

The center of the Matterhorn region is the Valais—the most mountainous area in Switzerland with a chain of fifty summits that top out at over 13,000 feet. The snow that melts on the top of these mountains sends millions of gallons of water into the valley below and as the waters collect they form the source of the Rhône River, which runs for 500 miles through Switzerland and France before finally emptying out into the Mediterranean Sea.

But in spite of this extraordinary alpine geography, the name Valais comes from the Latin word for valley, which in the end makes sense because between these mountains lies a valley that runs for 80 miles.

### Saas Fee

I started my trip through the Valais in the town of Saas Fee. It is a car-free village that has been a mountain resort for over a hundred years. People come up to ski the surrounding slopes in the winter and the glacier in the summer.

The Saas Fee glacier is more than two thousand years old. Glaciers form on the top of mountains where the air is so cold that the snow never melts. Each new layer of snow sits on top of the older layers and packs them down until you have a single layer of compact ice and snow that can be hundreds of feet deep. The continual arrival of new snow pushes the sheet of ice off the top of the mountain and into the valley below.

### Zermatt

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century a group of families purchased their freedom from the landowners along the Rhône and moved into a valley at the base of the mountains to start their own community. They named the town Zermatt and the old section looks much as it did 400 years ago.

The streets are lined with a type of structure called a *mazot*. It's used to store foods and grains during the winter and is held off the ground by stones that look like giant mushrooms. The stone tower and cap were designed to make it impossible for small animals to get into the food area. A simple idea but it works.



The newer part of town centers along the main street—strollers check out the shops and each other. The pubs and restaurants include a few spots that specialize in the traditional foods and drinks of the Valais. And there are lots of shops with stuff just in case you don't have enough stuff already.

### The Alpine Museum

Just off the main street is the Alpine Museum, which documents the history of mountaineering in Zermatt through paintings, old photographs, and some interesting letters.



One by Winston Churchill explains that he planned to climb the Matterhorn, but changed mountains and went up Monte Rosa instead. Even though Monte Rosa was more difficult than the Matterhorn the guides went up for half the price and Winston couldn't resist the savings.

There is also a letter from Theodore Roosevelt to his sister, dated 1881. He tells her that the main reason he went up the Matterhorn was to show some English guys who were staying at the same hotel that a Yankee could climb just as well as they could. Same attitude he had when he became President. Bully for him.

### The Matterhorn

The earliest climbs were made by religious groups who wanted to build altars closer to God, or by military expeditions who wanted a good view of the surrounding terrain.

During the mid-1700s scientists began climbing Europe's mountains so they could study the glaciers.

Mountaineering as a sport got started about the same time. A Swiss scientist from Geneva offered a prize to anyone who could get to the top of Mont Blanc. By the mid-1800s English sportsmen decided that they had to be the first to climb to the top of every major mountain in Europe. It became known as the golden age of English alpine climbing and within 10 years they reached the summit of every important Alpine peak. Of course, they hired Swiss, French and Italian guides to get them up—but then so did I.

The Matterhorn reaches a height of 14,692 feet. The first attempt to scale it in the mid-1800s was a total failure and it ended up being the last of the great Alpine peaks to be conquered.

The best way to see the Matterhorn is to take the Gornergrat railway. It's the highest cogwheel train in Europe and will take you to the Riffelberg at 8,469 feet. There are great views of the Matterhorn and the surrounding mountains.

### St. Bernard Pass

The St. Bernard Pass is the oldest and most famous of the great Alpine crossings. It has been in use for at least 2,800 years. The best way to reach it is with the St. Bernard Express that teams a bus and a special train.

During the Middle Ages the pass was taken over by a gang of pagan thieves and became too dangerous for travelers. But Bernard of Menton, a local bishop, decided to clear the pass of these savages. The legend says that in 1030 AD he climbed to the top of the pass and threw his cloak over the pagan temple. The power in his vestments turned the temple to dust and the bad guys were soon defeated. He built a hospice and a monastery on the spot where the ancient Romans had a temple honoring the god of thunder.

Travelers and pilgrims have been stopping at the hospice ever since Bernard built it. The monks who live here act as guides and ski instructors. They also offer inexpensive lodging to travelers—sort of an Aspen for ascetics.

The hospice has a church that dates to the late 1600s and is a good example of the kind of Baroque architecture that was popular in northern Italy. The frescos on the arched ceiling are quite extraordinary. All the materials for these works had to be hauled up to 8,000 feet above sea level.



### The Dogs of St. Bernard Hospice



For the last 250 years, passages through the St. Bernard have been made safer by the St. Bernard guide dogs that have saved over 2,000 lives. They have a great sense of direction, their strength and their broad build help them force a path through the snow and the shape of their paws hold them steady on the ice. The story that the dogs would go out with a barrel of brandy tied under their necks is pure fiction. It was made up by a novelist named Meissner who put it into a story in 1816.

Dogs are still trained to find people who are lost in the mountains or buried under an avalanche but the dogs are

## THINGS TO DO

### THE ALPINE MUSEUM

3920 ZERMATT, SWITZERLAND  
TEL: +41 (0) 27 967 41 00

### THE FIGHTING COWS OF THE VALAIS

TOURISM@VEYSONNAZ.CH  
[WWW.VEYSONNAZ.CH](http://WWW.VEYSONNAZ.CH)

Event scheduled to take place on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2002.  
Please contact the Versonnaz tourism office for more information.

### GERMANIER

1963 VÉTROZ, SWITZERLAND  
TEL: +41 (0) 27 346 12 16  
FAX: +41 (0) 27 346 51 32  
E-MAIL: WINE@BONPERE.COM  
[WWW.BONPERE.COM](http://WWW.BONPERE.COM)

Makers of the pear eau-de-vie *Bon Père William*

### THE HOSPICE OF GRAND-ST-BERNARD

TEL. +41 27 787 12 36  
FAX +41 27 787 11 07

The Hospice offers accommodations for travellers in winter.

### MASKENKELLER (MASK MAKERS)

AGNES & ERNST REIDER-JERJEN  
CH-3918 WILER, SWITZERLAND  
TEL: +41 (0) 27 939 13 55  
FAX: +41 (0) 27 939 30 49

### SAAS FEE SKI RESORT

CH-3906 SAAS-FEE, SWITZERLAND  
TEL: +41 (0) 27 958 18 58  
FAX: +41 (0) 27 958 18 60  
E-MAIL: TO@SAAS-FEE.CH  
[WWW.SAAS-FEE.CH](http://WWW.SAAS-FEE.CH)

no longer St. Bernards. These days the breeds of choice are Belgian and German Shepherds. The dogs must be airlifted to the avalanche site by helicopter and St. Bernards are just too heavy. Victims found within 15 minutes of the avalanche have a 90 percent chance of surviving. The dogs have a natural tendency to dig for the victims and then lie on top to keep them warm.

## HOW TO GO

### SWISS PASS

1-877-456-RAIL

[WWW.RAILEUROPE.COM](http://WWW.RAILEUROPE.COM)



This pass entitles you to unrestricted travel by rail, bus and boat on the Swiss Travel System network for 4, 8, 15 or 21 days or a full month. Also included are trams and buses in 36 towns and cities as well as discount fares on many mountain railways and cable cars.

### THE POSTBUS (POSTAUTO)



This area is one of the most beautiful parts of Europe and I think the best way to see it is on one of the post buses that run throughout the country. Their organized routes take you through the most beautiful parts of the country. You don't have to worry about which roads to take, or keeping to a tight schedule. Just relax and enjoy the scenery. Information about the Postbus system is available in English at [USA.MYSWITZERLAND.COM](http://USA.MYSWITZERLAND.COM) and in French, Italian and German at [WWW.POST.CH](http://WWW.POST.CH).

### GORNERGRAT RAILWAY

GGB GORNERGRAT-MONTE ROSA-BAHNEN

NORDSTRASSE 20

CH-3900 BRIG-GLIS

TEL: +41 (0) 27 921 41 11

FAX: +41 (0) 27 921 41 19

E-MAIL: [GORNERGRAT-BAHNEN@BVZ.CH](mailto:GORNERGRAT-BAHNEN@BVZ.CH)

[WWW.BVZ.CH](http://WWW.BVZ.CH)

### THE SAINT-BERNARD EXPRESS

CP 727

CH-1920 MARTIGNY, SWITZERLAND

TEL: +42 (0) 27 723 33 30

[WWW.TMRSA.CH](http://WWW.TMRSA.CH)

## Mask Making



Switzerland's mountains are a pleasure for modern tourists but for thousands of years they presented a difficult and frightening environment for residents and travelers. People believed that powerful and evil spirits lived on these peaks. When the spirits were moody, which was often the case, they'd come down into the villages and terrify everyone.

Each year in February a select group of residents in the town of Wiler put on their masks, burlaps sacks, furs and cow bells and set off to scare the hell out of everyone else. In theory, they are warding off evil spirits and making the town safe for the arrival of spring. The origins of the ritual go back to pagan times.

The most famous mask makers in town are members of the Rieder family. Mama Rieder takes pinewood that has been aged for two years and shapes the face. All of her work uses traditional forms. It takes about 40 hours to make a mask and the family only makes about ten each year. They have been part of the local culture for centuries but in recent years tourists have begun to collect them. Papa Rieder paints the masks with colors that are mixed by hand. The hair comes from sheep and goats, and the teeth from cows and goats. (Goats have a tough time in this town.)



## Château de Villa



The Château de Villa has been in the town of Sierre since the early 1500s and its name can be translated loosely as "the big house in town." Inside is a restaurant that specializes in the traditional foods of the region.

The main course is *raclette*. A half wheel of cheese is placed in front of a heat source. As the cheese melts it's scraped off the wheel and onto a plate. The chef works at the edge of the dining room and the raclette comes to your table as soon as the cheese melts.

There's a wooden bucket on the table filled with boiled fingerling potatoes. You take out a potato. Place it next to the cheese. Cut off a small slice. Cover it with the warm soft cheese and pop it into your mouth. Along side the raclette is a bowl of gherkins and pickled onions. The chef keeps an eye on each table and as you finish off the first dish he starts melting your second portion using a different cheese.. You can order from



three to twelve rounds of raclette, each with its own cheese.

The *Château* restaurant has 500 local wines on their menu and right next door they have a wine-tasting room with the same 500 wines for sale. Each week they have a different selection available for tasting in both the restaurant and the tasting room. And all 500 are available for sale at the same price you would pay at the vineyard.

## Sion

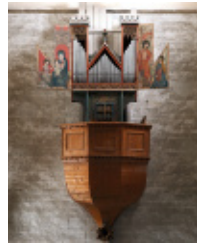


The Valais is the largest wine-producing area in Switzerland and also the birthplace of Swiss Christianity. It never participated in the Reformation and is still very Catholic.

In the center of the Valais is the town of Sion, which is over two thousand years old. At the center of Sion, on a hill overlooking the town is the Bishopric of Sion, which was founded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It is a fortified church with walls, battlement towers and internal walkways.

The church itself, Notre-Dame-de-Valere, was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It's a mixture of Romanesque and Gothic styles and was built without flying-buttress supports on the outside. Yet it's still quite high, so the builder arched the internal columns to keep it from falling down.

The most interesting element in the church is the organ. It was installed during the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the painted panels that enclose it depict signs from the Annunciation. It is the oldest playable organ in the world and every Saturday afternoon from the beginning of July through the end of August it is used for a public concert.



## The Fighting Cows of the Valais

Each spring the cows of the district are led up from the valley into the high mountain pastures where they spend the summer munching away on the new grass. They are led up by the lead cow who wears a bell that is larger and louder than all the rest. Her leather strap identifies her owner and her place of honor in the herd. But how do you get to be the lead cow—the Dairy Queen? It's not easy. You must compete against all the other cows who want to be queen. It is an ancient tradition in the canton of Valais and the competitions take place every spring and fall.

Cows that have been bred for their aggressiveness are brought together to challenge each other. The veterans use the old "What, me fight?" trick. They walk off to the



## TO LEARN MORE . . .

### SWITZERLAND TOURISM

TOLL-FREE: 1-877-794-8037

[WWW.MYSWITZERLAND.COM](http://WWW.MYSWITZERLAND.COM)

### VALAIS TOURISM OFFICE

RUE PRÉ-FLEURI 6

CH-1951 SION

TEL: +41 (0) 27 327 35 70

FAX: +41 (0) 27 327 35 71

E-MAIL: [INFO@VALAISTOURISM.CH](mailto:INFO@VALAISTOURISM.CH)

[WWW.VALAISTOURISM.CH](http://WWW.VALAISTOURISM.CH)

### MARTIGNY TOURISM OFFICE

PLACE CENTRALE 9

1920 MARTIGNY, SWITZERLAND

TEL: +41 (0) 27 721 22 20

FAX: +41 (0) 27 721 22 24

E-MAIL: [INFO@MARTIGNYTOURISM.CH](mailto:INFO@MARTIGNYTOURISM.CH)

[WWW.MARTIGNYTOURISM.CH](http://WWW.MARTIGNYTOURISM.CH)

### SAINT BERNARD TOURISM OFFICE

CH-1938 CHAMPEX-LAC, SWITZERLAND

TEL: +41 (0) 27 783 12 27

FAX: +41 (0) 27 783 35 27

E-MAIL: [INFO@SAINT-BERNARD.CH](mailto:INFO@SAINT-BERNARD.CH)

[WWW.SAINT-BERNARD.CH](http://WWW.SAINT-BERNARD.CH)

### SION TOURISM OFFICE

PLACE DE LA PLANTA

CH-1950 SION, SWITZERLAND

TEL: +41 (0) 27 327 77 27

FAX: +41 (0) 27 327 77 28

E-MAIL: [INFO@SIONTOURISM.CH](mailto:INFO@SIONTOURISM.CH)

[WWW.SIONTOURISM.CH](http://WWW.SIONTOURISM.CH)

### ZERMATT TOURISM OFFICE

BAHNPLATZ, POSTFACH 247

CH-3920 ZERMATT, SWITZERLAND

TEL: +41 (0) 27 967 01 81

FAX: +41 (0) 27 967 01 85

E-MAIL: [ZERMATT@WILLIS.CH](mailto:ZERMATT@WILLIS.CH)

[WWW.ZERMATT.CH](http://WWW.ZERMATT.CH)

side, uninterested. Then suddenly they turn and engage the adversary. They battle until one turns away. The objective is for one cow to cow the other. But it's not just being the Queen of Mean that counts, they're also judged on agility, form and endurance. The entire community takes a passionate interest in the sport: It's regularly televised and each cow has its own cheering section. And that's no bull.



TRAVELS & TRADITIONS  
RECIPES FROM  
THE MATTERHORN REGION,  
SWITZERLAND



SEAFOOD SOUP WITH CURRY  
*Soupe dorée aux saveurs océanes*  
*Makes 8 Servings*

- 4 tablespoons olive oil*
- 32 small mussels, scrubbed*
- 16 Manila clams, or other small clam, scrubbed*
- 16 periwinkles (sea snails), scrubbed*
- 1½ cups fish stock*
- 1 cup white wine*
- 2 cups vegetable stock or water*
- 8 medium shrimp*
- 1 teaspoon curry powder*
- 1 pinch saffron*
- 3 tablespoons heavy cream*
- 16 tablespoons butter, cut into small pieces*
- 1 small leek, whites only, cut into rings*
- ½ pound squid, cleaned and bodies cut into rings*
- Salt and freshly ground white pepper*
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh chives, for garnish*

In a medium pot, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the mussels, clams, periwinkles, fish stock, and wine. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium, cover skillet, and cook for 3 to 5 minutes, or until all of the shellfish have opened. Remove the shellfish to a bowl and discard any clams or mussels that have not opened. Remove meat of the shellfish from their shells, discard shells, and set meat aside. Strain the cooking liquid through fine cheesecloth or a fine-meshed strainer and return the seafood broth to the cleaned pot.

In a small saucepan, bring the vegetable stock or water to a boil over high heat. Add the shrimp and cook for 3 minutes, or until just cooked through. Drain and peel the shrimps, leaving the tails intact and set aside.

Return the seafood broth to the stove and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Add the curry powder, saffron, heavy cream, and butter, a few small pieces at a time, stirring constantly until broth begins to thicken. Add the leeks and simmer until the leeks are tender, about 5 minutes. Add the squid and simmer until just cooked through, about 3 minutes. Season to taste with salt and

pepper and add the reserved seafood and simmer until just heated through.

Divide the seafood and the broth between eight wide, shallow soup bowls and garnish each serving with the chopped chives.



## WHERE TO EAT

### HOTEL FLETSCHHORN

CH-3906 SAAS-FEE, SWITZERLAND

TEL: +41 (0) 27 957 21 31

FAX: +41 (0) 27 957 21 87

[WWW.FLETSCHHORN.COM](http://WWW.FLETSCHHORN.COM)

Just beyond Saas Fee, in a secluded forest, sits the Hotel Fletschhorn. It's owned and run by Irma and Jorg Deutsch and its restaurant is one of the finest in Europe. The cooking takes place under the direction of Irma who is considered to be one of the best chefs in Switzerland. Jorg is in charge of the wines and encourages his guests to drink the local wines of the Valais. His 17,000-bottle cellar holds hundreds of examples of the excellent vintages that this region can produce.

The menu Irma produced for me started with a seafood soup flavored with saffron. Saffron is the most expensive spice and must be harvested by hand. At least 250,000 flowers are needed to produce a single pound. It originated in Asia Minor and was likely brought to Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by returning Crusaders.

Irma prepared two main courses. The first was Hen surrounded by hay and steamed in a casserole. The second was a roasted lamb shank served with saffron mashed potatoes or spätzle.

## OVEN BRAISED LAMB SHANKS

*Jarret d'agneau au four*

*Makes 4 Servings*

*4 tablespoons unsalted butter*

*Four lamb shanks, about ¾ pound each*

*Salt*

*Freshly ground black pepper*

*Flour for dusting the lamb shanks*

*½ cup diced onion*

*½ cup diced leek whites*

*1 cup diced carrot*

*1 cup diced celery*

*1 tablespoon tomato paste*

*2 teaspoons minced garlic*

*1 sprig fresh thyme*

*1 sprig fresh rosemary*

*One 750 ml. bottle red wine*

*4 cups cooked spaetzle (optional)*

*2 cups cooked Savoy cabbage (optional)*

Preheat the oven to 350°F. In a small saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat and cook until a foam rises to the surface of the butter. Skim the foam until it subsides and remove the skillet from the heat. Carefully decant the clarified butter to a bowl, leaving the milk solids in the bottom of the pan behind.

In a large dutch oven, heat the clarified butter over medium-high heat. Meanwhile, generously season the lamb shanks with the salt and pepper and lightly dredge in the flour, shaking off excess. Sear the lamb shanks in the hot butter until nicely browned on all sides. Remove to a plate and add the onion, leek and a ½ cup each of the carrot and celery to the pot. Cook the vegetables until they begin to brown, about 5 minutes. Add the tomato paste and garlic and continue cooking until the garlic is soft, about 2 minutes more. Add the thyme and rosemary to the pot and cook until aromatic, 1 minute.

Pour the red wine into the pot and reduce the wine by half. Return the lamb shanks to the pot, cover, and bake until the meat has pulled away from the bone and the meat is very tender when pierced with the tip of a knife, 2 to 2½ hours.

Remove the pot from the heat and remove the lamb shanks to a large plate. Return the pot to the stove over medium heat and add the remaining carrots and celery. Cook the vegetables until they are soft, 15 to 20 minutes. Return the lamb shanks to the sauce, adjust the seasoning to taste with salt and pepper.

To serve the lamb shanks: Divide the spaetzle between four deep dinner plates and place a mound of cabbage around the spaetzle. Place one lamb shank on top of each mound of spaetzle and spoon the sauce over each.

## CAPON COOKED IN HAY

*Makes 6 to 8 servings*

*1 cup flour*

*5 tablespoons water*

*One 8- to 9- pound capon*

*Salt*

*Freshly ground black pepper*

*½ cup diced carrots*

*½ cup diced celery*

*½ cup diced onions*

*½ cup diced parsnips*

*1 cup white wine*

*1 cup vegetable stock or water*

*1 ounce fresh fragrant hay (optional)*

*6 tablespoons unsalted butter*

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Knead the flour and water together in a medium bowl until a smooth dough forms. Measure the circumference of a large Dutch oven. Roll the dough out, with the palms of your hands, on a lightly floured work surface to the measured circumference of your Dutch oven and set aside.

Season the capon, inside and out, with the salt and pepper. Lay a round wire rack inside of the Dutch oven and place the seasoned capon on the rack. Scatter the vegetables around the bird, pour in the wine and stock or water, and sprinkle the hay on and around the bird. Lay the rope of dough on the rim of the pot, gently pressing the dough down to secure it, then cover the pot, gently pressing the lid down to create a tight seal.

Place the capon on the center rack of the oven and bake for 2 hours, or until the chicken is fully cooked through depending on the weight of the capon. Remove the Dutch oven from the oven and set aside for 15 minutes before opening the pot. Carefully open the pot and remove and discard the dough seal. Transfer the capon to a serving platter and loosely cover with foil to keep it warm while you make the sauce.

To make the sauce, strain the vegetables and hay out through a fine mesh sieve and put liquid into a clean medium saucepan. Bring cooking liquid to a boil over high heat and reduce by ½ cup, about 5 minutes. Reduce the heat to medium-low and add the butter, teaspoon by teaspoon, to the cooking liquid, stirring constantly, until the liquid has reduced to a thin sauce consistency. Season sauce to taste with salt and pepper and serve along side the capon in a gravy boat.

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*All recipes courtesy of Chef Irma Deutsch, Hotel Fletschhorn, Saas-Fee, Switzerland.*