

# The mountain calls

Assignment on the Matterhorn



← Hut warden Kurt Lauber and the plumbers Davy Bregy and David Kummer (from left to right) treat themselves to a break. The Hörnli ridge – the classic route up the Matterhorn – begins directly behind the new Hörnli hut.

→ Safely landed once again. All the materials have to be transported by helicopter, which necessitates perfect coordination between the various trades.



Quite a number of adventurous individuals have made history on the famous Matterhorn. The plumbers David Kummer and Davy Bregy are no different, but they didn't even have to climb to the summit of the 4,478-metre-high mountain. Instead, their adventure took place a thousand metres further down.

The minor turbulence doesn't faze the Air Zermatt pilot. He gently sets the helicopter skids on the platform and both man and material have arrived safely at their destination – the Hörnli hut (Hörnlihütte), 3,260 metres above sea level. Behind the hut, the terrifying east wall of the Matterhorn towers almost vertically towards the heavens. It appears close enough for you to touch. The summit, on the other hand, is hidden behind wispy clouds, as is often the case early in the morning. David Kummer and Davy Bregy have already been able to marvel at the "Mountain of Mountains" in all weathers and at all times of the day and night. As sanitary professionals from the Swiss company Lauber IWISA, it was their job to get to grips with the water issue up here.

#### What a start!

For 20-year-old Davy Bregy, the assignment on the Matterhorn coincided with the completion of his apprenticeship – not bad! He couldn't agree more: "This highlight will be hard to top", he says with a grin. Together with David Kummer, the newly qualified "mountain plumber" is now standing on the wooden terrace and watches the freshly unloaded helicopter take to the air once again before roaring almost head first towards the valley in an audacious manoeuvre.

#### The Matterhorn legend

For a long time, the Matterhorn was considered to be unclimbable. However, when the English climber Edward Whymper reached the peak on 14 July 1865 as part of a climb that saw four members of the seven-member rope team fall to their deaths during the descent, it did not dampen the fascination for this mountain. On the contrary, the mysterious circumstances surrounding the accident are part of the Matterhorn legend to this day. Some years, up to 3,000 climbers attempt the ascent. "Like all famous mountains, the Matterhorn is also underestimated", explains hut warden Kurt Lauber. "And yet it is and remains one of the most difficult four-thousanders in the Alps." Awareness-raising campaigns have helped significantly reduce the number of deaths. Kurt Lauber points out that the new Hörnli hut building is also a response to the overuse of the Matterhorn: "We have reduced the number of beds and issued a ban on camping in the surrounding area in order to improve hygiene and reduce water consumption." With a range of products, Geberit is helping to ensure that ecological mountaineering on the Matterhorn gets a fair crack of the whip.



Shortly before being put into operation: Project Manager Pascal Zenhäusern from the company Lauber IWISA (middle) discusses the final steps with the plumbers. The collected meltwater is now pumped up to the hut via a 250-metre-long suspended pipe.



vre. Both can't help laughing at the ease with which the pilot goes about this dangerous job. The pair have experienced first-hand just what these aerial acrobats are made of. "One time it took several attempts to land", recalls David Kummer. "The gusts were simply too strong, and we were sent hurtling away from the landing site several times." And the pilot? He delivered everyone safely without even batting an eyelid. That was sometime in summer 2014, back when the work was in full swing.

A year has since passed, a new mountain summer has arrived and the peak season for mountaineers is just around the corner. The starting point of the most popular alpine climbing route will soon be crowded with Matterhorn fans from all over the world. However, before they set off to make an assault on the hut and then on the summit, there is still work to be completed.

### A desert of rock, ice and snow

In addition to provisions, painting equip-

ment and the photographer from an architecture magazine, the helicopter has today also flown in Pascal Zenhäusern. He is the Project Manager at Lauber IWISA and a dyed-in-the-wool mountain man, just like his two colleagues with whom he wants to discuss the final pieces of work. The three men climb over several drop sheets and proceed towards the lounge in the new part of the hut. Huge windows reveal a clear view of the south and east, where some of the highest alpine peaks – including Dufourspitze and the Monte Rosa Massif – adorn the horizon. The planning for the prestigious "new Hörnli hut" project kicked off in 2010, with the demolition work on the old building (whose foundation now serves as helicopter landing pad) beginning in 2013. However, nobody had a clue at the outset as to how to sort out the water issue.

The man at the next table with a slender physique and weather-beaten face could tell you a thing or two about the water issue. It would be fair to say that Kurt Lauber is a

legend here on the Matterhorn, having been a mountain guide and rescuer for 30 years and now entering his 21<sup>st</sup> season as hut warden. One thing's for sure – it is going to be a very special one for the "Guardian of the Matterhorn." "We're now starting a new chapter", he says. "To date, our summers have been like those of the desert Tuaregs. The constant worry as to whether the water will last accompanied us the whole time." Hard to fathom considering that water is rushing through the valley down below, but this water is unfortunately out of reach to those sitting up here at this lofty height.

### Eureka!

The three-man team from Lauber IWISA sets off. Their short walk leads them over a steep boulder field beneath the hut to the next ledge. Having arrived at their destination, Pascal Zenhäusern points at a tiny dot below a snowfield – it is the lid of a water tank. "We noticed that meltwater sometimes gathers here in a depression. That was our eureka moment." The necessary



← The foundation (right) is all that is left of the old mountain hut. The new building section (left) complements the historical mountain lodge "Belvédère", which dates back to 1911.

## The new Hörnli hut

**Opened:** 14 July 2015

**Open:** July to September

**Capacity:** 130 beds (previously 170), 152 seats at the restaurant (previously 90)

**Concept:** Arnold Perren Zurniwen GmbH, Architektur & Design, Zermatt

**Technical building systems:** Lauber IWISA AG, Naters

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→ A look inside a utility room: The giant tanks for grey water are proof that every single drop of water is valuable up here.

calculations were quickly made and they set about sinking a 180-cubic-metre water tank into the rocky ground right beside the natural reservoir. From here, the water is pumped to the hut elevated 230 meters above. The water pipe is suspended by a type of alpine Golden Gate Bridge structure. It is a first to collect the water here southeast of the Hörnli hut. Since the construction of the first Hörnli hut in 1880, water had always been taken from a glacier north of the hut – a decent reservoir that was, however, not without its snags: "Up here, we sometimes also have cold spells in the summer", explains Pascal Zenhäusern. "If everything were to freeze during such a spell, the sunlight on the north face of the Matterhorn would no longer suffice to melt the ice from August onwards and the most important source would run dry." Not so in the east.

An eerie rumble echoing from the rugged cliffs suddenly rings out. Somewhere, an avalanche of snow and ice is plummeting

towards the valley; you hear it long before your eyes can spot it as a small white cloud against the vast vertical backdrop. "When we resumed work this year, we had to first of all spend three days repairing the water intake", explains David Kummer on the way back to the hut. "An avalanche during the winter had ripped the feed pipe from its bracing." This meant he had to unpack his crampons and spend some time repairing the damage. Working on a construction site in the mountains means you have to be prepared for the unexpected.

### "Starship Hörnli"

Because you can feel almost as isolated in the Hörnli hut as on a spaceship, assignments outside at the water tank were like spacewalks for David Kummer and Davy Bregy. They spent two whole summers on probably the most spectacular and isolated construction site far and wide, flying in on Monday and returning on Friday. This is a long time, particularly when you are 20 (or 25, like David Kummer). "You do have to

sacrifice a lot", he confirms, "but the challenge – the special situation awaiting you up here – makes up for it. Apart from the location, the technology and organisation were also a major challenge." An example? "When ordering materials, we had to think very carefully about exactly what we needed and when", explains David Kummer. "If you start on a job and then realise that something is missing, you have a problem – namely huge additional costs." Although Air Zermatt with its "Top Gun pilots" is one of the project sponsors alongside Geberit Switzerland, extra flights were not budgeted for. ←