

Zermatt and the Matterhorn

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ZERMATT AND THE MATTERHORN

By E. Harper

What is the connection between a "glorious amphitheatre of great peaks," blue hone stones from Ailsa Craig and a boot, marked 'Douglas'? The tiny Swiss village of Zermatt is the answer.

Zermatt has been in the news since 100 B.C. when Marius, a Roman general, rested his legions where wooden chalets now stand. For centuries travellers struggled over the Theodul Pass from Switzerland to Italy but it was not until just over 100 years ago that Zermatt became famous. On July 14th 1865, the Matterhorn was climbed for the first time.

The Matterhorn gave Zermatt Museum one of its most tragic exhibits. Of the four Englishmen (Hudson, Hadow, Whymper and Douglas) who first reached the summit only Whymper, returned, with two Swiss guides. The bodies of all but Lord Francis Douglas were recovered but his belt, gloves and one boot that were found rest in the Museum.

The Anglican Church was built towards the end of the 19th century in memory of those first conquerors of the Matterhorn. In 1911 Hudson's body was moved to lie beneath the

altar. It was an English woman, Lucy Walker, who became the first woman to stand on the Matterhorn's summit, in 1872. It is said she ate sponge cake and drank champagne during the climb.

This, the most dramatic of Zermatt's peaks, has had many names — Mount Silvius, Hirschberg, Montaigne de Cerf, the Cervin or locally "Das Hore". An old legend tells how Gargantua, a giant living on the Italian side of the mountain range, wanted to see what lay on the other side. He stepped over, to gaze in wonder down the valley, but the earth gave beneath his weight, only the rock between his legs staying firm to form the Matterhorn.

The Zermatt villagers regarded their mountain with awe. None went near it after dark, for Dwarfs were said to live inside, while souls in purgatory wandered along its torrents and demons danced in the swirling mists, urged on by the Devil himself on the peak. Climbing proved a welcome source of revenue to the villagers, who, apart from a few skilled guides, never ventured beyond walking distance on the mountains.

Before climbers came, the village had known few visitors. Foreigners, mainly Botanists and Geologists had visited Zermatt from time to time to be "stared at as if they were beings from another world". In 1972

de Saussure first measured the Matterhorn, making it 4,501 metres high. Toepffer, a learned scholar who took a group of pupils to Zermatt in 1842 obviously found local hospitality a little heavy. He wrote "There was pastry for the first course, and then pastry again and later pastry once more."

A Dr. Lauber, realising the benefits to be obtained for invalids from pure mountain air, opened the first hotel in his house there with three beds, and called it Hotel Cervi (later known as Hotel Monte Rosa). The present modern Hotel Mont Cervin stands on the site where the first real Hotel for tourists stood in 1852. Today Zermatt boasts around 30 hotels capable of housing 3,000-4,000 guests.

Electricity reached the village in 1892 but a good water supply took longer, and only the local fountains functioned until 1901. Today almost every house has running water.

Anyone sending a post-card home from Zermatt's efficient Post Office might like to remember that until 1850 the "postman", a gendarme, went down once a week to Visp to deliver and collect the post. The Zermatt Post Office now handles half a million letters and cards each year. In the olden days, only a bridle path led up from Visp, now a road built in 1860 reaches as far as St. Niklaus. A railroad followed at the end



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of the century, from Visp to Zermatt.

The village remains a peaceful one, the only traffic sounds being horses' hooves, bicycles, the train and an occasional helicopter. Curling is a popular sport in Zermatt, attracting players from many countries to compete on the dozen or so rinks. Scottish opponents in particular are well known to the local team.

Blue hone stones, costing over £30 a pair, which have travelled all the way from Ailsa Craig, are owned by Mr. Seiler, the descendant of the first man Whympfer spoke to on his return from the tragedy on the Matterhorn.

Sir Winston Churchill wrote in a letter, kept in the Monte Rosa Hotel: "I still retain vivid memories of the peaceful valley of Zermatt." He it was who so aptly described "the glorious amphitheatre" that spreads like a backcloth behind the village — Weisshorn, Breithorn, the Monte Rosa to name a few. Since 1940, tourists have been able to ascend by Cog-railway to the Gornergrat all the year round in 40 minutes, to enjoy the panorama or ski in winter, for winter sports have given the village a continual season. The villagers never used skis until 1898, preferring snow shoes but they soon became expert, to win first place in the earliest Olympiad.

The people themselves are one of the oldest aristocracies of the Alps. The Bourgeoisie — a Peasant Corporation — consists entirely of descendants of the original inhabitants of

Zermatt and was founded in 1618, with 15 families. Since then one other family has been admitted — the famous Seiler family.

Each citizen claims free wood and grazing rights and enjoys dividends from such things as the electricity supply, hotels and local dairy manufactures. In return much voluntary service to the community is undertaken. Temperament and speech are Germanic in origin — in fact only the 'locals' can understand the Zermatt dialect.

The people of Zermatt are some of the hardest workers in the world. In the brief off-season periods so much has to be done, painting of homes, long-term shopping, possibly a well earned few days holiday when they become the tourists in other parts, barns and hay huts to be repaired, paths strengthened, not to speak of getting in enough wood and hay for the winter, and gardening in the Spring.

Zermatt has come a long way from the days when scared villagers gazed in awe at the encroaching foreigners. In 1800 all the folk flocked to look at an Englishman. Now nearly every villager speaks or understands English. Over 100,000 tourists mill in the streets, where once two travellers were a sensation. Commerce has laid its greedy hands on shops and hotels but Zermatt has a secret weapon against over commercialization — its natural beauty.

Pine and larch woods climbing to the snows, an azure blue sky, the

music of the wind and the unchanging rock ridges and peaks keep Commerce in its place. The glacier streams tumbling in milky foam over stones and boulders, wild raspberry thickets, walnut trees and vineyards guard the approaches to "the mountain of the mountains".

Above Zermatt the Matterhorn, of which Paul Budry said "The Matterhorn is not something, it is someone," stands aloof. There is no mountain in the world that is so dramatic or so reduces the spectator to his proper size. A gigantic slender peak, in isolation so remote its beauty is breath-taking, "Like a cone of fire" at dawn, spectral in the moonlight or grey and threatening in storm.

No wonder Whympfer called it "the most majestic mountain in the Alps." No wonder too that the people of Zermatt, sensibly easing the burden of their lives by the tourist trade, still regard the Matterhorn with awe. The Postmaster Karl Lehner wrote "Today humanity looks up at the peak in gratitude for something so incomparable."

English speaking tourists will feel an extra thrill of pride as they gaze, to know that it was an Englishman who first looked down on Zermatt from its summit and an English woman who was the first of her sex to climb this formidable peak.

We are very much indebted to Mr. Harper, who lives in Cornwall, for this most pleasant contribution.

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