

The Mystique of the Matterhorn

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 18, 2010



The wind blows snow off the summit of the Matterhorn, which is ever-present in Zermatt, Switzerland.

Photograph by: Zermatt Tourism

The iconic Swiss resort area of Zermatt is high on any downhiller's "best" list for its sweeping size and year-round skiing and riding. Add the mystique of the Matterhorn, superb country gastronomy and quintessential Swiss hotellerie, and Zermatt is arguably the world's top ski destination.

The focal point of about two million postcards sent from Zermatt every year, the Matterhorn is omnipresent. This geographical wonder and spiritual inspiration is visible from almost everywhere on and off the slopes.

Even Mark Twain got warm and fuzzy after climbing one of Zermatt's peaks: "The splendour of the sun on the alpine snow was unimaginable. Nowhere else is there such an exhibition of size and beauty ..." the U.S. author and humourist wrote in 1878 in *Climbing on Riffelberg*, a travelogue.

In spite of a century of growth that today provides shelter and comfort for up to 30,000 visitors in 125 hotels and scores of apartments, Zermatt has kept its Alpine charm and small-town soul. Founded by mountain climbers and geologists, it manages a delicate balance between a peaceful, mountain village and an efficient Swiss enterprise.

Eco-conscious ahead of their time, residents banned motorized vehicles in the 1970s. Everyone gets around on foot or hops aboard battery-powered taxis or shuttle buses. For a change of pace, hail a

Gaze over its parapets and you see 29 peaks that soar higher than 4,000 metres, a humbling expanse of jagged white caps against the sky. Glance down from the Kulmhotel and you see the famed Monte Rosa Hutte, a refuge for mountaineers. Reopened last year, the hut is an archetype of eco-design that uses a shimmering aluminum shell for solar power.

Getting to the Kulmhotel is a good part of the fun. For more than 100 years, the Gornergrat Bahn, the remarkable cog railway, has climbed nine kilometres through forests of evergreens, past tumbling waterfalls, over bridges and through tunnels to snowfields above the treeline.

The Kulmhotel looks huge and imposing, but the cozy lodge has just 23 rooms and suites, all recently re-done with flat-screen televisions and simple modern decor. But, who needs decor? The views from every room are spectacular.

Dropping by the mountaintop Kulmhotel is a fabulous experience, even if you don't stay overnight. The glass-walled dining room and terrace jut out over the mountain ravines. Coming in from the cold, you can indulge in a typically Swiss repast of rich cheese fondue, crispy schnitzel or "knoblauchsuppe," a creamy garlic soup. On Tuesday nights, the Gornergrat Bahn (train) runs until midnight so visitors can try the Kulmhotel's Starlight Dinner.

LOFTY LUNCH

Chez Vrony is one of the coolest and most picturesque snow-resort restaurants and a requisite stop, even if you are the type who would rather ski than eat. It started out more than 100 years ago as a farm where livestock grazed on Rothorn Paradise, 2,100 metres above Zermatt, in full view of the Matterhorn.

The property is in the third generation of the same family, but Chez Vrony today is a rustic-but-chic shrine of gourmet Swiss country cuisine. The cattle and sheep still munch alpine grasses in summer, but in winter, the scene turns hedonistic for visitors. Bronzed skiers and boarders loll about on sheepskin-covered chaises longues, sunbathing and sipping.

Vrony's Swiss delicacies include homemade sausages, Swiss cheeses and roesti. Typical of the surrounding Valais region, which encompasses the upper Rhone Valley and the southwestern Alps, are the platters of cured beef and wines like pinot noir and chardonnay from mountain vineyards.

MAJESTIC MOUNTAINS

Zermatt's three ski and snowboard mountains with their 313 kilometres of slopes add up to so many superlatives that the words "highest" and "longest" start to blur. The staggering total of 69 lifts, including 12 surface lifts for beginners, is topped by the highest lift station in Europe, at the summit of Klein Matterhorn (3,883 metres). For snowboarders or skiers, Zermatt is a multitude of unique, thrilling experiences along panoramic ridges, tree-free Alpine bowls, gladed trails and the sweeping, open glacier, all made even richer by the magic of skiing in view of the Matterhorn.

To add romance to the sporting life, join a guided Moonlight Paradise night on Rothorn, Gornergrat or Klein Matterhorn. This special evening, usually held when the moon is full, starts aboard a cable car as the sun sets over the Alps. Then it's on to a dinner of Swiss fondue in a mountaintop restaurant and skiing or snowboarding under a luminous night sky. Go easy on the food and drink. You'll be conquering a lot of terrain by moonlight before you get back to the cozy comfort of your Zermatt hotel. The longest trail on Klein Matterhorn is 22 kilometres -the equivalent of cruising down the 2,480-metre Beauvallon at Mont Tremblant more than eight times.

After a day or two in the Swiss Alps, you'll be acclimatized to the altitude and familiar with the intricate trail map. You're ready for the spectacular Matterhorn Ski Safari, a tour of 12.5 kilometres of skiing or riding that never repeats the same trail. With cable cars interconnecting Zermatt's three mountains, the Safari is an all-day adventure that uses 19 different lifts. Bring your passport. Lunch is in Italy.

IF YOU GO

Tourism information: For Switzerland: 800-794-7795, www.myswitzerland.com. For Zermatt: www.zermatt.ch. For Valais region: www.valais.ch.

Other winter activities in Zermatt: tobogganing, zip-lining, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, sleigh rides, curling, skating, climbing, para-gliding and heli-skiing.

Zermatt's altitude might be high but not all its prices are. It's possible to stay on a budget

One would think that visiting Zermatt on a tight budget would be as challenging as climbing the Matterhorn. Not so. Besides jet-setting skiers, the Swiss resort has a devoted following that includes adventurous mountain climbers, hikers and ski bums who are watching their pennies. You'll find accommodations, meals and apres-ski amusement to suit all budgets. This historic resort town is accessible for families, too. Skiing, lodging and train travel for children is discounted, or even free.

GETTING THERE

Since Zermatt is car-free, the best way to get there is on Switzerland's efficient railway system. You can buy a Swiss Pass for four, eight, 15 or 22 days of railway travel and includes access to more than 400 museums throughout the country. Plus, kids 6 and younger ride the rails for free. (Price details at www.sbb.ch/en.)

GETTING AROUND

Hop aboard an electric Ski Bus (free with a ski lift pass) and visit such local landmarks as the Bahnhof area (train station and tourism centre), the Kirch-Platz (church square) and the cable car stations. Zermatt's electric taxis are pricey, so take them as a group to share the fee. The free sightseeing tour from the tourism centre stops at the Matterhorn Museum and the sombre Mountaineers' Cemetery.

THE MOUNTAIN

The biggest savings for skiers and snowboarders is a multiple-day ticket. An adult lift pass for one day costs about \$75 (for Zermatt lifts only) or \$85 (including lifts in Cervinia, Italy). (The Canadian dollar is near par with the Swiss franc). That drops to \$60 and \$69 per day on a six-day ticket. (Details: www.zbag.ch/en/page.cfm/p—skipass). When your Zermatt lift ticket expires, you can add ski days by using your Swiss Railway Pass on the Gornergrat Bahn, the railway to the summit. For non-skiers who want to sightsee or have an on-mountain lunch, a Swiss Railway Pass offers a 50-per-cent discount for single rides on the ski lifts.

DINING

Most of Zermatt's hotels include a copious buffet breakfast of cured meats (a specialty of the local Valais region), cheeses, meusli and baked goods. If you pocket an apple, a Swiss chocolate pastry, roggenbrot (a Valasian thin, dark rye bread) or nusstorte (a nut loaf), you can last until a fashionably late lunch, after the crowds.

Prices for lunch and dinner are similar to those in Montreal. If you are backpacking, a ham-and-cheese sandwich at the Migros supermarket costs about \$4. A grilled bratwurst or quarter-chicken, barbecued on the sidewalk at the Bayard gourmet shop, costs about \$6. Each of Zermatt's three summit peaks has mountaintop cafeterias, where a homemade soup and a veal sandwich or a hearty roesti with cheese would cost \$10 to \$15. The view is no extra charge. At chic, gourmet on-mountain stops like Chez Vrony or Zum See, lunch costs \$25 to \$40.

For mid-level budgets, the big, friendly Restaurant-Pizzeria Klein Matterhorn is strategically located at the Matterhorn Express gondola station. You'll pay about \$24 for a gourmet pizza loaded with Swiss cheeses, home-cured prosciutto, beef carpaccio or spicy lamb sausage. Raclette is a specialty of the Valais-Matterhorn region, with three cheeses grated into a melting pot, then poured over potatoes and grilled until caramelized. Klein Matterhorn's fondues, raclettes, dinner salads, pasta or roesti cost \$15 to \$20; meat and fish dinners run \$35 to \$45.

Dinner at the high-end Heimberg, a Heinz Julen ode to avant-garde design and haute cuisine, or the chic Hotel

Matthiol, costs \$50 to \$75, (without wine).

ACCOMMODATIONS

Reservations are essential and most hotels have seven-night packages, some with a ski pass.

The three-star Hotel-Restaurant Derby has modern rooms at roughly \$110 to \$160 per person, including breakfast, plus discounts for children and a kids' menu. Apartments are a big trend in Zermatt, accounting for about 15 per cent of lodging. The Derby's Haus Bellevue studios cost \$90 to \$130, per person, per night (www.rhone.ch/hotel-derbyzermatt/hauptframe.htm).

The well-known Hotel Post (www.hotelpost.ch), a terrific mix of new design with moderate prices, has a seven-night package with breakfast, spa access, two spa treatments, a six-day Zermatt-Italy ski pass and more for \$1,500 to \$2,060. Even if you don't stay at Hotel Post, the Brown Cow Pub and the Pink Live Music Bar are great meeting places.

Hostel Matterhorn (www.matterhornhostel.com) is plain, but practical. With a great location near Church Square, the hostel has bunk-bed rooms (\$35 to \$50 per person) and private rooms (\$40 to \$70 per person) with two to four beds, all including breakfast. The bathrooms and showers are down the hall, but handy features include a guest computer, a TV lounge and lockers.

The bright, pleasant Hotel-Restaurant Helvetia (www.helvetia-zermatt.ch) on the Bahnhofstrasse is good value at \$80 to \$130 per person, double occupancy, including breakfast and kids' discounts of 30 to 50 per cent. Even the smallest rooms are attractive and have modern bathrooms and televisions. There are no worries about noise if your room overlooks the main street; with no cars and a zero-tolerance policy against rowdiness at night, Zermatt is pleasantly quiet after 9 p.m.

TOP 10 SKI RESORTS

Gearing up for skiing this winter? Here's AskMen.com's list of the best places to hit the slopes.

1. Whistler Blackcomb, B.C.
2. Kitzbuhel, Austria
3. Zermatt, Switzerland
4. Vail, Colorado
5. Banff/Lake Louise, Alta.
6. Chamonix-Mont Blanc, France
7. Stowe, Vermont
8. Mont Tremblant, Que.
9. Cortina, Italy
10. Aspen, Colorado *Houston Chronicle*