

## AUTUMN in ZERMATT

by Pamela Harris



Those of us who live in Switzerland are doubly fortunate, for not only do we live in a beautiful country but also we are free to travel to enjoy it, with none of the restrictions of neighbouring European countries now in lockdown. Mindful that this might change and Switzerland itself join the lockdown any time, my partner and I decided in late October to spend a few days in Zermatt while we could still get there.

I have visited Zermatt many times since coming to work in Switzerland more than fifty years ago, but I still feel the same thrill when the train from Täsch pulls into the station and I see the Matterhorn rising above the roofs of the buildings. Over

the years Zermatt has changed exponentially, with the building of more and more hotels and cable-car installations, and an influx of tourists from all over the world. However, on this occasion it was quieter than I have ever seen, with no flag-waving groups hurrying for the Gornergrat railway, the only tourists being from Switzerland itself.

It had been very cold the previous week, with snow even as low as the village, but our arrival coincided with blue skies and brilliant sunshine. Since the higher trails were covered in snow, we opted for lower-level walks, the first starting from the funicular at Sunnegga. From there we set out on the “Lakes Trail”, winding gently uphill towards Fluhalp. I had come here on my very first trip to Zermatt in the early months of 1965, and this was where, also for the first time, I had strapped sealskins to the base of my skis to trudge up through deep powder snow, rewarded by an exhilarating descent into Zermatt itself, with magnificent views of the Matterhorn all day. The views were equally splendid on this occasion, perhaps even more so with the autumn colours of the larch trees shining in the sunshine. We reached the snow-line at the small frozen lake of Grindjisee, so turned downhill to the lake of Moosjensee, with the Matterhorn a perfect back-drop. The trail became easier as we got lower, and after a welcome drink at one of the cafés still open at Findeln, we made our way back into the town.

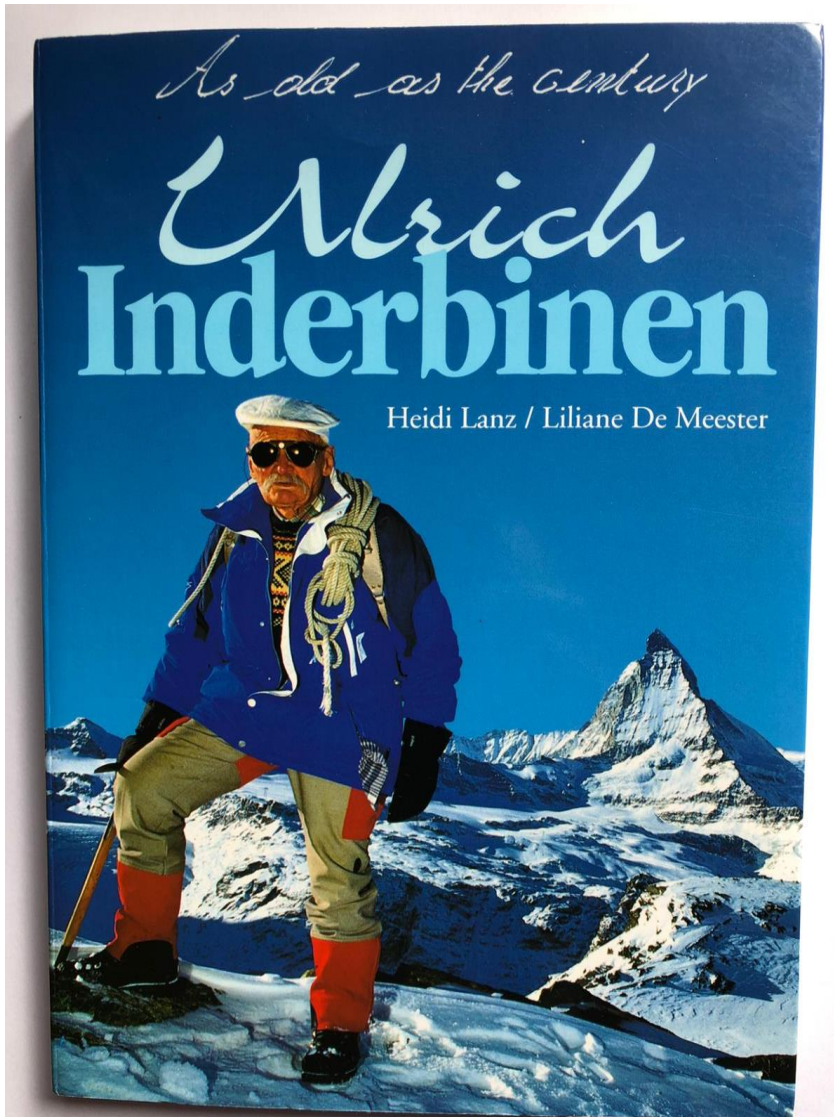
As we did so, memories of earlier visits came to mind, for it was from Zermatt that I had climbed my first 4000 metre peak, the Breithorn. Now it is an easy climb of two hours from the top of the Kleine Matterhorn cable-car, but we made the ascent in 1969, before this lift was built, making it considerably more challenging. And it was from Zermatt that I had made my own attempt on the Matterhorn almost half a lifetime ago. Like most Zermatt guides, mine had been born in the village and had climbed it many times himself, so knew the route well. We roped up at the Hörnli Hut, setting out when it was still dark, and at the start I had no problem following him up the steep rocks. But as we approached the Solvay hut high on the ridge, dawn began to break and it became light. I made the mistake of looking down, and there was Zermatt thousands of metres directly below. I froze, and although the guide managed to persuade me to continue for a short time, we both had to admit that I was not going to get to the top. Now I am content with just looking at this majestic peak, and with less energetic but equally enjoyable exploits.

One of these was on our recent visit when we discovered the “Kulturweg”, or Culture Trail, leading from Zermatt to the hamlet of Zmutt, 300 metres above. It is an easy trail of about four kilometres, with lovely views of the Matterhorn all the way along, and a welcoming restaurant on arrival, with a terrace in the sunshine for my favourite Valaisian lunch of *rösti mit spiegelei*. Previously called the “Panoramaweg”, in July 2019 the trail was re-named and equipped with 14 information boards to show what life was like for farming communities in bygone days. The trail starts just above the church, where it turns off the main street past some of the oldest buildings in Zermatt, dating back to the 1800s. These are large wooden store-houses, known as “raccards”, perched on small mushroom-shaped pillars of stone to keep out rats and mice. From there it climbs up more steeply to reach the small settlement of Herbrigg, where we found an information board pointing to the oldest barn in Europe, built in 1261.



A higher trail branched off from here toward Hubel, but the “Kulturweg” flattened out to contour along the hillside through the trees, the information boards full of interest. They pointed to a centuries old apple tree, which bore fruit at the unusually high altitude of 1750m; a lynx trap dating from 1720; and a circular stone cattle pen. The trail itself had been surfaced with stone slabs centuries ago and was lined by low walls. At the entrance to Zmutt there were more wooden hay barns and old houses, one of which had been built in 1551 and belonged to the Inderbinen family, so the information boards told us. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Inderbinens, together with their nine children, spent every summer and autumn up here looking after their sheep and cows, planting vegetables and collecting wood.

Ulrich, the second son of this family, grew up to become the most famous guide in Zermatt, where he was affectionately known as the “King of the Alps”. Born in December 1900, he lived until 2004, dying peacefully at the age of 103 in the house he had built himself for his young family. The story of his life, told in the 1996 biography “As old as the century”, makes fascinating reading, for it is also the story of Zermatt’s evolution from a small isolated village, cut off for months every winter, to one of the world’s top resorts all year round. The first mountain he climbed was the Matterhorn, and this was not until he was 20 when he decided to train as a guide and needed proof of his ability. He went on to climb it at least 370 times and became a well-loved figure in Zermatt, never changing his simple habits, and never owning a car, a bicycle or a telephone. At the age of 95 he was still an active guide and still winning ski races, for he was the only competitor in his age category, as he himself pointed out!



The last time Ulrich climbed the Matterhorn was in 1990, a few months before his 90th birthday. This was on 14th July, as part of the 125th anniversary celebrations of the first ascent in 1865. He reached the summit only four hours after leaving the Hörnli Hut, and was the centre of attention on his return to Schwarzsee. And this is when I saw him, for Alpine Club members had been invited to join in the celebrations at the small chapel there. And it was there too that I was able to talk to one of my childhood heroes, John Hunt of Everest fame. After the celebratory lunch, I noticed that Lord Hunt had been standing by himself for some time. I walked over to him and told him how I still remembered being taken to see the 1953 Everest film when in Primary School, and had always wanted to meet him. Ever gallant, Lord Hunt replied that I looked much too young to remember that far back! As we chatted, I told him how I believed it was this film that had influenced me to climb mountains myself, and to see Everest, a dream which I finally realised on a trek to Base Camp in 1972. I tentatively asked for his autograph, and he signed my copy of "The Alpine Flowers of Britain and Europe". His inscription, "*For Pamela, John Hunt*", has made this one of my most treasured possessions, and accompanies me on all my mountain walks.

I went on to have many more Himalayan adventures, repeating the Everest trek in 2007. The Armchair Adventures group might remember that I had prepared a presentation on my two Everest treks, scheduled for June this year. Sadly, Covid-19 restrictions meant that this was cancelled, but once we are allowed to meet again in larger numbers, I hope that many of you reading this article will be able to join me to share my adventures a little further away than Zermatt.