



The express train to paradise

One of the best ways to tour Switzerland and the Alps
is by rail, writes [Andrew Thompson](#)

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here was this brief moment in Zermatt when I stopped, looked at the scene that spread out before me, and sheepishly thought, 'Is this all?'

I'd decided earlier that morning to visit one of the remote Swiss village's most celebrated attractions, known as the Matterhorn Glacier Paradise, and yet something didn't feel quite right to me.

It wasn't that the view was unimpressive. Snow-capped Alps towered around me, the late-summer temperatures on the ground still unable to reach all the way up the high peaks. Blue skies with puffy white clouds provided a surreal backdrop, and together with the remaining snow, contrasted sharply with the scree on the bare, rugged cliffs that started at my feet.

In the valley below, I could just make out my starting point – the village of Zermatt – and to my right, partially obscured by thick,

white clouds, was the Matterhorn, the very symbol of Switzerland. Hell, it'd taken me the better part of an hour and four separate aerial cable-car rides to reach this point.

But people nearby were shuffling around on the desolate viewing platform looking a bit disillusioned. Some wandered a few metres out along the dusty pathway to nowhere, only to soon return with bemused expressions on their faces.

In any other country, cameras would have been whirring and selfie sticks would have been at full extension; but Switzerland has a way of spoiling you at every turn, and if you were going to a location called Matterhorn Glacier Paradise, you quickly learnt to expect nothing less than a true glacier paradise.

I did my best to remain enthused, snapped a few photographs, and started to head back when I realised I'd overlooked a turnstile for the final leg of the journey. I fed my ticket into

the slot and proceeded through two large sliding doors. On the other side, I saw a speck of a red gondola floating towards a tiny hole in the bare rock face hundreds of metres above.

'Surely not,' I said to myself. It looked like something out of a *Bond* film, a fictionalised secret base hidden in the side of the Alps. But to my astonishment, it was real, and just a few minutes later I was coasting above a colossal blue-veined glacier so impressive that it truly elicited involuntary audible gasps from every passenger packed into the aerial vehicle.

We disappeared right into the hole in the mountain, and I walked a long, cool tunnel through its heart before catching an elevator to the summit. From the small viewing platform at 3 883 metres I could witness groups of dedicated skiers doing their level best on the remaining skiable summer snow. Hikers with backpacks, crampons and sharp poles – who



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off the main drag to discover rows of quaint, though somehow clichéd, wooden houses – those with the steep roofs and balconies and dozens, in some cases hundreds, of pots full to the brim with multi-coloured Alpine flowers.

Zermatt might just be the ultimate alpine playground. Skiers, hikers and climbers all descend on the small village, accessible only by train, to test themselves on the treacherous terrain above. Some make lifetime pilgrimages to achieve the ultimate feat of conquering the summit of the Matterhorn itself.

The less active go there to walk the car-free streets, peer through store windows, dangle over breathtaking glaciers in gondolas, and, most importantly, soak in hotel hot tubs while gazing up at one of the world's most iconic peaks. Though I was there to do as much of the above as possible, I also had a different mission to accomplish – to ride the famous Glacier Express train line from start to finish.

On my final morning in Zermatt, I got up before sunrise and stepped on to the balcony. In three days, I had yet to see the Matterhorn unhindered by clouds. The receptionist who had shown me to my hotel room had enthused about its view, only to look a bit embarrassed when she discovered that just the base of the mountain was visible. 'Seems she's a little shy today,' she said.

But by morning three, the Matterhorn had appeared, rising out high above me like a weathered incisor. It was set against the purple haze of dawn, with not a cloud in the sky. I sat down on a small wooden chair on the balcony and waited. A ray of golden light eventually illuminated just the very tip of the peak, before sunlight slid its way slowly down the east face, turning it several shades of red and orange before lighting it up in all of its majestic glory.

Waiting for the Matterhorn had made me late for my train. I whipped up my belongings, dashed through to the dining room, crammed in a comprehensive Swiss buffet breakfast, and then marched through the quiet streets towards the station. I had just minutes to spare when an electric golf cart appeared right alongside me. 'Would you like a ride?' the driver asked. It was the same woman who'd shown me to my room. I smiled and hopped on board.

'You were right about the view,' I said, peering up at the regal mountain.

Almost as soon as I had settled into my seat on the train, it lurched gently forward, precisely as the crimson second hand of the station clock tipped the time over to 09:52. According to the brochure on the table in front of me, for approximately the next eight hours



were tethered together with looping safety ropes – trudged across the slushy surface towards the warmth of the high-altitude café. I watched them appear on the horizon and grow ever larger, until I could no longer resist the temptation to follow the path they were arriving on.

Though inadequately dressed, I stepped tentatively on to the snow and walked several hundred metres until I was alone in the vast expanse of the Alps. The nearest people to me were mere specks on the white horizon, and I took in the magic of Glacier Paradise in total silence.

Eventually, I returned to the valley floor below via the vast network of gondolas and cable cars, and then took a walk through the cobblestoned streets of Zermatt. They're lined with immaculate Swiss stores, many predictably selling knives, watches, cheese, high fashion, and any kind of chocolate variation you could dream of. When the bustling streets became crowded with tourists, I walked just two roads

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and six minutes, I would be confined to the first-class carriage of the Glacier Express as we wound our way out of the Matter Valley all the way to St Moritz.

The carriages of the Glacier Express are a true wonder in themselves. Carpeted floors, high-backed seats and fold-out wooden tables make up the interior. The spotless windows are so clean, it is easy to forget they are even there. They ascend up from your waist to the ceiling, and where ordinary train windows would stop, these angle inwards to require only the slightest pivot of your neck if you wish to take in views of the passing mountaintops. Every so often a gentle bell would chime over the public address system, indicating a new instalment on the multi-lingual audio tour that's available on your headset.

There's a fully stocked dining cart located midway in the train, but it's hardly necessary – uniformed staff regularly walk the aisles to

attend to the passengers at their seats. As lunchtime approaches, they descend on the carriages and make up the tables with crisp white linen and real cutlery and crockery, and then proceed to serve up meals chefs have freshly prepared on-board.

Some passengers pre-book a three-course buffet meal ahead of time, others opt for the plat du jour, and a handful go rogue and order à la carte on the day. Most pair their food with a glass or two of the finest Swiss wine. And if all that's not dramatic enough, you can top off your meal in the most scenic restaurant in the world with the insistent taste of grappa, poured into a thimble-sized glass from an unnecessary height while the train lurches its way around the mountain passes.

Such is the spectacle on board the Glacier Express that at times, it's easy to forget that you're on one of the world's most celebrated scenic rail routes. As soon as you leave the town of Zermatt, you're treated to views along Matter Vispa River. Parts of the leg towards the town of Brig are so steep the locomotive requires a cogwheel to keep the train from sliding back down. From Brig, you'll travel along the Mattertal and Rhône Valleys before embarking on a dramatic climb to the summit of the Oberalp Pass.

At this point, you may think you've reached the climax of the journey. You've already risen and fallen several hundred metres along sheer mountain passes. You've seen glaciers and rivers and started to come to terms with the fact that this is probably a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But you've yet to dip down into the Rhine Gorge – an isolated valley with steep walls and raging pale-emerald rapids at its base, popular with adventurous hikers and daring kayakers. With no roads or signs of human habitation in what's affectionately called the Swiss Grand Canyon, it's easy to imagine a wide-angle overhead shot of your red train hugging the bends of the river as it chugs alone through the pristine wilderness.

In winter, the journey allegedly feels as though you're travelling through a Narnia-like wonderland, past iced rivers, glaciers and still, snow-covered fields punctuated by the occasional cross-country skier. In the warmer months, when I completed my trip, much of the low-lying snow melts, stoking the rivers with frigid waters but still leaving the highest and most inaccessible terrain dusted in white.



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The landscape really bursts to life in summer, revealing dozens of green valleys and plains, each one of which could serve as backdrops for a Swiss tourism brochure.

The rivers, mountains, charming villages, cow-dotted fields and isolated hikers walking slim single-track paths float past the windows so calmly and effortlessly that at times you can almost be excused for taking it all for granted. Occasionally, as the rhythm of the locomotive dulled my senses, it felt as if I was watching a nature documentary on a crisp HD television screen. But then, something would happen to jolt me back to reality – a fleeting stop at a remote station, a new passenger taking up the seat opposite, or a polite waiter asking if I'd like another beverage – then I'd find myself gawking at the scenery in absolute disbelief once again.

Several hours and a few hundred metres of gained altitude later, the world's slowest express train eased to a halt at its final stop

in St Moritz. By then, many passengers had alighted, most at Chur or Davos, and save for a table of four on the far side, I had been left alone in the back of the previously packed panoramic carriage.

I took the short, steep saunter in the cool evening air to a quiet square in the heart of St Moritz, where I asked a young woman sweeping the cobblestone sidewalk if there was anywhere nearby to stay.

'Hotel Eden,' she told me, stopping mid-sweep. 'It's just around the corner.'

I thanked her, and the sounds of the gentle swishing resumed. I checked into a room on the third floor of the charming old hotel, sat down on the bed and wondered if a day of travel could get any better. When I eventually rose to my feet and parted the heavy curtains to discover a panoramic view of a misty Lake St Moritz at sunset, I realised that even in a country as constantly idyllic as Switzerland, it probably couldn't. ●

VISITING SWITZERLAND

When to go

Unless you're planning on skiing, the best time to visit Zermatt and St Moritz is summer (June to October). The cable cars still run, the temperatures are milder and the hiking trails are accessible. The Glacier Express runs in both winter and summer, though.

Visas

South Africans will require a Schengen visa in order to visit Switzerland. Visit www.eda.admin.ch/pretoria to get more information.

How to get there

Swissair operates direct flights between Johannesburg and Zürich. There are also several airlines offering indirect flights to Geneva. Both airports are about four hours away from Zermatt by train, but Zürich makes for a more convenient return point from St Moritz.

Getting around

Trains are still the most convenient way to travel around Switzerland. You can buy point-to-point tickets for the Glacier Express online at www.glacierexpress.ch. Several Eurail Passes (www.eurail.com) as well as the handy Swiss Travel Pass (www.swiss-pass.ch) include access to the Glacier Express, subject to certain reservation fees. These rail passes also include access on most Swiss trains and can represent good value.

Where to stay

Sunstar Style Hotel (zermatt.sunstar.ch) in Zermatt is a four-star hotel with beautiful, comfortable rooms conveniently located close to the train station.

Then, Hotel Eden (www.eden.swiss) in St Moritz offers several accommodation options right in the heart of the town.

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