



Zermatt

A Famed Alps Resort Schusses
into the Future

By Bonnie Tsui



every color-coded highlight on the ski map, thanks to the new lifts and runs that have made possible easy connections between sprawling ski areas. Sleek glass buildings are beginning to alter the traditional chalet landscape of the village. And modern Swiss efficiency has done away with what was once Zermatt's biggest disadvantage: the resort now uses an electronic ski pass system that allows skiers to zip through checkpoints at every on-mountain gondola, chairlift, train and underground funicular, making crowds virtually nil (except at the aforementioned après-ski spots).

Getting to Zermatt itself got easier—and swifter—in December, when the 21.5-mile Lötschberg Tunnel opened for full passenger service. Running beneath the Alps, it is the world's longest railway land tunnel, cutting more than an hour

Shall we dine in Italy today, or stay and lunch with the Swiss?

It wasn't even midafternoon, but the beer and glüwein were flowing freely in Zermatt, the picturesque, pedestrian-friendly Swiss ski resort that is the gateway to the Matterhorn. The mulled red wine is a signature beverage at the Igloo Bar, a snow-sculptured outdoor hangout right on the ski slope. Here, the Matterhorn's shark's tooth peak an icon for the Alps themselves stood sentinel overhead as skiers and snowboarders shed their rainbow layers of Gortex and soaked up the sun. The music was blaring, the fondue was cooking, and for this crowd the resort's top-rate terrain and happening après-ski scene were coming together quite nicely. I don't normally imbibe wine as part of my on-mountain plan of attack before the end of the ski day, but when in Switzerland, why not do as the Swiss do?

In "Ski Holidays in the Alps," a pioneer guide written in 1961 by the champion British skiers James and Jeannette Riddell, the authors described the ski experience in Zermatt as "high, big, serious, and glorious." The old village had character; the clientele was fashionable; the expert, energetic skiing was

matched only by the night life. But they also noted that "queuing for railways and lifts is inevitable and often frustrating," a drawback that marred the unparalleled views and vast, varied topography of some of the highest mountains in Europe. How things have changed. Horse-drawn carriages and brandy-bearing St. Bernards may still roam Zermatt, but this resort town of 5,500 people has lately schussed its way into a modern era of solar-electric ski buses and expansive, high-tech snowmaking. During a visit earlier this winter, I hit pretty much



off travel time from Zurich, Bern and Basel to Zermatt (from Zurich, the train ride is now just three hours and 15 minutes). I found the train to be quiet, speedy and civilized, with a dedicated dining car and wrap-around picture windows that gave a sense of scale to the awesome peaks we approached.

Changes are also pending at the resort's mountaintop. A local artist and architect, Heinz Julen, recently won a design competition to construct a 30-floor Dream Peak pyramid at the top of Klein, or Little, Matterhorn, the highest point in the Alps with cable car access. Plans for the glass-and-steel complex include Europe's highest hotel at 13,120 feet above sea level, though the project hasn't received final approval yet.

New this ski season are two lifts—one a high-speed quad linking the major ski areas of Gornergrat and Rothorn Paradise, and the other a T-bar to Stockhorn, an off-piste free-ride area. Last winter, the Riffelberg Express gondola opened to allow skiers easy access between Gornergrat and Matterhorn Glacier Paradise, on opposite sides of the mountain valley. The lift has revolutionized the resort experience, since skiers used to have to schlep across



all of Zermatt in order to ski both areas.

For an additional 9 Swiss francs a day, less with a multiday pass (the Swiss franc and the dollar are nearly at par), an international lift ticket gives skiers access to the Breuil-Cervinia ski resort in Italy, which has a terrific seven-mile run from top to base. It's the best deal around, since one of the stellar moments of any Zermatt ski experience is skiing into Italy for a pasta and red wine lunch—no passport required—from the top of Klein Matterhorn. At the lovely Rifugio Guide del Cervino, a small mountain restaurant with a wooden outdoor patio located at

I came here for the mountain.

Plateau Rosa, a decadent spaghetti carbonara lunch for two at 11,420 feet is 25 euros, or \$38.50 at \$1.54 to the euro. (In fact, my favorite question to ponder each ski day: Shall we dine in Italy today, or stay and lunch with the Swiss? The answer from my husband and our friends was usually, "Italy—because we can.")

Back on the Swiss side, Zermatt has more than its share of sophisticated on-mountain cuisine. In the Sunnegga Paradise ski area, the intimate Chez Vrony restaurant serves



up national specialties like raclette with truffle oil and rösti—a Swiss fried potato cake—in a setting of white tablecloths and candlelight. You can ski right up to the restaurant off the trail, but this is the kind of place that’s so good it attracts nonskiers who make special expeditions to dine on the outdoor deck, which has lounge chairs and stunning views of the Matterhorn.

The first modern design hotel arrived down in Zermatt village when Omnia opened a year and a half ago. A glass elevator cut into the mountainside ushers guests up to a lofty perch overlooking the town; the 30-room property has a spa, a library lounge and a gorgeous indoor-outdoor swimming pool. On a recent evening, the bar was crammed with well-heeled Brits; at the superb in-house restaurant downstairs, a quieter, fire-lit atmosphere could be found. Just a few of the marble-topped tables were occupied, and deliciously surprising dishes like beet soup with chervil foam and chili-spiced chocolate ice cream were presented by an attentive server outfitted head-to-toe in black.

Classic establishments like the ornate Grand Hotel Zermatterhof

—founded by the local priest in 1879—have also come up with new offerings. Those who can’t spring for a stay in the hotel should splurge on a massage at its recently opened spa, Vita Borni; it has an arnica steam room and a 20-meter pool. In front of the Zermatterhof, the Matterhorn Museum has relocated to—surprise—a new Matterhorn-shaped glass complex with historical displays of Edward Whymper’s first ascent and a 3-D weather model of the peak.

All the recent flash and dash doesn’t come cheap, especially with the American dollar in a downward spiral. But hidden gems like Le Petit Hôtel, which has 20 single and double rooms from 80 Swiss francs per person per night, can make a ski vacation in Zermatt less costly, if not exactly affordable. The pension-style lodge has a friendly, helpful staff, free wireless Internet, and a gear storage room with boot warmers; in lieu of expensive fondue dinners, guests can bring back takeout meals to eat in the downstairs bar and breakfast nook.

The lounge breeds camaraderie and conversation; on a recent night, we met a family from Wales celebrating a daughter’s birthday and

shared bottles of wine and birthday cake. The wood-paneled rooms at Le Petit Hôtel are, well, petite, but they’re also clean, comfortable and an excellent value in an otherwise expensive ski town.

After all, the real reason people come to Zermatt remains the classic one that James and Jeannette Riddell championed decades ago: the skiing. Each day, we skied more than 20,000 vertical feet. Though we spent most of that time bombing down beautifully groomed trails, on one perfect morning we found ourselves carving first tracks in an off-piste powder paradise at the top of Theodulgletscher.

“I Googled the highest vertical in Europe, and this is what it told me,” said Mike Tran, 28, a snowboarder from Toronto who works in Internet marketing. He spent a week in Zermatt in early February. “I’m sure there’s a market for new and modern things here, too,” he said, “but I came here for the mountain.”

With the highest lift access in Europe, a top-notch transport system and the longest winter season in the Alps, it is, indeed, quite a mountain.

Oh, and did I mention the après-ski? ☺

