

Fall in love with Matterhorn in Zermatt



Rick Steves

I have a confession: I'm in love with the Matterhorn. There's just something about this triangular peak of Disneyland fame — the most recognizable mountain on the planet. Just seeing it is one of the great experiences in Switzerland. And hiking with that iconic summit as a background is even better.

The 14,690-foot Matterhorn towers above Zermatt, a tiny-but-touristy town of roughly 6,000 people nestled at the dead-end of a long valley in Switzerland's remote southwest. While it's barely two hours from Bern and Interlaken by train (or about three hours from Zürich or Lausanne), it's not really on the way to anywhere. Especially considering its inconvenient location, many travelers find it overrated. If you make the trek and are met with only cloudy weather, you may end up with a T-shirt that reads, "I went all the way to Zermatt and didn't even see the Matterhorn." (This isn't rare; it took me multiple trips before I caught a clear glimpse of it.)

But in sunny weather, riding the high-mountain lifts, poking through lost-in-time farm hamlets and ambling along on scenic hikes — all with that famous pointy mountain nodding its white head in the background — make the trip worthwhile. And Zermatt itself also has pockets of traditional charm, with streets lined with chalet after chalet and overflowing flower boxes.

There are no gas-engine vehicles in Zermatt — only electric buses and taxis that slalom between the pedestrians like four-wheeled Vespas. (Driv-



Zermatt is often socked in by clouds. But if you're lucky to be there on a clear day, you'll see the Matterhorn peeking out above the rooftops. **RICK STEVES**

ers must park down in the valley and ride the train into town.) Strolling up the town's main street, Bahnhofstrasse, is a joy. Even bikes are forbidden on the main drag; the street is reserved for people and, in summer, a twice-daily parade of goats. Sure, the town hosts plenty of fabulously wealthy visitors, but locals like to say that the "traffic-free" nature of the town is a great equalizer. Zermatt strives to be a high-class mountain resort, but for active guests.

Once upon a time, Zermatt was a humble village of farmers, but with the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865 and the arrival of trains in 1891, it found itself on the Grand Tour of Europe. Over time,

its residents learned it was easier to milk the tourists than the goats, and mountain tourism became the focus. Aside from the stone quarries that you'll pass on the way into town, tourism is Zermatt's only industry.

This little town is capable of entertaining about two million guests each year, hosting more than a hundred modern chalet-style hotels and a well-organized and groomed infrastructure for summer and winter sports. From town, countless lifts head to all sorts of hikes, ski slopes, and incredible views. But really it all comes back to the star of the show: the Matterhorn.

High summer into early fall is the best time to come to Zermatt. Visit-

ing in spring is generally a bad idea because most trails, lifts and restaurants are closed. (Although, on the plus side, there are no crowds.) Early fall also works, as most lifts and trails remain open until the snow returns. (In winter, skiers take over the town, and prices jump even higher than in summer.) Zermatt has earned its reputation for untrustworthy weather — the valley can get completely socked in at any time of year. While two good-weather days are enough to experience the highlights, add at least one buffer day to your itinerary as insurance against rain.

The Zermatt region has three high-mountain summit stations linked by

lifts and hikes: Matterhorn Glacier Paradise (closest to the Matterhorn), Gornergrat (with a historic cogwheel train that goes to 10,000 feet) and Rothorn (farthest up the valley from the Matterhorn). While prices are steep, the community has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in their mountain lifts in recent years. They're absolutely state-of-the-art, and experiencing them is unforgettable.

Gornergrat is my pick if you can fit in only one high-mountain excursion, simply because it's a best-of-all-worlds experience. It features sweeping views from the top station and my favorite hike in the region, between the Rotenboden and Rifflberg train

stops. Whichever excursion you opt for, pay close attention to the weather — the lifts aren't cheap, and none of them is worth the cost if the Matterhorn is shrouded by clouds.

That said, don't wait for perfectly clear skies to head into the hills — even in bright, sunny weather, the Matterhorn loves playing peek-a-boo behind the clouds. If it's at least sunny-ish, get up the mountain-side. Like me, you may find love at first sight of the Matterhorn.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

For star of Broadway, Istanbul has it all

By **Jae-Ha Kim**
Tribune Content Agency

Irene Sofia Lucio has played numerous parts that she loved, but the actor said the character that resonates with her the most is the one she's playing on Broadway.

"I come from a long line of immigrants on both sides of my family," said the New York resident. "Isidora from 'Liberation' particularly reminds me of my mom. While the specifics of their past are not the same, they have both experienced exiles, poverty and family tragedies. Yet with all of that adversity, they refuse to get bitter or accept defeat. Rather, they have a buoyant, vibrant, relentless approach to life and they both have a miraculous sense of humor that has helped them weather many storms."

This interview with Lucio has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: Do you have any upcoming trips planned?

A: I am from Puerto Rico and most of our family lives there. We go to Puerto Rico several times a year, so that will likely be our first stop after the show wraps.

Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?

A: Istanbul! Oh man, for so many reasons. It has it all! It's East and West at the same time. It has a fascinating history and countless sights while remaining a very modern society. It is chaotic, loud and fun, and has a great night life. You can go to an Ottoman palace in the morning, go to a fabulous French bistro



Broadway star Irene Sofia Lucio said that acting in "Liberation" has been a liberating experience. **YELLOWBELLY**

for lunch and go shopping in a bazaar all on the same day.

Q: How do you separate work from vacation trips?

A: I try to limit checking emails to once or twice a day while on vacation. As an actor, there's a saying, "Want a job? Plan a vacation." So you can't fully disconnect while on vacation. There's often a self-tape audition to do. I take a portable tripod to be able to tape from wherever. You never know when your break might come from and it's never going to be at a perfect time.

Q: What's the most important thing you've learned from your travels?

A: Traveling teaches humility and nurtures a sense of wonder about the world. There is no one way to live, eat, worship (or) exist. I've learned to be a gracious guest in a new country — to learn and honor the rules of the new house I'm entering and appreciate it on its own terms.

Q: Do you have a knack for picking up new languages?

A: I do! I grew up speaking English and Spanish in school and in life. I took up French in high school and college and have kept it up. I have always loved to read in different languages. I studied comparative literature at Princeton, because English felt too limiting a concentration in terms of

languages to get to read in. And I love trying to learn as many phrases as I can of the language of whatever country I'm visiting.

Q: Where would you like to go that you have never been to before?

A: Vietnam.

Q: When you go away, what are some of your must-have items?

A: A book, AirPods, walking shoes, jeans, travel guide, notebook, tripod, phone and cute outfits. I like curating my whole wardrobe to wherever I'm going.

Q: What is your guilty pleasure when you're on the road?

A: Chips. All kinds.

Q: What is your best or worst vacation memory?

A: When I was a kid, my family got into a terrible car accident in Mexico. My dad had to pull over and ask for help in a busy street. My mom had a bad injury to her leg and needed to go to a hospital. But I remember a family stopped, helped us get medical help and even took us to their home to keep me and my sister entertained and not (be) scared at the hospital. It was very scary but to this day it is a testament to how amazing that family was to us and how generous people can be.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Insurance company balks at paying for missed connection

By **Christopher Elliott** | King Features Syndicate

This past August, my dream trip to India imploded before takeoff. A delayed flight from Orlando, Florida, to Atlanta caused me to miss my connection to Paris. Delta Air Lines rebooked me 25 hours later through London, costing me \$270 for hotels, meals and taxis. I'd wisely bought Trawick International travel insurance, which covers a trip disruption.

But dealing with their administrator SureGo Claims became a nightmare. They demanded endless documents, assured me that everything was received, then denied my claim with a lie: "Your delay was only 3 hours." SureGo falsely claimed my Atlanta-to-Paris flight was delayed. (It wasn't — I missed it entirely!) The Delta documentation that I provided clearly showed a 25-hour disruption.

When I appealed, SureGo demanded another 40-60 days after already torturing me for five months. I know \$270 is a small amount, but this is how they trap you: Too little to sue, enough to make you quit.

This feels like a scam where they bank on the customer's exhaustion. I've spent hours speaking to representatives on calls, resending paperwork, and being ghosted.

How can a company fabricate facts to avoid paying such a modest, valid claim?

— *Christine Porter, Apopka, Florida*

A: Trawick International should have honored your claim immediately. Your policy's trip delay coverage, which is standard in most travel insurance plans, typically kicks in after 6-12 hours. Your 25-hour disruption wasn't borderline — it was excessive.

I'm not sure how SureGo Claims investigated your case, but it certainly seems to have misread the basic facts of your claim. In doing so, it violated fundamental insurance principles of good faith and fair dealing. Florida statutes explicitly prohibit insurers from failing to adopt and implement standards for the proper investigation of claims or misrepresenting pertinent facts.

You did right by keeping records of your calls, but

you might have fixed this faster with a more thorough paper trail. If you have to call an insurance company, always ask for an email confirmation. Otherwise, it's your word against theirs.

The escalations were problematic and not at all what we're accustomed to seeing with Trawick, which has an otherwise good reputation for fast claims. You could have appealed your case to one of Trawick's executives. I publish their names, numbers and emails on my consumer advocacy site, elliott.org.

I'm puzzled by this case. Most claims like this are automatic and processed quickly. If you give your travel insurance company your flight itinerary (you can usually do this online),

it will track your flight and pay your claim within hours if something goes wrong.

I contacted Starr Companies, Trawick's underwriter. A few weeks after our inquiry, Trawick approved a claim for \$300 per person (which is more than you claimed), calling it trip delay coverage. I should note that you also continued fighting for Trawick to honor the claim, and it was likely pressure from all sides that finally led to this successful resolution.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.