



ENGRAVED ON MY HEART.

## Faces of Valais.

### "I would never have called one of my reindeer Rudolph"

The first snowflakes have fallen, Christmas is approaching. Santa Claus and his reindeer have appeared in shop windows, in front of people's houses and gardens - as well as in the small mountain village of Herbruggen, in Valais. This is where six of Switzerland's 50 or so reindeer live with Reto Summermatter.

Herbruggen, a small hamlet on the road to Zermatt, where the train only stops "on request", is home to the reindeer belonging to Reto Summermatter (34), an electrician and trained forest logger. His passion for northern deer goes back to his childhood: "I think I owe this fascination to Christmas movies," he explains. His weakness for these animals may also come from his penchant for winter: like them, he prefers cold and snow.

During the winter of 2013/14, Reto Summermatter travelled to Sweden to work as a sled dog guide and observe reindeer in the wild. On his trip, he met breeders and their large herds of up to 600 head. "In Scandinavia and Siberia, we work a lot with reindeer on farms," he says. Back in Switzerland, the Valaisan achieved his dream of owning his own reindeer park. Today, six of these deer live in Herbruggen. They don't work, however. "I could have bought myself a good car with what I invested," smiles Reto Summermatter. "I do this for pleasure. If it were just a matter of profit, I would raise other animals," he adds. To build his enclosure, he personally laid more than a kilometre of 2.8-metre high fence. The acquisition of the quadrupeds proved to be an interesting administrative challenge given that reindeer are effectively a "non-native wild species". He continues: "I had to undergo a two-year training course for cervid owners. The Veterinary Office also inspected the pen and issued a permit before the animals could move in." The procedure took three years. Initially, the inhabitants of the village of Herbruggen expressed some scepticism about the project. "But today, everyone has become accustomed to it and I am regularly asked about Rudolph and his friends." And yes, one of his reindeer is indeed called Rudolph-Theophil, but only because he had already been baptized as such before his arrival in Herbruggen! Says Reto Summermatter: "I would never have called one of my reindeer Rudolph. My animals have nothing in common with the famous Rudolph in the film. They are affectionate, but I try to raise them as naturally as possible and not to train them. Neither can they be coupled to a sled."

Reto Summermatter refuses to make his protégés a tourist attraction. "My main goal is breeding. In May 2017, Leevi was the first little reindeer to be born in Herbruggen. I would like to have between ten and 12 animals one day. Deer also help to maintain the grasslands and prevent them from being invaded by the forest." Reto devotes every minute of his free time to his animals, bringing them corn, lichen or regrowth from harvested fields, and taking them for walks. "When I walk around with my reindeer, we don't go unnoticed," he admits. Nonetheless, it must be said that meeting reindeer in Valais is not an everyday occurrence.

*Facebook: Rentier Reto*

*Would you like to know more? We would be delighted to provide you with further information or arrange an interview with Reto Summermatter.*