

Eating on the ski run

Brian Viner finds an Alpine resort where the cuisine takes your breath away

THE BEST RESORTS FOR FOOD

16 Zermatt, Switzerland

It is not every ski guide whose contingency planning extends to the possibility of a woman in his party breaking a fingernail. But it's not the nail file he carries in his rucksack that makes Donald Scott perhaps the most singular ski guide in Switzerland. Nor is it all the other bits and pieces, stored to cater for every possible mountainside requirement, in a bag that shares at least some miraculous properties with Doctor Who's Tardis.

No, what makes Scott such invaluable company is the emphasis he places on food and wine, the sine qua non of any good skiing holiday, but especially one in Zermatt, where the cream of the mountain restaurants have no peers anywhere in the Alps.

An urbane British former advertising executive, Scott enjoyed prestigious European postings with Saatchi and J Walter Thompson before deciding that what he really needed from life was more skiing. So 12 years ago, he turned his back on advertising and became an instructor in Zermatt. Then, as more and more people asked if he knew of any rental properties in the area, he glimpsed a business opportunity.

The fully catered luxury chalet market was already well established in other swanky Swiss resorts, such as Verbier, but not in Zermatt. So Scott set up a company to fill the niche, calling it Mountain Exposure. Moreover, he decided the catering needed to be of the highest quality, which is how, in March this year, my wife and I came to be sitting down to dinner in a Zermatt apartment with, among others, the Michelin-starred chef Michael

Caines. An enthusiastic skier, Caines had heard about Scott's operation from Chris Jenks, once one of his talented underlings at Gidleigh Park in Devon.

Jenks had been hired by Mountain Exposure for the season, and would be cooking for us on our third and last night. But first at the stove was Kostas Papacharalampous, quickly identified by Caines, something of a culinary Poirot, as having graduated from the kitchens of the great French chef Joël Robuchon. It was the mash – 70 per cent Ratte potatoes to 30 per cent butter – that gave him away. "This man has clearly worked for Robuchon," exclaimed Caines. *Zut alors!* He was right.

We ate splendidly in our apartment, and best of all when Jenks himself took control (much to the ill-concealed pride of his mentor, Caines). But it was on the slopes where we had the most memorable feasts, and where Scott, who bills himself as a gourmet guide, really came into his own.

Just as the perfect African safari yields sightings of the "big five" of lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and Cape buffalo, so the perfect skiing trip to Zermatt demands visits to as many as possible of the "big five" mountain restaurants: Blatten, Fluhalp, Frank & Heidi's, Zum Zee and Chez Vrony. Perfect, that is, for those whose constitutions (and, it has to be said, wallets) can stand decadently long, rich and bibulous lunches, before pointing the skis back down the mountain. Mine can, I'm happy to say. I took my first skiing trips as an impoverished student, to Scotland and then, before the demolition of the Iron Curtain, to undernourished Bulgaria, so it was some years before I realised that a day's skiing could be fuelled by something other than ►

JOE COMBRON



Main picture: Gourmet guide Donald Scott enjoys a view of the Matterhorn as he drinks a glass of Dôle Blanche. Right: venison carpaccio with truffles and parmesan at the Blatten restaurant





Lunch at Fluhalp (above); the restaurant on Zermatt's slopes (below)

◀ greasy, anaemic chips. I've been making up for lost time ever since, but never more spectacularly than in Zermatt.

I could not have managed it without Scott, though, who knows his way not only down the best pistes and finest off-piste routes, but also around the extensive menus and wine lists. At Blatten, a characterful wooden teahouse built in 1850 (where the only way of getting down the steep, narrow staircase is to descend gingerly backwards), he steered us towards a sublime mushroom soup with a pastry lid, followed by a crayfish and truffle risotto that quite took the breath away – and not only because it cost SFr47 (roughly £30).

It was an Italian, Enzo Andrietta, who really started Zermatt's culinary tradition. He opened a mountain restaurant in 1970, and added prawns and even oysters to the old staples of cheese and meat. Other restaurateurs followed suit, but it is still old Enzo who deserves the credit for the wonderful noodle dish with truffles and king prawns I ate the following day at Fluhalp, preceded by an array of top-notch bruschetta.

We sat on the terrace, the mighty Matterhorn looming over us like a gigantic chèvre cheese. Just as a delicious Swiss rosé, Oueil de Perdrix, washed away the last of our British inhibitions, a band started to play. Dancing suddenly seemed irresistible. Heaven knows what my wife and I looked like as we clumped around in our ski-boots to the strains of *Sweet Caroline*, but we felt like John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John. Mountain air and alcohol – a blissfully heady mix, with or without Neil Diamond.

If Fluhalp offers the most riotous afternoon, the most illustrious of

the big five is Chez Vrony in the tiny hamlet of Findeln, home to Europe's highest tree line and a variety of wild thyme that grows in only one other place on earth, somewhere in the Peruvian Andes. Chez Vrony is a restaurant full of surprises and one of them is the Bloody Mary soup with chorizo cubes, a house speciality. Another is that the waitresses' cute alpine outfits were designed by Frida from Abba, a Chez Vrony regular. Almost as improbably, on the stairs there's a prominent photograph of the late Senator Robert Kennedy, who climbed the Matterhorn in 1955 with his brother Ted, guided by August Julen, the father of the

Scott knows his way not only down the best pistes but also around all the menus and wine lists



DETAILS

Brian Viner was a guest of Mountain Exposure (www.mountainexposure.com), which offers a week's stay for six people at the Loft from £6,500, including half-board, drinks and a day's gourmet guiding service. He flew with Swiss (www.swiss.com), which operates daily flights from Heathrow, City, Birmingham and Manchester to Zurich, from £119 return.

restaurant's engagingly solicitous owner, Vrony Cotting-Julen.

The Julens are among a handful of families who more or less run Zermatt, but their nickname, the "Zermafia", rather suggests that theirs is a baleful influence. Not so. Except for electric buses, taxis and horse-drawn carriages, Zermatt has been kept admirably and rigorously free of traffic, and partly as a consequence, remains appealingly old-fashioned, most dramatically in the Hinterdorfstrasse, a perfectly preserved street of 16th-century buildings.

The past and the present rub along remarkably successfully in this small town of fewer than 6,000 permanent inhabitants. But there was certainly nothing old-fashioned about our almost laughably stylish split-level loft – designed by another Julen, Vrony's brother Heinz, an acclaimed Swiss architect. A vast dining table is suspended from the ceiling, and the living-room fireplace is incorporated into a window. There's religious iconography on the walls, but also a striking pop-art portrait of Robbie Williams, a former guest. Eclectic hardly begins to describe it.

Heinz Julen has made his quirky mark elsewhere in town, but nothing man-made will ever dislodge the Matterhorn as Zermatt's totem. It's not only its height but also its notable shape that makes it so iconic. The small but excellent Matterhorn museum in the centre of town records the mountain's starring role in advertising and packaging through the ages, from bars of Toblerone to Caran d'Ache pencils, to posters advertising the Rolling Stones' 1976 Tour of Europe.

There are no fewer than 29 peaks of more than 4,000m surrounding Zermatt, 19 of which were climbed for the first time between 1854 and 1865, mainly by intrepid British adventurers. This was the golden age of alpinism, and the museum tells the stirring tale of one of its leading players, Edward Whymper, who after eight previous attempts, led the first successful ascent of the Matterhorn in July 1865. Successful to a point, anyway: four of the party died on the way down, including Lord Francis Douglas, the Marquis of Queensberry's brother.

To many minds, the tragedy marked the end of this golden age. The golden age of alpine gastronomy, however, lives on. www.zermatt.ch

17 San Cassiano, Italy

The mountainous Sudtirolo region claims to have more Michelin stars per head than anywhere else in the world (there are fewer than half-a-million people and 20 stars). In some of its valleys, the concentration is still greater: farming village San Cassiano has fewer than 900 residents but three stars. The secret? This is where Italy's Mediterranean influences combine with Austria's mountain heritage. Better still, for several winters now, leading chefs (including Norbert Niederkofler, pictured below) have been working with the high-mountain refuges to create special menus, so that skiers can now embark on gastronomic ski safaris. www.altabadia.org

18 Val d'Isère, France

Known for its vast and thrilling ski area, and its rowdy après-ski, Val d'Isère should also be recognised for its restaurants, according to racers Chemmy Alcott and Graham Bell, and Ian Davis from Crystal. There are more than 70, and highlights include La Becca, where young chef Antony Tempesta won a Michelin star last year, and Table de l'Ours, also starred. Just outside town in the small hamlet Le Fornet, is L'Atelier d'Edmond, which offers serious cooking (the tasting menu is €125) in rustic, wood-panelled rooms. www.valdisere.com



19 Courmayeur, Italy

Courmayeur sits on the opposite side of Mont Blanc from Chamonix, but while the French resort may have the nightlife and the steepest slopes, there's no question about which resort has the best food. Five of our ski experts ranked it among their favourites. Renowned restaurants include Chiecco at Plan Checrouit, the wonderful Clotze, just outside town, and Maison de Filippo, famous for its fixed-price, 36-course marathon. Even unprepossessing mountain restaurants – such as the café at the mid-station of the Helbronner cable car – serve memorable dishes, such as pasta with wild boar, or plates of cured local meat. www.courmayeur.it

20 Megève, France

Decades before champagne corks started popping in Couchevel, Megève was France's undisputed glamour resort. It was developed in the 1920s by Baroness Noémie de Rothschild, who sent her Norwegian ski instructor to scour the Alps for a suitable location to create a rival to St Moritz. She turned a guesthouse into the Palace du Mont d'Arbois, and royals and celebrities began pouring in. Today the resort retains a rarified air and has a foodie scene to match, with more than 80 restaurants. One, Flocons de Sel, won three Michelin stars in the latest guide. www.megeve.com