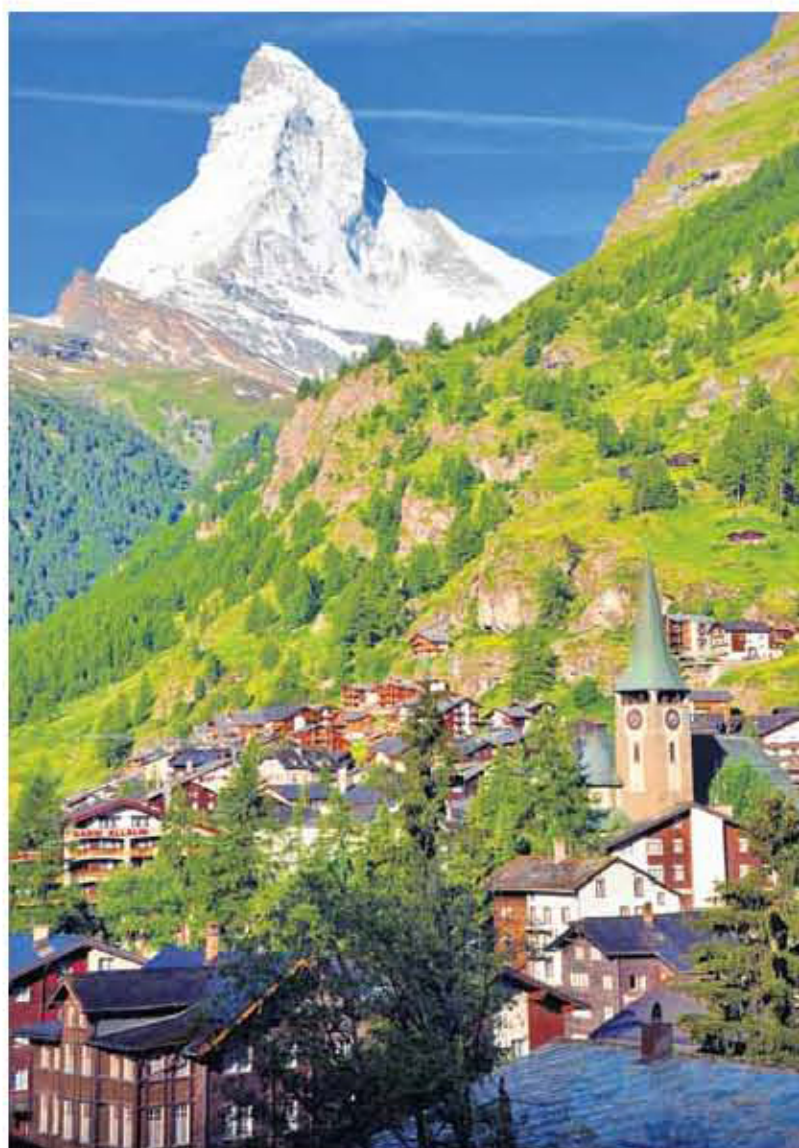


HOME & AWAY

SUNDAY • 03.01.2015 • H

Mesmerized by the Matterhorn



The Matterhorn rises above the village of Zermatt. The first ascent 150 years ago transformed the village into an international vacation spot.

150 years after the tragic first ascent, travelers are still drawn to Switzerland's iconic mountain

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Special to the Post-Dispatch

ZERMATT, SWITZERLAND • The panorama of blue sky and snowy mountains on this sunny terrace has shutterbugs snapping madly away. A solitary peak stands out from the rest. Everyone jockeys for position to grab that one shot they came all this way to capture. Viewfinders fill with a lopsided pyramid, and click, another image has been made of the Matterhorn, the world's most photographed mountain.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the first ascent of Switzerland's famous peak, an event that ended in tragedy but turned Zermatt from a quiet farming village in the valley below the mountain into an international playground. English mountaineer Edward Whymper became the first man to stand on the 14,692-foot summit. With him on that July day in 1865 were three other Englishmen and three guides. Their elation turned to horror when, on the way down, a rope broke and four men plunged to their deaths.

Whymper and a local guide were accused of cutting the rope to save their own skins, and though they were found blameless, the inquiry drew weeks of international publicity. Queen Victoria threatened to forbid her subjects from mountaineering. Human

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PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Alpine scenery comes without crowds in Bettmeralp, a village situated on a plateau in the Valais and reached by gondola and cable car.

3 million visitors flock to the town every year

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nature being what it is, the monarch's fury only made the Matterhorn more appealing, and wealthy Englishmen began flocking to Zermatt to see the mountain for themselves.

Now every year some 3 million visitors from around the world visit this town of about 6,000 inhabitants. A few thousand still come to climb the Matterhorn, many more to ski year-round in its shadow. Most are content just to lay eyes on it. Walk through the village on a sunny day, turn a corner and there it is, a snow-dusted beacon glowing high above the rooftops.

For a closer look, a cogwheel railway climbs above Zermatt to Gomsgrat, a plateau with a view of the Matterhorn and 28 other peaks above 14,000 feet. Snag a table at the outdoor terrace of the Kulm-hotel restaurant, and you can sip a glass of Swiss wine or beer over a lunch of alpine specialties while you watch sunlight and shadow play along the ridges of the iconic mountain.

Across a glacier-choked valley lies the Matterhorn Glacier Paradise and the highest aerial cableway in Europe with a view of 38 alpine peaks, 14,000-footers punctuating the borders of Switzerland, Italy and France. Lifts descend nearly 50 feet into a glacier to a palace of fanciful ice sculptures and an ice tunnel leading to a crevasse and icy toboggan run.

While Zermatt has grown with its international fame, it remains isolated at the end of a valley where cars are not permitted. Visitors arrive by train and get around by walking or riding electric taxis that cruise its narrow, winding streets. A few horse-drawn carriages wait at the train station for those who want to travel about as tourists did a generation ago.

The old ways are on display at the Matterhorn Museum Zermatt, where wooden chalets and barns re-create how farmers lived here before Zermatt gained international fame. Galleries tell the story of the first ascent of the Matterhorn. The broken rope from that fateful day sits preserved under glass.

Next door, tombstones in a cemetery

and churchyard mark the graves of guides and climbers who've lost their lives "am Matterhorn." A few lines of poetry on one reads: "Let me go climb these virgin snows, Leave the dark stain of man behind, Let me adventure and heaven knows, Grateful shall be my quiet mind." Another carries the simple inscription: "I chose to climb."

Zermatt tries to give its visitors a taste of its authentic past with daily performances by alpenhorn blowers who set up their long wooden horns in cobblestone plazas. On summer afternoons goats are ceremoniously herded down the main street just as they were a century ago when farmers moved them to mountain pastures.

Still, with its 111 hotels, 1,200 visitor apartments and 160 bars and restaurants, Zermatt remains just too touristy for some.

Those who love mountain views, but not crowds following flag-waving tour guides, take the train and a gondola up to Bettmeralp, a quiet village accessible only by cable car. The Matterhorn still pokes its head above the southern horizon, but the best vistas are north along the Aletsch Glacier, largest in the Alps. Part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it stretches 14 miles with some of Switzerland's other famous peaks — the Jungfrau, the Eiger and the Monch — forming a backdrop to a panorama known as the Aletsch Arena. Hiking trails along the glacier are some of the finest in the Alps.

With just 400 people living in Bettmeralp, 2,000 in the region, the Aletsch Arena is one of Switzerland's best-kept secrets. Walk along the plateau linking its three villages and you may hear cowbells jingle from alpine pastures where farmers still graze their livestock in summer. A nine-hole golf course, highest in Switzerland, has been carved from a meadow, and a tiny alpine museum occupies a stone and wooden chalet where docents demonstrate cheese making, butter churning and spinning wool.

Little known even to some Swiss, the family-friendly Aletsch Arena might be the anti-Zermatt, one where the price of a hotel room and a meal runs half that in the once sleepy village below the Matterhorn.



The family-friendly Aletsch Arena near Bettmeralp is little known outside Switzerland while Zermatt attracts millions of international visitors.



IF YOU GO

Information • Zermatt Tourism, zermatt.ch/en; Aletsch Arena, aletscharena.ch; Valais Promotion, valais.ch/en/home

Where to stay • Hotel Beau Site Parkhotel, four-star hotel in Zermatt positioned with great views of the Matterhorn, parkhotel-beausite.ch; Panorama Hotel and Restaurant, three-star chalet-style hotel in Bettmeralp with view of Valaisian Alps, panorama-bettmeralp.ch/en/home_en

Alpenhorn blowers put on impromptu performances for visitors on the streets and plazas of Zermatt. The wooden horns were once used as signals because the sound carried over the Alps.