

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal

Band: - (2016)

Heft: 125

Artikel: By cable car to the skies : David & Elizabeth Carpenter travel to the highest cable car station in Europe

Autor: Carpenter, David / Carpenter, Elizabeth

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854011>

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By Cable Car to the Skies

David & Elizabeth Carpenter travel to the highest cable car station in Europe



The magnificent view from Klein Matterhorn.

All photos: David and Elizabeth Carpenter

FOR many visitors to Switzerland, a trip to Jungfraujoch, the highest railway station in Europe, is a must. Indeed, this venue at 3,454m above sea level is marketed as the 'Top of Europe'. However, it is possible to reach an even higher altitude by public transport, using the cable car to Klein Matterhorn above Zermatt. At 3,883m above sea level, and marketed as 'Matterhorn Glacier Paradise', this is 429m higher than the railway station at Jungfraujoch and is the highest cable car station in Europe. It is a comparatively recent

addition to the Swiss transport system, with its construction licence held up by environmental concerns until 1973, with the system finally opening in December 1979. After several years of never quite making it there, we finally took the trip in Summer 2014.


Staying at Brig made for an easy journey up to Zermatt, and the morning of 2nd September saw us at the MGB station in time to catch the 08.52 formed of two Stadler ABDeh units. These were virtually empty on departure, but at Visp the whole world seemed to get on and so the train was well loaded for the rest of the journey to Zermatt. A walk to the far end of the town, doing our best to avoid the electric vehicles that zoom along and across the streets, brought us to the cable car station. The cable car to Klein Matterhorn is in two sections, the lower section to Trockener Steg being gondola cars providing a continuous service, while the upper section is a pair of larger cable cars, which seemed to run on demand. It was a beautifully clear day and we had wonderful views both of the Matterhorn and back down to Zermatt as our gondola car ascended to Schwarzsee (2581m). Here, surprisingly, the cableway takes a sharp left turn and descends into a valley carrying a

The Zermatt bound train at Brig MGB.



tributary of the Matter Vispa, the river which runs down the valley from Zermatt to Visp. From Furgg (2,432m) the cableway climbs again to the interchange point at Trockener Steg (2,939m), where we changed to one of the larger cable cars for the final ascent to Klein Matterhorn.

Being higher than Jungfraujoch, the atmosphere is even rarer here and we were advised to move slowly until becoming accustomed to it. We first took the lift to the observation platform for the 360° panoramic views of the Swiss, French and Italian alps, including the Breithorn and the glaciers below, before visiting the Eispalast (ice palace) which, unlike at the Jungfraujoch, is an extra cost but we felt it was well worth it. There are some quite magical ice sculptures, but for us one of the star attractions was a sculpture of an Audi car! We had intended to have a drink in the restaurant and a look around the shop, but everything seemed very expensive and you even had to pay for the toilets, so we decided instead to stop off somewhere on the way back. Having descended to Trockener Steg and finding the outlets there mainly closed, we joined a gondola car and continued further down to Schwarzsee. As you get nearer to Schwarzsee you can look across the valley and just make out the upper terminus of the Gornergrat Bahn (3089m). Schwarzsee had more going for it than Trockener Steg and is a good destination for anyone wanting a shorter trip from Zermatt - it has a café with inside and outside seating and also a picnic area from where there are wonderful views towards the Gornergrat and down to Zermatt.

Back in Zermatt there was time for a look round the town and a coffee before catching the train back to Brig, formed by another pair of ABDeH units that, on the rack section below Randa, came to a sudden halt. After a couple of minutes we saw the driver walk along outside the train apparently attending to something underneath the unit. As the Train Manager made her way through our coach we enquired what was going on. She had difficulty explaining the operation of the rack system in English, but showed the principle very well by rotating her hands and interlocking her fingers. Apparently the system should automatically engage but had failed to do so, triggering the emergency stop. The driver had then come alongside the train to engage the rack manually. The stop was only for a few minutes then continuing the journey normally and, by cutting a few minutes off the wait at Visp, our arrival back at Brig was on time. We very much enjoyed our day trip to the highest cable car station in Europe and the views from the top. We would definitely recommend it for anyone wanting a 'Top of Europe' experience, but not wanting to pay Jungfraubahn prices, as holders of a Swiss Pass can take advantage of a 50% reduction in the ticket price. 

TOP: A view of Randa station building (through the train window).

MIDDLE: A sculpture of an Audi car in the ice palace.

BOTTOM: The Schwarzsee cable car station.

