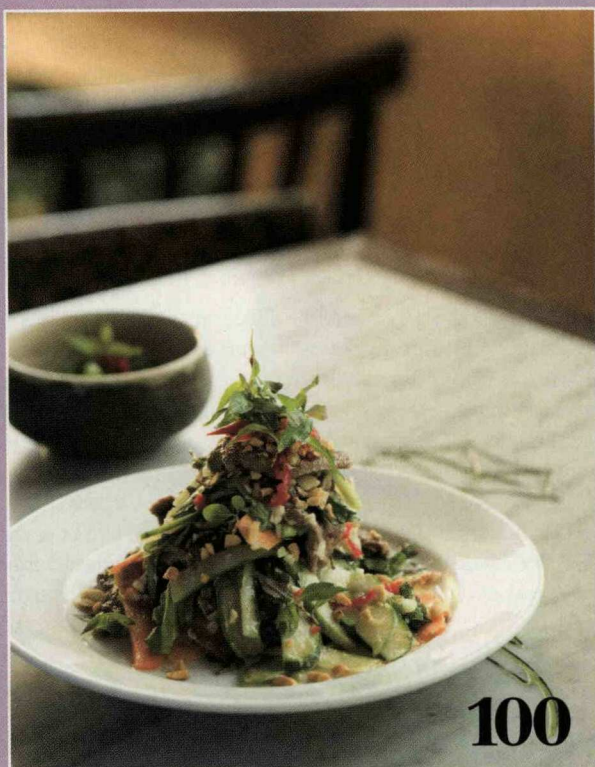
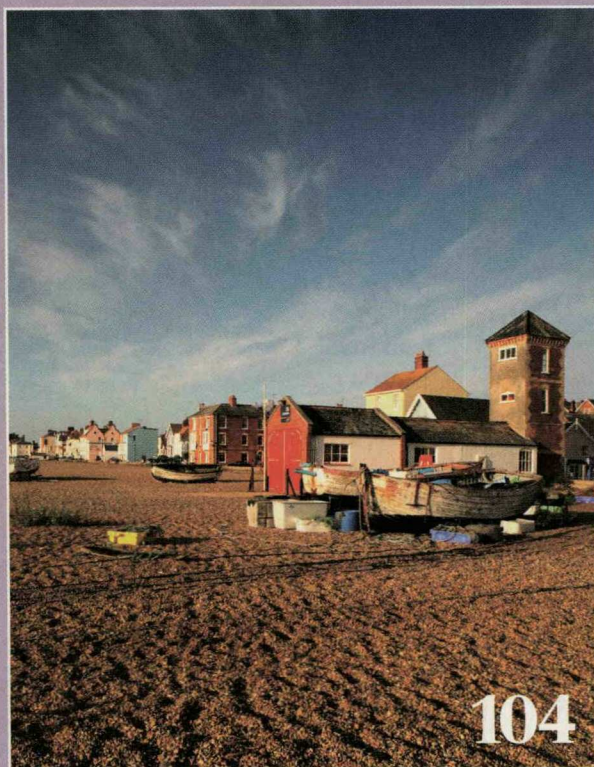


EAT AWAY

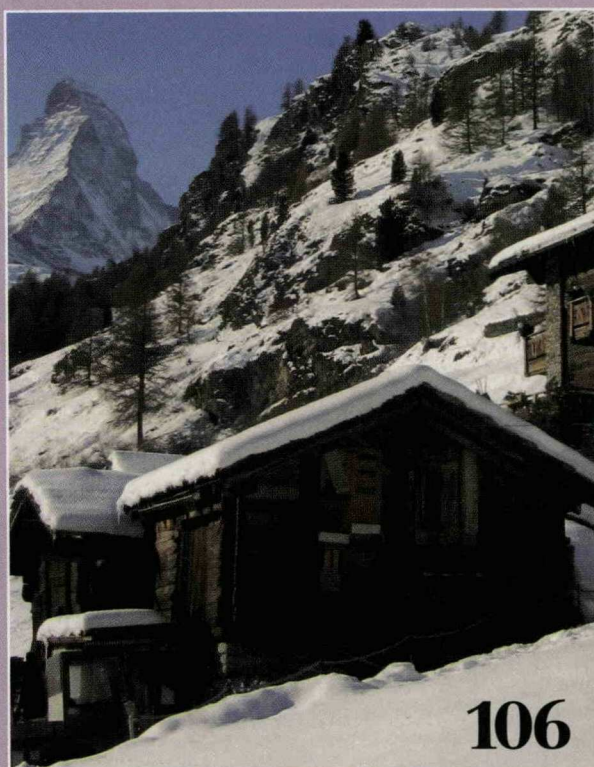
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Postcard from Zermatt

Marina heads to the Swiss ski resort for smoky hay soup, sultry local wines and her very own Michelin-starred chef

Let's go somewhere snowy,' we said, 'somewhere glamorous and snowy. With great restaurants.' There could only really be one contender: the delicious Alpine village of Zermatt, nestling in the armpit of the Matterhorn, familiar from a million Swiss chocolate wrappers.

Caught up in daydreams of rosti and fondue and pasta, air-dried meats and haunting cheeses, Zermatt's uniquely alluring combo of all that's best in Swiss and Italian cooking, I overlook one fairly serious consideration – Zermatt is for skiers. To access the best restaurants, the ones that snuggle in achingly picturesque mountain hamlets, you need to ski. And I don't.

I'm lured into a false sense of complacency by our first restaurant, **Heimberg** (heimberg-zermatt.ch), conveniently located at the bottom of our loft's private lift. (Ho yes, private lift. Every home should have one.) Not only is it on our doorstep, but it's divine: woody, mountain chic crossed with the trademark butch eccentricity of local hero designer, Heinz Julen. And the menu – or lack of it – is an adventure. Course after course of the 'Alpine dining concept' arrives: fragrant carrot soup packed with shards of trockenfleisch (cured local beef) served from a steaming tureen; veal and eel, a witty riff on vitello tonnato; the tenderest lamb with a dense soufflé of blue cheese. An elaborate pudding features a triangular chocolate

parfait. 'A-ha!' I say, 'it's another witty play – on Toblerone!' Chef Klaus Schlachter looks pained.

From here on in, things start to get tricky. Which is why I'm trudging behind Donald Scott and 'B' Hadden, my new best chums, responsible for organising gourmet tours of the area. Gourmet tours for skiers. In a fit of outrageous kindness, they've abandoned their skis to lead us by foot to the finest mountain gastronomy. It takes a long, long time.

Our first stop, the renowned **Chez Vrony** (chezvrony.ch). Owned, like so much in this town, by the Julen family, the restaurant is world-famous and patronised by international celebs and the world's super-rich. The Zermatt style is understated – turn up here in a Pucci ski suit and you'll be laughed out of town – but utterly deluxe. In this atmospheric converted farmhouse, all rickety stairs, attics filled with drying meat and quirky, overstuffed sofas, the wines are first-rate and dishes include curious, smoky hay soup (stock seeped in hay, with barley and vegetables), risotto with homemade venison sausage, and stout little gnocchi with spiced apricots. There's duck liver with rösti, and oodles of truffles. You clearly need to do a lot of skiing to work this lot off. You can also buy skiwear designed by local resident Frida from Abba, which kind of sums the whole place up.

Those Swiss wines, oh my: sultry merlots from Ticino, the liquid heaven of the Valais whites. I intend to neck as much

as I can – after all, I need something to help the pain in my muscles (I have muscles? Who knew?). Anyway, who cares if every single fibre of my unfit being is jangling with pain? The luxury of Zermatt caresses you like an expensive mistress. We're staying in a chalet. Chalet? Hah! This is a Bond villain's lair – called **The Loft**, designed by the ubiquitous Mr Julen and recently vacated by one Robbie Williams. There's a hot tub in the upper mezzanine, a bar that gazes over a view so perfect it looks Photoshopped, and a revolving bed. Blofeld eat your heart out. In the morning, a Michelin-starred chef, the affable Gerry Kirwan, comes and makes us breakfast. How will we ever acclimatise to real life again?

Venturing out into Saturday night, the streets are heaving with people, mostly men (I'm telling all my single girlfriends about Zermatt...). We follow them to **GramPi's** (grampis.ch) in the leery nightlife area known as The Bermuda Triangle, where Marco, a vaguely

deranged, tiny person entertains with feverish Rik Wakeman impersonations. We prefer **Elsie's** (elsiebar.ch), a sedate ski-lodge pastiche where punters wallow in bar snacks of lobster, oysters and caviar. How fabulously Zermatt.

Our last gourmet adventure is **Zum See** (zumsee.ch), via a terrifying, exhilarating bubble-car ride up the mountain followed by a slippery, snow-bound hike back down. Never in my life have I felt more like I've earned lunch – and what a lunch. Ripples of wafer-thin cheese with the velviciest cured meat and a powerful, granular shaved cheese called hobelkäse.

We have quail salad, topped with frilly little fried quail's eggs, and supple, gamey pheasant shot by the waitress's dad, served with potato gratin, red cabbage and candied chestnuts. A rich, potent syrah du Valais just about fuels me for the long stagger back.

Jettisoned right out of my comfort zone, I fully expect to dislike Zermatt intensely. Instead, we have a ball. Never did figure out what to do with that revolving bed, though.



Marina O'Loughlin, London newspaper Metro's restaurant critic, has remained incognito in the UK for 10 years. She regularly travels here and abroad in search of culinary adventure. Marina's trip to Zermatt was organised by Mountain Exposure (mountainexposure.com) and Swiss Tourism (myswitzerland.com).

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