

RIDING THE GLACIER EXPRESS



Traveling by train in Switzerland is one of the best ways to see this spectacularly beautiful country—no worries about traffic, directions or anything but sitting back, relaxing and enjoying the view. Swiss trains are clean, comfortable and virtually always on time. And if the Swiss train system is one of the best in the world, the ride on the Glacier Express must be the best train ride in the world.

The Glacier Express route was established early in the last century with the purpose of linking some of the previously remote villages—such as St. Moritz and Zermatt—that were transformed into chic ski resorts in the 1920s. The first run of the Glacier Express took

place on June 25, 1930.

In the early days, the train only ran in the summer because the Furka Alpine route, between Oberwald and Realp, was impassable during the winter. It wasn't until 1982, following the construction of a new tunnel, that the Glacier Express began to run during the winter. Now, there is year-round service.

The Glacier Express runs from Zermatt to St. Moritz and back again, passing through towns like Brig, Andermatt, the Oberalp Pass, Disentis, Reichenau and Chur. The train climbs and plunges through hills and valleys, starting at an elevation of 1,604 meters in Zermatt, rising in the Oberalp Pass to



above—The Glacier Express special edition wristwatch in two sizes is produced by Mondaine; MSRP: \$175.

below—The narrow-gauge rail system carries visitors from Zermatt to the Gornergrat. opposite—The Glacier Express.

ZERMATT DAY AND NIGHT

Zermatt is the resort destination at the foot of Switzerland's most famous mountain, the Matterhorn, in the Valais region. Here, a carefree atmosphere combines with fantastic snow to create the ideal getaway for both the sports enthusiast and the traveler looking for relaxation.

The Valais is also the largest wine-producing canton in Switzerland with more than 50 varieties, many of which are not available outside the region. Doubtless the tradition of viticulture contributes to the area's reputation for gourmet food as well. From rustic meals to fine dining and a new wave of organic cooking, there is plenty to explore. For even more variety, cross the Italian border on skis and enjoy lunch in neighboring Cervinia.

The best times to visit include November through mid-December, January and April. In the winter, 45km of hiking paths and 35km of cross-country trails offer opportunities for outdoor sport in addition to four ski areas, totaling 400km and multiple snowboarding parks. If that's not enough, try moonlight skiing, night sledding or skating.

For more information, visit www.myswitzerland.com.





2,033 meters and ending in St. Moritz at 1,775 meters. In all, the trip spans seven and a half hours, passes over 291 bridges and 91 tunnels, along with numerous viaducts, including the amazing Landwasser Viaduct.

Although the Glacier Express sounds like a tourist's dream, it's also part of the Swiss Railway system, and just like other trains, it makes stops all along the route. Still, riding the Glacier is more an experience than simply basic transportation. Here, the journey becomes an end unto itself. Time passes slowly, and one's attention is drawn to the passing peaks and valleys, the views of quaint villages, churches and chalets, the brilliance of the sun glinting off the snow and the glacial ice of the mountains.

Along with regular first- and second-class cars, there are first-class glass-domed cars offering panoramic views.



Reservations in this section are definitely worth the extra expense, which at 215 Swiss francs, is just less than twice the price of a second-class ticket. With seating arranged around tables, these cars feel spacious and comfortable.

The dining car offers several seatings for lunch, and every table offers a spectacular view. I've enjoyed meals in panoramic restaurants, on mountain tops and overlooking some of the world's most beautiful cities, but in my opinion, nothing compares with lunch enjoyed with the scenic

HOW HIGH THE ALP

One thousand meters is equivalent to approximately 3,281 feet. So at 4,478 meters, the Matterhorn is about 14,700 feet high. Europe's highest peak, part of the Savoy Alps of France, is Mont Blanc at 4,807 meters or 15,770 feet.



view through the windows of the Glacier Express. The meal was well prepared and plentiful and a great value at 38 Swiss francs for the three-course option and 26 Swiss francs for the dish of the day.

The Glacier Express is not the fastest way to any of the cities it serves. The train lumbers along at an easy, unhurried pace. In fact, it has been called the slowest express train in the world. If the goal is simply to get from Zermatt to St. Moritz, there are quicker and more convenient ways. But the Glacier Express is about more than getting from point A to point B. It is about experiencing Switzerland. The Glacier Express takes its time, winding through the most scenic areas, less concerned with efficiency than with the ethereal beauty of the country.

On the train, I met several passengers who ride the Glacier Express every year—as a way to escape from the everyday grind and reconnect with the natural beauty that is Switzerland. I took the ride with my 20-year-old son and his college roommate. Although a slow train ride through the countryside might seem like the last thing students would want to do, they enjoyed the Glacier Express as much as I did. After seven and a half hours, we disembarked knowing that we were leaving something very special.

ZERMATT

The best place to see the Matterhorn, the mountain peak that is an internationally recognized symbol of Switzerland, is undoubtedly Zermatt. Nestled in a valley below the majestic peak, Zermatt is charming. Situated among some of the best ski areas in the world, this is a town with a long history of snow sports, which is today a first-class ski resort. Zermatt is also blessed with incredible weather. During my stay, the days were warm and sunny, while the nights were clear and cold.

Zermatt's amazingly quiet streets allow no cars or gas-powered vehicles. There are only electric taxis and service vehicles. It's not uncommon for unus-

pecting pedestrians to be surprised by near-silent vehicles coming up behind them. Visitors can drive to Zermatt, but are required to park outside the city.

A trip up to the Gornergrat ridge 5km southeast of Zermatt is not to be missed. Take the narrow gauge railway, one of the world's oldest operating railroads—don't worry, the equipment has been upgraded since the line opened in 1898. The elevation, 3,136 meters, feels like the top of the world. On display is the Matterhorn plus 28 other peaks higher than 4,000 meters. In the summer, the region offers prime hiking opportunities; in the cold months, it's a winter wonderland. Skiing starts at the top of the Gornergrat. The slopes are fantastic, well kept and scenic. The Gornergrat is also home to the Kulmhotel Gornergrat, one the highest-elevation hotels in the world. Most of the 23 rooms offer incredible views of the Matterhorn—a spectacular place to stay.

ST. MORITZ

The other terminal of the Glacier Express, St. Moritz is an incredible place. Situated on a small lake in a large valley, and surrounded by mountains on all sides, St. Moritz is a playground for the rich and famous. Though I am neither, I really enjoyed this hamlet, world renowned for its ski slopes, boutiques and high-tone lifestyle. Despite all this, St. Moritz is also an accessible village full of great shopping and incredible restaurants.

Before leaving St. Moritz, I had a chance to ski, and although I'm no expert, I found the slopes amazing. Wide and incredibly well groomed, the course was perfect for a beginner like me. According to the experts, St. Moritz has one of the best lift systems in the world. The net-

work of trails was astounding, and the boys and I had a fantastic time.

MONDAINE AND THE GLACIER EXPRESS

One of the reasons I wanted to experience the Glacier Express is that the Mondaine watch company—a personal favorite—recently issued a special edition of its Swiss Railway watch to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Glacier Express. The watch comes with special features, including a crystal mined from the Alps along the train route and a caseback featuring special Glacier Express engraving. Even the strap is unique—the material is embossed with the Swiss cross. The dial replicates the railway clocks used throughout Switzerland. And, after riding the Glacier Express, the watch has become a reminder of that event for me. ♦

Article by watch editor Keith W. Strandberg. For more information, visit <www.mondaine.com>, <www.glacierexpress.ch>, <www.zermatt.ch>, <www.stmoritz.ch>, <www.gornergrat.ch>.

*opposite, from far left—The narrow-gauge rail system climbs toward the Matterhorn; the Glacier Express winds its way through the Swiss countryside in summer.
below—The Glacier Express in winter.*





TOP OF THE WORLD

THE SUMMIT EXPERIENCE

The Kulmhotel Gornergrat is one of the most exclusive hotels in the world. It has a view of the Matterhorn and other peaks in the region that is unrivaled. Manager Fernando Clemenz explains the hotel's special appeal. "At 3,100 meters high, it's unique," he says. "It was very difficult to construct; now we've just done a major renovation, and the hotel is really well appointed."

Although there are only 23 rooms, the Kulmhotel is incredibly busy during the day, when more than 5,000 people typically arrive in Gornergrat to admire the view or to have lunch. The hotel features two restaurants and a few shops, including a watch store on the ground floor. Once the last train down the mountain to Zermatt departs at 7:55 pm, it is quiet here indeed—perfect for stargazing, according to Clemenz, who adds, "The view is spectacular. At night, it's amazing, because the air is so clean and clear. The stars are wonderful here."

"Many people want to be away from everything, and you can do that here at the Kulmhotel Gornergrat," Clemenz continues. "We get a lot of writers who come here to work. Skiers love it because you can ski out the front door of the hotel."

One additional interesting note is that the rooms are not numbered in the usual way. Room numbers are based on the height of the surrounding peaks, so one room might be 4478 (Matterhorn), while the one next door might be 4228 (Castor). Even Clemenz needed a floorplan to find the rooms he wanted to show me. With rooms, however quirkily numbered, ranging in price from 120 to 250 Swiss francs, including breakfast and dinner, this rare hotel experience is also affordable. I can't wait to return and sleep at the top of the world. ♦

Researched and written by watch editor Keith W. Strandberg. For more information, visit <www.gornergrat-kulm.ch>.

