

THE ALPINE MONUMENT

A visit to the imposing Mt Matterhorn in the quaint village of Zermatt, Switzerland, will leave one wanting for more of the natural marvel



Matterhorn Glacier Paradise

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During the Swiss Week held in May last year in Muscat, Daniel Luggen, president of Zermatt Tourismus (Tourism) gave me a tiny replica of Mt Matterhorn enticing me to visit Zermatt, in Switzerland. Little did I know then, that I would actually stand marveling in front of the real Mt Matterhorn (4,478m) the very next year.

In the quest to reach the magical Mt Matterhorn, I boarded an Oman Air flight to Zurich and then took a ride on Swiss railways to reach Zermatt station. From here I was taken in a horse-drawn carriage to the hotel where I was staying, Mont Cervin Palace. Finally I took Europe's highest-altitude aerial cable-way to reach Mt Matterhorn, a glacier paradise, at 3,883m (12,736ft).

Mt Matterhorn lies in the village of Zermatt, near the border between Switzerland and Italy and is Switzerland's most famous landmark, putting Zermatt on the world map. On my way to Mt Matterhorn, the first thing I learnt was its meaning. The mountain derives its name from the German words *matte*, meaning 'meadow', and *horn*, which means 'peak'.

Though Mt Matterhorn is represented on various souvenirs and posters that are available at the Zermatt railway station what sets the real mountain apart is its ability to leave a visitor spell-bound.

One forgets the sub-zero temperature and the strenuous high-altitude train ride when one reaches the sun-kissed pyramid-shaped mountain that stands tall wearing a different look at different times of the day.

On a bright sunny morning, a nine-member team, as part of the familiarisation trip organised by Oman Air and Zermatt Tourismus, set out to Mt Matterhorn from Zermatt. Our trip guide Fabienna Schaller, a representative from Zermatt Tourismus, was well-versed with the geography of the village.

We boarded 'Gornergrat-the Matterhorn Railway' and whizzed past idyllic forests, frozen lakes and mountain peaks to reach a sunny platform for the first view of the misty mountain that is surrounded by 29 peaks.

While shutters clicked images of the stunning peaks, I silently soaked in the silent wildness of the mountains standing tall and so close that I could almost touch them. The platform is also ideal to view the highest Swiss mountain, Dufourspitze at 4,634m above sea-level, and the second-largest glacier in the Alps, the Gornergletscher. Teenagers and adults were seen totting their equipment for skiing and snowboarding in the skiing area of Gornergrat.

By train, one can then visit the five-star resort, The Riffelalp at 2,222m (7,290 ft) above sea level, that lies in the heart of Gornergrat skiing/hiking district.

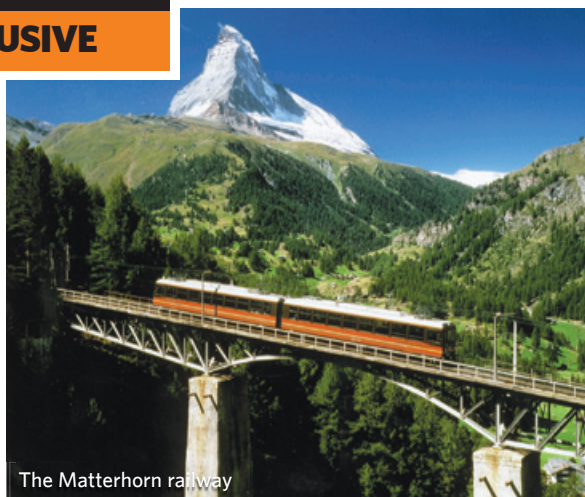
The Gornergrat mountain railway will bring one to the resort but the unobstructed view of Mt Matterhorn and plenty of outdoor activities including skiing, winter hikes, snow-shoe walking, ice hockey, ice skating, curling, heli-skiing among others will make one stay at The Riffelalp resort for longer than planned.

The following day, we set out on our journey to the highest mountain lift in Europe at 3,883m above sea-level transported by an aerial cable-way. When one looks down from the cable-way, the villages, chalet houses and winding roads resemble toy blocks, but the breathtaking view of the Italian, French and Swiss Alpine giants from an altitude of 3,883m is

MUSCAT DAILY EXCLUSIVE



Mont Cervin Palace, Zermatt



The Matterhorn railway



Cluster of houses and hotels



Dome shaped museum



Fabienna Schaller, Zermatt Tourismus (sitting) with the team from Muscat

a near-heaven experience.

The journey also gives a fine view of the gaping glacial crevasses leading up to the Matterhorn.

We soared upwards to meet the mountain with zest, vigour and anticipation and at the culmination of our journey to the mountain, the fairy-tale experience began. With the majestic Mt Matterhorn looming large, the sub-zero temperature becomes bearable.

But unfortunately, we didn't have enough time to soak in the magical rendezvous because the same gondola had to take us back to the boarding station. So we made a vow to return to Zermatt in the subsequent days. And we kept it.

Considering the history of the mountain, reaching the highest-mountain lift itself is nothing short of an achievement.

Until the later half of the 19th century, citizens of Zermatt led a tough life. The summiting of Mt Matterhorn on July 14,

1865, by a British-French team comprising Edward Whymper, Lord F Douglas, Michael Croz, D R Hadow and Peter Taugwalder and his son, Charles Hudson, was a milestone in the history of Alpine tourism.

Italian mountain climbers were in the race too but the ascent to the mountain proved to be a nightmare for them. This race to scale the popular mountain made the small village of Zermatt world-famous overnight.

After the customary photo session in front of probably the most photographed mountain in the world, it was time to explore the car-free village, Zermatt.

Before we set out to familiarise ourselves with the hotels, shops and culture of Zermatt, Pascal Gebert, sales manager, Zermatt Tourismus enlightened the team on the culture of the inhabitants.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Gebert said, "The Christmas and New Year season is a busy time for us, but Zermatt plays host and pampers travellers with their hospitality all year round. There are around 126 hotels with 8,000 beds in hotels and 6,000 inhabitants living in the village which is also pollution and noise-free."

The Gornergrat Hotel is the first edifice that will meet the eye on entry to the village of Zermatt. Soon the team was taken in electric cars to the luxurious five-star hotel, Mont Cervin Palace.

Karin Kunz, general manager, Mont Cervin Palace said, "We are situated over four buildings with 150 rooms in true Alpine and Chalet style. Occupancy is high during the winter season though the Alpine breeze lures guest to Zermatt during summer too."

Grand Hotel Zermatterhof is another one of the many hotels that tourists can stay in while at Zermatt.

"Our guests are escorted to the hotel in a horse-carriage. We are spread over 84 guest rooms," said Petra Ellmeier, director of sales, Grand Hotel Zermatterhof.

Petra also shared an interesting trivia with us. "In the village, the easiest way to clear a herd of sheep is by clapping. This is their cue to give way to cars and residents."

But it was while strolling in Zermatt, that I surrendered to my temptation at the newly opened Le Petit Royal. Chocolates of varying shapes and sizes await in the gourmet bistro and confectionery. After chocolate tasting, I opted for both traditional and modern Swiss chocolates to indulge in and take back home.

The visit to the dome-shaped Matterhorn Museum was another discovery that will provide tourists with information about the cultural past of the farmer's village, Zermatt, that is now a resort. Under the glass dome is a storehouse of traditional equipments and miniature houses and barns that transports one to the old charm of Zermatt. The staple diet of the residents of the village in the early days was dairy, meat products and rye bread. The village became famous in 1865 due to the first ascent of the Matterhorn followed by the Visp-Zermatt railway in 1891. Post 1961, Zermatt saw a boom in tourism and by 1975, the village had become a world-famous resort.

Zermatt's Swiss hospitality pampers every visitor all year-round and promises a vacation with mountain-climbing, hiking, skiing, snowboarding with a real adrenalin rush while you let your senses relax in the snow-covered mountain hotels.

Like President Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, I too was charmed by the spell of Mt Matterhorn and Zermatt.