

Zinalrothorn

4221 meters

28 July 2022

with

Thomi Zumtaugwald and Johann Williner



Our two guides: Johan Williner on the left, and Thomi Zumtaugwald on the right.

It has been a very hot summer following a near-snowless winter, and conditions are bad for mountaineering in the Alps. Well-known peaks such as the Matterhorn or Mont Blanc are 'closing' one after the other due to rockfall and other dangers. Many snowfields have turned to blue ice, or the glacier has disappeared, leaving unstable rock to navigate. Zinalrothorn is one of the few peaks that is still doable – or, so we hope! 😊



For this tour, we take the 'normal' route, starting from Rothornhütte at 3198 m (beyond the lower left corner in this photo), up through boulders, muddy scree, chimneys and hard snow to a flat ridge above two snowfields, then angle left up a steep face and through a long couloir. From the Gabel (notch) on the summit ridge (ca 4100 m), it's a further 120 m of steep and tricky climbing to the summit (4221 m). Returning, we head down the righthand ridge to Aeschhorn (3669 m).

For the hut climb the day before, we enjoy warm, mostly clear weather.

Just getting to the Rothornhütte from Zermatt, a 1600 m ascent, requires major output. But we clock an excellent time of 4 hours. At 2337 m, there is a well-earned break at Hugo's hotel - Hotel du Trift - in its lovely setting.



After an ice tea and a snack, we head up through meadows, over glacial streams and endless switchbacks, our goal in front of our eyes – the peak to the left of the hotel – although increasingly foreshortened.

With a bit over 90 minutes to go, we leave the stream bed and start a steep ascent up a curving glacial moraine. As we toil upwards, views of Zermatt's famous frontier crest open up. The peaks, from far left to right, are Dufourspitze, Liskamm, Castor & Pollux (their tops in cloud), Breithorn and on the far right, a sliver of Kleinmatterhorn.



Even with maximum camera zoom, Hotel du Trift looks tiny beneath us, perched on the lip of the Triftbach gorge.

Up this high, it's no longer balmy, but the strong sun and the exertion on the steep moraine mean no extra layers are needed on top of t-shirts and shorts.



We get to the well camouflaged Rothornhütte (3198 m) at 15.30. The terrace is amazingly warm, good for drying socks and boots.

Johann and Thomi arrive in the helicopter, along with a resupply of the hut's beverages.

We learn the hut is scheduled for a complete tear-down and reconstruction in 2023. There are no lights for the creaky, ancient wooden staircase inside. The WC kind of, umm, stinks.

We are glad for the roomy bunks, though, and for the friendly service.



At dinner, the menu is yummy risotto followed by yucky meringues. Although it's a full house, we sleep well.

As evening arrives, it's time to snap photos. Here's the top of the Matterhorn in sun, and the lower Gabelhorns, already in shadow.

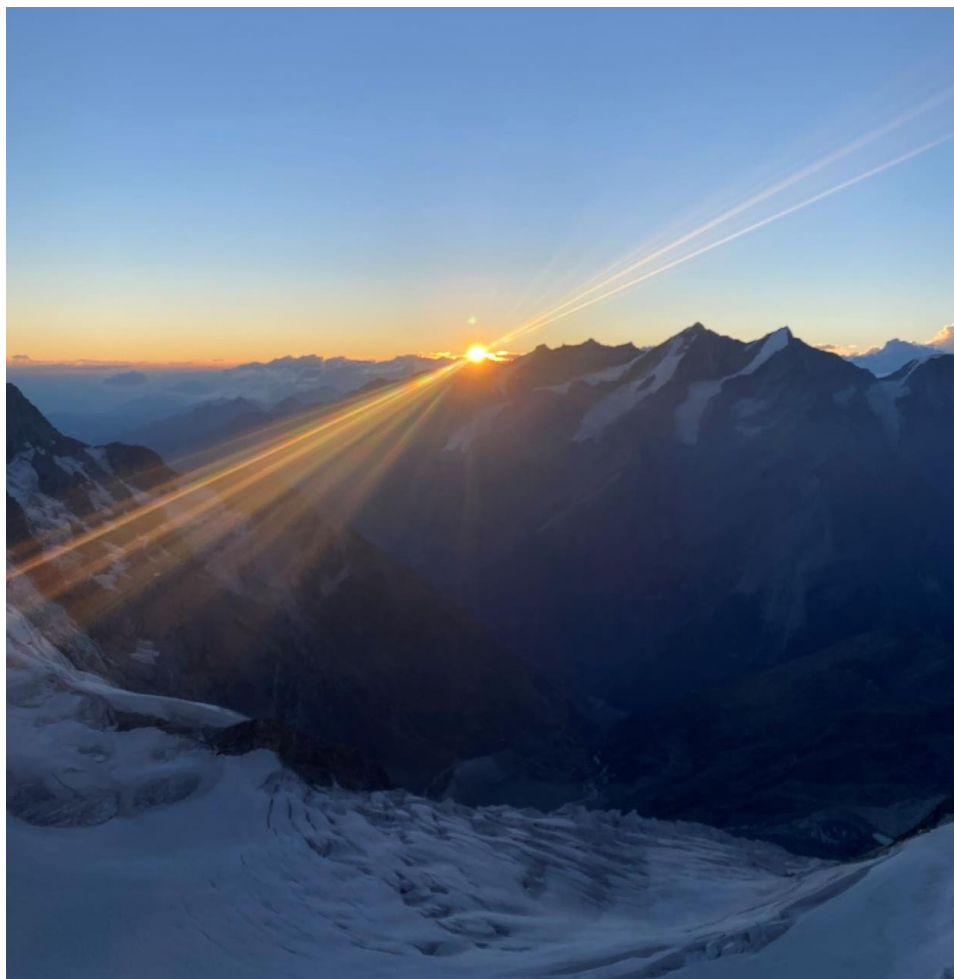


Time to get going!

We leave the hut at 4.00, jostling with numerous other parties, and ascend through glacial melt, scree, boulders and a very steep chimney (still in the dark). Soon, there is just one party ahead of us. M drags along at first, feeling yesterday's hut climb, and struggles with temperature regulation. But at some point, her second wind arrives, and everything's fine.

J and Thomi set the pace up the final snowfield (did somebody say 'steep'?) before we will transition on to rock. J is in super form. Here's Thomi just beneath the transition point, where we will take our only real break in the ascent. Up ahead, today's goal (Zinalrothorn summit) catches the rising sun.





It's 6.00 on a beautiful morning. We stop to catch our breath, stow our crampons and poles and enjoy some chocolate as well as views of the sunrise. Thomi is the most artistic photographer of the bunch, and these next few pix are his.



J with the Mischabel range in the distance.



Looking southwest, Dent Blanche.

OK, let's get moving again!

From here, nearly the whole route to the summit is visible; it's some 400 m above our heads.



First, we climb a steep rock face (red line with arrow) and then head up the couloir. Here we skirt loose boulders and twist and turn to find the simplest way up.

At 6.50, we reach the Gabel/notch (red X).

From the notch, we begin a stretch of rock-climbing stunts and thrills, some of them involving big steps across an abyss or inching along 'exposed places', as they say in the guidebooks. The left-hand shot is an example.

Note that Matterhorn, Obergabelhorn and Wellenkuppe form the backdrop.



Here is J on the summit ridge, having just completed the so-called Biner slab, an icy section with few holds (hence the iron post; can you spot it?). Johann and M are below, working their way up the slab.



The Biner slab is indeed a bit tricky and scary. Here's what it looks like from below, with the summit cross just visible to the top left. (Note our high-altitude alpine friend, climbing without crampons!)

Here are Johann and M, climbing the final few meters to the top. It's only 7.25, and we have done an amazing time (for us – 😊), reaching the summit in 3 hours and 25 minutes!



Thomi catches a very happy Jeff at the summit. One of J's favorite Valaisian peaks, Weisshorn, is behind him. This is the closest we have been to ol' Wysshoru (4505 m) in more than a decade.





This is the view
southeast
toward Italy,
across the
Mischabel range.

The two tallest
peaks are Dom
(left) and
Täschhorn, with
its icy white
north face.

Wow.

It's not really all that cold up here – maybe 2C – and the snack break is totally enjoyable. We are alone at the summit, except for the, umm, artwork.

M didn't realize until later that the party which soon joins us has come up the North ridge – something for us next year!





We start back down shortly before 8.00. Here's a final, over-the-shoulder look back to the pointed, tilted Zinalrothorn summit, at 4221 m.



Once we reach the Gabel/notch again (4100 m), it takes about 40 minutes to descend the couloir.

Owing to the very warm dry summer, the big couloir – as well as the rock section below it – is filled with loose rock. We move fast, using a series of Abseils to descend rapidly, to get back to our equipment depot on the snow. But these Abseils are vexing: It is so hard to spot the next peg, even if you know it is beneath you somewhere in the fall line. Where's the safest stand? Do I stop above the peg or beneath it?

This photo – taken at 3900 m – shows several parties who are still on their way up the couloir, when we are (finally!) done with it.

Here is Thomi at 9.15, descending the final bit beneath the couloir, with the summit receding into the realm of our adventure archives. Now wearing the crampons, we high-tail it down a mixed rock and snow rib, making a left turn to head for Aeschhorn. Hot and breathless, we have to scale one last small peak, the Aeschhorn, at 3669 m.

We have planned to treat ourselves to a helicopter lift back to Zermatt, from the landing spot at 3600 m. The weather is spectacular, despite some morning thermal clouds.



The Air Zermatt heli thunders into view at exactly 10.30. We have finished an hour earlier than expected! Our pilot, Simon Anthamatten (of rock climbing fame) tells us to hurry into the cabin, as he has a prank he wants to play



Yes indeed, we all take part in a sharp bank and swoop to ‘buzz’ a wedding party that Simon dropped off on the mountainside a half hour earlier!

From there, it’s only a few minutes to the Air Zermatt heliport.

This day has been spectacular – but it’s not our final climb of the season. So, as quickly as possible, we pile into Thomi’s car and head home, to rest up for tomorrow’s adventure.



Zinalrothorn 2022, Tour Stats

Distances

Zermatt train station to hut: 8 km

Hut to summit 2.5+ km

Summit to heli pickup: 3+ km

Total round-trip: 14 km

Ascents and Descents

Hut climb: 1600 meters up

Hochtour: 1055 meters up, 850 meters down
(including small ups and downs along the way)

Total ascent: 2655 meters

Times needed (including breaks)

Zermatt to hut: 4 hours

Hut to summit: 3 hrs 25 minutes

Summit to heli pickup: 2 hrs 45 minutes

Total time ‘on our feet’: 10 hrs 10 minutes