

# From Switzerland with love

Somewhere between Google and Shah Rukh Khan, we all have our idea of what Switzerland is like. But unless you actually go there, you will never understand why the stereotypes are hard to break.

Text **Ravina Rawal**  
Photographs **Kadambari Zacharia**

“It really isn’t going to be easy to sit still in Switzerland.” That was my first reaction to a large map that I was hunched over, informing me just how close I was also going to be to Milan and Paris, Munich and bits of Austria.

Till only a few years ago, Switzerland had been right up there on my list of Places to Visit Before I Die. I think all it took was an overdose of Bollywood starlets running around half-naked all over the Alps that made me feel like I’d already been there, done that. Perhaps this winter wonderland could be done quickly, then? Massive snow-capped mountains, check, next; cow with cowbell, check, next; photograph with Heidi, check, next...

But by the time I had worked out cross-country distances and alternative itineraries, I was already sipping Fendant in Sion, the capital of the generous Valais region, and Switzerland’s oldest town.

## Sion

As first suspected, I was able to tour the town over a single evening. But what I’d really covered was time—prehistory through to the middle ages and up until today. The castles of Valère and Tourbillon—charming medieval leftovers that sit on two fortified hills—overlook Sion, whose cobbled paths are scattered with cafés, bars, and adventure-enthusiasts from all over, excited to be just 20 minutes from all their favourite ski-resorts and infinite hiking trails.

The next morning, I settled for relatively tamer action, with Petit Tonnerre, the little storm of a horse that was going to trot its way through the Nax countryside with me



▲ Clockwise from above: Sion’s vineyards offer the best cold cuts, not to mention some great wine; Sion is Switzerland’s oldest town and the views from the chalets are truly stunning; Sion’s cafes are a perfect place to rest your weary feet after a walk around the town.

on its back. But I could not pretend to be calm about this. Much like their famous (but unusual) race of stocky, haughty cows, the valley’s horses were all also proud, impressive creatures, standing very tall. Not wanting to fool anybody into thinking that I was a pro just because I had remembered



▲ The barren and often stark views from atop Eggishorn summit are unlike anything else Switzerland has to offer.

to wear my breaches, I gathered a vague assortment of French, German and Italian words and went to talk to the lady nailing in one of Petit Tonerre's loose horseshoes. I tried very hard in mixed-language cacophony to explain that when I said I had ridden a horse before (back in India), I meant that I'd sat on its back while a disinterested man held on to the reins and walked alongside, clucking his tongue periodically in no real reassurance.

I don't know what she understood, but in answer she smacked Tonerre's bottom into action I just wasn't ready for. Holding onto the reins for dear life, I wondered if I'd made the wrong decision choosing horse riding over climbing the Via Ferrata and hoping to spot the peregrine falcon as I hung carelessly from a cliff. But it seemed Tonerre and I were suddenly doing just fine; he trotted along gently through forested areas and along roads winding their way up the hills, and if I gasped, it was only at the stunning views of the Rhone valley that the route offered.

It didn't feel like strenuous activity while I was doing it, but two hours later, my legs had new muscle and my tummy rumbled ominously. Sitting very pretty in the heart of vineyards, with generous alpine views, Bonvin is run by twin sisters Rosemary and Mary Rose (seriously) and had the best dried meat—pork and beef shavings—I'd eaten in a long time. Served with sweet grapes, further sweetened by Fendant, Amigne and Pinot Noir interruptions, I was happy for them to take their time with the raclette. It followed soon enough, though, complete with baby potatoes and fresh pepper, only minutes before it was time to sink my teeth into apfelstrudel and retire for the day.

---

## People visit Zermatt for the mighty Matterhorn from all over the world.

---

### Eggishorn

There's something indescribable about being at the top of a glacier, even if you found a short cut and did it like a tourist. The longest in all the Alps, the Grosser Aletschgletscher is 23 km-long, and standing on the Eggishorn summit it felt truly like someone had dropped me into a whole new world.

As I gaped at the audacity of what I was seeing, it didn't matter that it had begun to drizzle or that it was beyond freezing; I felt grateful to be there—at 2,926m, the summit of Eggishorn, with the monstrous glacier of leathery texture, oddly like elephant skin, sprawled endlessly ahead. Surrounded by forests above, there was something so untouchable about it, yet you know it's real because you're standing there and when you pinch yourself, it hurts. The moment demanded a grand orchestra to start up behind me; surely a soundtrack would be a nice way to credit this?

I had taken a cable car up to Eggishorn, and the only real effort was that of a 20-minute mini-hike up a rugged trail of rocks. And yet, as I stood at the summit, I couldn't control the sense of triumph that crept in. And an orchestra of sorts did start up; one that felt strangely real. It was real. Squinting my eyes, I spotted two men dressed in bright red traditional Swiss clothes in the



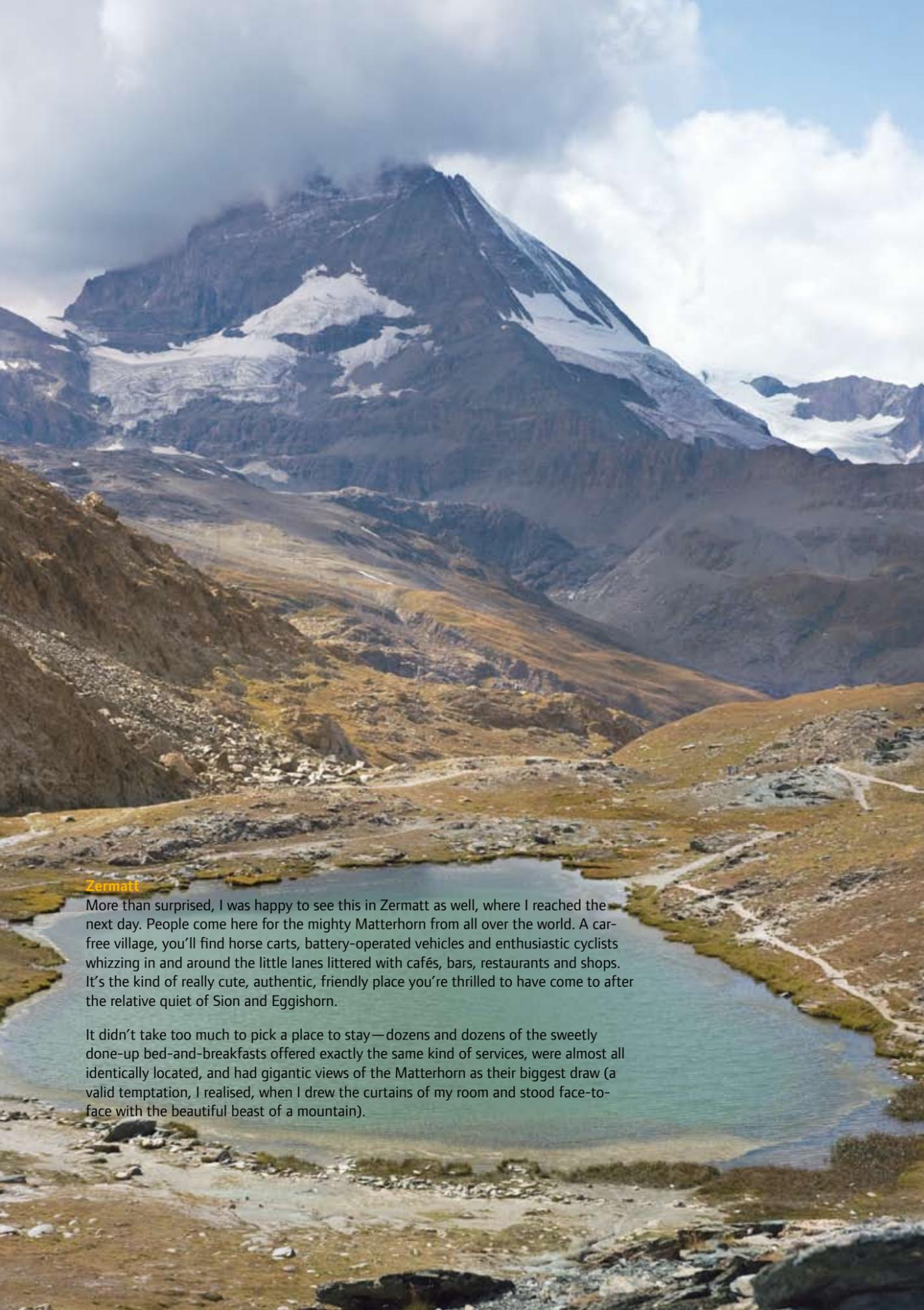
distance, playing alp horns. Gigantic instruments, yes, stretching along as endlessly almost as the glacier itself, but producing gentle sounds that my frost-bitten ears were happy to warm themselves with.



▲ Clockwise from above: The Alp Horns are the instrument of choice in Eggishorn; People of the Aletsch-Jungfrau region take pride in conserving their flora and fauna; Dinner in the clouds at Eggishorn.

As I chatted with the guide for the day, who insisted on regularly pointing out trees that were over 600 years old, I realised something important: the Swiss are committed citizens, when it comes to their environment. That this whole Aletsch-Jungfrau area was a World Heritage Site in 2001 didn't excite them into wanting to turn it into some sort of reserve, which they could then conserve. They instead had chosen to protect the area themselves, and worked out ways in which people, animals and nature can live in harmony, generation after generation.





### Zermatt

More than surprised, I was happy to see this in Zermatt as well, where I reached the next day. People come here for the mighty Matterhorn from all over the world. A car-free village, you'll find horse carts, battery-operated vehicles and enthusiastic cyclists whizzing in and around the little lanes littered with cafés, bars, restaurants and shops. It's the kind of really cute, authentic, friendly place you're thrilled to have come to after the relative quiet of Sion and Eggishorn.

It didn't take too much to pick a place to stay—dozens and dozens of the sweetly done-up bed-and-breakfasts offered exactly the same kind of services, were almost all identically located, and had gigantic views of the Matterhorn as their biggest draw (a valid temptation, I realised, when I drew the curtains of my room and stood face-to-face with the beautiful beast of a mountain).

I spent the day taking it easy, exploring the village at my own pace, stopping every now and then to chat with other tourists, sample local chocolate or double-check the price of yet another Swiss army knife.

The old part of town is where all those Swiss stereotypes you've forgotten about by now start to re-surface, because this is the one area that the locals have not been allowed to change, by law. Typical wooden chalets sit pretty, offering sometimes-fleeting, sometimes-lucky glimpses of the Matterhorn.

Aboard the Matterhorn Express, I knew in theory that it was going to be gorgeous up there, at almost 4,000m, heading literally into the clouds and (what seemed like) less than one-arm's distance from the snowy tips of some of the world's most beautiful mountains. And yet you don't know how it's going to take your breath away when you actually get there.

As I braved approaching a St Bernard that sat peacefully, staring in awe at the Matterhorn himself, I contemplated re-including Switzerland as a honeymoon destination option for when the time came, even if it was a cliché, and even if I was most definitely a beach person. And just like that, I looked up in excitement as I stood in the middle of my first snowfall ever.

Indeed, all that was missing was a six-pack-sporting hero doing killer dance moves next to me.

▼ Below: The old part of Zermatt is rigorously protected from reforms by local law. Above right: A typical Swiss meal of sausages and hash brown. Facing page: The intimidating Matterhorn peak in Zermatt.



### Fact file

#### Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights to Brussels from Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, New York, Newark and Toronto. From here you can get onward connectivity to Zurich via our codeshare partner Brussels Airlines.

#### Accommodation

Sion is home to many pretty chalets that offer spectacular alpine views. In Eggishorn, you can stay at one of the many ski resorts and winter homes. Zermatt offers ample choice of hotels and holiday apartments.

For more information: Log on to [www.myswitzerland.com](http://www.myswitzerland.com)

