

Zermatt & The Mighty Matterhorn

in the Adagio Collection of Ramble Worldwide, Grade 3 (leisurely) - June 2025 - Alison, Norma, Shelagh

The Matterhorn is located in the heart of the Valais canton, overlooking Zermatt, a picturesque village accessible only on foot, by train or cable car. Originally a farming community, tourism is now its main source of income. Zermatt lies at the head of a high alpine valley at a height of 1600m, surrounded on three sides by thirty-eight peaks towering to over 4,000m, massive glaciers and tumbling waterfalls. Dominating the views is the mighty Matterhorn, first climbed by Edward Whymper in 1865. This mountaineous area is vulnerable to extreme weather conditions. In June 2024, the Matternvispa overflowed and Zermatt was cut off from the outside world for 24 hours.

Our flight from Heathrow to Geneva was uneventful, and we identified our leaders, Elaine and Martin, from the bright green polo shirts with Ramble Worldwide logos they were wearing. We then travelled with the rest of the group, 17 in total, by train, with one change, to Zermatt, a 4 hour trip. It was a scenic journey, particularly as we climbed up to Zermatt. When we arrived it was a short walk to the Butterfly Hotel, where we had a late meal (8.30pm) and met the last member of our group (Sally from Australia). Our rooms were modern and comfortable but, as is often the case, the duvets were too hot for the time of year. Meals were taken in the attractive restaurant. The food was good average, with free tea and cake also available in the afternoon.

The walking on this holiday was at the top end of grade 3, due to the steepness of the rocky mountain paths, especially downhill (descents of up to 433m and ascents up to 227m), plus the effects of altitude. Good boots and poles were needed. Total mileage throughout the day was 6 to 8 miles.

Elaine acted as our tour leader and guide, with Martin as back marker and support. All of the walks started from the hotel. The first morning we had an orientation walk around the town, visiting the Hinterdorf area with its old traditional buildings. Following a walk and a gondola ride we crossed a wire suspension bridge over a deep gorge and then on up to the Glacier Gardens.

Our scheduled visit to the Kleine Matterhorn was cancelled due to rainy conditions and low cloud cover, but the following day the skies cleared and we made the journey via two cable cars up to 3,883 metres, where the air was clear and the views amazing. We had hoped to visit the Ice Palace but, unfortunately, it was closed for maintenance. The altitude sapped our energy but it was an exhilarating experience riding in the cable cars.

After descending to Furi at 1867 metres, our walk then took us to the 500 year old hamlet of Zmutt, where refreshments were available. A small museum located in the basic rustic buildings, depicted the harsh life of this small farming community, which existed until the mid-19th century. The opening of the Visp to Zermatt railway in 1891 and the rise of tourism led to the abandonment of the agrarian way of life.

Another day we took the Gornergrat cog-wheel train to a height of 3,089 metres, where once again we enjoyed spectacular views of the surrounding mountains. Our walk then took us mainly downhill, via the lakes at Riffelsee, to the historic Riffelhaus Hotel built in 1853. Nearby is the 'Bruder Klaus' chapel, where we saw a wedding in process, whilst eating our lunchtime picnics.

We also visited the Gorner Gorge, where wooden walkways overhang waterfalls and towering cliffs. Since the last ice age, the waters of the Gornervispe have carved an ever deeper chasm. Access for tourists was created back in 1886 and 1887. The rock, greenish serpentinite, is about 220 million years old. This natural spectacle is a 15-minute walk from the southern end of the village of Zermatt.

We started our final day with a ride in the Funicular, a steep journey carved inside the mountainside, then a gondola ride to Blauherd. Our walk then took us to the tranquil lake at Stellisee and up to the Fluhalp alpine hut at 2616m. Along the way we saw Ibex (alpine goats) and viewed the elusive Marmots from a distance.

Alpine flora were abundant on our walks, such as the Alpine Rose, actually a member of the rhododendron family, with beautiful deep pink flowers, and the Black Vanilla Orchid, dark burgundy with an aroma of chocolate.

One afternoon, we took the opportunity to visit the English Cemetery in Zermatt, where the remains of mountaineers who had perished on the Matterhorn and surrounding mountains were buried. In addition there are several monuments and plaques located around the town, dedicated to the brave/foolhardy climbers. The town itself is attractive but overrun with tourists, and eating out is expensive, with for example, a coffee at £6.

Temperatures were pleasant for walking at the higher altitudes but the thermometer showed 33C in Zermatt town. On the day of our return an overnight rockfall had blocked the rail line and we had to take a rail replacement bus for part of the journey. Fortunately, we were not delayed and reached Geneva airport in good time to catch the plane home, with plenty of time to reflect on all the week's experiences.

Alison, Norma and Shelagh