

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

Link: [https://soundcloud.com/cipra\\_international/91-it-voci-lungo-la-via-alpina-katia-tomatis](https://soundcloud.com/cipra_international/91-it-voci-lungo-la-via-alpina-katia-tomatis)

Interview conducted by: Francesco Pastorelli, CIPRA Italy

**Good morning and welcome to another episode of Voices along the Via Alpina. For 25 years, the Via Alpina has been connecting people, cultures and landscapes across the Alps. A series of podcasts tells its story, highlights the challenges and opportunities of long-distance hiking and promotes awareness of sustainable tourism in the Alps. I am Francesco Pastorelli, and today we are talking about the 25th anniversary of the Via Alpina with Katia Tomatis, athlete and ski mountaineering champion, mother of two children, who has been running the Malinvern mountain hut in the Stura Valley in the Maritime Alps since 2013. Welcome Katia and thank you for taking the time to tell us about your experience along the Via Alpina. I'd like to start by asking you to tell us about your decision to leave the city to come and live and work in the mountains.**

Of course, good morning everyone. I come from a fairly mountainous background: my mother is from the Stura Valley and my father is from the Vermenagna Valley, so I have always spent my holidays and weekends in the mountains. Obviously, when you are young, many people dream of going to work in a bank, and that was also the case for me. Then, when I met my current husband, Andrea, in 2007, we started talking about future plans, and the idea of 'it would be nice to turn your passion into your job' became more and more appealing to me. My greatest passion was, first and foremost, snow and the mountains in general. As a result, I started to find out if there was a possibility of managing an alpine refuge, a hiking refuge, which is what I now run together with my partner, Luca, namely the Malinvern refuge. It took several years, but then I managed to fulfil my dream because in 2013 the Malinvern refuge was left by the old management and I and other people were asked to go and have a look at this refuge, so we took part in this tender, we won it and we have been managing the Malinvern refuge since 2013.

**Katia, how do you manage to balance running a mountain hut, sport and training, and family life?**

Given that, as I mentioned earlier, my main passion is snow, when I decided to leave my job at the bank, I analysed my life, thinking about working in the mountains during the summer and keeping myself a little freer during the winter so that I could devote more time to my primary passion, which is skiing. When this opportunity came up, I immediately put two and two together and decided overnight to make the change because I could work all summer in an environment that suited me, the mountains, which I love so much. Working in the mountains in the summer allowed me to combine my passion with my work, while in the winter I had a little more free time to ski and train because my career as a ski mountaineer obviously required me to be a little more on the ball from September onwards, with dry training, then running in the mountains and then, from the end of October onwards, moving to the snowy environment at high altitude (when there should already be snow). In recent years, things have obviously changed a bit, but this way I was able to do everything I liked. When Azzurra, our first child, came into our lives in 2019, fortunately my life didn't change that much because having *childcare* in the valley was a big help for a mother, as I was able to devote at least half a day to my work. At that time, it was also necessary for me to train. During the summer, however, Azzurra lived with me at the refuge, and it was very easy because she was a very relaxed child, so I could keep her with me in the kitchen while I cooked and did my work. It was a little more complicated with my second child because he had a different personality. So, in 2023, my partner Luca and I decided to take on the

management of another restaurant, also in the mountains, the Revelin Bistrot in Vinadio, and we divided the tasks between us: I tried to spend a little more time in Vinadio because my mother-in-law was there to help me with the children, while he settled into the mountain refuge. As a result, we are now managing to run these two businesses in the mountains in sync, and everything is going very well, so I can juggle everything, even though with children you obviously have to run around a bit more and leave aside the things you like, such as running, cycling, skiing... But we manage to juggle everything.

**The refuge you manage is located right on the Via Alpina route, so you get hikers who are doing long crossings, as well as day hikers, of course. What does long-distance hiking mean to you? What potential does a route like the Via Alpina have for an area like yours, the Stura Valley?**

In my opinion, the potential is really huge. It's about crossing the Alps independently, without the use of motorised vehicles, unlike day tourists who go up and down in a day, but people who spend days and days walking on trails in fantastic places throughout the Alps. In my opinion, the fact that there is a Via Alpina, i.e. a multi-stage route organised at the base, is really very important because it allows you to discover places, trails and refuges that the average day tourist would not normally discover. Here in Italy, we are often used to Italian tourists who set off in their cars, arrive at the car park, climb up to the refuge, climb to the top of the mountain and return home. On the other hand, hikers who do multiple stages are able to enjoy the tranquillity, silence, landscapes and colours between stages, which day tourists miss, such as that tranquillity, those sounds that are difficult to describe, which offer experiences and emotions that are impossible to name. In my opinion, it really gives you 'the dream' because I see that everyone who arrives from these crossings and stops at our refuge, or the one before or after, arrives really tired but happy and curious. It's a beautiful curiosity because when you walk, you are also free to think, your mind is free, and I see them really happy. In my opinion, multi-day trips along these routes really give you a sense of peace that is difficult to find on holiday in places where there are lots of people.

**When did you first hear about the Via Alpina? Is there any experience related to the Via Alpina that you would like to share in your work or even in your sporting life?**

I first heard about Via Alpina when I started thinking about taking over the management of the refuge, because then all the bookings would come in from people who had already booked their night in the refuge six months in advance. There would be thousands of experiences. When every tourist or group of tourists arrives, it's wonderful to see the bonds that form when they stop at the refuge because they're happy to have arrived. Everyone goes to their rooms, then comes downstairs, has a beer, talks, laughs, jokes and plays cards. The slow passing of time and seeing the joy in their eyes at being there in such a peaceful place: those are all a thousand experiences, a thousand memories that remain in my mind. Then, of course, there are customers who leave a bigger impression on me because we also have time to talk, to share stories, to share experiences, to share curiosities. So let's say that all the customers who walk the Via Alpina leave a wonderful memory.

**The Via Alpina also aims to promote sustainable tourism and sustainable development in general. How has tourism developed in your valley over the last 25 years and how has the Via Alpina contributed to the development of tourism in the valley?**

The Via Alpina has helped to promote tourism in the valley because this type of tourism, on foot, is spread by word of mouth and we have many tourists, especially foreigners, who engage in this type of tourism. In my opinion, tourists who decide to walk the Via Alpina already have the idea of saying: "For a week, two weeks, three weeks, I will use my legs as a means of transport," and this is already a wonderful thing. In this case, there is already a

greater awareness of sustainability. In the mountain huts, we always encourage people to be more careful with their waste: for example, people who come up for the day, who are doing a day trip, take their waste back down to the valley with them. In any case, I think tourists who do the Via Alpina are already much more aware because they don't bring plastic with them, they tend to produce as little waste as possible, and this is already a mindset that is absolutely right for the kind of tourism we want in the mountains. In the last 25 years, in my opinion, there has been a greater focus on the mountains, but I think also in the world in general, with the advent of all these *green* aspects, healthy living and healthy eating. In my opinion, tourists who decide to do a route like this have an idea of being as *green* as possible, simply because they are not using transport. In recent years, we have seen a significant increase in this type of tourism: in my opinion, many years ago, very few Italians would have considered doing a trek like this or a holiday of this kind. Today, more and more foreigners are doing it, but in recent years I have also seen several Italians taking this type of route. I believe this phenomenon will continue to grow, partly because there is increasing global awareness of nature: we have noticed this very clearly since Covid. After Covid, we noticed a lot more tourism in the mountains; this year, 2025, in particular, a lot more people have come to the mountains, and we are very pleased because, from our point of view, we try to convey as much interest as possible. This is also because, working and living in the mountains, we are exposed to the dynamics of mountain life even when there is no one else around, so we are able to convey our life experiences as best we can, not only when there is the August rush. So, in my opinion, over the years, people have become much more interested in the mountains, and that is a good thing.

**Can we say that the Via Alpina can contribute or is contributing to deseasonalising tourism, to exploiting the off-peak periods and not just the peaks in visitor numbers?**

In my opinion, yes. The main limitation we have in crossing the Alps is due to the presence of snow. If we look at the amount of tourism, in June we tend to have fewer customers making the crossings, precisely because of problems caused by snow on the hills and passes, where not all hikers are equipped with crampons and may even be afraid. Instead, what we have noticed is that the summer season has been extended: July is when the bulk of visitors arrive, and August is obviously a busy month, but in recent years we have noticed a strong presence in September and quite a few visitors in October too. There are still some people around in October. As a result, mountain huts like ours, which tend to close in the first week of October, try to offer availability for other periods if the weather remains good and the sun is shining. Obviously, in October we have to start the closing work, i.e. we have to put the refuge to 'bed' because if there is a sudden snowfall, we have all the problems associated with removing the water inside, turning off the hydroelectric control unit, and removing the bridge that crosses the stream because the snow would break it every year. So, in my opinion, the Via Alpina has contributed greatly to extending the season, that's for sure. We are working very well in September and in October we still get requests from time to time.

**Can the Via Alpina help to raise awareness of the valley floor and the villages that are not located on the route? Has enough been done or should more be done in this regard?**

In my opinion, it works very well from this point of view too, in the sense that on some occasions we have had tourists who arrived at our door a little tired, so they asked for advice on things to do the next day, without having to walk too far. Since our Malinvern refuge is very close to the village of Vinadio, we often recommended that they go down to the village and enjoy what it has to offer. In Vinadio, we have the well-known fortification, the market inside the fort, the lake, etc. So, thanks to this, we can offer them 'the experience of the neighbouring villages'.

### **In your opinion, how does the Via Alpina stand out from other hiking trails?**

In my opinion, the fact that the Via Alpina starts in Trieste and ends in Monte Carlo gives it an international dimension, in the sense that it touches all the Alpine countries and not just the Italian part of the Alps. Consequently, this aspect of touching culturally different mountain countries is also an asset. When I first heard about the Via Alpina, I was already familiar with the GTA (which was created in the 1980s, while the Via Alpina was created in 2000), so at first I was a little confused. Then I understood the difference, which is linked to internationality and length. Because during these years of working at the refuge, I have met about six people who have managed to do the Via Alpina in one go; people who obviously took leave from work because it is no mean feat to cross the entire Alpine arc in one go. Most of the time, we meet customers who come to us and divide their trip over several years. We have many Austrians and Germans who do the Via Alpina in six or seven years because, obviously, we know that we only have holidays when we have them, the number of days off is limited and, as a result, we always have to manage everything a bit. In my opinion, the big difference between the Via Alpina and other routes is its internationality, the possibility of going from one side of the Alps to the other, spending time in Italy, Austria, France, Slovenia... I think this is a wonderful thing, being able to speak several languages, it's all things that open your mind.

### **The Via Alpina is celebrating its 25th birthday this year. What would you like to wish for the Via Alpina for the next 25 years and for the mountains for the next 25 years?**

I hope that the Via Alpina will have an ever greater impact on people. Being able to continue to give everyone the opportunity to choose these mountain routes is a wonderful thing, so I hope that the Via Alpina will reach as many people as possible, encouraging them to get closer to the mountains and "become better people" in the sense that what a journey like this gives you is something you rarely find in life. Here you can have truly unique experiences. I hope that in the years to come, the public will become more sensitive to the mountains and, above all, that people will show them more and more respect. I often say that schools should reintroduce civic education, which I, born in 1981, still had. In my opinion, the mountains, and as far as I am concerned, sport too, are great teachers of life because they teach you to make do with what you have, in the sense of 'inventing' things, and so I really hope that people will increasingly approach the mountains in a respectful way.

**Thank you Katia. We listened to an interview with Katia Tomatis, who lives and works in the Stura Valley and has been managing the Malinvern mountain hut on the Via Alpina for 12 years. If you would like to hear other voices along the Via Alpina or find out more about the project, please visit our website.**

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

**My name is Francesco Pastorelli, thank you for listening to our podcast.**