The Matterhorn on the third attempt
By Alvis Brazma

My friends asked me if I was going to write about my Matterhorn adventure as I did nine years ago after climbing Mt. Blanc. At first I said, ‘No, there was nothing interesting to write.’ Then, almost a year later, one afternoon I was on a train reading the FT Magazine about somebody climbing Tour Ronde near Chamonix. It was quite a detailed account – which day, what time, where he was, doing what. The story began at the London City Airport. I thought – hmm, my short climbing break started from the same airport. I felt that mine was more adventurous, still in some way similar to the one I was reading about, and doable by anybody reasonably fit and looking for something extra in one’s life. May be there was something to write about? As soon as I got home I looked if I could still find the records from my trip. Indeed, I had the date and time stamps on the photos on my laptop, the electronic tickets were still in my e-mail box, and I even had the GPS tracks from my climb.

July, 2002
The thought of climbing the Matterhorn first occurred to me in 1999 while I was getting ready for Mt. Blanc. I thought, if I succeed, I’ll do the Matterhorn in two years. Indeed, I did plan it in 2001 with my friend, but circumstances forced me to cancel the trip just a few weeks before we were about to leave.

A year later my wife and I spent almost two weeks in Zermatt, while I was waiting for a window of good weather long enough for the climb. It was raining almost every other day. Whenever there were two days of good weather I went to the Alpincenter. ‘Do you think there is a chance?’ ‘Nobody is going up right now, but if the weather stays like this for another two days, we can start thinking about it’. Alas, the next day
it was raining again. Nevertheless, we had a good time, we had a nice apartment with a view on the mountain, we went for beautiful walks whenever it was nice and sometimes in the rain, or sat on the balcony reading, enjoying the fresh air and the view.

Our international team on Pollux – a Britt from Australia, a Finn and myself

July 8-16, 2008

In the spring of 2008 together with my colleagues we were looking for a nice place for a meeting to mark a milestone in one of our projects and to plan what to do next. When it came to choosing between a beach and mountains, everybody voted for the latter. Somebody had recently been to Zermatt. At first I thought it might be too expensive, but no, it turned out that in summer Zermatt was quite affordable. My colleague found a nice hotel called Style with a meeting room and Internet. Indeed it had style, good food, and a conference room on the top floor with a view. I decided I could not afford to miss this opportunity and booked the hotel for quite a few days longer than the meeting.

My wife and I arrived in Zermatt two days before most of my colleagues and went straight to the Alpincenter to inquire about climbing. The weather was supposed to be good for a couple of days, then it would be spoiling. Damn it, was I out of luck again? I decided to book an acclimatisation climb to 4092m Pollux immediately. Hopefully the weather would improve again before we had to leave.
The day my work meeting was to start in the afternoon, I got up at 5am for the Pollux climb. We were a small international team – a Brit living in Australia, a Finn, myself – a Latvian living in Britain, and our Swiss guide – Helmut Lerjen. Helmut asked everybody if we were planning to climb the Matterhorn. I said yes, but the other guys were leaving in a few days. ‘Well, you can always come back,’ said Helmut. That’s where I got the idea – I can always come back, I can get here from Cambridge in half a day!

Our meeting had ended and all my colleagues left, when I woke up in the morning to see everything just above Zermatt completely white with fresh snow. It was clear that it would take a week before the snow would melt enough for the Matterhorn climbing to be safe. Never mind, I’m coming back…. We paid a visit to the Alpinist cemetery. Looking at the tombstones a plaque caught my attention ‘… New York, 19 May 1958 – 23 July 1975, on Breithorn I chose to climb’. I began my climbing ‘career’ a year later when I was the same age. I was luckier.

Next day it was all sunny and clear again. My wife wanted to have her ‘heroic act’ of the trip and we decided to walk up to Mettelhorn, which at 3406m is the highest mountain around Zermatt that one can safely ‘conquer’ without a rope or crampons. This is a long and strenuous walk. We tried it in 2002, but did not quite manage to the top, opting at the last moment for a slightly lower neighbouring peak – Platthorn. This time we did it. However there was something that worried me – that morning when I woke up I realised that I had a sore throat. This did not prevent me from renting a bike a day later, just before we were going back to England, and cycling from Zermatt all the way up to Schwarzsee, which is from where the walk and climb to Matterhorn would begin, if I ever did it. At the bike shop they asked me – ‘Are you sure you want to cycle up – it’s steep there.’ It was indeed a good two hours long hard lonely work up, but I was joined by quite a few more cyclists on the way down.
My wife Diana catching her breaths before the final assault on Mettelhorn

Later back in England I kept checking the Zermatt weather forecasts every day. It was looking good – the weather was becoming increasingly stable.

**Friday, July 18**

On Friday afternoon I called my guide Helmut Lerjen, ‘Next Thursday – do you think it’s possible?’ ‘Yes, Thursday is possible,’ replied Helmut in his funny Swiss German accent. I called my travel agent to book a flight to Geneva. Every morning I kept working out in the gym on a stepper. My sore throat and mild cold were refusing to go away, which worried me. It was not too bad, I did not think it was affecting my fitness (or perhaps the lack of it) very much, but I was worried about my altitude acclimatisation. Surely it was slipping away fast enough even without any respiratory problems. The Zermatt weather forecasts were still good and on Monday evening I booked a room in the same hotel *Style*, Swiss train tickets, and bought travel insurance from the British Mountaineering Council. I was considering for a while if I could try to catch the last flight back to London on the same day as climbing, but decided against it – even if I manage, it won’t be fun sitting on the train and plane with my legs sore and aching.

**Wednesday, July 23**

**4:30am, Cambridge.** A taxi picks me up from home and in an hour I am in the London City Airport. I have a small rucksack to check in, and hand luggage – climbing boots and a book. I am the first through the security and at 07:05 I am on my way to Geneva by Air France 5097. The flight lands on time, the luggage arrives
promptly as usual in the Swiss airports, and I have just enough time to buy a coffee and sandwich before catching the 10:27 train to Zermatt via Visp.

10:27am, Geneva. I am sitting on the train and reading ‘Bobby Fisher goes to war’ by David Edmonds and John Eidinow about Fisher’s famous chess match with Spassky in 1972. It was a Cold War battle fought on a chess board, except that Fisher was not a very typical representative of America, and Spassky was a silent Soviet dissident. Among other sins, Spassky was also a believer in a ‘bourgeois philosophy’ - existentialism. When this was happening I was living in Latvia – on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and although I was too young to follow the match, I still remember my uncles talking about it. It was seven years later, in 1979 and still in Latvia when I first saw a picture of the Matterhorn. It was during a student party after a winter skiing/mountaineering trip, when somebody who had been lucky enough to spend a year in Switzerland showed us slides from Zermatt projected on the wall. We were confined to climbing the Soviet mountains - the Caucasus, the Pamirs and the Tien Shan. Later my girlfriend got hold of a Western wall calendar with the Matterhorn – it was a special mountain, but I did not dream of ever climbing it.

A text message arrives from my colleague, ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Indeed, my errand was carefully planned in secret, only a couple of people knew about it. Not to look so ridiculous if I fail, and to surprise some, if I succeed. This trip was all about existentialism. Just before arriving in Visp, I receive a call from Helmut, ‘Where are you?’ ‘On the train, coming, everything according to plan, will be in the hut at around 6 o’clock’. The static on his phone is so strong that I can barely hear him, he must be at the hut right back from a climb and the wind must be really strong there...

2:14pm, Zermatt. Punctually the train arrives in Zermatt and I just manage to change my sandals to climbing boots before getting off. I have a small piece of paper with a to-do-list to go through as I make my way towards the Schwarzsee cable car on the other side of the town:

- at the supermarket right across the street from the station buy energy drinks, bananas and apples;
- at the climbing equipment store on the same street rent an ice axe;
- at the bank get Swiss Franks from a cash machine;
- at the bakery near the bank buy a sandwich for tomorrow (hopefully to be eaten on the top of the Matterhorn);
- at a bicycle rental shop return a pump, which I had forgotten in my bag when returning the bike about a week ago;
- at the restaurant at the foot of the Schwarzsee cable car station have a good lunch.

After having a sausage with rosti I get on the cable car and off – at Schwarzsee. I start walking towards Höhnhütte at around 4pm. It’s quite windy and as the sun is getting lower in the shade it is becoming chilly. I have to stop and put on something warmer.

6pm, Höhnhütte at the foot of the Matterhorn. I arrive at Höhnhütte just in time to see a helicopter taking a body off the slope. People are watching in silence, but nobody seems to be changing their plans for tomorrow. In the hut I ask for Helmut, who seems to be quite a favourite figure there. I check in and have my supper and a beer with Helmut, another guide and his client – a lean guy, former cop, now a businessman. We ask, how do the guides communicate with clients who do not speak
English, German or French? Japanese are the most difficult ones, they always answer ‘yes’.

Sunset over Pollux

Helmut checks my equipment, tells me what to wear, what to carry in the rucksack, and what to leave at the hut. ‘It’s safe here, you can leave the money and passport in the hut.’ We have to reach Solway hut, which is about half way to the top, in no more than two and a half hours, otherwise we turn back. Tough. Helmut shows me a picture on the wall of his cousin, Michael Lerjen, who is the Matterhorn ascent-descent record holder from September 2007 – from Hörlüihütte up and down in 2 hours 33 minutes. Crazy! But it’s great to know that Helmut is from a family of guides – I feel safe.

I take some pictures of the sun setting over Pollux. The wind has disappeared, it is now quite pleasant. I hope it will be a nice day tomorrow.

Thursday, July 24

3:30am, Hörlüihütte. The wake-up, a quick breakfast, I pick up my vacuum bottle, which has been filled with hot coffee. I put on my harness, Helmut ties me to himself in an about 8m long rope. No carabiner, just a rope tied to the harness. I wonder if this is to prevent the suicidal from unhooking themselves too easily.

4am, Hörlüihütte. We start in complete darkness; the only light is from our head-torches. I remember that I wanted to switch on my GPS to record what I hope will be
an achievement. I ask Helmut to stop for a second, one rope passes us while I am reaching for the device. We are going quite fast, overtaking some other climbers. I am dressed lightly, but it is warm. I am breathing quite heavily, as if running, but it is OK, I can maintain this speed at least for the time being. I do not remember very much from the actual climbing, only that at places we had to stop and wait for a fixed rope to be cleared by the preceding climbers, and that I enjoyed these little stops, as they helped me to catch my breath. It was steep, we were scrambling over large boulders, there was always a rope of two climbers before us, and another one behind.

On the way up near Solway hut

We are at Solway hut at 6am, in 2 hours. Perhaps I can do it! The sun is coming out, we remove our torches. I drink my energy drink and after a very short rest we are off again. Still going quite strong.

At 7:30 we stop at a snow-ice slope to put on crampons. I look up – I can see the top and some climbers, who are just starting down. I am sure I will make it!

8:03am, the Matterhorn. I’m on the top! I press ‘mark’ on my GPS, take some photos, make some phone calls, eat the sandwich, drink some coffee and at around 8:15 we are already on our way down.

Most climbers are still coming up, there are traffic jams, at places we have to wait for them to clear the rope. Helmut knows alternatives and shortcuts, he abseils me down over large boulders. It is fun, but I am glad I have done abseiling before, for a novice this might be a bit scary.
With my guide Helmut Lerjen on the right

Traffic jams on the way down
Just after 10am we are back at Solway hut, I am quite exhausted and beginning to feel dehydrated. Maybe this is because of the Diamox I have taken. I drink all the remaining liquid I have and after a longer rest we continue our way down. It is getting hot, I am going slower and slower, feeling more and more dehydrated. We meet some climbers who seem a bit lost, Helmut shows them where to go.

Helmut on the way down after abseiling me first

12:30pm, Hörnlihütte. We do the last little scramble down the cliff just above the hut in full view of admiring tourists taking photos. Only now Helmut unties me from the rope and congratulates me. I have done it! It has taken me longer to climb down than up. In the hut I drink a large bottle of water without stopping. Helmut presents me with a little medallion and a diploma.

While sitting at a table eating my lunch and drinking my well earned beer, I notice a British group, which I remember arriving in Zermatt with their rucksacks some two weeks ago. ‘It wasn’t very technical, it was more like keep going, keep going, keep going,’ they say. ‘Yes,’ I agree. It is more physical than technical if you know where to go. There is no free climbing, there are fixed ropes in all really steep places. It was not unlike running a marathon, provided that one can avoid looking down. Having been roped with Helmut was comforting and surely made it much easier. Could I do it without a guide? Probably yes, but it would be silly, and I am not going to find out. It was quite different from climbing Mt. Blanc – more intensive, but shorter. I did Mt. Blanc on my own, which was an entirely different experience from climbing with a guide. Helmut says he has never heard of anybody flying in from England and
climbing the Matterhorn on the next day. Maybe I should apply to start a new Guinness world record: Cambridge – the Matterhorn – Cambridge.

The last cable car from Schwarzsee leaves at 5pm, I cannot afford to miss it. At around 2pm I have recovered enough to start my walk down. I say good-bye to Helmut (maybe I’ll come back for ice climbing in the winter) and off I go. I reach the cable car at around 4pm, and a few minutes later I am in Zermatt. I walk slowly towards the Style hotel, on my way returning the rented ice axe.

**5pm, Zermatt.** At the hotel they seem surprised to see me again, alone. Jacuzzi, sauna, swimming pool and I lie on the bed exhausted. It is a bliss. One of the existentialist moments of one's life.

Zermatt

Friday, July 25

**5am, Zermatt.** I get up, no breakfast. I am on the train at 5:35, arrive at the Geneva airport at 9:24 just in time to catch the 10:25 plane arriving at London City at 11:20. The London Light Railway, the Tube to Kings Cross, the train to Cambridge, and at 2pm I am at home.

**3pm, my desk in Hinxton, near Cambridge.** I am at my desk in my office. Very few here know where I have been for the last couple of days – maybe just working from home.

Cambridge, 2009