

Transcript

Podcast project Voices along the Via Alpina

<https://www.cipra.org/de/projekte/stimmen-entlang-der-via-alpina>

With: Dominik Siegrist, April 2025

I'm Dominik, I used to work for CIPRA, I was also involved in the development of the Via Alpina and I'm delighted that we can talk about it today.

For 25 years, the Via Alpina has been connecting people, cultures and landscapes across the Alpine region. In our new podcast series, we tell its story, highlight the challenges and opportunities of long-distance hiking and talk about sustainable tourism in the Alps. My name is Michael Gams and I welcome you to the first edition of Voices along the Via Alpina. Today I am talking to Dominik Siegrist. Thank you for taking the time, Dominik.

You're welcome.

Before we get started, I'd like to tell you a little bit about you. There are few people for whom the term "Alpine hiker" is more fitting than Dominik Siegrist. The Swiss geographer and landscape planner has walked the route from Vienna to Nice twice. Once in 1992 and again in 2017. The hike took four months. In 2021, he followed in the footsteps of climate change in nature, culture and society with his Climate Trails hike through Switzerland. In 2023, he hiked through the Pyrenees for 80 days. His books about these documentary journeys on foot are not only exciting travelogues, but also encourage reflection on sustainable tourism, rural exodus, landscape and climate protection, and other similar topics. Dominik Siegrist is involved in numerous environmental organisations dedicated to protecting nature and the climate. Among other things, he was president of the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps (CIPRA) from 2004 to 2014 and co-president of the Swiss Climate Protection Association from 2018 to 2023. He also helped found the Wir Alpiner association. Welcome back, Dominik. I'd like to start by asking you when you first caught the long-distance hiking bug.

That was in the early 1990s, when the idea arose that we wanted to visit active groups throughout the Alpine region. A few colleagues and I had this idea, which came about at the Salecina holiday and education centre in Bregaglia during a large conference on transit avalanches. That was the topic at the time, the transit axes that were overflowing. The Alpine Initiative was also launched in Switzerland at that time. My colleagues and I were enthusiastic and we said we would organise such a project, hiking from Vienna to Nice and documenting this political resistance, these initiatives for sustainable development in the Alpine region.

So that was really your very first contact with long-distance hiking. You hadn't been hiking long distances as a hobby before that?

Yes, I had. As a student, every summer we would pack our sleeping bags and set off on a hike without any planning. We would start somewhere in the Alpine region and hike over the passes, spending the nights in hay barns. So no tent and not enough money to stay in a guesthouse, and then we ended up somewhere else after a week or two. For me, it was always a really great experience – . Just being out there hiking, feeling free, without having to rely on infrastructure.

In 2017, you repeated this hike with some of your friends from back then, 25 years later, from Vienna to Nice again. But this time under the motto "What's Up". What was it about for you or what was it about for all of you?

In 1992 it was called Transalpedes and in 2017 What's Alp. So you can see the difference in wording, right? Social media was incorporated. There were young people involved in the project who said you can't just carry on like you did back then. We have to find new channels of communication, hence What's Alp. And actually, it was about seeing what had changed. The route was more or less the same, again from Vienna to Nice. And we actually asked the groups, citizens' initiatives and so on that we had met back in 1992 what had become of them. We also found new projects, new initiatives that may have taken up new issues, especially agriculture, which was really a new issue, alternative agriculture in the Alps. And so we were able to make a nice comparison between then and now. How has the Alpine region changed? What are the problems today?

What were the biggest differences or insights you had on this hike compared to 1992?

The strong development that the Alps have undergone was very visible. I am referring to economic development and modernisation. There were many regions and valleys that were still somewhat left behind in 1992. That was no longer the case, especially in the Eastern Alps in Austria. These large valleys have undergone strong tourist development, visible in settlements, new mountain railways and ski resorts. That was one of the strongest impressions we had. But then there were the big issues such as transit traffic, mass tourism and migration, which we still encountered, of course, perhaps on a different level. Traffic has increased massively in the Alps over the last 25 years. I think it has doubled in terms of frequency. On the transit routes, on the tourist roads. So that was the basic impression we took away from this comparison.

And you also met many people for conversations along the way. It wasn't just a hike. You met an incredible number of people, making appointments in advance with representatives of nature and national parks, environmental organisations, but also with large landowners, tourism professionals and power plant operators. Who or what left a particularly lasting impression on you?

So there were about 70 events that we had planned in advance, ranging from local events with three or four people to large events with two or three hundred people. A total of around 300 fellow hikers took part. They hiked with us for a week or a few days. So it was actually a very communicative project. And of course we had some really great encounters, perhaps less so with the power plant operators than with these grassroots initiatives. For example, in Styria we came across a goat farm. These were young people who had taken over the farm from their parents. It was a dairy farm and it had no future. They said, we're going to start goat farming now. And they make goat cosmetics, goat's milk, goat's cheese, roast goat. We went there, thinking we were just going to look at the farm. But lunch was already on the table, with roast goat in the oven. We were able to join them and experience first-hand how this farm works. These were such wonderful encounters, which we had again and again, of course.

Did anything surprise you, perhaps with people from the other camp, so to speak? It's never black and white, but there are people who run power plants or work in tourism who are very committed to sustainability. Can you think of anything that impressed you?

This initiative has always been very well received, even by people who are now on the other side, so to speak, who are not ecologically oriented. And there is a special reason for that: hiking. Hiking is somehow an ancient activity in the Alps. People know this from their

ancestors, the mountain farmers, who all travelled on foot. And that's why, when you come hiking, you have an open door, no matter what message you bring with you. Be it resistance to reservoirs or large-scale tourism projects. Hiking has opened doors for us. It has also enabled us to organise events with people who think differently, contradictory panel discussions. When the population came, right? We said we were hiking from Vienna to Nice. People didn't understand that you could hike that far. They only know the next valley, right? I said, what? You've already been hiking from Vienna? And where are you going? To Nice, to Nice. So hiking really opened doors.

Yes, it's actually really exciting. The fact that something as simple as walking brings people closer together is actually a very nice thing.

On the mountain, you say to each other, "Hey, right?" Exactly. It doesn't matter where you come from. You meet there. And I think that's also true in the villages. We mainly visited villages. We hiked across the mountains, but the places where we met people were the villages, where the culture takes place.

In your book *Alpenwanderer (Alpine Hiker)*, you've written many books, but in the book *Alpenwanderer von Wien nach Nizza (Alpine Hiker from Vienna to Nice)*, you report, among other things, on a section of the trail where it meets the Tour du Mont Blanc long-distance hiking trail. This trail is walked by tens of thousands of tourists from all over the world every year. Nowadays, there are influencers on social media and, of course, they also contribute to the fact that secret paths and places are no longer secret. Is there such a thing as too much long-distance hiking, a kind of overtourism?

These circular routes are very popular, such as the Tour de Mont Blanc, Tour Monte Rosa and Dolomites Circular Trail. People spend one to two weeks on these routes, although I think many people only spend a few days on them, don't do the whole long-distance hike and just take their selfies at these famous viewpoints with Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn in the background. Of course, these hotspots exist, and there is also a real phenomenon where social media draws people to very specific locations. That's true. We have experienced many places where there is no one. It is true that large parts of the Alps are not very frequented by tourists. And then you have these hotspots, mostly in the intensive tourism areas in Valais or in the Dolomites in Tyrol, where these long-distance hikes are now being developed as commercial offerings.

Yes, do you view this critically or do you think, well, that's just the way it is, and if it's limited to a specific region, then it's not the worst thing? There are other forms of tourism that are perhaps more invasive.

Yes, I think if you compare it to mass tourism, the ski business or large events, it's a different ball game altogether. So a long-distance hike like the , even if it attracts tens of thousands of people a year, is still a certain form of sustainable tourism. Sure, the huts are overcrowded and so on. I think we also have to look at how people travel, how they get around, whether by car, plane or public transport. These are important questions that need to be asked. So in that sense, I don't see the existence of such circular hiking trails and long-distance hiking trails as overly critical.

How do people get around? How do you get to where you're going to hike? With the issue of the climate crisis, which has finally become very prominent in public discourse in recent years and has reached the centre of society. That's exactly what you dealt with in 2021 with the so-called climate trail hike through Switzerland. What was different about this compared to the previous hikes you've done with others? What was the big difference for you?

The idea of doing a What's Alp climate hike through the Alps was already there in 2017. We then had discussions with glacier researchers and climate researchers, who advised us not to do it because the climate traces are not very visible on a hike through the high mountains. You can see the glaciers receding, but if there are no glaciers, you actually see relatively little of climate change. Climate change is visible in settlements, in places where people live and work, in the waters that fill our plates. And that's why we did this tour through Switzerland, through the lowlands, in 2021. We also travelled through the Alps, but always in the plains, always among the people, always in the cities, where the climate discussion is really taking place. And that's where we saw the big issues. There's mobility, there's the whole building issue, the energy issue. Or, in terms of the effects of climate change, there's the risk of flooding, heat, summer and so on. These were things that we saw very clearly and that we were able to cover on Klimaspuren, with dozens of events and 700 participants. There were also 700 people on this tour who joined us on the hike. It makes a difference, because crossing the Alps is more demanding for the people who take part. The tours are longer, the altitude differences greater. And when you're hiking through the flatlands, you can take people with you for two or three hours and then they get back on the train at the next station.

But it's great, of course, because you can reach more people with the message.

Yes, so when you go to the cities on a hike, which was also the case with the old ones and the crossings, the big cities. Vienna was also there, Innsbruck, the big cities, where we also had the big events.

Now, our podcast is called Voices along the Via Alpina and we are celebrating these 25 years. Now I want to steer the topic a little bit in that direction. During your first hike in 1992, there were already long-distance hiking trails through the Alps, but there was no official hiking trail through all the Alpine countries. How did you experience the creation of the Via Alpina?

There was no route from Vienna or Trieste to Nice or Monaco because the Alpine Convention had only been signed a year earlier. So this Alpine-wide thinking was new. It was only then that the idea of actually hiking the entire Alpine arc came about. There were long-distance hiking trails from north to south, quite a number of them. Yes, so I think the Via Alpina actually arose from the same idea that we had when we launched Transalpedes. It was a few years later, and there was a competition. A departing managing director of CIPRA had requested this competition, and then a young woman, Nathalie Morel, who later became well known in connection with the Via Alpina, won this prize and was able to make this hike from east to west across the entire Alps and document it at . And that's how the Via Alpina project came about. That was in the mid-1990s, and a few years later it was institutionalised. An organisation was founded, an association that took on the task of establishing this long-distance hiking network.

So ideas could be submitted about what to do, or was it basically, to understand, a prize or a scholarship for people who wanted to hike across the Alps?

It was a competition for Alpine-wide projects. Two women were awarded prizes: Nathalie Morelle for her Alpine crossing and another woman for her project on large predators, bears and wolves, and so on. She also did an Alpine hike and then addressed the issue of these predators.

You were president of CIPRA until 2014. And in that very year, CIPRA took over the international secretariat of Via Alpina. Was that a coincidence?

The idea had always been that CIPRA could play a central role in Via Alpina. However, for various reasons, this was not possible for a long time. There were financial reasons, of

course, but also institutional reasons. And it was a certain constellation that made it possible in 2014 for the coordination of Via Alpina to come to CIPRA. Personally, I always thought it was important that CIPRA, as the most important Alpine-wide organisation, also manages this network of hiking trails, that CIPRA also brings its contacts to Via Alpina, and that it uses these contacts, which are newly established there, for new projects on Via Alpina. I believe that we have succeeded in combining many CIPRA projects that have been created since 2014 with Via Alpina, exploiting synergies. So I think it's an ideal situation that CIPRA has this management. I also hope that this will continue to be the case and that the necessary financial resources can be found to do this work.

What is your conclusion today? After eleven years of connection between Via Alpina and CIPRA, perhaps you also have a few critical thoughts on the matter.

You have to imagine that Via Alpina was unknown at the beginning, at the end of the 1990s, when the association was founded. There was a map showing these routes, but there were no signposts anywhere saying Via Alpina. I don't even know if there was a logo yet. And it was very difficult to get tourist destinations and tourism managers to work with Via Alpina. It was seen as some kind of ecological project, and people said that long-distance hiking wouldn't bring any economic benefits anyway. They would just go to the next valley and hardly stay overnight with us, and so on. And that has changed completely. I'm really amazed at how things have changed. I never thought that tourism would get so involved in a project like this. I mean, today, practically everywhere along the Via Alpina, the tourist destinations are on board. The Via Alpina symbols are everywhere on the signposts. That was difficult back then. So I got involved myself and said, hey, you have to mark this now. Then they said, no, you can't create a separate signpost for every project. But that has changed a lot and I think today the Via Alpina is really the most important, I would say, the most important Alpine-wide tourism project. A tourism project that encompasses all Alpine countries. A product, as tourism experts would say. The Via Alpina has achieved that.

Is that what makes it unique, or are there other aspects where you think the Via Alpina is unique?

The Via Alpina is unique because it has built up a community of people who care about the Alps. You might not see that so much when you look at the Via Alpina publications. I think it would be good to have a bit more content, something about the situation in the Alps, about critical issues, about future challenges. But the people, this community, who support Via Alpina are people who care about the future of the Alps. I find that very exciting and it is, of course, a difference to many other tourism projects that are purely commercially oriented. I would see that as the main difference, this potential to also do something for the future of the Alps. But more could be done in this area.

If Via Alpina didn't already exist, could it even be created under today's social and political conditions? Or was it a very special situation at the time that allowed it to come into being in the first place? Would it be possible today? What do you think?

I think it would be possible. The Alpine region has become an issue in Europe. The Alps are well known as a single entity, as a tourist region. I think it would be possible. The question is, of course, how it would be financed. Are there still donors willing to support such projects? I don't know. But in principle, it would be possible. It's interesting that, given the current global political upheaval, the Alpine debate is continuing largely unaffected by all these changes. There are still many people who believe it is important to protect the Alps and develop them sustainably. Perhaps this also has to do with tourism and the need for unspoilt nature. So I do see that there are still good opportunities to carry out such projects.

With the current political situation, nationalism, neoliberalism and authoritarian politics are definitely on the rise, even in the Alpine countries. Will the Via Alpina still be around in 25 years? What do you think?

Definitely. If the Alps still exist in 25 years, the Via Alpina will still exist. I can imagine that, because of climate change. Accessibility to places is becoming a problem. Transport routes are under threat. People don't think about that enough today. What will actually happen when all these valley slopes become unstable? When the mountain paths are no longer passable because of rockfalls? But I think, of course, the Via Alpina will continue to exist because people will still want to go to the mountains. Probably even more so in the future. The more urbanisation progresses, the greater people's need to go to so-called unspoilt nature will become. No matter how unspoilt it really is. Yes. A big problem, in my view, is what you mentioned, namely that this international change is already globalisation, even though people are now saying that this is the end of globalisation and so on. I don't believe that's the case. Globalisation is having a massive impact on development in the Alps. Investors, the big financiers, are coming to the destinations and buying up the mountain railways. They are buying up the tourist resorts. They are investing on a large scale. And there is a lot of money available today. Even if Russian money is not available at the moment, there is still a lot of money available, financial capital looking for investment opportunities. And we see everywhere in the Alps how these investors are pushing in and implementing large-scale projects that have nothing to do with sustainability. I see this as a very big problem for the future of the Alps.

With this in mind, what do you wish for Via Alpina for the next 25 years, what should it achieve, what can it achieve, what is it allowed to achieve?

Well, of course I hope that it continues to develop as it has done in recent years. I would like to see even more thematic projects linked to Via Alpina. Perhaps the regions and destinations could also come up with specific themes that are important in their area and fit in with Via Alpina. There is, of course, climate change and the consequences of climate change, which is a very important topic that can be communicated really well to visitors. People are interested in natural hazards, glacier melt, of course, the issue of sustainable management, mobility and the whole energy question. I think these topics should be linked more closely to the Via Alpina. Perhaps a little like we did with Transalpedes and What's Alp. So that was the idea, to set an example, to ensure that the whole Alpine debate really addresses these critical issues and not just the beautiful aspects of the Alps.

You have been listening to a conversation with Alpine and climate hiker Dominik Siegrist. For his next book project in collaboration with Rotpunkt Verlag, he is exploring the smuggling routes between Switzerland and Italy. You can find out more about Dominik's activities and books on long-distance hiking on the website alpenwanderer.ch. That was the first episode of the podcast series Voices along the Via Alpina. You can find more information in the show notes. I hope you found it inspiring and I would be delighted if you told others about it. In the next episodes, we will meet a young French woman who has made a film about the Via Alpina, a national park manager from Slovenia and a Via Alpina volunteer, among others. This podcast series is made possible with the financial support of the non-profit foundation Fürstlicher Kommerzienrat Guido Feger in Lichtenstein.