

A race of superlatives

by Andrea Schneider

With nearly two thousand metres of altitude behind you and with the Matterhorn in sight – what more reason do you need to battle your way on to the finish of the Zermatt Marathon at Riffelberg?

The 8th edition of the race had almost 1500 finishers, again breaking the record for participation. This is not surprising, because the Zermatt Marathon is full of superlatives. The event has the potential to become the shooting star of the Alpine races. Here are eight reasons, why the Zermatt Marathon, which takes place on 10 July next year, should be in your race calendar:

The Matterhorn: After the red and white national flag the Matterhorn, with an altitude of 4478m, is the identifying symbol of Switzerland par excellence. It is also considered to be the most beautiful mountain in the world and decorates the front page of nearly all guidebooks. Time and time again runners can catch a glimpse of the triangular peak of the Matterhorn which takes the breath away. At the finish on the Riffelberg they can look at another 28 four thousand metre mountains.

The challenge: With 1944m of climbing - and 444m of descent - the Zermatt Marathon is one of the most challenging mountain races. For runners it is convenient that the climb is moderate, beginning right after the start – and does not suddenly rise steeply as in the LGT Marathon in Liechtenstein. Or that effort is packed into the last third of the course as in the Jungfrau Marathon.

400m lies ahead of you. These three kilometres are the apex of the race – most of the participants are not running by the time they get here, but everybody afterwards adores these last metres alongside the Gornergrat Bahn up to the finish line that lies at an altitude of 2585m.

The start: Runners assemble in St. Niklaus at an altitude of 1085m. The course leads through

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The final ascent: After 39km runners reach the Riffelalp, which lies at an altitude of 2211m. Here the atmosphere reaches a peak: enthusiastic spectators, entertaining live music and a breathtaking panorama. It is a relief to fill up on energy here, because a crucial final ascent of

Switzerland's deepest valley, alongside the roaring Vispa, in the direction of Zermatt. St. Niklaus, with nearly 2400 inhabitants, lies at the centre of the "Mattertal" valley and it is the starting point for reaching holiday resorts such as Zermatt, Grächen and Saas-Fee. The Meiertower (dating from around





Result

MEN:

1	Jonathan WYATT	NZL	2:57:48
2	Anssi RAITTILA	FIN	3:15:52
3	Helmut SCHLIESSEL	GER	3:17:13
4	Jean-Christophe DUPONT	FRA	3:18:22
5	Gerd FRICK	ITA	3:22:46
6	Lorenzo TRINCHERI	ITA	3:24:21
7	Franco ZANOTTI	ITA	3:24:21
8	Ulrich BENZ	GER	3:25:12
9	Martin JOST	GER	3:29:04
10	Patrick JEANNERET	SUI	3:29:57

WOMEN:

1	Claudia LANDOLT	SUI	3:43:31
2	Corinne ZELLER	SUI	3:46:35
3	Michaela MERTOVA	CZE	3:52:00
4	Britta MEULLER	GER	3:57:50
5	Tanja AMIET	SUI	4:01:31
6	Jacqueline KELLER	SUI	4:22:50
7	Christiane BOUQUET	SUI	4:23:08
8	Sandra DANZER	SUI	4:30:07
9	Eveline BLATTER	SUI	4:32:11
10	Karin ERNE	SUI	4:34:56

1270), is the oldest building in the valley, and houses the only mountain guide museum in the world. This museum gives the visitor an overview of the 150-year old mountain guide tradition of the village. St. Niklaus also made it into the Guinness book of records, by having the biggest Santa Claus in the world.

Halftime in Zermatt: At the half marathon mark, runners reach the glamorous holiday resort of Zermatt. In the peak season around 30,000 visitors rub shoulders with around 5700 inhabitants. Attracting the applause of spectators and tourists, participants run through the 600m long main street, and past the many shops, boutiques, hotels and restaurants of Zermatt. This atmosphere does not leave any runner cold. Zermatt is the changeover zone for the Marathon relay race.

Supporters on the move: A train from the "Matterhorn Gotthard Bahn" Company offer a special excursion for the race, leaving St. Niklaus just after the participants and carrying spectators, supporters, and invited guests to Zermatt. The railway line mostly runs alongside the marathon course. The train stops from time to time to allow spectators to cheer runners in flat-out effort and to take photos. There is a commentary on the development of the race and a lot of particular details about the "Mattertal" valley

The Matterhorn railway: In Zermatt spectators change trains and take the Matterhorn railway (Gornergrat Bahn), Europe's highest open-air cogwheel railway. While the runners in Zermatt still have 21km to go and 1336m to climb, the railway takes a direct route up and after about 8km arrives at the finish in Riffelberg. For the last two kilometres the cogwheel railway tracks lie just next to the course. Runners benefit here from the encouragement offered by the railway passengers, as they witness the runners' most difficult test from very close up. It is also great for the runners in the train on the way back down to remember their experience by looking down on the valley and seeing the course of the race.

The general programme: On Friday, at lunchtime, the big pasta party takes place in front of the famous railway station in Zermatt – the meeting point for all runners. The body's carbohydrate store is filled up and in the background traditional Swiss music is playing – alpenhorn players, yodeller

groups or the legendary Schwyzerörgeli – the atmosphere is great and every runner is in pleasant anticipation waiting for next day's Zermatt Marathon.

After the marathon, when all the runners' supporters are glad that their friends safely reached the finish, and runners are exhausted but full of emotion at their achievement, everyone returns to Zermatt. Then it is good to relax and listen to some traditional Swiss music. After the Zermatt Marathon on the Saturday a church service with yodeller music takes place in front of the railway station. Afterwards people can re-live their earlier experience by looking at the first pictures of the marathon day on a big screen. The day ends with a typical meal from the Valais, the Raclette and a glass of Johannisberg, a good white wine from the Valais. All the runners agree: they always like to come back to Zermatt, its fantastic mountain world and impressive Matterhorn – that's the unique appeal of the Zermatt Marathon.

RACE CONTACT DETAILS

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Full race contact listings start on page 70