



# BEYOND HEAVEN

*In the most spectacular village in Switzerland, two modern classic chalets offer a perfect balance between tradition, modern design, and an eternal view, says **Darius Sanai**.*



The name Winkelmatten may not mean much to the average Alpine devotee. Certain skiers and alpinists, however, will know it as the most bijoux part of Zermatt, the Swiss resort famed for the height of its mountains, the pitch of its slopes, its gourmet-traditional mountainside restaurants, and for the Matterhorn, the world's most famous mountain.

Winkelmatten is a hamlet on a plateau just beyond the southern, Matterhorn-facing end of Zermatt. It sits at the confluence of Zermatt's river and a ferocious stream, the Findelbach, which rushes down from a high glacier to the east. For most of the hundreds of years of its existence, Winkelmatten comprised a church and a few wooden huts, all with a dramatic view to the Matterhorn, a mountain nobody bothered or dared attempt to climb until the arrival of the British alpinists in the 19th century.

Now Winkelmatten is more or less contiguous with Zermatt. But it feels a world apart: quiet, light, a little higher, and closer to the wilderness.

A few years ago, André Lauber, a Swiss vascular surgeon from a local family, inherited a patch of land on the slopes next to the Findelbach. The torrent has carved itself a steep gully along the edge of Winkelmatten, and the land between the road and the water, raking steeply down to the river, seemed to have nothing going for it except a great view – if you were a mountain goat.

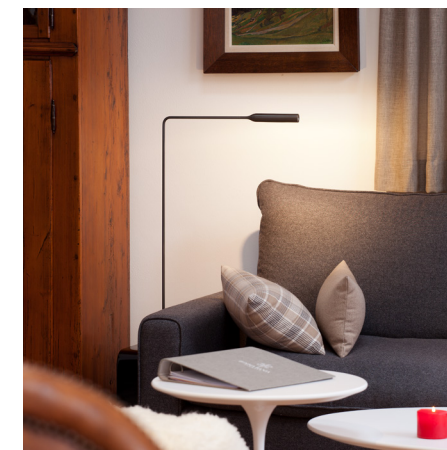
Lauber, who had spent part of his schooldays in Zermatt, had other plans. Consulting with engineers and architects, he and his wife designed two chalets built into the hillside on four floors. From the road – whose traffic is just electric floats and horses, as cars are banned in the village – Chalets Banja and Binna would barely protrude above ground level. Seen from the river, though, they would reveal themselves to be of modern classic design, using hand-broken local stone (not cut by saw), local larch wood and slate, all built into the slope and looking out over the forests and the great mountain. LUX stayed at Banja recently and was more than impressed.

"The roof is built in an old-fashioned way like they were centuries ago, with local stone," says Lauber. "There is a local specialist in Zermatt who breaks the stone to size and measure; it is very irregular and it's quite rare to see it now."

Inside, Chalet Banja has a stainless-steel swimming pool on the lowest of its four floors, reputed to be the biggest private pool in Zermatt. Next to it, a large gym room giving onto a terrace above the stream. One



**Chalet Chic**  
Chalets Banja and Binna in Winkelmatten next to Zermatt are distinguished by their combination of traditional chalet construction and a sleek, modern design which is both comfortable and stylish. Exposed larchwood beams, floors and fittings complement a contemporary wood-burning stove, an antique oven and, on the lower floor, a steel swimming pool.



floor up, three bedrooms, all with the same Matterhorn view; and above that, the main living area, 14 metres long, with sweeping kitchen, opening into a dining area. Sight lines are artfully created so you have a glimpse into each room and onto clusters of artworks; next to the dining table is a beautiful antique oven with a carving of the Matterhorn on it, sourced by Lauber from down the valley. "On the one hand we wanted the most modern architecture we could have, using a lot of local, traditional larch wood. But we use modern lighting, which is important."

Lauber also points out the reading area with its trove of books in English, German, French and Italian about the area, the mountains and Alpinism. "It's important to have a library where people can read about the history of the Matterhorn, the history of the valley and also of Zermatt and about local traditions," says Lauber, who says his wife Regula took care of the library and many of the interior details.

The superimposition of contemporary architecture onto the traditional landscape of the Alps has not always been a happy one, with history sometimes reduced to the role of pastiche. In Chalet Banja, it succeeds joyously. Lauber uses the chalet for his own visits to Zermatt, and it is also let out to summer hikers and winter skiers. ♦♦

[matterhornchalets.com](http://matterhornchalets.com); [zermatt-luxury-chalet.ch](http://zermatt-luxury-chalet.ch)

