

# IT'S MIND OVER MATTERHORN

**WHEN the itinerary arrived for my glacier skiing expedition on Klein Matterhorn, the highest point in the Swiss ski area of Zermatt-Cervinia, the office sweepstake on which one of my limbs would come home encased in plaster did little to boost my confidence.**

My only previous experience of a glacier had involved crampons and a pick-axe. How on earth could I – a complete novice – ski on sheet ice?

But the prospect of seeing the Swiss Alps in the summer – flower-strewn meadows framed by snow-capped mountain – won me round (wouldn't it you?).

Zermatt enjoys a spectacular setting. The train journey there leads you through picturesque mountain passes, sculpted hillsides and glacial waterfalls. The town itself is encircled by 38 peaks more than 4,000 metres high, including the mighty Matterhorn.

It's a growing knot of chalets, hotels, restaurants, bars and gift shops, all done out in a stereotypical Swiss style.

I could be forgiven, then, for

expecting my home for the next few days to be traditional in style, all rustic wooden charm and cosy log fires...

Little wonder my jaw dropped when the Mountain Exposure resort manager welcomed me to one of the most striking and contemporary chalets in Zermatt: part cutting edge Manhattan loft, part art-installation.

Once the home of local designer, architect and artist Julien, Heinz Julien Loft is testament to his eccentricity; the dining table lowers from the ceiling, the chandelier's made from a jelly mould and old cutlery, and there's a revolving bed.

Still, I'd barely had time to put down my bags when we were ushered out to get fitted for skis. Although I confessed all and suggested a glacier may not be the best place to start a skiing career, my protests fell on deaf ears. My hosts simply arranged for an instructor to accompany me on my first foray on to the slopes.

The next morning we had an early start. Skiing off season, usually in mid-April and beyond, means getting up there before the sun melts the snow. That's the snow that lies on the glacier,

so it turned out I wouldn't be skiing on sheet ice after all.

Other members of my group, all seasoned skiers, greeted my inexperience with a mixture of bemusement – and mischief.

I was warned about the risks of falling down the crevasses: "The rescue team give you a cup of hot soup to drink," I was told. "And they say it's to keep you warm until the rescue helicopter arrives. But really it's to kill you because there's no way to ever get you out."

I was soon distracted from my impending doom when, emerging from the thick cloud that had covered Zermatt since my arrival, I saw the

majestic peak of the Matterhorn. Standing defiant before a clear blue sky, it was a truly unforgettable sight.

After disembarking on to the Matterhorn Glacier Paradise (aka Klein Matterhorn), I gingerly picked my way to the flattest looking spot we could see. Skis on, I shuffled around, clutching my poles for dear life, as two six-year-olds zoomed past.

I soon got the hang of the ski stance and the all-important snowplough, and

within hours I'd even managed a couple of wonky turns. As I soared down the slopes, reaching top speeds of at least 13mph, I couldn't help but feel a bit smug. I hadn't fallen over once.

After they'd gotten over their shock, my companions seemed almost as proud of me as I was.

"Now it's time for the best bit of skiing," one whispered on the way back down. "The apres-ski!"

In winter, the whole area is thick with snow, but in the summer months it's

like a scene straight out of *Heidi*, all lush meadows and bell-wearing cows.

Zermatt, famed as one of Europe's top winter ski spots, is really a year-round destination. Its summer-season skiing is extensive: one cable car and six ski lifts covering 21km of pistes and 1,000 vertical metres of natural snow.

The Matterhorn region is a hikers' paradise too, with over 400km of marked trails. After lunch we made our way back to Zermatt on one of them, following a suspended wooden walkway through a narrow river gorge.

As luxury chalet specialists, Mountain Exposure can provide Michelin-level chefs to cook for you in your accommodation. However, if you prefer to eat out, Zermatt has more than 100 restaurants and cafes.

The next day, as I sat enjoying breakfast, marvelling at how the view of the Mischabel Mountains changed with every passing cloud or burst of sunshine, I spotted something out of the corner of my eye.

It was a parachute, spiralling, hurtling towards the ground. My stomach lurched as I realised that in an hour or two that would be me up there.

Two hours later, I was standing on the edge of a snow-covered mountain with an adrenaline-junkie expat strapped to my back. I closed my eyes as we ran off the edge of the mountain and when I opened them again, we were soaring through the air.

At first it was all very pleasant and leisurely, far too leisurely for my pilot.

"Let's try a couple of loops," he said, tugging down on one of the two control lines.

Suddenly we swung up to one side, and back down. My stomach was left far behind, somewhere along the way. A few more loops and a spiral or three later and we landed.

With my face an odd shade of green, I spent 10 minutes lying on the ground recovering. The views, when I was the right way up again, were amazing.

After that I was ready for a drink...

## Getting there

- Claire Walker flew from London City to Geneva with **BABOO** (flybaboo.com)

## Staying there

- Claire was a guest of **MOUNTAIN EXPOSURE**, which offers luxury catered and self-catered chalets in Zermatt and Saas-Fee year-round, from £100 per person per night, catered, and £70 self-catered. Its concierge service arranges pick-ups at Geneva/Zurich airports and any other services required.
- Mountain Exposure reservations: call 0845 425 2001, go to MountainExposure.com or email bookings@mountainexposure.com
- Information on **SUMMIT SKI AND SNOWBOARD SCHOOL** at summitskischool.com

## Best for...

- Skiers and those seeking Swiss luxury

## Time to go

- Winter's peak ski season, but spring and summer for a more relaxed pace and fantastic hiking

## Don't miss

- A trip up the Matterhorn Glacier Paradise – even if you don't ski, the views are a must-see

## Take note

- Zermatt's a car-free village, with electric taxis which are dangerously quiet!

## Don't forget

- The currency is Swiss Francs, although they speak Swiss German