



A breathtaking view of the Swiss Alps mountain range from the highest cable car in Europe going up to the Klein Matterhorn at 3,820 m. The deep valleys were formed from glacial movements. The air is palpably thin at this height, with dizziness, headache and fatigue setting in quickly for susceptible individuals



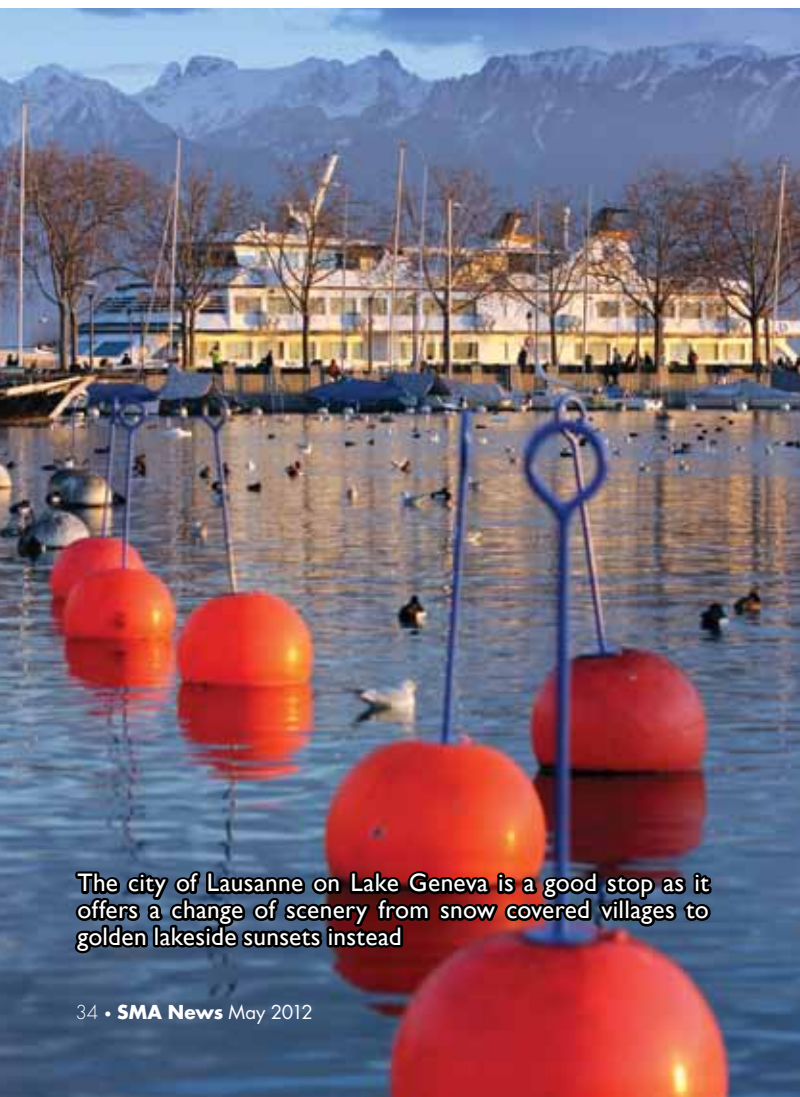
# At the Top of the World

By Dr Wong Tien Hua





A banner cloud formation caused by the sharp peaks of the Matterhorn. Much like an aircraft slipstream, banner clouds form when air flows around a solitary peak creating vortices, causing condensation of the air on the lee side



The city of Lausanne on Lake Geneva is a good stop as it offers a change of scenery from snow covered villages to golden lakeside sunsets instead

“Z is for Zurich, Zermatt and zero degrees...” I punched this into my iPhone and updated my Facebook wall just before I boarded my flight. After months of planning, we were finally on our way to the land of snow, skiing and Swiss cheese.

It had started as a discussion about travel over dinner one evening. My friends urged me to try a ski trip with them, as they were planning to share a chalet. I had never thought of going on a destination ski holiday before, preferring self drive road trips that covered both city and scenic country exploration. Spending a whole week “holed up” in a “wooden shack” and struggling to learn a new sport with its intrinsic risks (anterior cruciate ligament tears came to mind) didn't sound like much of a holiday to me. But they urged me to at least try it once, and also assured me that the scenery would be unforgettable.



So it was that I found myself embarking on a trip to Switzerland in the first week of December 2011, taking advantage of cheaper rates one week before the official ski season. It was a calculated risk as snow might not have arrived. This was one of the reasons why we chose to head to the resort ski town of Zermatt, which was located at one of the highest points in Switzerland, surrounded by soaring mountains. The most famous of them all is the Matterhorn. Rising to an altitude of 4,478 m and directly overlooking the town, this star attraction dominates the Zermatt skyline. Its rugged angular slopes in the shape of a shark's fin are emblazoned on every triangular Toblerone box, but more than that, it has also become the very symbol of Switzerland itself.

The approach to Zermatt was by way of train from Zurich, which operates with famed Swiss efficiency. The railway brings the traveller south towards the Swiss-Italian border, changing once at Brig to a cogwheel train that is able to negotiate through and ascend the rugged and romantic Nicolaital valley. The town of Zermatt is at the final stop of this 60-minute scenic ride. Stepping out of the station, one finds the main street on the right leading into the town centre, with no cars in sight, as Zermatt is only served by electric cars to keep the air pollution-free.



A river runs through it



The magnificent Matterhorn dominates the Zermatt skyline





The picturesque town of Zermatt lies nestled in a valley under the watchful eyes of the Matterhorn. At sunrise a pink glow illuminates the sleeping town for only a brief moment, captured here on camera

An elaborate web of ski lifts and cable cars spread out in all directions from the base stations in Zermatt, offering 350 km of piste for skiing during peak season. One can start the day skiing in Switzerland and end with dinner at a restaurant in Italy. This is a world class ski range like no other. As for beginners like me, I had no ambition (much less any hope) of tackling such slopes but was content with the all round scenic views from the top of the world.

From Singapore's overcast skies, seemingly nonstop monsoon rain and flooded streets, to the majestic mountain ranges covered in white snow under crystal clear blue skies – the contrast was so acute that it was as if we had travelled not by plane but through a space warp to a different planet. **SMA**



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