

Real Road Adventures: Schilthorn and Zermatt - Matterhorn

Hi, I'm Jeff Wilson. Picture yourself in a tiny alpine village, high up in the mountains, surrounded by equal parts scenic splendor, Swiss culture, and thrilling wilderness fun. This episode we soar thousands of feet above sea level - and we leave the cars and pollution far behind – to explore the mountain regions of the Schilthorn and Matterhorn!

[Standard open]

Tucked high up in the Alps, amid glacial canyons and flower-lined fields, there are small towns that are truly the apex of travel adventure. These are idyllic places, where the air is so fresh, the mountains so close... and the nature so pristine... you'll want to come back time and time again.

We've been traveling through Switzerland with an electric vehicle, but this episode is a little different.

EVs are great for getting you where you need to go and still feeling good about your carbon footprint. But there are places that are so special, that they're worth parking the car and going on car-free. And that's the theme for this episode: car-free mountain towns that model sustainable practices and still offer the ultimate in mountain adventure.

But don't think for minute things won't get charged up - from solar driven cable cars to electric trains and buses, we're embarking on an alpine odyssey that's fully powered for fun.

We'll explore two destinations featured on the E-Grand Tour of Switzerland, which is an organized mapping of the country's very best sites.

The E-Grand Tour is the world's first road trip for electric vehicles and features a network of hundreds of car charging stations

We'll start in Murren, a village located in the Lauterbrunnen Valley, just below the Schilthorn mountain. Then we'll head for Zermatt, tucked underneath the iconic Matterhorn.

The Lauterbrunnen Valley...it's like something out of a fantasy novel - perhaps even Middle Earth? That's no surprise. The "Lord of the Rings" film series may have been shot in New Zealand, but it was actually a trip to this area that inspired writer JRR Tolkien. It's hard to believe that such places even exist. This is land of giants: towering rock faces and dramatic cascading waterfalls.

When Tolkien's son visited the Alps, the author wrote to him: "I am delighted that you have made the acquaintance of Switzerland, and of the very part that I once knew best and had the deepest effect on me."

Hanging more than 5,300 feet above the valley floor is a shelf of Alpine pasture. It's a spot that seems destined to host the archetypal Swiss village. Looking for one of those special places lined with traditional chalets, colorful flowers, and enough activities to keep you busy for days? Murren fits the bill. You're hard pressed to find a spot in town that doesn't have an amazing view. And the icing on this alpine cake is that the town is car-free.

I am very excited about my first activity. Via Ferrata is Italian for "Iron Way." And oh man, is it a way to test your mettle.

Via Ferrata refers to a mountain route that's been equipped with devices such as steel cables, ladders, and bridges, designed to assist climbers. It allows adventurous types, even those with little climbing experience, to traverse difficult mountain ledges and vertical walls. You wear a harness that attaches to a steel cable to reduce the risk of dangerous falls.

The origins of via ferrata reach back centuries. The practice became more popular with the early alpine tourism of the 1800's. Later the routes were used by Italian soldiers in WWI to move weapons along steep mountain slopes.

The Murren Via Ferrata is about a mile and half long, part hiking trail and part assisted route. It takes you along exposed rocks and spectacular vertical cliffs.

Here the daunting power of glaciers is on full display. As you hang 2000 feet above the valley floor, cast your mind back about 35 million years to when the Alps were formed by a collision of tectonic plates that pushed the ground upwards. Now jump forward to the last ice age. Flowing rivers of ice drag gravel through the V-shaped valley, rubbing, scraping and grinding, and slowly transforming it into the U-shape it is today.

Let's celebrate the power of water! I mean, without it, none of us would even be here. We've seen how the force of glaciers can shape the land. And dramatic waterfalls help make this valley one of the most beautiful places in the world.

The name 'Lauterbrunnen' actually means 'many fountains.' Water also provides 100% of the electricity for the people who live here.

[Soundbites with EWL rep Karl]

Karl: In the Lauterbrunnen Valley we have the hydropower plant which is submitting the power for the whole valley actually.

Jeff: How long has hydropower been used here?

Karl: The plant has been built in 1905 and since then power is produced here for the whole valley. What needs to be added is that the power supply from the valley is alright in the summertime, but for the wintertime we need to get the hydropower from another plant little bit outside the valley.

Jeff: There's a lot of value in producing green energy and how is that reflected in what your customers are willing to pay for this power?

Karl: People are aware of this green energy and are willing to pay more for their energy as it is a green product. Especially the Schilthorn Cableway as one of the main clients, they are paying this extra amount of money to get the clean energy. But actually Switerland's already producing renewable energy since a hundred years and that's how it works.

I know, I know, I spend a lot of time talking about the views in Switzerland. But this next one is worth all the accolades. Today's destination: The Schilthorn.

There's only one way to get to the Schilthorn and that's from Murren via cable car.

On a clear day, the views from the Schilthorn are nothing short of spectacular. At an altitude of 9,700 feet, you get an unparalleled look at that famous triad: the Eiger (or ogre), the Monch, and the Jungfrau (or maiden). See how the monk is fending off the ogre to protect the maiden?

The Schilthorn dazzled international audiences and secured its place in Hollywood history when it was chosen as a primary location in the 1969 James Bond film, "On Her Majesty's Secret Service." Bond fans from around the world were slack-jawed at the hair-raising stunts that played out on these alpine slopes.

The Restaurant Piz Gloria, which doubled as the mountain-top hideaway of Bond villain Blofeld, is famous for being one of the world's first 360-degree rotating restaurants. We toast the Alps with glasses of sparkling Prosecco and dive into the James Bond Brunch buffet.

I've often wondered how the Swiss manage to get supplies to their well-equipped mountain resorts and restaurants. Take this bread, for example. The loaves are baked early in the morning in Lauterbrunnen on the valley floor.

They travel up the mountain via cable car and are offloaded at stations all along the way along the way. According to experts, this series of cable connections is the longest and most technically challenging airway ever built. It's been operated using hydro power since the early 1990's, and today solar panels generate even more energy.

Finally, the still-fresh bread lands here at the Piz Gloria Restaurant.

To come down the mountain, consider taking the cable car back to the station at Birg and hiking the rest of the way.

Here you'll find a steel and glass footbridge that clings to the mountain side. It's the most exciting aerial adventure you can have on two feet. They don't call this the "Thrill Walk" for nothing!

[Sound up: It's a ways down.]

About 650 feet long, it snakes its way down along the sheer vertical drops of the rock face. And the glass floor makes you feel as if you're descending through a surreal, alpine dreamscape.

If all that fresh mountain air makes you hungry again... you've got plenty of choices. Stop for lunch in Murren and order up a traditional fondue. It's the perfect way to warm up after a misty mountain hike.

If you like meeting people, having personal travel experiences, and delicious food, you need to visit a Swiss farm. Check with local tourist offices for farms that are open to visitors. I'm hanging out with a few of the friendly cows that belong to Thomas Rubin in the tiny town of Gimmelwald.

Thomas invites me to sample some of his fresh meats and cheeses.

[Soundbite Thomas]

Jeff: Try this piece. Mm

Thomas: It's good?

Jeff: It's really good. It's buttery but it has a lot of flavor.

Thomas: and you like schnapps?

Jeff: I love schnapps! And it goes with the food right? So you should taste the cheese and have the schnapps, right?

Thomas: Ok

Jeff: What do you say?

Thomas: Pröschtli

Jeff: Pröschtli. Oh it tastes like fresh pears. With a little kick.

When most people think of Switzerland, they think of Alps. For our next stop, we've got a premier alpine destination in store: Zermatt and its lofty neighbor the Matterhorn.

It's the icon of all alpine icons. An image that's figured in countless travel fantasies and inspired a Disney ride - the incomparable Matterhorn. At nearly 15,000 feet, it's one of the highest peaks in Europe.

The Matterhorn was first summited by a party led by Edward Whymper in 1865, a triumph that quickly turned tragic when four of its seven climbers fell to their deaths on the descent. But each year mountaineers still attempt to reach its daunting heights.

Researchers note that climate change is making the already risky ascent even more dangerous. Melting permafrost is causing more frequent rockfalls, landslides and other hazardous conditions. There are still lots of ways to safely view the mountain, but we'll get to that in a minute.

First things first. I parked my electric car in a garage in the town of Tasch, a few miles from Zermatt, and left it to charge.

A shuttle train drops me at the station in the center of Zermatt.

It's easy to get around town on the city's electric buses and taxis. These vehicles, with their distinctive rectangular shape, have been around for decades. They're emissions-free and most are built right here in town. They make up the backbone of Zermatt's transportation system.

Zermatt is one of Switzerland's most sustainable resort towns. Local businesses have demonstrated a real commitment to responsible use of resources.

Before I take on the mountains, I drop my bag at the Cervo Mountain Resort. I like this hotel because it was the first one in the region to be awarded an Ixos Fairstay label, which is a Swiss guarantee of sustainability based on EU Ecolabel standards.

The hotel has its own geothermal heat pump and solar panels. And it generates up to 95 percent of its own energy requirements for heating and hot water.

[Soundbite]

Daniel: We collect the heat of the water. Say if you shower here at a certain temperature you regain that heat. Of course not the water that's only used once but that all helps. Including the spa we achieve to heat the entire resort with that extension with it. That's one thing.

Cervo's restaurants use only local products and emphasize vegetarian food. The goal is to eventually become a zero-waste hotel.

One of the things that surprises visitors is just how accessible the Matterhorn really is. I mean, you don't have to be an experienced trekker or have any special gear to get that "so close you can almost touch it" feeling.

From the valley station in Zermatt, I need to take several cable cars to get high up on the mountainside. The gondolas soar over the forests and meadows just outside Zermatt, heading up to the rough, rocky, slopes of the Alps.

At the Trockener Steg station we change to another car. The company that runs this station has been using a photovoltaic system since 2010. The 99 solar modules here generate around 20,000 kilowatt hours per year.

There are two parallel cars that cover the final stretch of the ride. If you can, hop on the Matterhorn Glacier Ride. It's ultra-high tech, especially the four cabins known as "the crystal ride." A few minutes into the ride, the opaque glass floors turn transparent, showing a phenomenal view below as you fly over the glacier that wraps around the base of the Matterhorn. The effect is done using an electric current that turns the white glass to clear.

The car drops us on Klein Matterhorn at more than 12,000 feet of elevation.

Ahh! Breathe in that fresh alpine air! Ok, it's a little thinner up here. I mean, some people find it exhilarating, but others find, well it saps their energy and takes some time to acclimate to. So, take it slow to see how your body reacts.

The Matterhorn is a mountain that won't be constrained by manmade maps, straddling the border of Switzerland and Italy. The name literally means "peak in the meadows," which seems unexpectedly benign for such a force of nature.

Nearly fifty feet below its surface, the glacier conceals an icy, mystical realm. A network of tunnels, infused with soft music and lighting, forms the world's highest glacier palace. Intricate natural formations and crevices line this frozen labyrinth. And tucked in tunnel alcoves are luminous sculptures, regularly reimagined by local ice artists.

Everywhere I turn in Switzerland, I discover impressive efforts at sustainability.

[Soundbite Katherine]

Katherine: This is where we generate the solar power. It's enough power to feed about 15 households.

Besides having terrific views and great food, the Restaurant Matterhorn Glacier Paradise has a Minergie P certificate, which is a Swiss certification program for buildings with low-energy-consumption. Pretty impressive for being Europe's highest mountain restaurant.

[Soundbite Katherine]

Katherine: This makes us more or less self-sustaining

To keep their environmental footprint small, they use a microbiological wastewater treatment plant and circular heating systems.

With more than 240 miles of marked mountain trails in the Zermatt area, hikers will think they've died and gone to heaven. I'm exploring the Gorner Gorge, an easy hike that winds through a spectacular mountain canyon. The gentle incline takes a couple of hours, but there are several options depending on how much you want to walk. Wear sturdy shoes, as the trail is rocky in places, and be prepared for fickle weather, even in the summer.

It's hard for me to come to Switzerland and not think about trains. Well, I've got the perfect train to highlight for our sustainability theme.

The Gornergrat Bahn is actually Switzerland's first electrically powered rack railway. Today virtually all of the Swiss rail system is electrified, but back when this train opened in 1898 it was considered a sensation. Now it's Europe's highest open-air cogwheel train. It gently chugs its way up the mountainside, passing by its namesake, the massive Gorner Glacier on the way to the 10,000-foot summit.

The viewing platform at the top delivers 360-degree views of the surrounding peaks.

This is a chance to savor the immensity of the Alps, to allow the sheer power and beauty of the mountains to filter through you. For me, being here is both humbling and inspiring. It creates within me an even stronger sense of protectiveness toward the environment.

A century ago, there was talk of building a railway to the summit of the Matterhorn. But developers had to drop the plan when it was met with outrage from Swiss citizens. They proclaimed that the Alpine peaks were "the ideological property of the entire Swiss population and hence are not for sale."

The last time I visited Zermatt, I trekked to a barn to visit with some friendly locals - aka blacknose sheep. This time I'm meeting my old pals on their own turf.

[Soundbites]

Jeff: Hi guys. Like to be scratched right behind the ears. You're pushy, yeah you're pushy, but you know, that's what makes a successful blacknose sheep.

Amadé: This blacknose sheep is especially in this area. Twice a year they're cutting the wool, in springtime and in fall they're cutting the wool, and the whole summer they're up here then.

The blacknose sheep originated here in the alpine canton of Valais and have frolicked in these parts for at least 600 years. They're hardy and well-adapted to grazing on mountain terrain. But these days, even the sheep are going high-tech.

[Soundbites]

Amadé: In my time, I also had a lot of sheep like that. And the bells, I knew exactly what kind of sheep has what kind of bell. Ah they're way over there! That's exactly the right bell. And today, this one here has a GPS.

Jeff: Right.

Amadé: GPS is the newest thing.

Jeff: Sure.

Amadé: You know exactly and you can see on your phone

Jeff: Where your sheep are.

Amadé: Makes it easier for the shepherd.

Jeff: It's a sheep app. That's all I need is to get myself a sheep app and I can have my own herd.

Amadé: It's a lot easier now.

Their legions of fans dub them the “cutest sheep in the world.” I mean, let’s face it, all sheep are pretty cute, but these little faces do kick it up a notch.

There’s no shortage of outdoor fun in Zermatt. I just got a tip that the nearby Sunnegga Paradise area is a great place for mountain biking, so that’s where I’m headed next.

You can rent bikes in Zermatt, then take a five-minute funicular ride to the park. The name Sunnegga translates to “sunny corner,” since this spot reportedly gets the most rays in Zermatt. Today it’s definitely living up to its name.

I’m loving riding these trails!

Sunnegga has more than 60 miles of hiking and biking trails, offering a fantastic opportunity to explore. The tracks are well maintained and there are published guidelines to help make sure wildlife isn’t disturbed. I fly across along ski runs where in winter downhillers find fun. And I coast into the hush of forest passages. And the best part? What else, the views.

When I first visited the Alps, it was the start of a life-long love affair with Switzerland.

It’s so heartening to see all the forward-looking work that’s being done here... to preserve this land’s natural beauty... and mountain wonder.

Thanks for coming along as we explored car-free towns of Murren and Zermatt, and the peaks of the Schilthorn and Matterhorn!

Join us again as we find more sustainable destinations on “Real Road Adventures!”