss cigarettes expensive in Switzerland? And what should the real price per packet be?

One often hears the usual complaint of smokers that the price of a packet of cigarettes in Switzerland is so high, very high! They claim to remember a "better time" when everything cost so much less. We all have memories, more or less accurate, of paying CHF 1 for a cup of coffee, whereas now one easily pays CHF 4 or 5. If it is partly true that prices have gone up in nominal terms, this doesn't mean that today's products are more expensive than they used to be in real terms. Even non-smokers think, very wrongly, that Swiss cigarettes are very expensive; one non-smoker who we asked recently guessed between CHF 12 and CHF 15.

One should also take into consideration the fact that taxes on cigarettes have not risen in Switzerland for many years. The last increase was in 2013, for the modest sum of CHF 0.10. Since then, nothing, because the parliament has refused to let the Federal Council raise them again. Yet there have been price increases since 2013, as has already been shown, but these benefit only the cigarette manufacturers.

Let us compare Swiss prices to those of other countries. No other country has a single reference price; yet it is necessary to use an artificial reference price, otherwise the analysis becomes too complicated. Thus, on the international level, we are practically obliged to use Marlboro Red as a reference brand. But this results in comparing exactly this: one single brand at its highest price, and not the overall price of different markets. For a more in-depth look, one would have to also include an average price, a

median, the lowest price, etc. While keeping in mind all these limitations, we will undertake the exercise with Marlboro Reds – the first brand to have used ammonia as an additive starting in 1965, in order to transport nicotine more rapidly to the brain.^{viii}

It is in northern European countries that cigarettes are the most expensive, because of higher taxes.

Country	Local currency	Swiss franc (CHF)
UK	12.73 £	16.10
Ireland	15 €	15.64
Norway	140 kr	14.43
France	10 €	10.90
The Netherlands	8.32 €	8.95
Belgium	8 €	8.60
Finland	7.8 €	8.40
Switzerland ^{vii}	8.10 CHF	8.10
Denmark	55 DKK	7.95
Germany	7.20 €	7.75
Sweden	66 SEK	6.97
Italy	6 €	6.46
Austria	5.5 €	5.92
Luxemburg	5.35 €	5.76
Spain	5 €	5.38
Portugal	5 €	5.38

To construct this chart, we did an internet search (in late July 2021) for each country's current price for their reported reference brands, thus usually a packet to 20 Marlboro Reds. This method, again, has the limitation of having the brand used being relatively expensive, and in each country, it is possible to buy less expensive brands. It should be noted that, in Switzerland, one can buy a packet of Marlboro Reds at a much lower reference price than the CHF 9.90 retained by the ADF!

This chart furnishes prices in francs, but does not consider how these prices compare to the cost of living. To compare prices with respect to the cost of living, we can try to apply the Big Mac Index, which is based on the principle of purchasing power parity (ppp). Even though this method is not absolute, it gives us a good indication for comparison. Thus if one applies the Big Mac Index Converter

to a packet of Irish cigarettes, which costs 15 euros, the same packet should cost CHF 21.67 in Switzerland. For the British cigarette packet, the formula indicates that the Swiss equivalent would be CHF 23.71.^{ix}

In countries that have complete and coherent public health policies combatting smoking, the tendency is toward regular price increases. France is pursuing a policy of increasing prices on reference brands such as Marlboro, which now costs more than 10 euros per packet. The most recent price hike was 0.50 euros in November 2020, and more increases are already under discussion. In the Netherlands, cigarettes cost around 8.20 euros, and their price should reach 10 euros by 2023. A recent study by the University of Maastricht showed that a packet should cost 12 euros if it is to help reduce consumption by 10%, and that 50% of smokers would quit only if the price reached 60 euros.

Australia and New Zealand are true models of public health in the realm of smoking cessation. Each has advanced policies with multiple measures in place, and a high level of taxation is a central element in these policies. In Australia a packet currently costs AUS \$44 , or CHF 23.88, and in New Zealand a packet of Marlboro Reds costs NZ \$36.90, or CHF 24.13.

Low prices and discounts everywhere

At points of sale in Switzerland, some brands are always cheaper than the best-known or reference brands. For example, Coop has its own brands, particularly the Bay series of cigarettes. This Coop product is specifically aimed at young consumers, as has been openly explained by the firm which developed the marketing for this product; a considerable amount of the marketing is at points of sale.^{xi} Bay cigarettes all have names of well-known tropical beaches: Malibu, Bora Bora, Waikiki, Bondi Beach, etc., names which are well-known to young people and which evoke dreams of exotic vacations and surfing. A packet of this brand costs CHF 7.40 (or CHF 9.95 for a slightly more expensive variation).



Image 3: Bay brand cigarettes by Coop (from internet and advertising at points of sale)

Yet more shocking is another Coop product that is apparently the cheapest packet on the market at present. It is the "5.50" brand, where the name on the packet gives the exact price. This brand, highly visible on the shelves near cash registers because it has a very simple visual code with large yellow letters on a black background, appears to target low-income customers. A cheap brand for poor people! In addition to these cigarettes, Coop sells large cans of bulk tobacco named "17.95," which carry the same black-and-yellow design.



Image 4: Lowest-price brand "5.50" by Coop and can of Coop bulk tobacco "17.95"

Coop's strategy is to market door-opener products priced at the bottom of the price range. The profits on these products are probably minimal, but return customers will also buy more expensive products as soon as they have a little more money to spend.

At the point of sale, besides the products with the lowest base price, promotions abound. Coop very often sells one or two brands at a 50% discount clearly marked with a very visible bright orange sticker. In the following example, we see that on April 20, 2021, two brands were being sold at 50% off: the Bay

Zigaretten Makena Natural weiss Filter Stange, usually sold at CHF 7.40 and thus offered at CHF 3.70, and the Gauloises Zigarettes Disque Bleu Filter Soft Stange, typically costing CHF 9.60 and offered at CHF 4.80. In the image on the right, taken August 16, 2021, we see the the Gauloises Zigaretten Disque Bleu Filter Soft Stange displayed beside Al Capone cigarillos (Al Capone Pockets Filters, 10-pack) normally priced at CHF 5.20 and thus at 50% off for only CHF 2.60. We are not able to conduct a systematic observation of this practice of 50% discounts at points of sale, but every time we went to Coop, we noticed at least one brand with its orange 50%-off sticker. Thus we believe this is a deliberate marketing strategy practice at Coop.



Image 5: 50% discounts, Coop. Brunnmattstrasse, Bern, April 20, 2021 (left) and August 17, 2021 (right)

Denner and Migrolino are both affiliates of the Swiss distribution giant Migros. While Migros still claims to adhere to the ethical positions of its founder by not selling alcohol or tobacco, its affiliates have no compunctions about doing exactly the opposite. Denner in particular uses discounts regularly, often in connection with festive events. Denner often sells well-known brands, especially Parisiennes, on such occasions with large discounts. This example from July 30, 2021, relating to the August 1 national holiday, thus offers a box of 10 packets for CHF 74 instead of CHF 82.



Image 6: Publicity appearing in Blick on July 30, 2021 profiting from the Swiss national holiday.

Low prices on the internet: the new k kiosk website

Particularly during the Covid-19 crisis and the lockdown which often accompanied it, online sales with home delivery developed significantly. This seems to be the case for tobacco and nicotine as well. In April 2021, k kiosk, a business which was already managing many points of sale (bus and train stations, gas stations, etc.,) launched a new internet site which boasts that it offers over 1,000 tobacco and nicotine products.

On the k kiosk website, one can buy packages of 10, 20, or 40 cigarette packets, and the larger the quantity, the lower the price. Starting from the assumption that one buys larger quantities online, we calculated the average price of a pack of cigarettes using the lowest-cost packaging, or 40 packets. This comparison gave us an average price of CHF 7.41.

As for Marlboro Reds, they sell for CHF 9 per single packet on the k kiosk site. But in reality, no one buys a single packet of cigarettes online, and the site encourages the purchase of larger quantities: If one buys three boxes, or 30 packets (600 cigarettes), the total price is CHF 243 but the price per packet drops to CHF 8.10. The site also sells the Marlboro Red Swiss Edition for a unit price of CHF 7.74 (if one buys three boxes), but it is hard to know how it is different from the "normal" Marlboro Red sold at CHF 8.10. These different "special editions" of Marlboro appear to be marketing operations aimed at keeping consumers dependent on the brand of cigarettes which is the champion of ammonia use. The cigarettes contained in the different packets are the same; only the wrapper changes, following a very basic marketing strategy.^{xii}

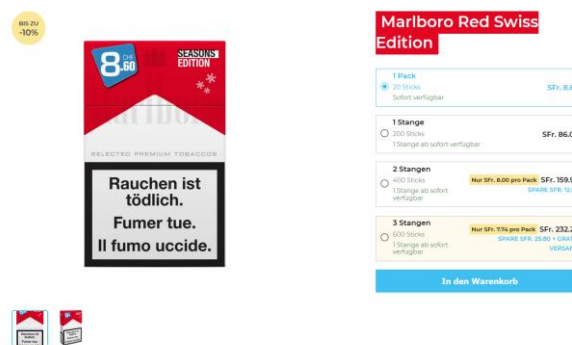


Image 7: k kiosk.ch, screen shot from December 8, 2021

Coop also has an online sales website, but until now the prices appear to be the same as those found in stores. E-commerce has taken off in a big way since the beginning of the Covid crisis, with a

veritable explosion of sales pages online for products such as snus or e-cigarettes. This seems to be less often the case for classic cigarettes, apart from the notable exception of the kiosk site.

The duty-free shop market: a legal form of tax evasion

Duty-free shops are a parallel world where the most dangerous products – cigarettes and liquor – are sold *en masse* tax-free. These are mainly duty-free shops in airports, but certain special border zones, such as the municipality of Samnaun in the canton of Grisons, are also duty-free zones. Our position is clear: even if we can understand that selling gasoline without tax can make sense for the inhabitants of Samnaun, flooding the place with mountains of cigarettes and alcohol should be prohibited, because it defeats the idea behind taxing these products, undermines public health efforts, and is in fact nothing but a means of filling the pockets of a few shopkeepers.



Image 8: Hotel Post, Samnaun, photo taken on-site at the hotel. Duty-free cigarettes are clearly displayed beside stuffed animals and children's toys. (Photo taken on-site December 8, 2021)

Duty-free shops in Swiss airports

Duty-free shops in airports sell the largest quantities of tobacco products. Although we do not have statistics regarding these sales, one only needs to stroll through an airport to see them in prime

locations – unavoidable if not mandatory viewing after passing through security. The piles of cigarette packets are visibly placed and well-lit, at unbeatable prices, next to shelves of alcohol, and finally chocolates and other products. Everything is done to force the traveller through a zone of cigarettes and alcohol, and one can't help noticing the price: the marketing strategy for this kind of point of sale is skilfully planned. The next time you fly, stop for a few moments to observe the setting (quality and placement of displays, skilful use of lighting) and the passers-by who often leave with many cartons of cigarettes.

One particularity of Swiss airports is the duty-free shops in Arrivals as well as in Departures. However, these shops, even though they are in the same airports, do not always sell exactly the same products; there are subtle differences, especially in the size of the packaging. In the Departures zone, immediately after security, one is obliged to pass among brilliantly lit displays of cigarettes.



Image 9: Duty-free shop (Departures, left, Arrivals on right) July-August 2021

Everywhere in the cigarette aisle, highly visible signs exhort, "Save up to 45% compared to prices in town." These products are not taxed, thus they are not included in official statistics of the Federal Administration. Some claim that mostly foreigners buy these products when leaving our country, an argument partially true, but mostly . hypocritical. Swiss travellers can just as easily buy them in duty-

free shops in the countries they are leaving to return to Switzerland, besides which on arrival, before going through customs, they can go by duty-free shops and buy again. It is only in Swiss airports that one finds such duty-free shops on returning home. No official numbers are available for duty-free sales, still less for the different sales figures for Departures and Arrivals in Switzerland. We have therefore resorted to an empirical methodology and examined the price of cigarettes in the duty-free shops in the Zurich airport on July 18, 2021 in the Departures zone and on August 6, 2021 in Arrivals.

We have absolutely no knowledge of the quantities of cigarettes sold in duty-free shops in Switzerland, given that they are completely absent from customs statistics.

Duty-free at the Zurich airport

In duty-free shops, a large section is dedicated to tobacco, always located beside the alcohol; the overall space is smaller only because cigarette packages are smaller than bottles. While the placement of cigarette displays is always carefully calculated to force a maximum number of consumers to pass by them and notice their products, the amount of space given to cigarettes in duty-free shops in the Arrivals area is larger than that in Departures.

The major differences in the two zones are the size of the packages and the diversity of products. In the Departures duty-free shops, cigarettes are sold in cartons of 10, 20, or 30 packets, which correspond to 200, 400, or 600 cigarettes. In the duty-free shop in Arrivals, one notices significant differences in packaging. We found many cartons of 12 packets, often marked as "10+2," which were totally absent from the Departure zones. This yields a total of 240 cigarettes. Thus, in Switzerland one can import for personal use a maximum of 250 cigarettes or cigars or 250g of other tobacco products without paying any customs fees. In the rules limiting duty-free purchases, the age limit is arbitrarily set at 17. For quantities over the limit, for example with cigarettes, one must pay a tax of CHF 0.25 per item, or CHF 4.00 for a packet of 20.^{xiii} The tobacco industry sells these packets in cartons of 12 in order to incite Swiss travellers returning home to buy the maximum quantity possible. But whether the packet is sold in cartons of 10 or 12, the price per packet is the same, thus helping to maximise profits for the manufacturer.

Only some of the most popular brands (American Spirit, Camel Chesterfield, Kent, Marlboro, Parisienne, Vogue or Winston) sell cartons of 12 packets in Arrivals. All the others sell cartons of 10 packets. This type of special packaging must generate extra costs, and thus it is limited to the most

profitable brands. On the shelves, however, clearly the 12-packet cartons are most prominently displayed, for example with separate displays, larger posters, entire walls with just one product, and so on.



Image 10: Duty-free shop: carton of 12 packets and reduced prices for cartons of 400 and 600 cigarettes

On the label near these products, the price is always marked for the carton of 10 packets or more, as well as for individual packs (even though it is never possible to buy just one packet) to help the buyer compare prices and thus to incite him/her to buy larger quantities.

One element common to both zones is a decreasing price per packet for larger quantities. Take for example Camel cigarettes: a package of 10 packets costs CH 52.10 (or for 12 packets in the Arrivals zone, CHF 62.50), for a unit price of CHF 5.20. For the carton of 20 packets (400 cigarettes), the price is CHF 92.90, or CHF 4.75 per packet, and for the 30-packet carton (600 cigarettes) it is CHF 132, or only CHF 4.40 per packet. The greater the quantity purchased, the more the price decreases, in an obvious effort to induce the consumer to buy more and thus to smoke more.

The price per packet thus varies, for the cartons of 200 cigarettes, between a minimum of CHF 4.30 and a maximum of CHF 6.20. We calculated, for these cartons of 200 cigarettes and for all the prices listed, an average price slightly less than CHF 5.30.

Next to these cartons of Marlboro Red, right beside the price and very visible, a sign in capital letters says, "LOOKING FOR THE TRUE TASTE OF REAL TOBACCO? DISCOVER IQOS," whereas PMI claims that IQOS is an "alternative" product which carries fewer risks; yet here it is being sold for what it is, real tobacco. Marlboro Red is the signature brand of PMI cigarettes, so this is the ideal location for encouraging consumers to change to IQOS. Less than two metres away, a wall design presents Heets for IQOS, with a variety of flavours. A packet of Heets, equivalent to a packet of cigarettes and containing 20 sticks, is sold in Switzerland for CHF 8 (at Denner they can easily be found for CHF 6.90), and thus a carton of 10 Heets (200 sticks) is sold for CHF 80, yet at the duty-free shops the same carton is sold for CHF 53.40. Remember that Heets are not as heavily taxed in Switzerland as cigarettes and that this is the product on which PMI has the highest profit margin.^{iv}



Image 11: consumers are encouraged to "discover the true taste of real tobacco"

Duty-free: the kingdom of menthol and flavours

We must also point out the presence of many products containing menthol in the displays in duty-free areas. We find menthol products for brands such as Camel, Glamour, Kent, Marlboro, Sterling, Vogue, and for heated tobacco products such as IQOS or Glo. Menthol makes inhaling tobacco smoke easier, facilitating addiction and making it more difficult to quit. The European Union outlawed the addition of menthol on May 20, 2020, after years of study and debate. When the new law on tobacco products (LPTab) was drawn up, the Swiss parliament refused to ban menthol to align with the EU's law, which was itself only a minimalist version aiming to regulate artificial flavourings. The result was that European travellers passing through Swiss airports can buy products whose sale is banned in EU countries.

Besides classic cigarettes that are flavoured with menthol, we also find many products with flavour capsules. These are products which were first commercialised in Japan in 2007 to recruit new smokers or make it more difficult to quit.^{xv}



Image 12: Menthol cigarettes in large quantities



Image 13: Cigarettes flavoured with capsules

Duty-free: the smoker pays less, the industry earns more

While buying at duty-free shops helps smokers "save" up to 45%, as is claimed in the displays, the tobacco industry increases its profit margin with these sales. A packet of cigarettes in Switzerland is taxed at 59.6%. But in duty-free shops, the "discounts" offered to buyers are generally 45%, as is clearly marked. This means that the tobacco industry does not pass on the entire difference in price to the consumer but keeps 14 or 15% for themselves. This is the obvious reason why the industry fiercely defends duty-free shops in airport

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