

Transcript of the podcast “Voices along the Via Alpina – Katia Tomatis”

Interview conducted by Michael Gams, CIPRA International

Link: <https://www.cipra.org/en/projects/voices-along-the-via-alpina>

Hello and welcome to the current episode of Voices Along the Via Alpina. My name is Michael Gams and today we are joined by Ellen from Belgium, a passionate long distance hiker, language enthusiast and a new member of the Via Alpina volunteers team. After completing the full red trail of the Via Alpina in 2024, she is now excited to contribute her skills as a volunteer to the communication team of Via Alpina. With a master's degree in multilingual communication in Dutch, English and Italian, Ellen brings a unique blend of linguistic and cultural insight to her work. Her love for the mountains, languages and Alpine cultures continues to grow and in 2025, now she's hiking her favorite section of the Via Alpina, the Western Alps, for the fourth time actually. So we are thrilled to have her with us today. Welcome, Ellen.

Hi. Thank you very much for having me and thank you also for this lovely introduction.

Yeah, we're joined by you today in our office actually in Liechtenstein. It's nice you dropped by very spontaneously. How are you feeling right now?

Right now, I would say very happy to be here and to finally meet CIPRA International, but I'm also quite tired, especially after yesterday's rainy day. And yes, the body is a bit exhausted, but the mind is full of energy.

You already said it a bit tired. How long have you been on the trail so far?

For now, about two weeks. So, four more weeks to go for me.

Where did you start? I started in the Karnik Alps, so close to the border with Slovenia and Austria. And then I did a small detour in the Dolomites to then switch back on the Via Alpina.

It wasn't all easy the first days you told me before, a lot of rain and so on. What's your takeaway from these first days?

I would say that I have to enjoy more just being in the mountains and not just being focused on doing long distances every day. In the beginning, I was just focused on, you know, speeding up and I wasn't really taking time to enjoy the beautiful landscapes, but I soon realized that it is all about just enjoying where you are. And yes, this has so far been the most important lesson for me.

We might have to add that you are not just hiking the Via Alpina. You try to do it in a trail running mode. So, as quickly as possible. How did you come up with this idea?

Well, five years ago, I started through hiking. So, then I was just a hiker with a heavy backpack. And last year, I felt like I needed a new challenge. Challenge, yeah, indeed. And also because when I was hiking on the trails, I saw many trail runners. So, that inspired me to do it as well. And yeah, it came naturally just after I already hiked for three years in the mountains. It was time for a new step for me.

What does a typical day on the Via Alpina look for you?

Well, I try to start as early as I can. So, that means setting my alarm at 5.30, which is still late, I think. But yeah, I do that to avoid the late afternoon storms because they mostly roll in at about 3 p.m. So, then I try to do as much as I can before that. And then I take a long break during the afternoon storm to then continue for two more hours after the storm. And then I'm happy if I can reach the final destination by 6.30 or the latest 7 p.m. But yeah, because of the weather the last few days, that wasn't possible. So, yeah, I don't see the point of continuing when it's like pouring outside. So, then I take shelter. But yeah, for the last few days, that was mostly how my days were looking. So, then that means that I can only continue when it isn't raining. And sometimes that means that I'm still on the trails by 8 or 9 p.m. even.

What has been your toughest day so far?

I think in the Karnic Alps, when I was on the ridge line. And I knew that a thunderstorm was forecasted, but it wasn't clear when. So, I had a stretch of like 20k to do. And there weren't really options to go down. So, I had to be quickly in order to avoid this thunderstorm. And just as I could finally go down to the Mitrikar Bivak, the thunderstorm rolled in. So, I was really happy that I wasn't up there while it was thundering.

So, you were lucky. Yeah, indeed. I was very lucky. Yeah.

And what was your most beautiful day so far, would you say?

Well, every day is beautiful if you just look to the landscape. But on the fourth day, I had a really inspiring encounter. Encounter, yeah. Sorry, I'm a bit tired. With Renata, who is 80 years old. And she was doing the high Karnic way. And I was so impressed that it is still possible when you are 80 years old to do this. That's my dream. And I asked her, yeah, how she managed to do this at, yeah, let's say, a very unusual age. And she told me that every day she hikes and she tried to just eat what is good for the body. And, yes, that was really an amazing moment.

You are hiking and running along the Via Alpina for the fourth time now. But you told me before that some years ago you dreamt about hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, which is very well known among people who like to do through hiking. Pacific Crest Trail is in the USA. But now you're not interested in doing that so much. So why did your point of view change here?

Well, I think because for me, being on the Via Alpina also means to eat well. And that is eating slow foods. And slow food is food that is, yeah, really good for your body. So no unprocessed food and also food that is good for the environment. And when I see that hikers on a PCT fool themselves with McDonald's, yeah, that doesn't appeal to me anymore. And also as a language enthusiast, it's really nice to, yeah, to explore all the dialects here in the Alps. And culture-wise, it's also much more interesting compared to, yeah, the United States, I would say.

Okay, maybe if we go back to this minimalist, fast-paced style of hiking, your backpack weighs only about five kilograms without water, with water a bit more, obviously. How well is that working out for you so far?

Well, of course, five kilograms is ultra-lightweight when you compare it to most hikers. But it is still demanding for me because, yeah, I think that my body weight is 53-ish. So running with, I think that it's more than 10%, when my backpack is also filled with water and food, is still challenging. I can definitely feel it in the evening on my shoulders. But, yeah, I have

everything that I need and everything that I need to be safe. So, yeah, I will definitely not cut weight when it comes to safety. And, well, also my point of view to safety is that if you are lightweighted, you are much faster. And when you are much faster, you can much easier reach a place to take shelter from, for example, when there is a thunderstorm. So overall, I feel really safe with everything I have. And, yeah, if I see sometimes hikers with backpacks of like 20, yeah, even, yeah, I met hikers with a backpack of 20-ish kilo who are struggling to do more than two kilometers an hour. Yeah, that would definitely make me afraid, like knowing that you have to hurry up because of a thunderstorm. So, yes. **I understand. So about this safety aspect, this arises also the question to me, how did actually your family and friends react when you told them the first time maybe, I'm going to hike the Via Alpina and I'm doing it all alone and maybe this time even running the Via Alpina or at least a large part of it. How is the reaction among family and friends there?**

Well, by now they are used to this because this is basically my life for five years now. And to come back to why I prefer the Via Alpina compared to, for example, the PCT is, yeah, because there are just so many people out in the Alps during the summer and you have huts and you can be in the middle of nowhere. But at the same time, you are, for example, two hours away from a parking lot where you can descend and go to a doctor, for example, if needed. So as a female solo hiker, I feel absolutely safe in the Alps. And yes, I don't think there is need to worry to be out here alone. Also, there are no dangerous animals. So, yes.

In some parts of the Alps, people are afraid of the wolves and the bears coming back. But still, it might not be the same as somewhere in the U.S., the complete wilderness, I guess. You are also volunteering for the Via Alpina. How did that come about?

As being so passionate on the Alps and the Via Alpina, it felt like a logical step for me to join the Via Alpina volunteers team. And also because with my background in multilingual communication, I knew that I could mean something for the organization. And yeah, it also combines my passion for languages and the Alps. So that was a perfect new project to embark on for me.

And what exactly have you been able to contribute so far?

Mainly translation. So when something has to be translated, Nora would text me and ask me if I'm available to do that. So there is no pressure on contributing to the Via Alpina project. It is just when you have time that you can embark on something. And if it doesn't work for you at that time, you can just say it. So that's also really nice.

Great. Nora, just to explain, is coordinating the Via Alpina for us. You've met interesting people on your way already. As mentioned, the elderly lady who is very fit. How do those encounters differ from the ones that you make in everyday life?

That's an interesting question because they definitely differ. Well, first of all, when you're out on the Via Alpina, you meet like-minded people, which is much more complicated for me as a Belgian woman. So that's one thing.

Why is it more complicated?

Because we have no mountains and although I know that there are people that are as passionate as me in Belgium, it's still hard to find them. Whereas when you go out here in the mountains, in the huts or in the bivacos, it's easier to meet people. And of course, when you

are doing the Via Alpina, you have time. So you're more likely to start having deeper conversations, I would say, compared to back at home.

Is actually sustainability a big topic for you in your daily life?

Yes, yes, it definitely is. Although, yeah, it makes me quite sad when I think about me entering a supermarket and just buying stuff that isn't good for the environment and for myself. But it's somehow the only way to do it because as I'm working full time, for example, I don't have the time and the energy to grow food in a garden. So because we have this lifestyle of working 40-ish hours a week, we do not have another option than just buying food in a supermarket. Whereas here in the Alps, also here you have the space, of course, to produce the cheese and everything that is more difficult in Belgium. It's also a nice way to, at least for some time, only eat food that is good for the body and the environment.

What advice would you like to give others who are thinking about taking on the challenge of hiking the Via Alpina or even running it, but just hiking it maybe first?

Do not let the long distance hold you off embarking on the Via Alpina. You can easily split it up and, for example, make a project of it for like five years and come back every summer because you pass cities where you can take the train. So it's not because you don't have three months of holiday that you cannot embark on the Via Alpina. I know that that is tempting to do, for example, Tour de Mont Blanc because it's like, I think, 10 days. So perfect for one holiday. But, yeah, I think with some planning, you can make projects out of it and just come back every year to finish a whole traverse of the Alps instead of doing loops all the time.

I understand. And did you actually, we did not talk about it before, did you actually walk or hike the whole Via Alpina at once already? Or did you also split it up?

The first time, that was four years ago, I did the GR5. So that is from Lac Le Mans to Nice, mostly on the French side. But the Via Alpina is mostly following the GR5. And then the second year, I came back to do the La Grande Travessata delle Alpi. So at the Italian side, also the Western Alps. And then last year, I started actually in the Carnic Alps because I was planning to start in Trieste. But because of last year's late snowfall, I couldn't start when I actually had planned to start. So I had to skip that part. So I started in the Carnic Alps and then I followed the Via Alpina. But I tried to stay mainly in Italy. So I used the Via Alpina as my main trail. But I did some detours to explore the eastern side of Italy. And then when I was back in the Western Alps, I stayed again on the Via Alpina. So actually, no, I'm still doing parts on the Via Alpina that are new to me. But my point of view is that when you cross the Alps, you can call it Via Alpina because what would you call it otherwise? I think that if you like to explore an area, you can just easily make your own way instead of following an official route. I think it's just nice to know that you have the official route in case you don't like to plan everything yourself. But I really like to study the maps and see all the possibilities. So yeah, that's why I like to make my own projects of it.

Yeah, it's a nice thought to have the Via Alpina as an inspiration and then find your own way where you want to go. But you also arrived in Monaco last year, right?

Indeed, yeah. **I would be interested, how did you feel? What were your feelings when you arrived there? Must be a mixture of many feelings, I guess.**

Yes, indeed. Well, since I traversed the Western Alps already three times, Monaco was my destination for three times already. And I always like to reflect on how I felt the year before

and on everything that changed during that year. And yeah, as I've said before, you have the famous GR5 as well with a destination in Monaco. So you are very likely to meet other hikers that have been through hiking for weeks or months in the Alps. And then you always share it with someone else. I never arrived there completely alone. So I think, yeah, I think I would be kind of sad when I would be there alone, especially because, yeah, Monaco is again a big city with a lot of people.

So you arrived there and you meet other people who just finished the Via Alpina and there is the big Via Alpina party or how can I imagine that?

Yes, I heard from other people that then they have an overnight stay on the beach and celebrate the end of their Via Alpina. But I didn't do that. Well, maybe a funny story to tell. Well, for example, two years ago, when I was in the Mont Blanc region, I met a woman and she told me that she lives in Monaco and I told her that I was going there and she gave me her number and she told if you if you are there, you can come to my house and sleep there. So that was what I did. And I feel like this is also quite typical, especially for the Western Alps, I would say I had many more of those kind of encounters that people are just very welcoming to host you and to have you. And also, if you are hiking the Via Alpina with a tent, do not be afraid of just asking to to someone in the evening, if you're still looking for a place to set up your tent, if you can just sleep in their garden, because I feel like most people are very welcoming to help you. So, yes.

Okay. You are 26 years old now, right? Because Via Alpina is 25 years already there. It was founded around the year 2000. So almost your age. What are your wishes for your next 25 years and maybe also for the next 25 years of the Via Alpina?

Well, for myself, definitely that I can stay healthy and come back to the mountains every summer. And for the Via Alpina, that it gets more exposure in some way that maybe huts and towns are more aware of the Via Alpina and that they can even more support through hikers. But I wouldn't say that I want the Via Alpina to be more well-known in the world because, yeah, right now I feel like most of the time people from Europe hike the Via Alpina. And although I, of course, everyone is welcome to hike it, I would find it a bit strange to, for example, all of a sudden have hikers from, yeah, America and New Zealand. And I, well, maybe it's just because it isn't there now, but I cannot really imagine that it would all of a sudden become very international.

So, yes, that's an interesting aspect because, of course, it's maybe not so sustainable to fly around the world to do a certain hiking trail might be more interesting to find something that's near, nearer to your home. So, yeah, that's right.

Yes, indeed, yeah, that's, well, I do not see the point of going to the United States or New Zealand when we have such a beautiful scenery and landscape so close by and the Alps are just so big. So, it's endless to, to explore everything we have here. So, and I mean, of course, I come back every summer and I stay here for two months. So, maybe in 10 years I will have seen most of it. But, yeah, as long as there is still something to discover, I prefer to come here instead of taking a flight to another continent. And, yes.

Yeah, and you, you already mentioned before, maybe you also want to move to the Alps, actually.

Yeah, yeah, indeed. Because, yeah, no, I mean, when I started in the Carnic Alps, I could have taken the train, but it's also just so expensive. So, yes, I opted for a cheap Ryanair flight

to Venice, but I would be much happier if I can just, you know, live in the Alps and go out in the weekend. And it's also such a hassle to come here from Belgium. So, I will definitely try to find a job here. And then I think, because, of course, we are always looking for the best, but I think that then I can say that I have everything I need in my life. If I have the mountains around me and if I'm able to go out whenever I can, that would be my biggest dream.

Because you said you're doing it in a trail running mode, this part of the Via Alpina. Is there any goal there where you say, I want to do it in, I don't know, a certain amount of time or did you set yourself a time frame for that?

Well, as I've said before, initially when I was in Belgium, I made a big Excel list with like, you know, the elevation change and kilometers that I wanted to do every day. But, yeah, for now, I don't care about that anymore. And I, yeah, I just try to enjoy the mountains. So, no, I don't have like a time frame. But, yeah, I, if I cannot do or finish something, I will just come back next year. And, yes.

That's cool. So, it's a nice change of perspective, actually.

Yes, yes. Well, as a runner, and I feel especially with ultra running, it's mostly not about competition between all the runners. But ultra running is more about challenging yourself and being competitive with yourself. So, I'm happy that I learned to let go of that and just, yeah, really try to enjoy it because it would be such a pity if I didn't and just focused on doing case.

Thank you so much, Ellen, for sharing your journey with us. Thanks for being so open. And I'm also talking about your experiences and reflections. We wish you many more unforgettable moments on the Via Alpina and lots of joy in your volunteer work with the team. And, yeah, there's many more stories to come, I guess. All the best. Thank you very much. **You have heard a conversation with Via Alpina volunteer Ellen Bouquet. My name is Michael Gams. Goodbye.**