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Anniversary summer in the three traditional burgher hotels of Zermatt

Understanding the history of the Matterhorn

What began 150 years ago with the first ascent of the last great unconquered four-thousander in the Swiss Alps is a fascinating story that in 2015 has caught the attention of people around the world. Zermatt is celebrating the mountain of mountains with a host of special events. Yet it is even more thrilling to experience the legend of the Matterhorn away from the large-scale celebrations. All three hotels owned by the burghers of Zermatt – the Grand Hotel Zermatterhof, the Riffelhaus 1853 and the 3100 Kulmhotel Gornergrat – offer their guests unique access to the history of the Matterhorn and thus the opportunity to discover the mountain and region anew.

Zermatt is the Swiss mountain village where Alpine tourism began – and not in winter, but in summer. At the end of the nineteenth century, the rich and beautiful left the hot and oppressive cities and made their way to Zermatt to take in the fresh summer air. They would often stay for several weeks and enjoyed the cool nights as much as the long walks through the glorious flower-filled Alpine meadows. Nobody demanded any sort of infrastructure specially designed for tourists. The entertainment programme in those days included volleyball, summer punch, masked balls and concerts.

The burghers of Zermatt as hosts

The history of the Zermatterhof shows that, right from the very beginning, the burghers of Zermatt recognised tourism as a great opportunity for their village. In the space of three years – 1876 to 1879 – the old families built the Zermatterhof themselves, working without payment. In those days, the Zermatterhof was the largest hotel at the foot of the Matterhorn. Today, the five-star establishment presents itself as the “small grand hotel” and has more than 77 rooms and suites. The Zermatterhof still belongs to the burghers, thus offering visitors the unique opportunity to get to know the Swiss burgherships better during this Matterhorn anniversary year.

Hemp rope and dried meat on the way to the summit

To understand the mountaineers in the days the four-thousanders were conquered, it is important to forget the climbers of today. A few hemp ropes, an ice pick and a woollen pullover were more or less all that distinguished these wild adventurers from everybody else. And instead of energy bars and isotonic drinks, they carried dried meat and wine in a wooden flask in their rucksacks.

In 1853, the Riffelhaus became the second hotel in Zermatt and the first on the Riffelberg, 2,500 metres above sea level. It opened even before the Gornergrat railway was built. It was in the Riffelhaus facing the Matterhorn that mountaineering and hotel history was made. In 1855, the first team of climbers to ascend the Dufourspitze also set off from the Riffelhaus on their way to conquering Switzerland’s highest mountain (4,634 metres above sea level).

In the anniversary summer of 2015, the stage of the Freilichtspiele Zermatt open-air theatre will be erected just 300 metres from the Riffelhaus and from 9 July 2015 will be the setting for performances of *The Matterhorn Story*. And those drawn to the mountains themselves will find – just like the mountaineers of yesteryear – that the Riffelhaus at 2,500 metres above sea level is the perfect base from which to set out on hiking and mountain tours.

The world of natural history – then and now

In days gone by, the high mountains were very much *terra incognita* and were studied with the same enthusiasm as islands in distant seas and ancient graves in exotic lands. Glaciers, flora and fauna, and the stars brought researchers to Zermatt. Astronomers still gaze out into distant galaxies from the towers of the Kulmhotel Gornergrat today, and glaciologists study how the glaciers are changing.

On clear nights, and even without a telescope, guests at the 3100 Kulmhotel Gornergrat have a real sense of how close they are on the Gornergrat to the stars and planets. Under a full moon, the peaks and glaciers take on an almost mystical appearance. During the day, one can seemingly reach out and touch the world of the four-thousanders, and viewing the 4,478-metre-high Matterhorn from 3,100 metres above sea level gives spectators an even more intimate familiarity with the imposing slopes. What is less well known is that there are 238 Matterhorns worldwide. Twenty-two of these Matterhorns from five continents are currently on display on the Gornergrat (until 25 October 2015) as part of the Swiss Alpine Museum's pop-up exhibition *The Matterhorn Family*.

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