



DREAM VACATIONS

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ZERMATT, SWITZERLAND

A four-season resort in the shadow of the Matterhorn

Visiting Zermatt is all about seeing and succumbing to the allure of the Matterhorn. No other mountain on earth enralls you in this way, completely engulfing all of your senses. The first time I saw it, I was spellbound by its jagged profile and the way it sits, solitary, crowning the horizon, as though no other mountain would dare to stand beside it. The mountain mesmerizes you. You stare and you stare and you stare.

Zermatt is a hamlet, 1,620m (5,310 ft.) above sea level, in the small, German-speaking portion of the predominantly French-speaking *canton* (province) of Valais, adjacent to the Italian border. I always hear a jumble of languages floating around town—mainly German, French, English, and Italian—typical for a fashionable mountain resort and *de rigueur* in cosmopolitan Switzerland. Zermatt is also one of Switzerland's many car-free resorts; the only forms of transport are electric taxi vans with jingling bells, and ornate, horse-drawn sleighs and carriages. In Zermatt, I always feel like I've been plopped down in postcard Switzerland: Dark timber chalets line narrow, cobblestone lanes and dot the valley; snowy peaks jut out beyond rolling hills; and just when you think Heidi is going to come skipping around the corner, you hear the soft sound of Alphorns, played by locals in traditional Swiss dress.

The town teems with energetic visitors year-round. In summer, the mountain biking, Nordic walking, paragliding, hiking (400km/248 miles of trails), and mule trekking make the area an outdoor enthusiast's utopia. Rock climbers and mountaineers from every continent come to scale the rock and conquer the four-thousanders (peaks above 4,000m/13,120 ft.)—the area around Zermatt possesses a whopping 36 of them. Naturally, the Matterhorn is the ultimate summit. But if all you want to do is kick back and do nothing, you can hop on a cable car to one of dozens of restaurants above Zermatt and spend the afternoon on a sunny balcony overlooking the panorama of peaks, listening to the gentle clank of cowbells in the surrounding pastures. In winter, the slopes around Zermatt are my slice of bliss: three prime ski and board areas with a total of 313km (194 miles) of marked pistes. I've skied here for an entire week and never skied the same run twice. If I start the day early enough, I can ski to Italy for a midday plate of spaghetti *bolognese* and return to Zermatt just in time for an *après-ski* cocktail.

Whether I visit Zermatt in summer or winter, there are always three certainties: I relax; I inhale fresh, unpolluted Alpine air; and I stop, mid-ski run or mid-hike, and surrender to the most iconic mountain on earth. The thrill of seeing the Matterhorn in person seizes me every time.

◀ Traditional Swiss mountain hut
with view of the Matterhorn.

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SPECIAL MOMENTS

1 Ascend the Rothorn. Getting to the Rothorn is half the fun. First, zip up to Sunnegga Paradise (Swiss-German for “Sunny Corner”) via a 5-minute underground funicular ride, and then hop on a snazzy eight-seater cable railway to Blauherd. Here, transfer to a big red cable car that hoists you up 3,000m (9,840 ft.) above sea level to Rothorn. The entire trip takes only about 25 minutes, but you’ll wish it took longer because the views along the way are astounding. They’re not as awesome, however, as what you see at the top: Over 30 colossal four-thousanders frame the horizon up here. This vantage point is the most photogenic place to gape at the Matterhorn.

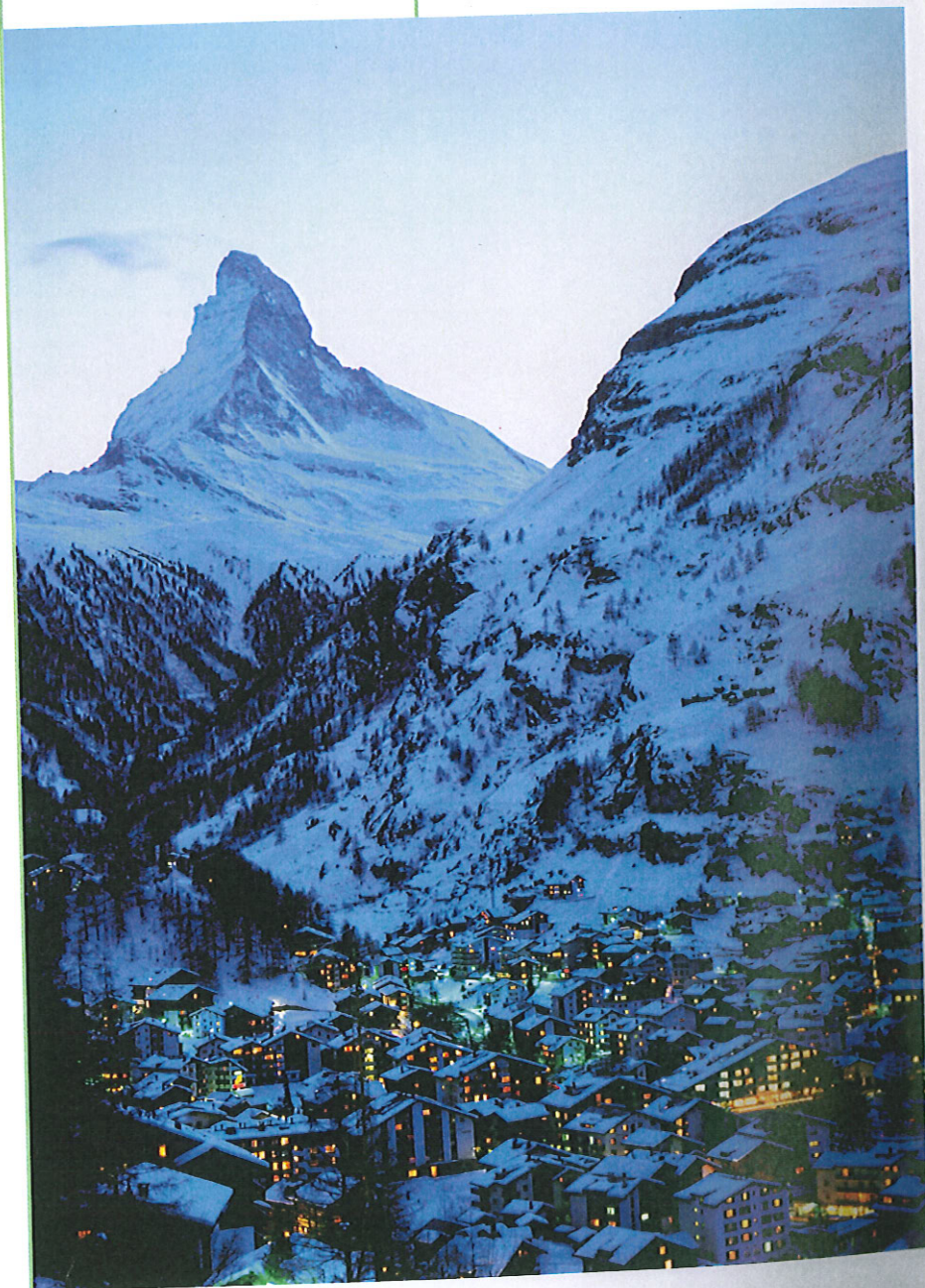
2 Explore the Hinterdorf. Wandering down the bustling Bahnhofstrasse (main street) is fun and entertaining in summer and winter—but the real treasures line the side streets, in an area of the village known as the Hinterdorf. Veer off Bahnhofstrasse onto Hinterdorfstrasse and let yourself get lost in the meandering lanes crammed with miniature chalets and *mazots*: worn, wooden barns oddly propped up on multiple round, stone disks and thick stilts to keep the rodents out. The chalets enchant, regardless of the season: In summer, their window boxes spill over with vivid, thriving flowers. In winter, the snow drifts pile up against their dark, ancient wood walls.

3 Embrace the chocolate and the cheese. Something happens when you set foot in this country: You buy chocolate and find yourself eating it everywhere: on the train, on the ski lift, during your picnic, and probably before you go to bed. It doesn’t matter what brand you buy, it’s all fantastic, creamy, and satisfying. But somewhere in between your

chocolate fixes, you’ll crave another Swiss specialty: cheese. And the best way to appreciate it is warm and melted, in two basic dishes: fondue and raclette.

Cheese fondue is a mixture of two or three cheeses (usually Gruyère and Emmental or Vacherin), garlic, wine, and/or a shot of schnapps melted in a cast-iron pot. You dip cubes of bread into the concoction and savor the flavor. This is a heavy load on your

stomach, so do as the locals do and pair the meal with herbal tea or white wine (preferably locally produced Fendant, a light-bodied wine made from the chasselas grape). If you’re up for it, sip or do a shot of Swiss fruit schnapps like Kirsch (cherry) or Williams (pear) while you eat; the theory is that this burns a hole in the cheese and makes way for more. I think it is just an excuse to drink locally made distilled spirits. Whatever your poison, don’t



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drink water (it coagulates the cheese in your belly and makes for an unpleasant ache).

Raclette is slightly more complex in terms of the cheese-melting procedure. Large rounds of raclette cheese are cut in half and screwed onto a special contraption that heats the flat side of the cheese. As it melts, the oozing cheese is scraped off onto a plate over boiled potatoes. Cornichons and pearl onions join the mix, and the result is heavenly, addictive comfort food.

4 Drink Glühwein. Glühwein is hot mulled wine—a mixture of red wine, sugar, cinnamon, and cloves, usually served with slices of fresh orange and lemon. In winter, you'll find it for sale at slope-side restaurants, from tablecloth-and-fine-silverware lodges to ramshackle huts with a few creaky chairs. It is the perfect warm treat to sip on a break between ski or snowboard runs. Year-round, you'll find Glühwein served at most traditional Swiss restaurants or bars in the village.



CAROLINE SIEG, a dual citizen of the U.S. and Switzerland, has spent most of her life moving between Europe and North America. She travels in search of fabulous food, fine wine, spectacular hiking trails, and awesome ski slopes. She lives in London, where she occasionally hosts midwinter fondue and Glühwein parties.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

General Information: Contact **Zermatt Tourism** (☎ 41-27/966-8100; www.zermatt.ch) or **Swiss Tourism** (☎ 41-800/100-200-30, or 877/SWITZERLAND in the U.S.; www.myswitzerland.com). **Getting There:** Hourly trains depart from Brig and stop in Visp and Täsch. The route is scenic; on the way up, sit on the left for the best views. Travel time from Zürich or Geneva to Brig is 2 to 3 hours. If you must drive, park in the large lot in Täsch (the closest town that allows cars) and travel the rest of the way by train. **Best Lodging:** Splurge on a room with a view of the Matterhorn at **Seiler Monte Rosa**, a traditional, character-filled hotel in the center of Zermatt (Bahnhofstrasse 80; ☎ 41-27/966-0333; www.zermatt.ch/monterosa; \$351–\$454/£186–£240). **Best Lodging Value:** **Hotel Weisshorn**, a snug and cozy chalet near the train station, has clean rooms and a friendly staff (Aufdenblatten; ☎ 41-27/967-3839; www.holidaynet.ch/weisshorn, German only; \$97–\$127/£51–£67). The best lodging value for groups of three to eight people on winter ski/snowboard trips is to rent a furnished apartment—many are in renovated chalets. Contact **Zermatt Tourism** to view properties and make reservations (see above). **Best Restaurant:** The **Grillroom Stockhorn** serves fondue, raclette, and other local specialties in a chalet with a roaring fireplace (in Hotel Stockhorn; ☎ 41-27/967-1747; www.grill-stockhorn.ch; \$18–\$35/£10–£19). **Best Restaurant Value:** **Walliserkanne** serves Italian and Swiss specialties in a rustic and informal space (Bahnhofstrasse 32; ☎ 41-27/966-4610; \$14–\$43/£7–£23). **When to Go:** You can ski/snowboard in the Zermatt area year-round, but the main ski season runs from late November to late April.

YOUR TRIP

◀ The town of Zermatt at dusk.

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