

Make a dream come true - see the Matterhorn

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IF YOU CAN'T DO WINTERSPORTS — WHY NOT PLAN YOUR SUMMER HOLIDAY NOW?
MAKE A DREAM COME TRUE — SEE THE MATTERHORN

By LEE EUGSTER

The Sphinx of Switzerland

Every Swiss cherishes the wish to go at least once in his life to Zermatt in the Canton of Valais to see for himself the Sphinx of the Swiss mountains — the Matterhorn — Cervin. No wonder I was in a state of unusual excitement when, at long last, I was on the way there.

Travellers board the small mountain train at Brigue in the Rhône Valley, or at the village of Visp, where the river Visp emerges from the narrow valley of Zermatt. One can also drive into this valley, but the road stops at less than half the distance and one faces the choice of waiting for a train or walking for at least four hours.

During the whole journey, we saw in the distance a large mountain covered with glittering snow looking down on us. It is the Breithorn. But the Matterhorn was hidden from sight until the train emerged from the tunnel and entered the terminal at Zermatt.

The village lies in a narrow valley from which rise the steep bases of mountains whose ice-covered summits are out of sight. But from the centre of this chaos, the Matterhorn soars like a sharp tooth. Its noble silhouette has so often fired the imagination of poets, painters and photographers that it has become the symbol of Swiss mountains; and, of course, it has tempted thousands of Alpinists ever since Whymper conquered it in 1865. Because of this mountain, the isolated village of Zermatt acquired world fame overnight.

However, Zermatt is not the best place from which to see the Matterhorn in its full glory. Only its upper third can be seen from the village. Its full beauty can be admired by those who climb to the mountain summits facing it.

In the middle of the 19th century, Alexander Seiler, the pioneer of innkeepers in the Canton of Valais, caused the first footpaths to be traced in the vicinity of Zermatt, and in 1898 a narrow-gauge railway was built to the top of the Gornergrat.

On my first trip, I could not afford to pay the fare to the Gornergrat. But, realising that I must reach a higher point to get the full view of the Matterhorn and its neighbours, I enquired in the village and was told that I and my guest from London could climb to Findelen in about two hours. But I had serious doubts that we untrained tourists from the lowlands could make it in such a short time.

Finally, we went to Findelen, a tiny village perching on the edge of a mountain at 6,000 feet above sea level, by the chair-lift of Sunegga. There we were facing the Matterhorn pointing into the clear sky of a sunny April day.

To the right, rocks and glittering glaciers formed a long chain along the left bank of the river Visp. Their names — Gabelhorn, Wellenkuppe, Zinal Rothorn und Dent Blanche — are familiar to Alpinists. However, the more important chain of glaciers which flanks the Matterhorn on the left was hidden from our view by the hunchback of the Gornergrat.

We descended from Findelen, after looking into the church, which has an interesting Gothic triptych of the 17th century, on a well-kept footpath. Although we did not dawdle on the way, it took us exactly two hours to reach Zermatt, which goes to show that tourists need more time to walk in the mountains than the locals who are obliged to climb day in, day out to reach their fields.

The first view of the valley incited me to return there some years later. This time, I took the train to the Gornergrat and was awe-struck by the majestic beauty of the mountains surrounding it.

The Gornergrat reaches 9,408 feet above sea level. It has been carved out by two glaciers which almost surrounded its base. It squats in the centre of the highest Swiss Alps. From a terrace above the railway terminal, one is struck speechless by the grandeur. I had admired our mountains and glaciers in many lovely places of Switzerland, but nothing can compare with this view. One feels small and uplifted at once, and grateful to be in a spot where all human pettiness vanishes.

To the left of the Gornergrat one faces across a deep valley the Monte Rosa, whose Point Dufour is the highest point of Switzerland. Two large glaciers surround it like a white collar and meet at its base of gleaming black rock. To its right the Lyskamm, the Twins Castor and Pollux, the Breithorn, all of them culminating at more than 12,000 feet above sea level, send their glaciers to join those of the Monte Rosa.

But after the Breithorn, the chain breaks off abruptly. There is a long, flat glacier, and from its centre rises, solitary and majestic, the pyramid of the Matterhorn. It looks as if the other giants are standing aloof to enhance the beauty of this unique mountain.

While I was being carried to the Gornergrat, thunderclouds began to shroud some of the mountains. But I could still see a breath-taking spectacle. When the clouds parted, a sudden sunbeam would sweep over a glacier or light up a summit like a searchlight.

It seems that the best time of day to admire these giants is at daybreak. Tourists stop over night at the Hôtel Riffelalp or the Hôtel Gornergrat higher up to watch the sunrise.

When the first ray peeps over the shoulder of a mountain, the crests which can hardly be distinguished in the grey sky began to be outlined by a fringe of flames. Gradually, all the snow and ice blushes a deep pink. But when the sun has finally risen, the mountains become like gold against a soft blue sky.

In midsummer it often happens that, when the train spills its first load of tourists on the Gornergrat, the circle of mountains is shrouded by clouds. The early birds who rose at 3 a.m. were rewarded with the grand Cinerama show of the sunrise.

(From the "Weekly Tribune", Geneva.)