

Switzerland

July 21-25, 2014



The iconic Matterhorn

I had been dreaming of visiting the Alps in Switzerland all of my life. Mountains had always fascinated me. I had been privileged to get to trek in Nepal earlier in the year, which was wonderful, though a bit bittersweet since Nisha wasn't able to come. I looked forward to making a trip together to the mountains, and I felt a trip to Europe would be our great chance.

Nisha and I had been taking personal sabbaticals for several months already, and we were both looking forward to traveling to Europe to see some of the grand sights. Nisha found it fitting to visit Zermatt and see the Matterhorn (both names had a 4-letter name as part of them!). We felt the pieces were coming together and the name must be a sign...

I had been to 2 "Matterhorn's" in the last few years - Matterhorn Peak in Yosemite (itself a wonderful trip but very different), and the Matterhorn in Disneyland (again very different!). There wasn't going to be an "abominable snowman" or out-of-control train on the real Matterhorn, but the mountain was as magnificent as I ever imagined.

We both came across an interesting tour package - Peregrine tours was offering an 8-day hiking tour in the Alps - 4 days around Zermatt and 4 days around Chamonix. I was excited about this tour and so was Nisha. The nice thing was that there was no pressure - if the weather wasn't good, or either of us was not up for hiking any day, we could stay back and not feel committed to having to reach the next point in a trek. The package was rather expensive, however, nearly \$2500 / person = \$5000 for the both of us. We decided to take the splurge

(even registering early to get a 10% discount) - when would we go back?

We were still a bit reluctant spending so much money on the trip and started to develop a bit of “buyer’s remorse” soon after signing up. However, the trip was not “guaranteed” since they hadn’t met the minimum number of sign-ups. They said the trips should be “filling quickly” and we were “lucky” to get our spot when we did. But we started to have second thoughts when months passed and the trip was still not guaranteed. And most of the other departure dates were not guaranteed as well. Some departures were even starting to get cancelled due to lack of interest - bummer.

The call came around May that our trip was going to be cancelled as well. I was bummed at first but soon realized it was a blessing in disguise - I was able to find just about everything online that we would need to do the trip self-guided - we would only need to pay for the lodging. There was no point in paying twice for accommodations and guides - we could reserve our own Best Western lodge in Zermatt and find out when we got there where to go. We would end up saving probably \$3000 in the end - nice!

We had been wanting to visit friends in Germany on this trip as well - we had planned on tacking on Germany with the Zermatt / Chamonix tour. Ironically, the trip ended up being a visit to Germany with a few days to Switzerland tacked on instead! We had a wonderful trip to Germany after all. Visiting the castles and old cities in Germany was magnificent - seeing the history, regal architecture and baroque cathedrals was a real treat.

We had already been in Germany for almost two weeks, traveling by train through Frankfurt, Bonn, Cologne, Bamberg, Nuremberg, and Munich. Train travel was stressful at first - keeping track of the schedules, schlepping our luggage across the platforms, and making sure we were on the right track. But once we got started, we found the freedom that attracts backpackers to travel Europe. Sure it was expensive, but maybe that was part of the price of the freedom.

It was an 8-hour train journey from Munich, involving one train to Bern, then a connecting train to Visp, then the final one to Zermatt. Zermatt is reachable only by train - no road goes all the way into the glacier-carved valley.

It was raining when we got into Switzerland - a cold front was blowing through, socking most of the majestic mountains in clouds. Still the scene had a serene beauty. Several large lakes of turquoise glacial blue water reflected the lower slopes of the distant mountains as in a mirror. I kept my fingers crossed on the weather that it would clear for at least some of the time we were there. Weather in the mountains is always unpredictable - we had to take what we could get!

We got a bit of a surprise on the train as we were making our way from Germany to Switzerland. Our route was taking us on the east side of Lake Constance, which passes through a narrow sliver of Austria. This 20km stretch had a stop, and our Eurail passes didn't include Austria as a country! Our Europe trip wasn't cheap, and the rail passes cost almost \$1000 already, and still turned out to not be enough! We had to pay an extra 25 euros to make it through the short stretch through Austria. Luckily we were able to just pay the officer on the train with no penalties - whew!

We had to make our final connection in Visp - a cute Swiss chalet town on the banks of the Breiterbach River. Trains out of Visp departed every hour, and the lady at one of the information counters in Visp let us hold our bags behind the counter for a few hours so we could explore the little town as a bonus - nice!

An old church, heavy wooden buildings and artistic Swiss architecture brought us back to a simpler time. A delightful path by the river gave us a warm-up for the days of hiking ahead. We met a local couple on the trail who enjoyed speaking English with us – they gave us some tips on what we shouldn't miss over the next few days.



Visp

The last stretch from Visp to Zermatt is along the Glacier Express train, which was unfortunately not included as part of the Eurail system. After another 105.20 Swiss francs for tickets, we were finally on our way to Zermatt. We seemed to be spending money left and right but we just had to roll with it this time - it would be a lesson learned for next time!

Zermatt reminded me of an old style European village before cars - cobblestone

streets, cute restaurants and shops, and beautiful old buildings laced with flowers. It was a mecca for hikers, skiers, mountain climbers, adventure sports and tourists from all around the world. With the expensive exchange rate with the US, there were few American tourists - mainly people from China, Japan and other parts of Europe. We hoped it would be a bit less crowded when we were there...

Although we were staying at a “Best Western” (Nisha gets points and the hotels are generally quite nice and predictable), it felt like a European ski lodge - rustic interior, gardens on the outside, and a wonderful location! We were at the Hotel Butterfly, complete with butterfly carvings on the ceilings. 4 nights at the lodge would set us back 900 francs - nearly \$1000, so not cheap!



Best Western Hotel Butterfly

We enjoyed a simple dinner of food we brought from Germany - we had brought bread, cheese and wine from Aldi's (like Trader Joe's) in Munich. A relaxing way to spend our first night in Zermatt.

July 22

We awoke to a glorious morning - the clouds from the previous afternoon had cleared, revealing dazzling blue skies above. We had 3 days to spend in the mountains around Zermatt. We had our doubts before coming to Switzerland - previously the forecast was for clouds and rain showers every day. I was hoping for the best, given that we were spending quite a bit of money (Switzerland had to be the most expensive country in Europe right now!), and we didn't know when we would ever make it back. We relished every moment of sunshine we had.

At first we had our doubts as to what to do for 3 days in one place. But once we got to Zermatt, we realized we were in a mountain playground - a mecca for

people all around the world. Cable cars, trains and gondolas come right from the center of town to the heights above. We figured we wanted to see as much as we could, so we splurged (yet again) for a 3-day unlimited rides hiker pass (for 390 francs, almost \$500 for the two of us! - at least we should be able to get 10 of those back at the end of our trip)

Given the glorious clear weather, we headed first to the highest lift - the Matterhorn Glacier Paradise. Connecting through 2 stages, it takes you to the highest observation point reachable in the Alps by a cable car. At 3,883 m (over 12,700 ft), the summit of the Klein Matterhorn ("little Matterhorn") gives a glorious 360 degree panorama of countless 4,000 m peaks in Switzerland, Italy, and even France on a clear day, and of course, the majestic Matterhorn is visible straight ahead!



On the lift

The first part of the route from Zermatt, through Furi and Schwarzsee and up to Trockener Steg was on a gondola, and then finally we were on a "school-bus" sized gondola to just below the summit of the Klein Matterhorn. We were quite lucky with the weather - it had been raining down in the valley most of the previous day, with snow and high winds on the peaks above. In fact, the upper lifts hadn't even been running then!

Climbing from the forests lower down over the Gorner river valley, we crossed above the tree-line on our way to Schwarzsee. The Hörnli hut and the higher Solvay hut were clearly visible. The Matterhorn is a mecca for climbers all around the world. Every route is difficult and requires good conditions and good weather for a safe ascent. The mountain appeared close enough to touch as we got closer.

The lift made a left turn at Schwarzsee and descended a ridge before climbing back up to the higher outpost of Trockener Steg. I felt we were on a magic ride to another universe as our lift took us to the heights. The green trees gave way to shrubs and to fields of bright green, flower-studded hillsides. I looked forward to reaching the summit in the icy heights, but I also was eager to explore the scenes from the “Sound of Music” down below.

As we ascended, a thin band of clouds at around 11,000 feet started to form at the base of the iconic pyramidal mountain, adding another dimension to its glory. The lifts were a marvel of engineering - the way they constructed the towers and the cables to whisk us to the dizzying heights in a matter of minutes.

It was time to get off at Trockener Steg at 2,939 meters, where we had to connect to our upper lift to the summit. It would be a quick 10-minute ride once we got on. I couldn't wait! However, throngs of people were thinking the same thing! Instead of seeing where we get on the next lift, we ran into a sea of humanity of Disneyland proportions! Probably 1000 people were waiting with us. Each lift came about every 5 minutes, and if each “school bus” could hold 100 people, we estimated it would take an hour to get on - bummer...

Patience was a virtue, and we were soon on our way. Buried in the middle of the packed car, anyone less than about 5'6" could only see a bunch of heads of tall Europeans surrounding them. I was able to make out some of the views as we cruised over high ridges and glaciers opening to the glorious views higher up. Ribbons of ice poured out in many directions now from years of accumulated snowfall. Even with decades of global warming, the glaciers above about 3,500 m were similar to the way they have been for centuries.



View from the cable car

I had marveled at old pictures of Switzerland from near the turn of the century, when glaciers reached all the way to Furi deep in the valley. Now, they've receded several hundred meters up the mountains. I'm glad we had this chance to experience some of the remaining raw beauty of nature before it is all gone.

Talking with a group just behind us, we found out they were on a 4-day backcountry climbing / camping trip. They would be taking the lift to the top, then traversing the ridge to the east, crossing the summit of Breithorn, Castor / Pollux and eventually to the summit of Dufourspitze - the highest summit in Switzerland (2nd in the Alps, just behind Mt Blanc). They had their climbing gear and cold-weather camping gear. Having been recently to Nepal and camping in the high mountains, I envied their adventure – I'd have to look up similar packages when I got home.

Many of the people were folks who had been waiting a couple days for good enough weather to get to the top - we had been lucky that on our first day the weather was spectacular! An orienteering camp had been going on as well, and for many competitors, they had this as a day off from the competition, so they battled the crowds to enjoy the time off in style!

The broad Unterer Theodul glacier was spread out right below us - a jumbled sea of irregular flowing ice, broken by rivulets of melt-water and small parallel crevasses. The Gorner glacier spilled over from a row of mountains further behind. I felt we were flying through a time machine in an alternate universe. My camera was busy recording videos as to not miss a moment.

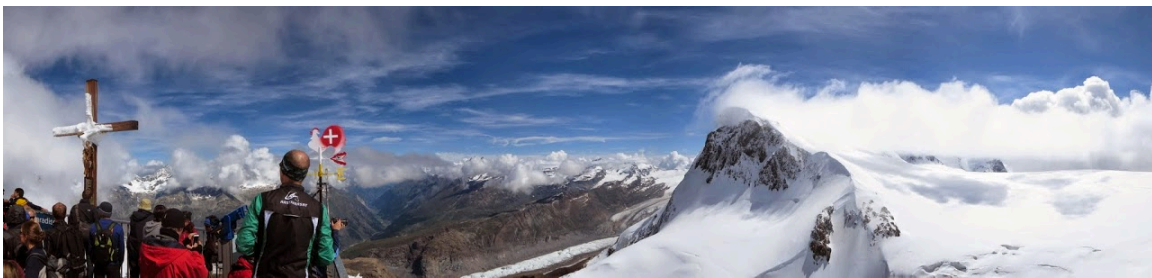
In the wintertime when the glaciers are snow-covered, people pay thousands of dollars to fly around the world to take advantage of skiing on these great mountains. We actually had the chance to go skiing in the middle of summer if we were willing to shell out big bucks! Ski rentals alone were around 60 francs (about \$70) and lift tickets weren't cheap either – but we could get the bragging rights of being able to say we skied in July! I had skied in Mammoth at the end of June (with my own skis), so I figured that would be good enough - next time!

Our "magic school bus" was just arriving at the upper part of the mountain - my ears popped several times the temperature probably dropped 10 degrees when they opened the door. Following the stampede of people through a tunnel carved in the mountain, we made our way outside to the base of the stairs climbing the final 40 feet to the summit.

By the time we reached the very top, the clouds had started to roll in, partly obscuring the Matterhorn and other peaks to the west. The peaks around us and to the east were dazzling in sunlight. A moderate breeze was blowing from the north on the backside of the front that had passed through the previous day.

Evidence of the stormy night the previous night was all around us. Rime ice covered the structures around us, plastering the southern sides in several inches of ice.

The summit of the Klein Matterhorn featured a beautiful wooden cross, as did many peaks in Switzerland, in the way prayer flags were draped over many mountains and holy places in Nepal. This cross was majestic with a crucifix figure of Jesus hanging on it. I overheard they had to close the upper lifts the previous day due to white-out conditions and 60 mph winds. I imagined the Jesus on the cross, bearing his way through the stormy blast, enduring the accumulating rime ice throughout the night. This night of suffering paralleled the suffering Jesus went through on the real cross for our sins.



View from the summit

The cross has a piece of Scripture below it from Psalm 104:24 – “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches”. It was a beautiful place to soak in the beauty of the view and the wonder of the Lord for His creation.

Climbers on the Breithorn nearby us were ascending above the clouds - a layer of clouds had formed several hundred feet below the summit. Enormous icefalls and thick cornices plastered the slopes of the mountain. The trail of climbers looked like a train of ants, following each other to the rounded summit. With proper acclimatization, the climb takes just a couple of hours up moderate snow slopes to the summit. Maybe my next trip to Switzerland!

We walked out on the snow slopes behind the summit - the snow-clad Italian Alps on the southern side of the crest of the Alps were visible under a passing cloud bank. It was a winter paradise - where it snowed almost every day and skiing was open 365 days a year (when it wasn't too stormy). In CA over the last 3 years, our snow had been severely lacking, so the winter wonderland was especially beautiful.

We didn't realize it, but the flat snow fields we were walking on were actually on top of at least 100 feet of ice. The snow never melted where we were - it was high enough to be below freezing except for maybe the couple warmest days of

the year. An elevator had been built, dropping one about 50 feet down into the ice. Networks of ice tunnels had been carved out of the glacier, forming a “glacier palace” that never melted. I had heard of ice castles in Norway, but this was an unexpected treat. I remembered one of my favorite barbershop tags “Ice Castles” which goes “Please don’t let this feeling end, it might not come again, in the eyes of love” – I didn’t want this to end!



Ice castles

Ice sculptures of castles, animals, and even a full-size car had been carved. (The car was the only car we saw around Zermatt!). The ice was surprisingly not all that slippery - it was cold enough that it hadn’t started to melt. The lights cast an eerie blue glow through the clear slabs of ice. A small altar with coins embedded in the ice shone like in a chapel.



Ice cave

A crevasse had formed in the glacier, reaching down into the ice tunnels - they had opened a side tunnel to allow passage into the crevasse (the only "safe" crevasse in Switzerland!) A natural ice cave had formed, clad in icicle stalactites and smooth flowstone-like slopes. The ice was quite slippery in the cave and entry was difficult, but inside it was a wonderland of gleaming sculptured formations frozen in place.

We were starting to get a bit chilly and decided we had our fill of the ice tunnels, so we headed for the gondola to take us back to a lower elevation. Some clouds were starting to form near the summit as we lined up to take the gondola - again the line was quite full and we had to wait for several cars to pass - again patience was a virtue.

Trockener Steg had a milky grey-green lake nearby, formed at the toe of the melting Theodul glacier. A series of small lakes had formed recently as the glacier has been receding. The lakes were at varying stages of thawing for the summer - some had large slabs of ice and some were ice-free. The still water reflected the blue sky above like a mirror. The towering Matterhorn partly enshrouded in clouds formed an impressive backdrop.



Lake by Trockener Steg

Some of the snow fields just above one of the lakes showed sections of blue ice underneath. I didn't realize it but we were walking on part of the Theodul glacier. The snow where we were had a slight pink hue - watermelon snow caused by a special type of bacteria. Dazzling white snow continued above the pink snow, endlessly to the skyline. A small crevasse a couple inches wide had opened nearby my feet almost making me trip - the glacier looked tame enough, but one could never be too careful!

We were walking the last couple hundred yards to the top of the gondola taking us back to Furi and into Zermatt when I noticed the clouds had come in rather quickly. Most of the Matterhorn was obscured, and sheets of rain and snow were pouring in the nearby Zmutt valley. We got on the lift not a moment too soon - less than 5 minutes into our ride, we could see drops on the windows around us. Some hikers below us were hurrying along to get out of the rain!

The rain was only a drizzle when we got back into Zermatt - most of the peaks were obscured in clouds by now. We took a peek into one of the old churches in town to get out of the rain on our way back to our hotel. The altar was wonderfully done – carvings from different scenes of the bible decorated both sides.

We were eager to enjoy a little happy hour on our deck when we got to the hotel. A steamy shower and fresh change of clothes seemed overdue. Watching the rain come down and munching some chocolate and sipping some wine (from Germany for \$1, forget buying it locally) we recounted our day's adventures. It felt all as if it were a dream.

We decided on a nearby bakery for dinner - the local restaurants were an order of magnitude more expensive than they needed to be. A plate of 4 Indian samosas was 16 francs (about \$20). In India, we would be able to get samosas for 5 rupees each, so the same plate would be 20 rupees, less than 50 cents! A triangle of Toblerone chocolate ran for 5 francs, but at home, we could buy a 6-pack of chocolate triangles for 5 dollars. We'd have our celebration dinner / dessert back at home in CA after this trip!

The Hörnli bakery was satisfying - lasagna for dinner made it feel homey and chill. We anticipated another great day tomorrow as we hit the sack after dinner.

July 23

The forecast for our second full day was a bit rainy, and since we finished one of our big objectives on our trip already, we decided to take it easier and amble our way up toward the Rothorn. We slept in a bit more and enjoyed the lavish breakfast buffet at the Hotel Butterfly (we've been pretty happy with breakfasts in the Best Western chain). Arrays of pastries, rolled meats and cheeses, smoked salmon, fruit and yogurt filled us up and the coffee / tea were wonderful as well! It was nice that a lot of the pressure was off now - we could just take our time.

The summit of Rothorn was a 3-step process - first take a cog railway to Sunnegga, then a gondola to Blauherd, then a bigger gondola to the 3,103-meter summit.

At the summit, we had a dazzling view of the Matterhorn right across from us. An

old man with a beard had a beautiful St Bernard dog - standing in a most photogenic location. He must have been a local - I got a couple candid photos with the mountain in the background. He looked like a National Geographic photographer with an expensive looking SLR camera. I thought of taking my "good" camera on this trip, but found that my pocket point-and-shoot sufficed so well now these days, making the awkward SLR almost obsolete.

A cross stood by a viewing platform as well - the Swiss like to have crosses all around! A series of signs by the summit pointed out all of the summits visible and who first climbed them - there were at least a dozen 4,000-meter summits. I would love to go back and try to climb some of them, but for our first trip, this sampling of the different lifts would give an overview.



Cross and Matterhorn

I looked back to where the old man and the dog were standing, when I saw some Japanese tourists grouping up on the platform with the St Bernard in front of them - the "local photographer" was actually a salesman, selling photos with his camera for 20 francs each - taking advantage of the location and raking in big bucks for very little effort! Instead we just had other tourists get our photo by one of the "Wolli" black-nosed sheep mascots in exchange for us getting their photo in return - a lot cheaper that way!

A parasailer was taking advantage of the thermals, flying like a bird above the clouds. What a day – take a train and cable car to the top and float to the bottom!

The Rothorn was a high point along the ridge, which led up to the higher Oberrothorn (3,414 m). Some people were on the desolate winding trail to the higher summit. I thought about giving it a go, but seeing the clouds rolling in a bit

sooner than the previous day, it looked like rain would be coming soon. In fact, I hadn't noticed right away, but a bank of clouds was forming underneath us and starting to follow the slopes of the Rothorn, obscuring the views below.

We thought it would be prudent to stick to the main ridge and maybe just hike part-way, in case the weather decided to clear after all. We made it to the saddle between the Rothorn and Oberrothorn rather quickly - the downhill was no problem. But coming back, we knew the uphill wouldn't be particularly fun given we were at nearly 10,000 feet! It was a lung-burner and our steps were slow but we made it. We had to earn our dessert for later in the day!

We descended the lift into a swirling mass of clouds below - I felt we were getting off the mountain not a moment too soon! Connecting through Blauherd, we descended to Sunnegga. We remembered some tips from the locals we met back in Visp about Sunnegga and how it was like the "Sound of Music" covered in green hills and flowers. We had been in the rocky alpine all of the previous day and at the Rothorn, so the greenery was a treat.

The rain was coming in just a few showers, nothing too heavy, but we sat inside enjoying a bit of lunch and hot coffee. If the rain continued we could just hang out and relax or take the cog train back down to Zermatt - no pressure. We were under the clouds now - the peaks above us that we had just seen a couple hours ago were just a shadow in our memories.

Signs containing a menagerie of bright yellow arrows pointing in every direction guided our steps. The mountains were covered in trails where you could hike to your heart's content - I wish we had a week now! Even though the big views were obscured with the rain now, the flowers and meadows came alive with the rejuvenating wetness.

Just down from Sunnegga was Leisee, an idyllic lake surrounded in green meadows. Some people were taking turns with a wooden raft, racing each other how fast they could pull the raft across the lake and back - just having fun, Robinson Crusoe-style! The peaks were mostly buried in clouds now and the lake looked like a hidden jewel in the misty mountains. I expected elves from the Lord of the Rings to come out at any moment.

Flower-studded meadows lined the trail all the way down to Findeln - a small hamlet from the Middle Ages. Slate-roofed houses and shops lined the path. Alas, the prices were Switzerland-level prices - 10 francs for even just a pastry and a coffee. (In Nepal a few months earlier, we had passed many small villages in the mountains but the prices there were at most a couple hundred rupees - less than 1/4 of the price in Switzerland) - we had to take a pass on food - a bar would suffice.



Leisee lake

A couple marmots peeked out from some of the boulders lying on the grassy hillsides. A loud “cheep” came from one of them - for a small animal, they sure have quite a sound that you can’t miss! If it weren’t for the sound, I would probably have missed the marmots completely...



Hamlet of Findeln

A treat in Findeln was discovering a small chapel. The small wooden church was built at least a couple hundred years ago. Surprisingly the doors were open, inviting anyone to come in for a bit of spiritual refreshment. The ceiling was adorned with beautiful rosette patterns and the altar brought a serene peacefulness. My first intention was to get all the pictures I could since I didn’t want to miss a moment, but I soon realized some of the futility in stressing to “capture peace”. We sat in silence for a few minutes to let the whole experience

get absorbed, and to give thanks that God has allowed us to partake in the beauty of His nature.

The weather held off nicely as we dropped down through the pine forests lower down on the mountain. A rushing creek came up on our left - rather loudly. I wondered how much water there was when I angled over to have a look. It turned out to be a majestic roaring waterfall. A train track in fact passed over a majestic gorge right next to the falls - and when one of the red train cars passed over, it said "Gornergrat bahn" - we were going to be taking that train the next day - nice!

We came down to Findelbach in the Zermatt valley. A free bus was passing by, taking us close to our hotel - we caught it with perfect timing - nice! We had some time to relax in the hotel, read a bit and give our legs a break. The trip had been fairly "high octane" so far - trying to take in a lot of sights and adventure, knowing it might be a while before we got back. But a bit of rest was just as important - and during so much of our travels we hadn't had nearly enough!

We had seen signs for the "Gornerschlucht" - something that looked interesting. I remember "schlucht" meaning something like "gorge". I googled it on my phone and saw some pictures of what appeared as a majestic slot canyon with boardwalks clinging to the sheer walls - wow! We had seen hints of an interesting canyon the previous day when taking the first lift from Zermatt to Furi - the gondola had passed right over the Gornerschlucht. We decided in about 1/2 hour we had enough "rest" - time to get out again!

It was about a 20-minute walk through town, following the Gorner creek upstream to a small park. The few francs for the entrance fee would be worth every penny - the Gorner slot canyon turned out to be everything I was hoping. Silt-laden glacial meltwater was carving a deep slot just above Zermatt - the particles in the water acting as sandpaper grinding out a curvy set of narrows below. Having been to some slot canyons in the deserts of Utah and having seen some glacier carved slot canyons in the Canadian Rockies (such as Maligne canyon) and Nepal (like the slot of the Dudh Khosi and the one above Pangboche), I was eager to explore this one. The boardwalks were an engineering masterpiece, allowing visitors to experience the roar of the rushing water up close.

The water thundered down the canyon, echoing off the water-polished walls on both sides. The walls were about 10 feet apart as cascades tumbled down weak spots in the rock layers below. A series of "Millerton plunge pools" had formed as eddies in the current swirled and carved deep potholes, one pouring into the next. (Millerton is a slot canyon "cave" near Fresno with a playground of pools carved in granite - the first time I had seen this type of formation).

Checking the integrity of the steel beams and bolts holding the boardwalk, I carefully made my way forward, Nisha behind me. A mist seemed to be falling - probably a combination of water falling from the sky above and some spraying up from the swirling maelstrom below.



Inside the Gornerschlucht

Coming out, we realized if we were smart, we could have entered the canyon from the back, gone all the way through until just before the entrance kiosk on the front side, then traversed the canyon all the way back, for free! We actually didn't pay until we left the canyon - I guess that would be cheating to go through twice and not pay... we did our due diligence since they probably need every bit of money to keep the place open.

On our way back, a few thrill seekers zip lining on cables over our heads whizzed by. A ropes course to our right was set up - some people were climbing through the dizzying heights clinging to narrow ladders and wobbly steps (hooked to a belay of course!) - the 33 franc price was as dizzying as the ropes - we decided to sit and watch instead...

The Hörnli bakery made for dinner again - we figured we'd wait until we got home to have a fancy dinner. Plus it was nice to do something low-key since it had been another day full of adventure. Some tea and chocolate in the room made for dessert as we read about the hiking trails around Gornergrat for the next day.

July 24

We had better weather for the forecast, and we were excited since we were heading to one of the signature peaks of the Zermatt area - the Gornergrat. The "grat" meaning "ridge", towered over the Gorner valley. The immense Gorner glacier spilled off the highest summits including the mighty 4,634 m Dufourspitze.

Trains started at 8:00 in the morning and ran every 24 minutes to the top. Seeing the glorious blue skies outside I was psyched to get up as soon as we could! We again enjoyed a luxurious breakfast at the hotel (had to take full advantage of our 225 francs / night!) - rolled meats, cheeses, bread, salmon, and pastries with coffee and tea. We wanted to get out as soon as we could but we wanted to enjoy the breakfast as much as we could too - conflicting intentions once again!

Nisha was getting excited as well and we were hastily getting our packs ready to make the 8:24 train. I felt again we were on a magic train ride that was taking us to the heights above. We were soon passing over the Findelbach waterfalls that we had seen from the previous day. We clattered to the summit in just around ½ hour – the train was a marvel of Swiss engineering. I can't imagine anything like that getting built around Lake Tahoe or elsewhere in the Sierras...



Summit panorama

The view from the 3,089 m summit were breathtaking - probably some of the most sublime in all of Switzerland. Enormous rivers of ice flowed down every mountain above about 3,500 meters.

The Monte Rosa hut at 2,883 meters was visible on a ridge above a meltwater lake in the Gorner Glacier (Gornergletscher). It looked quite close, as if you could hike down the slope, run across the glacier below and knock on the door of the hut. A sign in blue nearby said 3:30 to the hut (3 ½ hours). Most of the signs were yellow, but the blue one indicated a climber's route. I thought it would be like 1-2 hours, but all sense of scale was lost in the grandeur of the scene below. I remember on my first trip to the Grand Canyon and seeing if it was possible to get down to a certain point – the scene was like a postcard that hardly changed even after hiking for an hour. The same thing happened at Gornergrat.

It was tempting to at least try to get down to the broad glacier at the base of the ridge where we were standing - it looked like just 20 minutes down the switchbacking trail. I had been fascinated by glaciers for years - seeing how the ice had accumulated over so many years and has been sculpted by the elements as it flowed downhill. The jumbled glacier at the bottom of the trail was broken into fantastic shapes of blue cracks, frost heaves and ice cliffs. One of the rangers discouraged trying to go all the way down - it was farther than it looked.

We reluctantly took the main trail following the Gornergrat ridge proper, roughly following the train route that we came up. It was like Disneyland - people from all around the world were out and exploring the magnificent view.

I was a bit disappointed at first to not make it down to the glacier, but upon further inspection, it was a good 400 meters down according to the map. (And we would have to go back up most of those 400 meters). It's something I probably would have eagerly done on my own - but it would have to wait until next time!

But there were no regrets - with the myriad of hiking options and train stations, we knew we could hike down as far as we wanted and then just take the train the rest of the way. We started down the main trail and soon afterward we came to the beautiful sparkling Riffelsee lake under the Riffelhorn peak. The summit of the Matterhorn was poking through a layer of clouds, all of it reflected in the lake as in a mirror. This is what we came to Switzerland for! The serenity was slightly lacking, however, since this is what hundreds of other people also came to Switzerland for - the lake was packed with people from all around the world, soaking in the views!



View from our lunch spot

Luckily there were 2 other lakes nearby, each with just a couple of people. We enjoyed a view of Dufourspitze reflected in one of the other lakes while snacking on bread and cheese from the Hörnli bakery. The ridge behind the lake provided a spectacular panoramic view looking almost straight down on the Gorner glacier. A couple of circular meltwater lakes looked like big blue buttons on the white ribbon of ice. The Unterer Theodul glacier was pouring down almost at eye-level across the canyon.

Purple wildflowers and blue butterflies straight from the Sound of Music lined both sides of the trail on our way down to the Riffelalp hotel. The sign had said it should have only been another 1/2 hour, but that must have been for tall and fast European hikers - it probably took us an hour. (Of course that was with many

stops for photos). I couldn't imagine how long the 3 1/2 hours to the Monte Rosa hut would have been...



Green valley below

After we got back into Zermatt, we checked out the nearby Matterhorn museum. Stories of the first ascents, climbers risking their lives for glory over the mountain, and artifacts from some of the fateful climbs filled the museum. The horror story of the 1865 led by Edward Whymper where 4 people died when a rope broke on the descent was a humbling tale of the risks the early climbers took. I felt the last 3 days were “cheating”, cheapening the experience of reaching the heights - relying on lifts and millions of dollars of engineering to take us to the heights that we didn't earn. But I was thankful for the views we got every day and for the gracious sunny weather we had most of the time.

It had been a wonderful 3 days in the mountains - we were sad to have to go. But I felt we had gotten a good fill and decent money's worth. Packing up was a bummer, and we had a fairly early train the next morning to catch to get to Frankfurt to our friend's place (we'd be staying with him a couple nights before flying home).

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We woke to grey skies and a drizzling rain – I felt we maximized our time after all and we had no regrets. The memories of the last few days felt all like a dream as the train clattered its way down the valley back toward Visp and eventually back into Germany. I had to review the photos on my camera to prove to myself it was all indeed real! It had been a wonderful experience and I can't wait to get back for more adventures in God's country.