

LEISUREZONE

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Forty years ago . . .

by
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TIME WARP: Above, the Kulmhotel, Gornergat, and Phil bringing back the drinks. Below, 40 years on . . . with Lynne



SCALING THE HEIGHTS AGAIN

THE MEMORIES are as sharp and as clear as a blue Alpine sky . . .

With one foot in Italy, the other in Switzerland, I was experiencing one of the best moments of my life – and sharing it with my great pal, Phil.

We were both just 17 and were striding across snow-packed ridges high in the Alps, staring, almost incredulously at the beautiful, mighty Matterhorn that towered above us.

It was our first attempt at mountaineering and within hours we were hooked.

Until then I'd been totally preoccupied with football, thoughts of Spanish holidays, and all the other "normal" things that teenage lads are supposed to do.

But waking at dawn to the sight of the Matterhorn filling the entrance of our small, triangular tent somehow changed my outlook forever.

And I owed it all to Len, my old photographer and climbing friend at the Ellesmere Port Pioneer, who had

persuaded me to change our Costa Brava plans for a trip to Switzerland.

"Buy a tent and a train ticket to Zermatt," he said, "and you'll come back absolutely hooked on the mountains."

He was right. And I've still got the £29 ticket – three weeks' pay as a junior reporter – from Chester railway station.

After our Matterhorn adventure we went on to spend the next three summer holidays trekking around the Alps. I would probably have continued to do so for many years to come, too, had fate not intervened in the shape of a bandit's bullet on an Iranian roadside.

Everest base camp

Our self-planned overland journey to the Everest base camp ended tragically when we were attacked as we slept inside, and on top of, our old minibus.

One bullet smashed into the head of one of my friends (he miraculously recovered), but the one that caught me between my shoulder blades left me completely paralysed from the chest. Since that bleak June dawn back in

1974 I've always yearned to go back to the mountains.

But I'm hopeless when it comes to negotiating my wheelchair up and down steep and uneven trails. Something suddenly flips in my brain and I feel completely vulnerable. Frequently I freeze on the spot – even in town when rolling going down a relatively short and safe pavement or path, or whenever there is a steep edge to one side!

In my case, mountains and wheelchairs definitely don't go together . . . Or they didn't until a few weeks ago.

"What about going back to the Matterhorn?" my wife, Lynne, suggested after watching a mountaineering documentary. "Maybe we'll see some of the sights that you keep talking about. Perhaps we might even be able to get into some of the cable cars."

A call to Switzerland Tourism and I got all the answers (and confidence) I needed.

Yes, the trains and cable cars are okay for people using wheelchairs. Yes, I can get to the tops of the passes. Yes,

there are plenty of wheelchair-friendly hotels in Zermatt. And yes, a mid-week break was available. All we needed to do was to book. The rest would go like clockwork. Swiss clockwork, I was told.

Once we'd sorted things for our three teenage boys, our 11-year-old cross Collie, and our two young tortoises, we were on our way to Manchester airport.

The plane took off at nine in the morning, we boarded the Zurich-Visp train at lunch, and three hours later we were meandering up and through the lush green, steep-sided, snow-capped mountain valleys, arriving in the chocolate box Zermatt resort for tea.

Milk float taxis

Situated at more than 500 metres higher than Snowdon, Zermatt is encircled and dwarfed by 38 peaks over 4,000 metres. The only vehicles you will see are electrically propelled, and although there are lots of converted milk float-style taxis none yet are wheelchair accessible.

But that didn't stop us from getting around the reasonably level and

bustling streets (there's soon to be a wheelchair friendly bus in town).

An hour later, as the sun began to set, and we were on our bedroom balcony, staring, silently and open mouthed at the Matterhorn.

I was caught in a time warp – and in it I remained for the next 36 hours . . .

Amazingly, the Matterhorn Focus hotel – run by Sonya and Chris Noti, and approached via a short tunnel and lift – occupies a site within 20 metres of where Phil and I had pitched our tent all those years ago.

And the view that Lynne and I were now enjoying was virtually the same as I had from the tent – give or take the positioning of the odd star or two!

It was also a coincidence that the cable car station was sited next door – perfect for the hair-raising, spine tingling trip on Europe's highest mountain railway to the Kleine Matterhorn.

Again, there were no problems getting into the 'pod' and half an hour later we were right up – and inside – the Kleine Matterhorn, overlooking the fabulous

glacial paradise that I so vividly remembered, now being occupied by a new generation of skiers, walkers and climbers.

Although I couldn't quite get down onto the glacier, access for wheelchair users was really very good. I rolled out of the cable car and pushed along the 50 metres' tunnel – about a similar distance from the summit – before spending an hour daydreaming in glorious sunshine. There was even an accessible toilet – not bad at 3,883m!

Screams

By this time I was beginning to feel very smug with my new-found sense of confidence – until the moment on our descent when our 'pod' raced over the mountain's edge and I felt my stomach drop and heard myself scream.

I suddenly wanted out. But this was no time, nor the place, for quitters.

Next stop was Gornergat and the Kulmhotel.

Forty years ago it had taken us four hours, a lot of sweat, and a few broken blood vessels to reach the hotel, which

at 3,089 metres the provides absolutely stunning views of 29 snow-capped peaks.

Getting there this time was much easier – and in just 40 minutes, thanks to Europe's highest open-air cogwheel railway, which sets off in the centre of the village.

The hotel, while still retaining all its charm, has been completely refurbished and now has two disabled friendly rooms facing either the Breithorn (4,164m) or Monta Rosa (4,634m).

The idea of a night's stay was exciting, but our whistle stop trip was almost at an end.

There was just time to catch the last train back to Zermatt and to grab a meal at one of the many quality restaurants.

Next morning, we were on the way home again. Our three-day break was suddenly all over. It was just like a dream. But like all the very best of dreams, it was far too short.

Next time, we'll make it longer! And, hopefully, I'll be ready to tackle a few more hills . . .

