

Rethinking the last Kilometer: Soft Mobility in alpine destinations.

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Transcript:

Kathrin Holstein, Alliance in the Alps: Hello and welcome to our speciAlps-Podcast Series “Guide Visitors – preserve nature experience”. My Name is Kathrin Holstein and I’m working at the community network “Alliance in the Alps”. This is the second of four podcast episodes within the Series, produced by CIPRA International and the community network “Alliance in the Alps”. All episodes are in English. Additionally, this Episode will be available in French. So, if you speak French, feel free to choose the French episode.

Visitor management starts at home with transport playing an important role. Taking the car not only leads to traffic chaos but we also leave a huge carbon footprint. We can reduce both by travelling with public transport. Sometimes, this can be challenging for the passengers, especially when it comes to the famous last kilometer of the journey. Using public transport often goes along with a lack of infrastructure, delays, expensive tickets and last but not least, the obstacle of the last kilometer on our way to alpine destinations.

I talked with two guys, who know more about this: Louis Didelle – he is pursuing a community project to redefine access to the mountains. And Antoine Pin, the head manager at Protect our Winters France. First, I asked Antoine, why he prefers going to the mountains by public transport and which challenges he faces when doing so.

Antoine: Do I like to go to the mountains by public transport? I do. I do. I enjoy that very much. Can I do it often? That's another question.

Going back to the very first time, when I went on a ski winter holidays without my parents. I was like 15 or 16 with two of my friends. We had no choice but to take the train because we had no permit. And it was the first of many trips like that. We thought it would be easy for us because, hey, you can just go to the train and then you're in Saint Gervais/ Chamonix, all those big places and stuff. But it happened that the famous last kilometer was a bit trickier than we had expected, and the place where we slept was a few kilometers away from the resorts. So, we had to walk every morning and we had to get back every night. So that was still fun. But yeah, a bit less efficient, let's say.

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Kathrin: Antoine is not the only one with this experience. Sometimes, using public transport in the Alpine region often fails because of the last kilometer. Many people are deterred by this to use public transport. Getting there by car is more comfortable and flexible. Nevertheless, Louis Didelle prefers public transport, even if it sometimes might be less comfortable. But why?

Louis: So, it's true that it's a sacrifice of comfort, but you can see it in the other way. It's another adventure, another kind of adventure. You really live something that you will never live if you use the car. The adventure really starts from the house, in the valley to the mountain and again to the house. [...] It's never boring. It's always an adventure. It's yeah, it can be a nightmare. But then two days after, you will say, Oh, it was funny.

Kathrin: The journey to the mountains can be already part of the adventure: That's the message of Louis. Last year, he started a project called L'Escarpade. A community project to redefine access to the mountains and offer a sustainable alternative to the car with a sporty approach.

Louis: We decided to organize an event with my friends, a sports event, but also a raising awareness event. The idea is to organize a kind of winter triathlon with three sports: bike, walk and ski. To start from the valley to start from Grenoble with the ski on the bike and to climb to the mountain to go skiing, but only by bike. So, the idea is to organize a zero-emission event and to use this sport event to also organize workshops during the three days of the event to raise awareness about all the different issues regarding the mountain. We organized the event in April 2023 and we work with a team of volunteers, mostly my friends and family and we also work with different partners as Protect our Winters and Mountain Wilderness, also supermarket as Sartoriz, they produce some bio food or stuff like that. So, with different partnerships. Now we are more working on a side project as a white paper on mobilities. We use the event to really push for more soft mobility in the mountain.

Kathrin: "Zero Emission" is about leaving no harmful gases or substances in the air or nature. The overall goal is to become climate neutral in the future. In 2019, the European Union set this as its main goal with the Green Deal - to be climate neutral by 2050.

What difference does it make, if you go to the mountains by public transport instead of the car? It makes a huge difference. Do you know the platform Ecopassenger.org? It compares energy consumption, CO2 emissions and other environmental impacts for your planned trip. You can see how much emissions your trip has and what alternatives there are. Feel free to try it out!

Climate neutrality is an ambitious goal with many obstacles, especially when you consider transportation.

As mentioned, Louis planned a zero-emission event within his project. So I wanted to know from him: Did it actually work?

Louis: No, it's really, really difficult, to have a zero-emission event. Our principal objective was to raise the participants awareness on soft mobilities and to show them that access to mountains doesn't have to be by car only. [...] We really focus on transport with the alternative of the bike and the train because we also use train. And the second sector on which we worked was the food. Even if we wanted to really do our best, there is some infrastructure issues because when it comes to train and bike, there is not enough place in the train to put all the 15 bikes of the participants. There are only 12 places in the train we took so we had to rent a truck to transport bicycle from point A to point B [...] It was a bit paradoxical. So the event is not zero emission because of this issue with the train.[...] So I contacted the SNCF, the main company in France and asked them, is it possible to add some places for the bike in the train and they told me we are sorry, but if there was more places for the bike, you will not have enough time to go down the train because the stop timing is really short. It's only two minutes. And when there are 30 Persons that that leave the train with a bike, there is not enough time for 30 bikes. So, they refused to add another wagon because of this argument.

Kathrin: In most of the public transportation services it's possible to take the bike with you, but this often requires a reservation or an additional fee. So, if you want to use your bike for the last kilometer, you have to inform yourself well before the trip. Of course, not everyone can use a bicycle as part of their journey. Different groups of people have individual needs. But where can I find the information for a journey that suits me best? Antoine from Protect our Winters France:

Antoine: They're everywhere. [...] it's not that the information doesn't exist, it takes intense time and energy to go and look for it because even for the most remote, like tiny bus shuttle in the back, there exists somewhere a PDF file lost on the internet that you could find if you took the time. [...] Internet is a powerful tool and there are tools that can help us do that. So on our own website at Protect Our Winters France, we do have a tool called Tictatrip, which is an algorithm that gathers all available information which they can test and tells you if you ask it to go from point A to point B, what are the trains that you can take, what are the buses that you can take, what are the trains and buses? You can take one after the other, the carpooling that you can take and you can even buy those tickets whenever available.

Kathrin: Have you ever heard of *Tictatrip*? It is one of many tools on the Internet with which you can plan a trip. There is a huge variety of international platforms like Thetrainline or Interrail and regional platforms like Gosavoirmontblanc in France or Zuugle in Austria, Italy and Slovenia. The info exists, now it's time to find the connection. Easier said than done. But what if there's no connection to the destination or the transportation doesn't leave at the right time?

Antoine: Frequencies and schedule are a bit of a problem, especially if you take into account the seasonality of year, meaning like sometimes some days, some weeks, some weekends you may have the finest schedule that you would want to be able to do those activities. But outside of holidays, maybe the service won't even run anymore. And that's a bit of a problem, especially when you see that it affects the possibility for locals to use those means of transport when they only finance during holidays and such. At least it happens in not most, but a lot of cases in France, maybe not in other alpine countries.

Kathrin: Did you know that most intra-European flights are cheaper than travelling the same distance by train? This shows a study which was published by Greenpeace in July 2023. The more train companies are involved when travelling across borders, the more expensive it gets. Prices vary as well among the different train companies. The more spontaneous the trip is, the more expensive the public transportation gets. This is where politics comes into play. Louis wants to take a step towards policy makers with the L'Escarpade project:

Louis: We decided to write the white paper on mobility. And for that we ask other NGOs to help us, that have the expertise on the subject. And this is why we propose to Protect Our Winters and Mountain Wilderness to help us on this white paper to really be together and to show to politicians that we need change, if we really want to push for more soft mobilities. If we are willing to use soft mobilities, but there is not enough infrastructure, there will be an issue. So this idea of white paper is to lobby for more, soft mobilities.

Kathrin: The goal of the white paper is to have more communication between citizens and policy makers on the topic of sustainable mobility in the Alps. Infrastructure for sustainable mobility does not work without people using it, and it is equally important to get politicians on board for this. Political awareness-raising of organizations is one thing. But what can we do? Is it enough to just take the train instead of the car or do we need to set the course to overcome infrastructure and price issues? Antoine has an idea:

Antoine: Get involved on the political side of things, not trying to get elected. Even if you get elected, they want to put more trains and buses. That could help, but just to participate in all the occasions that transport services local governments give you to give feedback on such questions to which Protect Our Winters does quite a lot to just reflect the reality that sometimes the technicians that think those services may have not in mind, because they don't live on those in those places. They don't do those sports or activities. So yeah, go out there and whenever people ask you, is there enough trains, are they at the right time, say no every time and you may get what you want. You can gather people around you to support someone who you feel is defending the right ideas at this moment in time and go and vote for them, manifest for them.

[...] You can tell the current people what you think and we give tools to our community for that, to contact their elected officials easily and to share with them like positive feedback when it's needed and negative when we feel like it's not going the right direction.

Kathrin: So, one important step we could do to initiate changes is to give feedback, either directly to transportation companies and politicians or indirectly by voting. Let's talk more about our trips by fair means and exchange tips and tricks for our next journey and be open to see the travel time as part of the adventure.

Do you already have ideas for your next trip with public transport in the Alps?

This was the second episode of our speciAlps-Podcast Series "Guide Visitors – preserve Nature experience". The next Podcast will focus on the Topic "Nudging in Alpine Tourism – guiding visitors on the right track."

The term 'nudge' is used to describe measures that encourage people to act on their own initiative as desired. How is nudging used to guide visitors? How effective is it for sustainable tourism? Does visitor management need psychologists and is nudging ethical? We will address these and more questions in the next podcast episode.

You are also welcome to join our webinar on this topic on September 21st at 2 pm. The registrations are already open and the event is free of charge.

More information about this podcast series are available on alpenallianz.org and cipra.org. You can also listen to our previous podcasts about visitor management in the Alps.

My name is Kathrin Holstein, thank you for listening.

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