

## 28 Travel

### Skiing

# Unplugged on a mountain top

Zermatt's acoustic festival is becoming as popular as its peaks and slopes, says **Roger Alton**

**I**f you prefer to take your music festivals seated, and without the risk of losing your tent, your friends and, of course, your religion, then the booming business of Alpine music festivals may be for you. If you also prefer your music festivals with a side of waist-high powder rather than mud, and a day of superb skiing, then Zermatt Unplugged should be just the ticket. It's après-ski, but not as we know it.

Zermatt Unplugged is now in its sixth year and pulls in thousands of music lovers, skiers and boarders to this most glamorous of ski resorts, 5,300ft up in the



The band 77 Bombay Street at last year's Zermatt Unplugged

still hauntingly beautiful in her sixties. A long-time resident and a regular in the audience at the festival, she says: "Zermatt is my heaven on Earth. I love living here. The village deals with celebrities well, and I have never thought my integrity was challenged or questioned. Zermatt has always helped me find myself."

My integrity is constantly challenged and questioned, not least by me, but I know what she means. Zermatt is good for the soul. Arriving fresh from a magical and punctual three-hour train ride through the Nicolaital valley, we are ferried about the car-free centre of Zermatt by electric taxis. We are staying at the Zermatt Lodge, one of many five-star chalets owned by Donald Scott, who runs the swish chalet company Mountain Exposure. It's fabulously luxe and roomy, all warm wood, crisp, white bed linen on super-size beds, a woodburner suspended from the ceiling, balcony hot tubs and a gourmet chef thrown in.

Donald is an "accommodation partner" of Zermatt Unplugged, so if you're skiing with him, the best doors tend to open. This is particularly welcome when approaching a dreaded red rope or crowded bar. He's an expert skier, graceful as a gymnast — and a food, wine and music-lover, too.

Zermatt is a foodie heaven. The town has no shortage of great places to eat, but it is on the slopes that it has a peerless reputation for quality. Chez Vrony ([chezvrony.ch](http://chezvrony.ch)) is worth visiting, as is Chalet Etoile (0039 016 694 0220) in Cervinia, Italy — to which you can ski. Highlights at Vrony include the risotto with ceps and blueberries, and pan-fried foie gras on homemade rosti. It's not only the beautifully presented food or the extensive wine list; this is a lazy sun-trap restaurant, with sheepskins to keep you cosy.

Zermatt will never top the charts for budget family breaks, but for sheer quality, unparalleled beauty, superlative skiing and now music, too, you can't beat it.

### Need to know

Roger Alton was a guest of Mountain Exposure (0041 27 967 4353, [mountainexposure.com](http://mountainexposure.com)), which has three-night self-catering stays at Chalet Zeus (sleeps six in three rooms), from £1,422. **Getting there** Easyjet ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)) has returns from Gatwick to Geneva from £51 in April. For train transfers contact Switzerland Travel Centre (020 7420 4934, [switzerlandtravelcentre.co.uk](http://switzerlandtravelcentre.co.uk)), returns from £90.

**More information** [zermatt-unplugged.ch](http://zermatt-unplugged.ch)

Valais region, and with the shiveringly beautiful outline of the Matterhorn wherever you go. That view. That mountain. The peak has inspired artists, writers and skiers for hundreds of years. As the name suggests, this is an acoustic festival, but that doesn't mean it's all cardigan and beards. It's a big event spread between nine venues, with the main one the 2,000-seat Marquee. The music is a good match for the magnificent scenery.

On a whistle-stop visit last year we took in David Gray, Swedish rock band Mando Diao, OneRepublic from Colorado, as well as Seal and Supertramp's Roger Hodgson. This year the festival runs from April 17-21 and includes an eclectic line-up, with top French balladeer Grégoire, wistful Scots songstress Amy Macdonald and Chris de Burgh at the Marquee. Meanwhile, at the Vernissage, you'll find Newton Faulkner, Jonathan Jeremiah and the Kiwi Brooke Fraser. Headlining is Lauryn Hill, formerly of the Fugees.

The festival was set up by Thomas Sterchi, 42, who has experience in advertising. He says: "I have always loved Zermatt and I wanted to launch something cultural. I wanted to revive the nightlife at the season's end — by making it acoustic we had a point of difference."

Abba's Frida and Jon Lord of Deep Purple have been supporting the festival since it started. Frida is the dark one from the band, though she is actually blonde and

