

HARDTAIL HOLIDAYS

SWI

40 December MÖLLER

SINGLETRACKING IN TZERLAND

Ah, the joys and simplicity of a hardtail. Strong, reliable, they're great on your local loop... but can a hardtail cut it on the long and lumpy Alpine descents of Switzerland?

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Sometimes old school is new school, it's just the old schoolers don't know it yet. Take the hardtail. They are the past and the future of MTB; everyone will learn how to ride one at some point in their personal development, learn the finesse, the hurt, the need to steer around an unforgiving line without several inches of suspension travel as an escape route. For its 21st anniversary, Marin chose to

relaunch a hardtail. I'm no Luddite (unlike Jo Burt -Ed) and I embrace suspension technology when I need to, but I confess a certain reluctance to ride a seemingly unstoppable juggernaut that comes with 5in or 6in of travel. I seem to manage to ride most terrain on my hardtail, both up and down, I enjoy the challenge, and there are plenty of us hardtailers out there...

However, I was about to ride in the



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proper big Alp mountains, and the thought of what I had just agreed was making me a little anxious. "Get a grip. Is it the man or the machine that makes the rider? Just throw on a big set of tyres and get on with it," I hear a little voice in my head, whispering, persistently. And my better sense agrees.

But this is the Alps we're talking about. Big. Lumpy. Rocky. *The Alps!*

On the piste

To go and ride a three-day trip in Zermatt in Switzerland is the sort of invitation that would have most rider-cum-photographers twitching in their trackmitts and I was no exception. Dreamy ribbons of singletrack winding through Alpine pastures, technical rocky descents and long, rewarding climbs all washed down with a bucket of fondue and a thimble full of the kind of coffee in which you can stand a spoon up in. "Sounds great, I'll be there," I say accepting the



Above: Kalpertran, probably the best gondola in the world. Definitely the smallest
Top: Big Al gets the 'horn every time he rides Zermatt even on his hardtail

offer. I can already taste the cheese. But as soon as I put the phone down a niggler of doubt sets in, the same niggler that creeps up on every hardtailer, every XC racer lined up on the start line, and the niggler says, "Is my bike up to this? Am I up to this?"

I'm familiar with riding in the Alps, but it's usually at my own pace. To tag along with an MTB guide from On The Piste (OTP – www.mountainbiking.uk.com) is a very different challenge altogether, especially on a hardtail. The niggler is back and going strong, "Full face helmets, body armour, chairlifts, full suspension..." But maybe it's right. Isn't that what mountain biking is

recent visit by freeride god and Rocky Mountain hucker Ritchey Schley. They weren't on hardtails. A quick scout around the OTP website reveals the pinnacle of an average week as a 13km downhill. My trackmitts feel wet with cold sweat. I'd still be halfway down while the other riders were already supping on their second or third beer. I might even miss supper.

Tranquillity & titanium

Alighting from the train that serves the tranquil and refreshingly car-free resort, I'm greeted by Al Pittar, one of OTP's two main MTB guides. He's still in riding gear, complete with bike and the unmistakable odour that says he's just finished a ride. I take one look at the guy that I feared would wreak havoc with my hardened old-school attitude and breath a big sigh of relief. As he extends one hand to greet me, his other is left clutching his bike, a titanium hardtail. Big Al rides a hardtail! I instantly feel relieved, a weight lifts from my shoulders, the world just became a better place. Things are looking up. He's even sporting a peakless lid that wouldn't look out of place in the Tour de France. "The peak ended up falling off," he quips in defence of his XC race styled helmet. For a moment I believe him, but later after riding with Al, I would come to supine that he had deliberately pulled off the peak in allegiance with the old-school and current peak-versus-peakless dichotomy of style.

I'm excited and relieved, but I haven't met the rest of the group

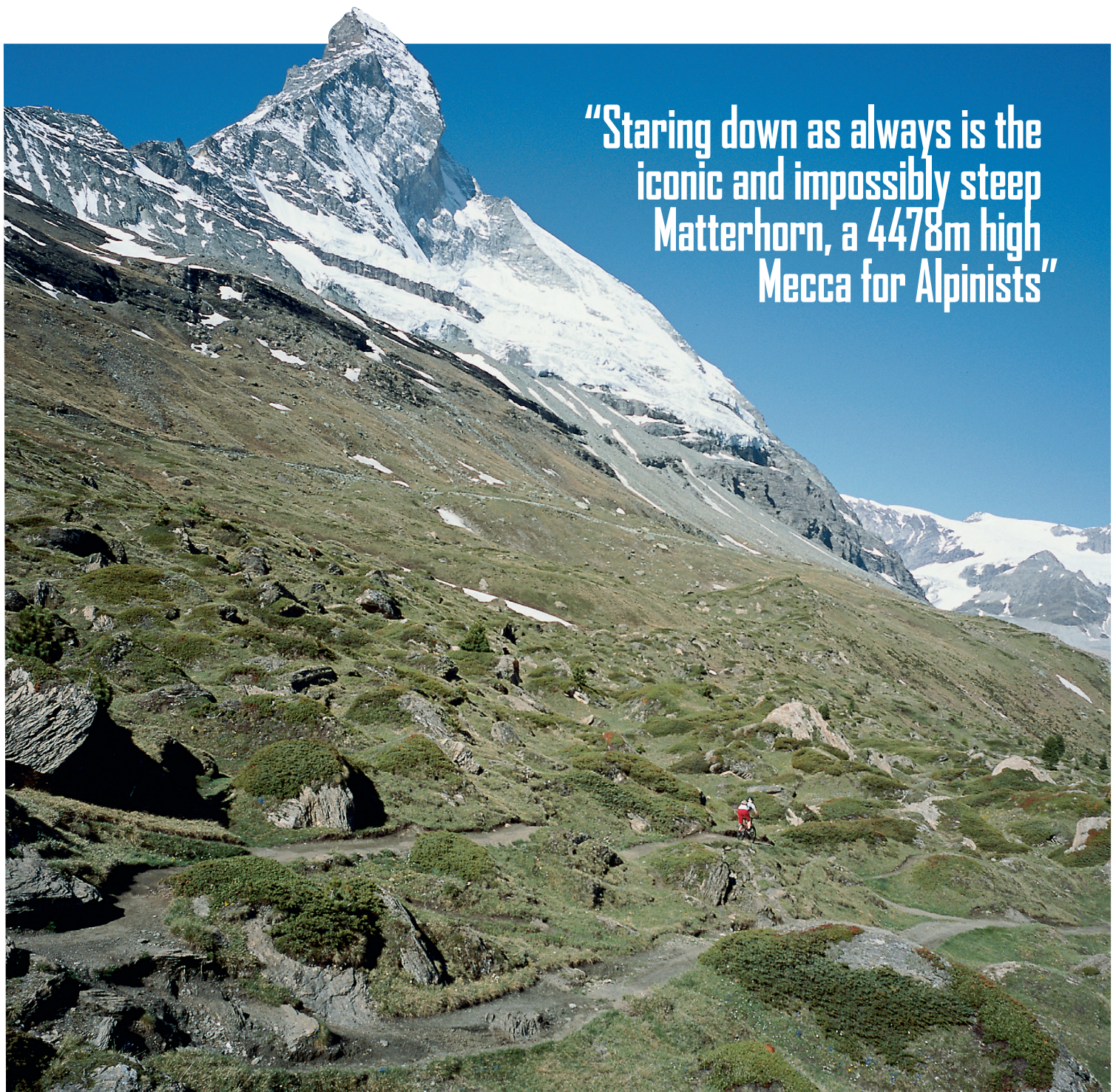
"Dreamy ribbons of singletrack winding thro' Alpine pastures, technical rocky descents..."

all about nowadays? That's what was bugging me, the bit about the rear travel. The fact that I didn't have any was making me ponder how the hell I would keep up with a group of bouncy-biked riders? I don't mind riding at the back, but I hate getting left behind.

"Pro-pedal, suspension sag, bolt through axles" the little niggling voice continues as I reach for the broadband to check out Zermatt.

Coverage of Zermatt, the quiet Swiss singletrack goldmine, has been creeping into the media lately, largely fuelled by images from a





“Staring down as always is the iconic and impossibly steep Matterhorn, a 4478m high Mecca for Alpinists”

yet. Over welcome drinks at The North Wall Bar, I get to eye up the other riders whose rear wheels I would no doubt be chasing along the myriad of trails that has put Zermatt firmly on the MTB map. They're a group of stocky fire fighters from the Midlands, a mass of muscles and cheery banter, out on a long weekend break. They're all sporting full suss rigs. I know it's not a competition and despite the allegiance I feel with Al, I feel my day of reckoning may have arrived.

All aboard

Al has been riding Zermatt for eight years, and of course knows the trails like the back of his gloved hand. For the first day of our mini-break he's decided to ease the pain of the big climb up to Gornergrat by jumping aboard the ancient cog train. Squeezing us and bikes

in among the Japanese tourists at about the same hour as Tokyo's morning bustle begins it strikes me that Al has a pretty unique commute to work. We tumble out of the train with the Japanese at a giddy 3100 metres altitude and climb onto our bikes, pausing for a moment to take in the views and, for those that have them, don the elbow and kneepads that seem almost obligatory attire for riding nowadays. A jumble of peaks and glaciers spill out in all directions as if scattered by a giant clumsy toddler and to our right, twinkling in the morning light, sits the town of Zermatt some 1500m below. Staring down on the town as always is the iconic and impossibly steep pyramid of the Matterhorn, a 4478m high Mecca for alpinists, while behind us is the ubiquitous concrete-domed, missile-concealing building that seemed to star in

Above: Feeling horny? The Matterhorn looks over Jeff as he rides his 'local loop' of pump jumps and berms
Below: OTP ride guide Big Al leads the way on the Alpine singletrack



every Bond film I ever saw as a kid. “No Mr Bond, I expect you to die,” I can almost hear the words reverberating around its lofty ceiling. Yes, everything was here; it's 100 per cent Alps including a whopping big descent in front of us.

It's the second week of June, still early in the year to be riding at the sort of altitude at which just sitting still leaves you breathless and we find that here and there the trail disappears beneath swathes of snow. Secretly I welcome the chance to pull up and gawp at the views; the trail we are on – a staircase of unforgiving rock that commands respect and concentration – certainly doesn't permit such sightseeing while riding. We spiral down through barren rock fields and between pockets of awakening alpine flowers, while playing leapfrog with huddles





Forest trails give some reprieve from the midday heat

of hikers sporting cagoules until we pass the volcanic looking peak of the Riffelberg. Alongside a cascading stream, the trail leads us between bulbous bedrock before emerging onto a grassy hillside, where we send marmots scurrying for cover.

Free willies

We pause again to take in the view affording Big Al an opportunity to drop in the first of the day's words of caution, "Take it easy along here as it's a bit exposed." The trail, although not as technical as the rock-strewn field we'd left behind, is enough to give me a mild case of the willies. The grassy hillside slopes down to the left of the trail in a way that suggests that a fall down

"I hang my weight back, feather my brakes, and ease my bike down several rocky steps..."

there would be a long one, and the last you'd ever take. Al doesn't always take clients along this trail he confesses. "I assess a rider's ability first; it's not for everyone," he says as if this should make me feel safer, and with a glint in his eye steers his Titanium machine off across the traverse.

Before long we drop off the end of the hillside down a spiral of technical switchbacks that have me sweating from concentration

Below: "You want technical trails? I'll give you technical," says Big Al as he shows us the way down from high above Zermatt

alone. I hang my weight over the back wheel, feathering my brakes and easing the bike down several rocky steps. Two-point-one inches of inflated rubber is all I have for a rear shock but it seems to work. I'm in no hurry, enjoying the challenge of a trials-like section. It's all about balance and weight shift I remind myself, front wheel up over this rock, watch that bit to the right, ease it down off there, let the legs absorb the jolt. My calf muscles are burning. I make the mistake of glancing at the foreboding exposure on one switchback, inevitably lose my bottle and I'm forced to dismount. Walking a couple of switchbacks may be humbling but I'd rather live to ride again than show bravado this early in the game. And anyway, I've already decided that I'll be back for another go at it, sometime before I get old.

At the bottom as we regroup, nobody seems to mind having to wait; everyone has had their 'moment' somewhere along the trail it seems, their crisis of confidence, or mistimed hop over tube pinching rocks.

The trail eases us into lunch mode, opening up and letting us swoop down its last couple of kilometres. The singletrack is plush, lying deep in rust coloured larch needles, the tree roots rising like ripples in a badly laid carpet. A perfect floaty descent for hardtail and full suss alike. It's a relief not to have to concentrate so hard and





“The amazing permissive ‘hiking’ trails are so good to ride that I’d forgotten the ‘disadvantage’ of my hardtail”

I lose myself in the smell of pine, then suddenly we are back among the streets of Zermatt, where the only decision to make is which café is going to serve the apple strudel.

Zealots in Zermatt

Mountain biking is still relatively new to Zermatt, and it’s clear that the tourist office used to dealing with buses of pensioners doesn’t yet know how to fully respond to the sport’s energy and enthusiasm. There’s little in the way of purpose built bike trails and certainly no North Shore to huck, but there are a lot of kilometres of amazing permissive ‘hiking’ trails to ride. Fortunately OTP’s boss Jeff Michel has been operating in Switzerland for over 15 years as a winter and summer ski holiday operator and he’s both known and respected by the powers that be. The MTB side of his operation, spearheaded by Al and fellow guide and photographer Chris Patient now finds itself in the enviable position of being able to talk to the resort of Zermatt at an early stage and to be on hand to advise as the MTB scene undoubtedly grows. No doubt

dedicated trails with berms and tabletops will follow at some point, but for the moment it’s just nice to feel welcome.

That night over a beer or two, Jeff asks me how the day has been. For once I’m a bit stuck for words. I’ve been treated to two of Big Al’s favourite trails in a single day, and all that from a person I’d only met a few hours earlier. What can I say? The riding’s been so good that I’d clean forgotten the ‘disadvantage’ of my hardtail.

Although from my hotel window the snow at altitude is still clearly visible, the next day starts with all the hazy signs of searing summer temperatures. We get a head start on the heat by taking the train and cable car combo up to 2571m. There are many good XC climbs to be conquered around Zermatt but Big Al has put aside the day for the ‘Downhill Club’, a day spent cramming in as many descents as possible, culminating in the same inviting but somewhat intimidating 13km descent that had aroused the niggling voice in me a week earlier. While in other Alpine locations a day of downhill often means coating the body armour with dust accrued

Above: “Don’t forget to duck,” warns Big Al as he leads Dan along one of his secret trails, more commonly used by tiny mining gnomes

from laps on the same descent Al’s route involves using only two lifts to knit together a maze of different singletrack descents. In all we would drop more than 3000m by the end of the day; a test indeed for any self respecting disk brake worth its weight in hydraulic fluid, whatever rig it’s fitted to.

Pushing your limits

Out of the lift and above tree line we snake along a twisting line of singletrack, before turning our backs on Zermatt and starting to drop down the neighbouring valley. Bringing up the rear as usual I’m soon clinging to the back wheel of the group in a test of reflexes, railing bends and hopping rain bars in an attempt to keep up with the full-suss boys. If the group’s fire-extinguishing skills are as impressive as their trail riding then the Midlands has nothing to worry about. Keeping them in my sights proves futile but I no longer care. It’s worth a try and I soon find myself letting off the brakes and pushing my own abilities a little further than I’m used to. It’s a blast. In fact I can’t



Above: The trails wind their way down through ancient, remote farmsteads filled with the sound of tinkling cow bells and whistling marmots



“Today is ‘Downhill Club’ day: yet 45km and 3000m of descending later and we still haven’t ridden the same trail twice”

remember having so much fun on a fast descent for a while. Maybe there is something in this chasing the full sussers idea? Timing along here is everything though whether on a hardtail or full susser, and I pass one of the group pulled up at the side. Despite his 5in of travel, he’s a victim of the snakebite rock slabs that punctuate the trail. I catch up with the group at the first junction, where Big Al has stopped to gather his flock. He knows what lies ahead and in a commendable display of altruism he wants, “Nobody to take a wrong turn and miss out on what will be of the best switchback descents you’ll find anywhere.” For the next forty minutes we drop, grunt up tight little climbs that have the big travel riders enviously eyeing up our two hardtails and then drop again, all of it on fast swooping trails, eventually emerging from the forest blinking

in the sunlight to roll into the sleepy village of Tasch. Everyone’s sporting enormous grins and if the film *Brokeback Mountain* hadn’t already been on general release, I feel man-hugs might have been handed out such was the group elation. We’re just another mixed group of riders all sharing the same trail buzz.

A welcome and well-earned refuelling break at a café in Tasch lets the adrenaline flood recede before being unleashed once more by the riding The Cresta run – so named for its smooth and almost luge-like berms that kick us out in Kalpertran where we take a reprieve from the heat of the day, letting perhaps the smallest gondola in Europe take the strain. Hardtail or not, I’m happy to let it whisk me and bike 400m up what would have been a punishing climb even without pedal induced suspension bob.

Above: Wherever you are riding in Zermatt it’s hard to escape the Matterhorn. At Riffelberg Big Al leaves a huddle of hikers behind and within minutes finds a little singletrack solitude

To die for

By the look of the tons of splintered rock precipitously perched above Kalpertran it’s questionable that this lift will still be there in years to come. My advice is to give OTP a call and come and use it while it still exists. The descent is to die for, or to die on if you get it wrong. From the summit the trail dives straight into a series of cleanable switchbacks, the trail’s so loose it serves up a traction challenge to the braking abilities of hardtail and full suss bikes alike. This time with the slower, testing terrain levelling the odds, I’m hot on the heels of the full sussers and loving it. Just as our fingers start to ache, we are spat out onto a rolling balcony a hundred metres above a tumbling alpine river. Out of the forest again the intense afternoon heat hits us and I half expect my



Above: Hardtail or full susser, you need to have your wits about you on these tight and steep Swiss trails

gaze to be met by the azure blue of the Mediterranean rather than a wooded mountain side. Not that I'm complaining you understand. Half an hour later we're spinning our way alongside the river to pull up in Visp. Visp? I remember passing that place on my way to Zermatt. "Yeah," says Big Al, "we're about 45km from Zermatt." 45km and 3000m of descending and we haven't ridden the same trail twice. I think about what we've just ridden, beaming like a maniac like a kid who's suddenly realised he has a secret and is itching to tell the whole world.

"You know what Big Al", I say, "I don't know about this hardtail thing. I think we need to do that ride again to decide." My guise is as transparent as the water in the river beside us. He can see straight through me, but nods in agreement. Popping his helmet back on he grins, "Let's go and see then, eh?" ●

TRY IT FOR YOURSELF **Travel and resort info**

→ Getting there

The nearest airport is Geneva. OTP packages include free travel on Swiss railways from any Swiss airport (there are hourly trains from Geneva). Flights aren't included in the package price but can be arranged on flights through their partner the Swiss Travel Office. Self-drive packages are available.

→ Staying there

While OTP doesn't offer its own place you have a choice of accommodation in self-catering apartments or in 2-5 star hotels according to price. Hotel accommodation is half board. Five days of MTB guiding as well as half price lift passes (and free carriage of bikes on the mountain lifts) is included. Bikes can be hired and arranged in Zermatt. Wednesday is typically the guides day off, so if you need a rest from riding (I doubt you will in Zermatt) then there is summer

glacier skiing or snowboarding available if you're still feeling active. OTP packages start at £299 pp.

→ The guides

OTP has partnered up with the Swiss and Zermatt tourism boards and has all the logistics and the mountain biking well worked out. Between them Al and Chris have over 20 years of riding experience in Zermatt and can tailor rides to any ability, including beginners. While there are double tracks, most of the riding is geared



toward singletrack devotees wanting a variety of technical and rolling trails rather than just downhill. Full suss XC machines are the weapon of choice in the alps, able to cope with the ups as well as the rocky, rooty descents, however, I rode a hardtail and lived to tell the tale. A typical week may include over 1000m of descending (most on singletrack) so make sure your brakes are in good condition.

→ When to go

The Zermatt MTB season is open from beginning of June to the end of October. The altitude at which you will ride may be determined by the weather, and as it's a mountain town storms are possible any time of the year, and there will be snow above 2500m in June and October. July and August are obviously the busiest months for tourists and hikers in the Alps.

→ Go to www.mountainbiking.uk.com or telephone in the UK: 0871 871 8084.

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