



Snow business like show business

Combining a ski weekend with gourmet food and a rock festival is as close to sensory overload as you can get says DAVID ALLSOP after a trip to Zermatt



Donald Scott (left) enjoys another meal at the Rascard



David Gray is one of the many top names who have appeared at Zermatt Unplugged

I CAN'T quite recall where I read the following, but it sums it all up for me. "Skiing requires a commitment to pleasure of the sort endorsed by hedonists, layabouts, ne'er do wells and philanderers – in other words, a single-minded approach to absolute self-indulgence."

Oh yes, now I remember. They were the opening words of *The Bluffer's Guide to Skiing*, the seminal work on slopeside indolence written by, er, me. (ovalbooks.com). So of all people, I should be better qualified than most to advise on the one ski resort in the world where dangerous measures of self-indulgence are not just guaranteed but actually compulsory. It's Zermatt, and it's got the most iconic mountain, the most compelling Alpine history, the most jaw-dropping scenery, the highest mountain lift in Europe, unquestionably the world's best mountain restaurants, and now it's got the world's leading gourmet ski guide.

What? Who? This is a man with the perfect job who spends his time taking clients on a gastronomic odyssey around one of the great Alpine ski areas – and he gets paid for it.

His name is Donald Scott, a former London ad-man who sensibly left Soho for Switzerland and

founded a luxury chalet business in Europe's most glamorous resort. And he has an equally glamorous partner called, simply, 'B', who often accompanies him on his gruelling gourmet guiding duties.

If these weren't reasons enough to hate him, he's also an expert skier and an affable and engaging lunch companion who knows exactly where to go, where to sit, what to eat, and most importantly what to drink.

Naturally he's also an expert in Swiss and Italian wines who knows his Vesperterminens from his Verdicchios. It's worth skiing with the gourmet ski guide just to see the restaurant owners fall over themselves to greet him. Rest assured that as his client, you will be introduced to your lunch hosts as if you are visiting royalty, and for a single glorious moment you will feel like it as you are led to the best table in the house (usually the one with the unimpeded view of the Matterhorn).

On consecutive days I was swiftly and expertly guided to Zum See and Chez Vrony, both regularly voted in the Alps' top 10 lunch venues.

"Lunch is the most important part of the day, which is why we treat it with appropriate reverence – allowing enough time to contemplate the virtues of the long liquid lunch," says Scott suavely, adding: "I'd say there is far more interest in good lunchtime restaurants than there is in evening places."

He should know. The reason his clients prefer not to eat out in the evening is because his chalet company, Mountain Exposure, employs a Michelin-starred chef called Gerry Kirwan, who serves up food which invariably outperforms the local competition (which is saying something) and almost certainly outperforms anything in any chalet anywhere else in the Alps.

I'm no expert, but I'd hazard a guess that there aren't too many Michelin stars twinkling around the world's ski resorts. So, why would you want to do anything else of an evening than gorge on Gerry's gastro-extravaganza?

This being Zermatt, however, there's always another opportunity to indulge your senses, and when you see your host tapping his watch and pointing towards the chalet door, it's a safe bet that the evening entertainment is far from finished.

And it's certainly not finished if you find

yourself in this part of Switzerland in mid-April for the 'Zermatt Unplugged' festival. Music in the mountains has progressed significantly since Julie Andrews and the Von Trapp family – these days you're much more likely to find yourself attending a performance by Lionel Richie, Billy Idol, David Gray, John Mayall, Deep Purple's Jon Lord, and Supertramp's Roger Hodgson.

In my case it was an audience with Seal, aka Mr Heidi Klum – although it's probably not a good idea to call him that. On the other hand, neither is it a good idea to come on stage and announce to your predominantly Swiss audience that much as you like their Matterhorn you prefer the real one in Disneyland. Memo to Seal: "Seal, they're Swiss! They don't do irony. Don't do the Disney joke, or you'll get booed – again."

The festival can be added to the list of things Zermatt does better than other ski resorts. It invigorates the end of the season, and it increasingly attracts major acts. Robbie Williams hasn't signed up just yet, but he stayed recently in Mountain Exposure's premier 5-star chalet The Lodge so it's probably only a matter of time.

And it's not just about the big names. I found myself ski-stalking an attractive young Swiss chanteuse called Anna Kaenzig who was one of 14 less famous acts playing a different mountain restaurant every day.

But nothing quite eclipses meeting Frida from Abba (the dark-haired one). She now lives in Zermatt, and is one of the patrons of Zermatt Unplugged. Does she have any plans to perform at the festival herself? "I've never been asked", she confided to me. "Maybe. Who knows?"

At the time of writing the line-up for 2012 hadn't been announced, but I live in hope that when all is said and done Frida gets asked if she wants to do it.

Meanwhile I have a dream. Donald has invited me to join Mountain Exposure's gourmet ski guiding team – to cover the cheaper end of town naturally.

USEFUL WEBSITES

// www.zermatt.ch
 // www.zermatt-unplugged.ch
 // www.mountainexposure.com

Photo: Switzerland Tourism / Christof Sonderegger



Photo: Switzerland Tourism / Thomas Andenmatten



Making tracks on the Monte Rosa Massif

Photo: Switzerland Tourism / Robert Boesch