

English Transcript of Podcast #1 Via Alpina Youth

En passant par la montagne

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Sophie: Hello and welcome to the CIPRA podcast. This podcast is produced as part of the Via Alpina Youth project and I'll be telling you about inclusion in the mountains, young people in difficult situations who discover them and how it can be beneficial for them. I'm Sophie from CIPRA international and I learnt about the following while doing a job shadowing with the association En passant par la montagne in Chamonix. Damien Urbain has been working there for four years, before which he was an educator in a specialized prevention service for young people at risk of marginalization. He also has a real passion for the mountains, and his current job allows him to combine his professional knowledge of the public with his passion for the mountains. He told me about the association, their work and the activities they do.

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Damien: En passant par la montagne has existed since 1995. It was set up by a great mountaineer called Marc Batard, whose aim was to use the mountains to help young people from difficult neighborhoods, because he felt that, when he was younger, the mountains had saved him from his difficulties to some extent, and he wanted younger people to benefit from them, so he went looking for young people in neighborhoods or in homes and took them to the high mountains. Since then, the association has evolved. Today, we work with all kinds of people who are experiencing difficulties or weaknesses, whether they are disabled, delinquents or people in child welfare homes, and we offer different activities, the idea being that what we experience in the mountains can help us in life, and that the mountains are a fantastic educational tool for the social structures we work with. When we work with organizations, the idea is for them to have educational objectives. And we propose mountain activities in line with these educational objectives, and the organizations come, and it's always young people, or young adults or children, accompanied by educators. In this way, they can work on an educational link with them and we accompany them in all the activities, providing them with mountain professionals, equipment, all our infrastructures and all our know-how.

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Sophie: In Chamonix, my colleagues and I took part in an excursion to the famous Mer des Glace glaciers, which tell their impressive story in a museum on the Montenvers. We travelled there on the historic Montenvers train and accompanied a group of autistic young people from the Paris region, along with their educators, Boris, the mountain guide, and Clotilde, the project manager. Before leaving, Damien had explained us the educational potential of the mountains.

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Damien: The mountains have a number of educational benefits for us. First of all, the mountains impose a de facto framework, meaning that when you're in the mountains, you follow rules that don't depend on human beings and everyone is obliged to abide by these rules, for example, weather conditions in particular, or at some point, even if you want to go to a summit, you can't go because it's too dangerous. And that teaches you a bit about respecting the rules. It also has something to do with discovery and wonder, because sometimes you realize that people don't really know what they're doing any more, or they've lost the habit of observing and marveling at

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what surrounds them. And that's something that's very important, even in life, for everyone. And after that, it also allows you to work on relationships between people, because in the mountains, you need solidarity, you need to be with others. You can't be on your own. Some people are on their own, but that's a different sport. But this idea that it brings solidarity, mutual aid and confidence, these are also things that can help the people we work with, who have had a difficult life, confidence, self-confidence, confidence in others, is often a bit damaged. And with the mountains, we can try to repair that a little.

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Clotilde: We're hiking above the Montenvers train. We're going on snowshoes to the point called the Signal. It's a few hundred meters above the train station. The noise we hear behind us is the glacier moraine. The glacier has become much thinner in recent years and the cliffs, the edges of the cliffs it was on, are gradually crumbling away. All day long, as soon as it starts to get warm, and sometimes even at night, you can hear falling rocks.

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Sophie: Clotilde is project manager at En passant par la montagne, and with Boris, the guide, she supervised this day. She describes the setting for the excursion

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Clotilde: Opposite us, you can see the Dru. That's the first mountain and then, as we continue, we come to the Aiguille Verte and we see that there's a different color on the Dru mountain, because there was a big landslide on the cliff a few years ago, on this mountain, and it's a mountain that's very well known to mountaineers for its climbing.

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Sophie: After the snowshoe hike, the youngsters had a great time having a snowball fight. I took the opportunity to talk to two of the group and their educator, Jonathan. What's your name?

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Yolanda: My name is Yolanda

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Sophie : and how did you like the activities yesterday and today?

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Yolanda: Well, that was cool. I really enjoyed yesterday with the dog sled.

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Sophie: and what else have you done?

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Yolanda: The snowshoes, it was yesterday afternoon

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Sophie : and how do you feel about the snow? Did you like the snow here?

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Yolanda: It was cool, I liked it a lot.

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Sophie : Thank you very much. Hi, what's your name?

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Jean: My name is Jean.

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Sophie: How did you like the activities here?

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Jean: Great, yesterday we went dog-sledding, sledging and snowshoeing.

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Sophie: Very good.

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Jean: Then today we went to visit the Mer de Glace glacier.

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Sophie: Was it cold in there?

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Jean: Yes.

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Sophie: And what was your favorite activity here?

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Jean: The sledging

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Sophie : Sledging? Is it fun?

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Jean: Yes

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Sophie : Hello, Jonathan! Great to be here! You did these activities with En passant par la montagne, here in the south of France, in the Alps. Why did you choose to come here from Paris?

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Jonathan: Because we have three young people in the group who had never been to the mountains. They didn't know about the big snows, the Mer de Glace that we discovered today, all that, they'd never seen, already for them. And then the other two, they love it so everyone was happy.

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Sophie : So good! And last night, how were the vibes, were they tired, did they like it, how did you perceive that

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Jonathan: Yes, they're all very happy, but they're very tired. In fact, when we got back yesterday, we must have arrived at the accommodation at around 6.30 pm. We were already very tired by 8, 8.30 pm. There were no more people awake. Especially

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when you have young people who are very dynamic, and when you see them in that state, you say to yourself that we've done well, we've had a good day's sport.

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Sophie : I'd also like to introduce Boris Fournier who, as a mountain leader, led our group today. He told me how the day went and what's important to him on days like this.

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Boris: In the end, the most important thing is the relationship with the group we're taking with us. We're lucky, because the weather's nice, but that's the little extra. But the most important thing is the relationship with the group we're taking with us. And the young people are super motivated, super dynamic, they're happy to be there, they talk, they enjoy the day. That's the best, the best experience you can have, both for us as supervisors and for them, to see that they have stars in their eyes when they set foot in the snow and see the glacier. That's it, it's great.

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Sophie: After the excursion back to the office, I asked myself a few questions about how the association worked. I was lucky because Damien was still there, working. I immediately referred to him. How do you approach marginalized groups or those in social difficulty who live in mountain towns but don't have access to the mountains for social, cultural or economic reasons?

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Damien: We work in partnership with social establishments, in Haute-Savoie in particular, or in Savoie, to set up mountain activity projects, but we also have another way of trying to make the mountains really accessible to people who live in the districts of mountain towns and cities and who don't go to the mountains for social, economic or cultural reasons. The idea is to bring mountain activities into the neighborhoods so that people can get out and say to themselves: maybe I can go to the mountains, they're right next door. It's nice. So why not? We've been running a project for four years now, called La montagne prend ses quartiers, where the idea is that, first of all, we go into the neighborhoods with activities such as orienteering races, we also do a collective fresco on the theme of the mountain and the neighborhoods with young people, and then we organize a big neighborhood party around the theme of the mountain, in the middle of the neighborhood, with climbing walls, we're doing descents, recalls of buildings, shows all around the mountain, and then we're starting to go out, offering families from the neighborhood a day of climbing or hiking outdoors, and ending up with two days in the high mountains for around twenty young people from the neighborhood, The idea is really to work with local partners, so that we can get into the neighborhoods without it being a problem, because we don't know the people in the neighborhoods, but we work with people who do, in particular the specialist prevention educators or the youth services, and they bring legitimacy to the project and enable us to get these young people directly with the educators who work in the neighborhoods to come with us. As a result, we realize that small mountain groups are being set up in some of the communities where we've been involved, or even groups of mothers who didn't dare to do any

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activities who asked us afterwards to do climbing activities again, etc. This is a tool that we use and that we really like.

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Sophie: How do you prepare your target groups for activities in the mountains?

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Damien: When we set up projects, we try to have between four and five months of preparation already for everything logistical, because there's a lot of preparation. My role as project manager is to create an estimate with the activities requested in relation to the educational objectives. Once the quote has been accepted, we have to do all the work of finding professionals, accommodation, etc. And at the same time, we ask the group to prepare themselves physically, without it being excessive, but just to get them used to it, for example long efforts if we're going hiking, and we also try to start giving them ideas about what they're going to do. For example, I'm going to work with an organization in Paris. I'm going to go to the facility a fortnight before the project to present it to the educators and the young people, so that they can start to prepare themselves mentally for what they're going to experience and also to be able to avoid things on the spot that might upset them, for example, explaining that in a refuge there isn't necessarily a shower or that the telephone network isn't available everywhere. You need to prepare them for all these things, and that takes away some of the stress and difficulties at the start of their stay.

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Sophie: How do you ensure the safety of participants during activities, especially when they are people who have never done it before or have disabilities?

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Damien: We work with a network of mountain professionals. In other words, in a project, there are educators, the association's project manager, who is in charge of organization, and mountain professionals who are suited to the activities. We work with high mountain guides, a lot of mountain leaders, mountain bike and ski instructors, who are in charge of safety and the framework of the activities. We also really adapt to the audience. We're not going to do the same thing if we know that they've already done several climbing sessions with such an audience as if it's really a discovery, we're really adapting. We don't set any objectives at the start, or in any case no summit-type objective: we'll go up to this refuge and see how it goes. After that, we adapt to the group so that there are no safety issues, but also confidence issues and putting them in a position to succeed, because these are people who have often experienced failure in their lives, whether at school, in their personal lives or in their families. And the idea here is not to put them back in that situation of failure. That's why we don't aim too high, we do simple things to give them a sense of success.

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Sophie: What aspects of your work are particularly demanding?

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Damien: What's demanding is sticking to our methodology right to the end. In other words, as I said before, we plan between four and five months before the project, for

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all the preparation. Then there's the project and then there's the post-project period, when there are reviews and so on, and that's difficult, because we often have periods when there are a lot of projects in a row. For example, in winter or in June, and sometimes the succession of projects means that we can forget certain aspects of the methodology. For us, this methodology is really our trademark, because the idea is not that people come on holiday to the mountains. If they come on holiday with En passant par la montagne, it's because they know that, behind it, there's a link with what they're doing at educational level. So, what's difficult is to maintain that throughout.

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Sophie: Ok, when you talk about methodology, it's about preparation, how to do it and can you explain?

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Damien: Yes, sorry, the methodology is really us, it's how it's going to work, from the first call from the social structure to the final assessment. And we have a whole system in place to make sure that happens in the best possible way. The idea is that at the outset, we work on the educational objectives of the social structure we're supporting. These educational objectives will give us ideas for mountain activities. For example, if we want to work on group cohesion and doing things together, we'll suggest going on an independent itinerary, with donkeys and teepees, where the whole group has to take part in fetching water, making a fire, cooking, etc. That's an example of an activity in relation to an objective. All this work follows a methodology, we draw up the estimates, we think about the activities, and once we've found the activities, we look for the professionals who are going to supervise them, because we have a network of professionals with whom we work, who want to work with us, but we know that some professionals work more easily with people with disabilities or with young people who are monitored by the judicial protection of young people. We find the professionals, we find the accommodation, we do all the organizing and we go and meet the young people. That's essential before the project. During the project, we all have a methodology of briefing, debriefing every day, final assessments, etc., and also to be able to readapt if necessary. We have a final assessment, which we call an "on-the-spot" assessment, i.e. following the stay, what the young people experienced, how they found it. Then, a month later, we do a cold assessment to try and see what changes the educators have noticed in the young people, whether or not it has helped them, whether or not they have seen any benefit. And that's really when we reach the end of our methodology. And it's these times that are sometimes a bit difficult, because when the educators go back to the people they're working with on their day-to-day lives, they move on to other things. So, we have to be a bit insistent to get that final time.

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Sophie: What is your favorite part of your job and why?

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Damien: What I like best is when I'm out in the field, with the groups, because it's the culmination of a lot of thought and administrative work, and when we're out in the field and we manage to achieve the objectives that have been set, it's comforting and

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it's reassuring for us. But that's not all. What's great is to see what people are going through at the time, what they're feeling, and the idea that we or the guides can pass on to young people. But the young people also bring something to us. Because sometimes, when we live in the mountains, there are things we're used to and sometimes we don't realize what it brings to people, what it puts them through, whether in terms of benefits, but also in terms of stress, difficulties, things that, for us, seem relatively simple and insignificant, for them are enormous. And even taking that step isn't easy. So, it's a bit of a challenge for us too, and that's great. And then to see that, in fact, many young people who thought they couldn't succeed, that they couldn't do it, that they weren't capable, realize that all it takes at some point is a little willpower, belief in oneself, and trust in others, to be able to go beyond one's limits, go a little further, overcome one's fears. And that's very rewarding, and it's great to see people moving towards greater well-being. So, it's really when you're out in the field with people.

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Sophie: What or who has personally surprised you the most during your mountain activities so far?

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Damien: I'm always very admiring when we do activities with people with strong disabilities. For example, we've worked with an association called Synapse, which looks after people with brain injuries, who've had car accidents and so on. In other words, these are people who are in wheelchairs or who can no longer use part of their limb and with whom we manage to do climbing. It's the same for them, when they arrive, they think we're crazy. But we work with guides who are used to working with these types of people, and after four or five sessions, people manage to climb to the top of the wall, and for them, it's really, really rewarding. I remember one lady who said to me: "My family doesn't understand why I go climbing, given my condition." But she knows that it does her a world of good and that it restores her self-confidence and makes her happy. That's really great, yeah!

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Sophie: What are the three most important lessons you've learnt from your groups?

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Damien: First of all, it's really this idea, sometimes, of not setting an objective, which is what I was saying earlier, that we're always surprised by people's ability to adapt, well, what I'm learning with, with the groups, is that sometimes we imagine that it's going to be complicated, that young people don't want to do it at first, they don't want to do it and we're not going to succeed. Except that, at some point, there's always a little click that makes them switch to the other side, and they manage to take what we can give them. And that's really, I mean, it's this ability, sometimes, to change state, that's what it brings, I think it's interesting. But even for us, there comes a time when we have some preconceived ideas. We have preconceived ideas about the young people we're going to have, the young people have preconceived ideas about the mountains, and we manage to switch all the time, at a given moment, to get over that. That's great. What it also teaches me is that you always have things to learn from others. And that's true, like when we work with young people, young migrants in

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particular, who have had very complicated lives, and when we see what they can also bring us, when they talk about what they've been through, etc., that's something, or sometimes it makes us realize how lucky we are. That's quite obvious with these audiences. And finally, a third point about these projects, La montagne prend ses quartiers, to come back to what I was talking about before, it's the same thing, we always have a few preconceptions and fears when we set up this kind of project, we always wonder if it's going to work. Then you're always surprised by people. You're always surprised by the desire to discover that everyone has. At first, it's not obvious, but everyone wants to discover. And that's important, I think, whether it's for the mountains or for nature in general. The fact that you want to discover and be amazed already starts there. It also helps us to become aware of what's around us and, after that, how to take care of what's around us and how to protect it. So that's really important.

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Sophie: Is the contribution you make to these groups sustainable or do you know if they develop a passion for the mountains?

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Damien: It's difficult to quantify or imagine. A passion for the mountains is a lot for groups who come and have never experienced the mountains and who discover them over a week. I don't think there are many who become passionate about the mountains, although there are certainly some. For us, it's difficult to know in the long term what they've gained from it. At least for the trips that come from far away. For the trips I work on with the social structures in the area we've already been able to observe that projects such as La montagne prend ses quartiers, or other holidays, where we organize another holiday called montagne de vacances, where we take young people from here to discover the mountains of the south of France. We've been able to observe young people who are really interested in mountain activities, and who come back to us afterwards, either to set up projects with the youth workers, or we direct them to our climbing and hiking clubs, or we set up a new project. After that, it's minute. For us, the aim isn't for people to become mountain enthusiasts. It's that at some point, the mountains can offer them something in their lives. If, after that, they're passionate about it, so much the better. Some of them might want to become guides or something like that. But it's more, it's more the tool, it's not the educational tool, because it sounds strange to say tool, but it's the fact that the mountain brings, it can bring things to everyone, from the moment you know and start listening, you're going to pay attention to others. And it's not necessarily the aim to become mountain people, it's to use it, to know how to be present, to live in the mountains, to use it and enjoy it.

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Sophie: How do you imagine ideal and equal access to mountain sports and experiences?

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Damien: There's already a central issue, which is the question of resources, financial resources. Today, mountain sports are expensive and some activities are really reserved for an elite. Mountaineering is very expensive, skiing is very expensive. So,

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there is something like that. But then you also have to think about the fact that we can no longer enjoy the mountains in the way we have until now. There is a need to make your mountain activities a little more modest, so that they are accessible to everyone, but also so that we have less impact on the mountain. The idea is not, it's not to have more, even more of the mountain type, to make even more tourism and build even more ski lifts. The idea is that making the mountains accessible to everyone means ensuring that people can access them and realize the effect they have on them too. That's what we need to do. Our aim is not to train future mountain tourists. So, it's a bit difficult, but I think that if we could get people to want to go there, that would be a start. To want to go there, to want to see. That's where it starts. Because access to the mountains already means knowing what mountains are. A lot of people, even if they live next door, have no idea that there are so many things to see, or it scares them, and they need to be told that no, look, it's not all rock falls and melting ice, there are also things to see within easy reach. You don't need a lot of equipment, there are simple things to do. So that's it, but always with the idea in mind that the mountains are changing and that, as a result, we need to be careful about how we use them.

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Sophie: This was an interview with Damien Urbain, from the association En passant par la montagne. Associations like this make a valuable contribution to greater inclusion in the mountains. Thanks to their sustainable approach, they do good for people and for the nature that surrounds us in the Alps. We have come to the end of this latest episode of the CIPRA podcast on inclusion in the mountains. You can find out more about these topics and the Via Alpina Youth project on our website. Thank you to the whole team of En passant par la montagne for a great experience and a warm welcome. My name is Sophie Mahlkecht and I'd like to thank you for listening. Have a nice day. Bye for now