

# Why They're Lighting Up The Matterhorn This Year

*Zermatt, Switzerland will be the epicenter for high alpine adventure this summer as it pays tribute to the first ascent of this iconic mountain ... in a most unusual way!*

*By Chip Hartman*



Throughout the month of July, 2015, a row of high intensity red lamps will light up the entire northeast ridge of the Matterhorn. The reason? A Swiss mountaineering company called **Mammut** decided it was a fitting tribute to Edward Whymper, a British climber who made the first successful ascent to the summit 150 years ago (July 14, 1865).

Mammut hired world-renowned alpine photographer Robert Boesch to photograph a team of expert climbers holding the lamps at strategic intervals along Whymper's route as part of its 2015 ad campaign. On a signal from the ground team, the climbers switch their lights on; the visual effect at dawn is breathtaking.

## The Mountain's Grisly Reputation

In the mid-19th century, climbers from all over Europe were eager to claim the Matterhorn as a prized addition to their climbing portfolios for two main reasons: 1) it seemed to be impossibly steep on all four sides and 2) it required expert rope skills. Because so many climbers had fallen to their deaths trying to reach the summit, expeditions to the Matterhorn were often regarded as suicide missions.

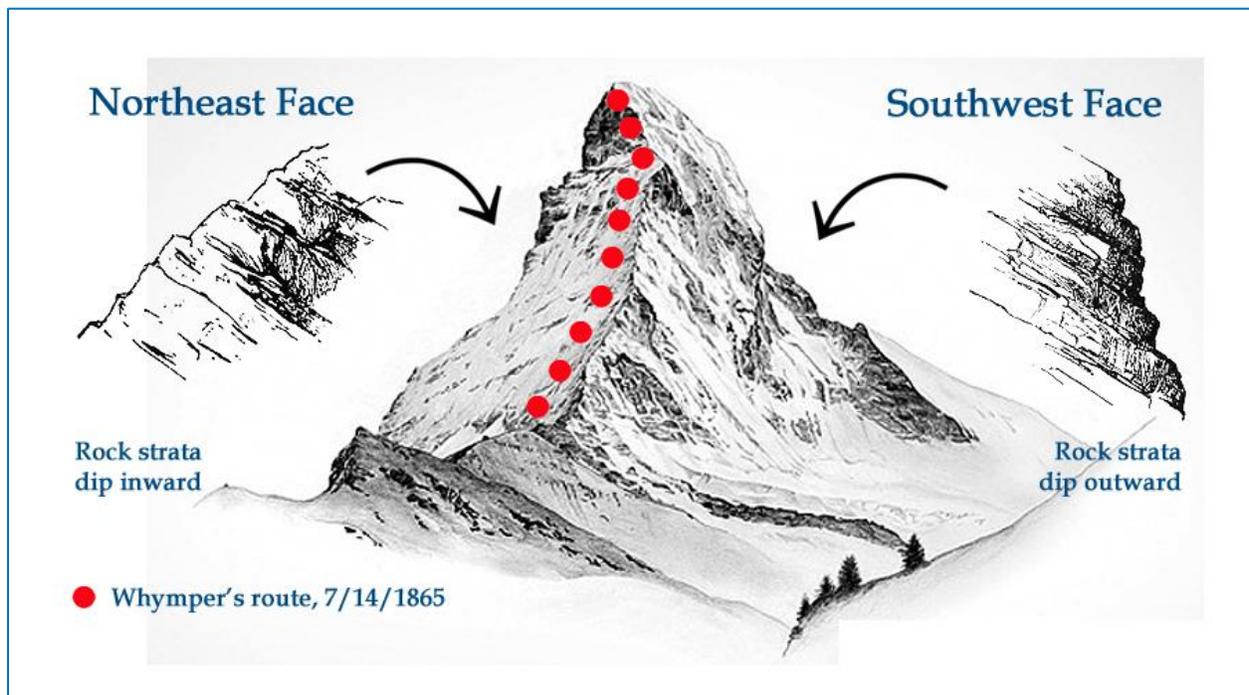
Whymper and dozens of others had tried to scale the Matterhorn before; previous attempts failed due to treacherous footing, wildly fluctuating weather conditions and sudden, violent rockslides.

Over 500 people have died climbing the Matterhorn since Whymper's expedition, many on the descent. Deaths average now about 12 annually.

## Whymper's Epiphany: "The Map is not the Territory"

Whymper had a burning curiosity to learn why so many of his colleagues failed in their attempts to conquer the southwest face of the Matterhorn. Even crude maps and sketches showed that its surface appeared to offer a sufficient number of ledges and outcroppings for good footing along most of the route.

But his thinking changed radically when he realized that "the map is not the territory." He began to study the terrain on opposite faces of the mountain. His observations about the dip of the rock strata on both the southwestern and northeastern faces were a breakthrough moment for finding a new, safer route to the summit.



The southwestern face, generally favored by most climbers as having the more forgiving slope, revealed rock strata that dipped outward (see the diagram above under "Southwest Face"). But any ascent on this face meant that climbers would be stepping on outcrops and ledges dipping "down and away" from the mountain, effectively adding some gravitational penalty.

By contrast, the northeastern face showed rock layers that dipped inward, offering far more secure footing since the dip angle was "down and in" relative to the mountain itself. It would actually be hard to fall on such a succession of natural steps since gravity would pull the climber in toward the mountain instead of causing him to slip away from it.

After his discovery about the structure of the rock layers, Whymper realized that the northeast face was, in reality, "a great natural staircase" all the way up to the top.

He was now ready for another expedition to the summit!

## July 14, 1865: A Fleeting Triumph — then Unfathomable Tragedy



of July 14.

Confident that his new route up the northeast face would get his team to the summit, Whymper arrived in Zermatt on July 12, 1865 to share his new plans with the team.

The team included three other British climbers: the Rev. Charles Hudson, 36; Douglas Hadow, 19, and Lord Francis Douglas, 20; a French alpine guide, Michel Croz, from Chamonix; and a father-and-son alpine guide team, Peter Taugwalder Sr. and Jr. from Zermatt.

The group started the climb shortly after 6 am on July 13. After a relatively easy first day of climbing, they bivouacked for the night and began the final push to the summit in the early morning hours

In terms of skill level, Croz had superior technical climbing abilities and unmatched skills with the rope. At the other extreme, Douglas Hadow was not only the youngest member of the team but also the most inexperienced.

By 1 pm, all seven men were standing on the summit of the Matterhorn, elated at their new-found celebrity status within the professional climbing community.

But only an hour after starting their descent from the summit, one of the men (most likely Hadow) slipped a few feet, causing the rope line to snap against a jagged rock. Hadow and three others fell 4,000 feet to their deaths onto the glacier below.

The victims were Hadow, Michel Croz, Rev. Charles Hudson and Lord Francis Douglas (whose body was never found). Only Whymper and the Taugwalders survived and made the descent to safety.

## Zermatt's Tribute to Whymper's Success and His Fallen Comrades



There are a multitude of lessons that can be learned from Whymper's expedition to the Matterhorn. Some of those lessons involve courage and determination; others might include preparedness and contingency planning.

While it's a safe bet that the alpine community in Switzerland this summer will be thinking of the incredible courage and perseverance of Edward Whymper and his team, they will also be showing their profound respect for the ever-present dangers on the world's most challenging mountains and the members of Whymper's party who never returned.

That simple, elegant chain of red lights all the way up the Matterhorn this July will be everyone's reminder of the bizarre collision of triumph with tragedy near the quiet alpine village of Zermatt, Switzerland 150 years ago.

## Resources & Links of Interest

Video (3:55)

Whymper's First Ascent, July 14, 1865

<http://bit.ly/1OnPs4f> (3:55)

Video (3:11)

How Mammut and Boesch Produced the Dramatic Lighting of the Matterhorn

<http://bit.ly/1PYmXxu>

Video: (2:08)

Mammut: You Tube Channel: The Matterhorn (Introduction)

<http://bit.ly/1yCiVWk>

Video: (14:57)

Climbing Matterhorn, Hornli Ridge, 2012, HD (Ray Lachica)

<http://bit.ly/1G0u6W4>

(may be a bit dizzying to watch due to continual movement of "helmet-cam")

Video (9:08)

Climbing the Matterhorn via Hornli Ridge (8/6/2010) leeburty

<http://bit.ly/1G0Cq8i>

More Amazing Alpine Photos By Robert Boesch

<http://bit.ly/1J7rr2X>

Zermatt/Matterhorn 150 web site

<http://www.zermatt.ch/en>

Mammut Web Site

<http://www.mammut.ch/>

A New Look at Death on the Matterhorn (LA Times Article 7/29/1990)

<http://lat.ms/1GwnPEg>

Whymper, Edward Scrambles Amongst the Alps © 1981 by Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA

<http://bit.ly/1zhab8w>