

Catch the late, late snow and a show with altitude



Zermatt offers superb end-of-season skiing as well as the most civilised music festival in the world, says **Neil English**

WHAT do such esteemed musical talents as triple Grammy-winner David Gray, multiple award-winning singer-songwriter Seal and the founding member of Supertramp, Roger Hodgson, have to do with skiing? Well, very little normally. But in two weeks' time they will all be on the bill at Zermatt Unplugged – the extravaganza that marks the end of the skiing season and which has become known as 'the world's most civilised music festival'.

The event is now in its fourth year and has properly come of age, attracting thousands of skiing and snowboarding music-lovers to this glamorous resort 5,310ft up in the Valais region of Switzerland.

This crowd is no heaving mass of bouncing flesh driven wild by ear-splitting decibels or bass levels that might cause avalanches. The clue is in the name – this festival is non-electric. And nor does the resort get uncomfortably crowded, as the action is spread between nine venues dotted around the Alpine village. The main one is a 2,000-seat marquee.

It is a celebration of sound befitting a mountainous area of almost unrivalled natural drama. Zermatt sits among the highest concentration of 13,000ft-plus peaks in the Alps, all overlooked by the 14,690ft Matterhorn, whose majesty must inspire skiers,

climbers, artists and musicians alike. Imagine kicking back after a great day skiing in sun-kissed spring conditions on snow-sure glacial slopes and listening to the uplifting chorus of Seal's Kiss From A Rose echoing through the valleys – while savouring the rather excellent local wine.

The other big attraction of the festival is that it is largely free. Tickets are required for

only ten of the 45 acts appearing during the four-day event, which takes place from April 12 to 16.

And you don't even have to be off the slopes to catch a gig. Skiers wanting to hear good tunes before they get down the mountain for the bulk of the evening concerts can head for the Blauherd sector of the Rothorn ski area, where an on-slope venue, called Blue Lounge, will host an array of new artists and bands.

Zermatt Unplugged aficionados

advise me that if you want to catch as much as possible of the live music, you should grab dinner on the march between venues or eat very late – in which case a substantial lunch is a good idea.

As luck would have it, Zermatt is regularly hailed as the world's best resort for on-mountain restaurants, and I would have to agree.

Skiers and snowboarders can load up on carbs in a variety of ways, from a quick plate of fine-quality pasta at Gandeggghutte above Trockener Steg to a steaming bowl of

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Asian noodles in the new self-service Mountain Glacier eco hut.

Or why not enjoy a decadent, lazy, sun-trap lunch with stupendous views of the Matterhorn at Chez Vrony, below Sunnegga, where the signature dish is pan-fried foie gras of duck on a bed of home-made rosti – the traditional Swiss dish of grated and fried potato.

You can check out countless other fine restaurants on and off the mountain by visiting www.zermatt.ch, while the festival details are at www.zermatt-unplugged.ch.

It's a good time to plan a trip to Zermatt for another reason. This

has been a generally disappointing snow season in Europe and many people have been asking me to recommend places to go for late-season skiing, or asking whether it is wise to take the family skiing over the Easter break – which this year is exceptionally late, falling in the penultimate week of April.

In recent winters, an end-of-season drop in temperature and significant

snowfalls have provided great late skiing but, generally speaking, the later you plan to ski, the higher you need to go.

Zermatt is as safe an option as any for late-season action, given that it has the highest lift-served skiing in Europe from the Klein Matterhorn at 12,530ft. This is Europe's largest lift-served glacier, offering skiing all summer and preserving a good base of snow all year round. Easter skiing is guaranteed.

Furthermore, Zermatt has recently enjoyed a 2ft top-up of snow, high on the Swiss-Italian ridge of Plateau

Rosa. Donald Scott, director of Zermatt specialist chalet operator Mountain Exposure – an accommodation partner of Zermatt Unplugged – told me the other day that the new snow had transformed things.

'While I've been hearing tales of woe from friends skiing in other parts of the Alps, I've been almost embarrassed to say how good the conditions have remained here,' said Donald. 'This new dump has just freshened up that wonderful wintry look and feel.'

Rental chalets are hard to come by in Zermatt and most accommo-

dation offered by British tour oper-

ators is in the 100 or more hotels in the resort, many of which I can say are good.

I can also recommend the chalets available through Mountain Exposure – from the vast glass-and-steel structure of the Heinz Julen loft (which houses a grand piano in the main room), to smaller and far less expensive traditional chocolate-box chalets.

With restaurants so plentiful and good in Zermatt, Donald rents out chalets with the rare option of having them catered or not.



TOP OF THE BILL: David Gray