

Transcript “Voices along the Via Alpina – Sascha Dubach”

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

Hello and welcome to Voices along the Via Alpina, a multilingual podcast series about the longest long-distance hiking trail in the Alps. For 25 years, the Via Alpina has been connecting people, cultures, and landscapes across the Alpine region. Our podcast series tells its story, highlights the challenges and opportunities of long-distance hiking, and raises awareness of sustainable tourism in the Alps. My name is Michael Gams.

[Sascha] I come from Switzerland, I am 38 years old and I am currently walking the Via Alpina.

Hiking alone for months on end. Swiss hiker Sascha Dubach is fulfilling this dream. He is hiking along the Via Alpina from Trieste to Monaco, crossing all the Alpine countries. We met him in July 2025 halfway through his journey in Liechtenstein and talked to him about his fascination with long-distance hiking. A conversation about being alone, minimalism, records, unexpected encounters, and his volunteer work for the Via Alpina. Welcome, Sascha, and thank you for taking the time to stop by while you're on the Via Alpina.

It's nice to be here, thank you.

You're about halfway there now, as you corrected me in our preliminary conversation. That's not quite right, you've already covered about 1,000 kilometers on foot. You still have about 1,500 kilometers to go. Those are incredible distances, of course, when you think about walking. How are you doing physically and mentally right now?

Physically, I'm doing very well. I had some difficulties at first, during the first week or two. When I got up in the morning, I could feel how my muscles and my body had to adjust to a different activity. I usually work in an office, where you sit a lot or maybe stand or take the stairs. But when I walk every day, I really notice it. Now I'm used to it and it's going quite well. And mentally, I'm feeling good again too. I hit a low point last week. I was questioning everything. But now everything is fine again. I haven't given up or anything. I'm doing well again. I expected that to happen. I'm making good progress and I'm really enjoying myself.

How long have you been on the road in total?

I'm now in my eighth week. That means I have just under two months behind me and about three months ahead of me. Not quite halfway, as you said.

What is your conclusion after these first few weeks? Would you say everything is okay, I'll keep hiking, or is it enough now?

No, I like it very much. My conclusion is that I can see how my preparations last year have paid off. I did several tours to optimize my luggage and the equipment I'm carrying. And I can see that it was a good idea, because I'm not missing anything on the road. I may have brought a little too much with me, or one or two things I could have left at home. And I really like the journey itself, being on the road. So I'm looking forward to the next three months or two and a half months that still await me on the road. I can already say that the whole thing is an enriching journey for me, across the species from east to west.

In our preliminary conversation, you also said that you are currently in a kind of nothing box in your head. What did you mean by that?

Perhaps you could explain it briefly for our listeners. Sure, yes. When I run, I'm in a flow. I enjoy nature. I can't listen to music, maybe a podcast or something in between. It's like I'm not thinking about anything. I'm not thinking like I am in my normal everyday life and at work. Then you take your work home with you or have other thoughts and maybe worries. I don't have those when I'm out and about. It's very quiet in my head. I'm completely in the flow. There are things in my everyday life that I don't think about as much or don't think about at all. That means I don't think about financial things, but can live fully in the moment and enjoy nature and also enjoy encounters with people.

You put a lot of effort into planning so that you can now travel so relaxed. Was it important to you to be perfectly prepared before you set off? Or maybe there are other types of people who just say, I'm just going to go now. I'll just try it and see what happens. How is it with you? What type of person are you?

Well, you've made a good point there. It's important to me because it gives me peace of mind. I want to be intuitive and spontaneous on the road, which I'm now very good at. Not at first. At the beginning of my journey, I tried to control a lot of things, which is why I planned so much. I planned too much, I would say now. So I'm at a point where I still pay attention to my plans, because they give me a sense of security. If I don't know what to do next, I can refer to them. But I need them less and less. I'm referring to it less and less because I know what's going on. Nowadays, I get up in the morning and may not know where I'll be sleeping that evening. It was very different at the beginning. I used to plan two or three days in advance where I would spend the night. I would make reservations so that I was sure to have a place to sleep. That's very different now. I travel much more intuitively and can enjoy the trip in a completely different way.

What is a typical day of hiking like?

Yes, it depends, it varies. If I'm in a hut, I'm in a tent. I usually wake up around five, between five and half past five, then turn over again. And then I get up and have a hearty breakfast. In huts, there is a prepared breakfast. In a tent, I have to prepare it myself. After breakfast in the tent, I check the weather conditions, if I have reception. What does it look like today? What can I expect so that I can prepare myself

mentally? The second important point is the water reserves, which I have to refill along the way. It's important to me that I don't carry too much luggage. That means I have a water filter with me and can refill my water bottles along the way. I usually manage with just under a liter. If the route I want to cover today doesn't offer any opportunities to refill my water bottles, then I have to refill them where I start and take them with me. That means I have to carry more luggage. That's the downside. And then I set off. I usually start hiking between 7:00 and 8:30 a.m. Sometimes it's a quiet day. Then I might only walk for four hours. Sometimes it's ten hours. And then around noon, my stomach starts to growl. Then I have to eat something. Sometimes I cook something myself. Sometimes I go to a hut or an alpine pasture to eat something. Sometimes I snack, depending on my mood. And then in the afternoon I hike or walk on. And when I stay overnight in a hut, I arrive at around 3 or 4 p.m. I check in, make my bed, and chat with the other guests, which is very enriching. When I'm traveling alone, i.e., staying in a tent, I sometimes walk until just before sunset, set up my sleeping place, cook something, and then go to bed. Usually around 9 p.m., whether in a hut or in a tent. That's the end of my day, and the next day I continue. Not every day is pleasant.

What has been the worst day for you so far? Do you want to talk about it at all?

Yes, the worst day, yes, that was the low point I had last week. I really asked myself what I was doing here and why I was on this path. And then various aspects came into play, which led to me really hitting rock bottom that day. And then my wife gave me the impulse, I think it's time for a hotel. That's my plan or my strategy to do something good for myself, to check into a hotel and then eat there, take a shower, and let myself be pampered, or just have a quieter, normal bed. And then things usually look better the next day. That's how it was. And if that hadn't been the case, I could still have stopped or said to myself, well, I tried. The mood is still there, something is wrong, I don't know why. Which really surprised me, because I hadn't expected it. I had planned for it, but I hadn't expected it to actually happen, because you know why you're on the road and you lack motivation. You might still be hungry, it's raining. You're in pain, you might miss your partner, in my case my wife. These are all little things that almost make you give up, and then you question everything.

What was the best day in contrast, so we can get there?

Yes, the nice thing is that there isn't really a best day. Every day is beautiful, just as it comes. I get up in the morning and look forward to the day ahead because I don't know what to expect. And in the evening, when I go to bed, I think of all the wonderful things I've encountered today. For example, interacting with people or animals or nature. Maybe even the rain or the sun that was there. There isn't one beautiful day or the most beautiful day. Everyone has something that inspires me.

When people think of long-distance hikers, they imagine them traveling with huge backpacks. Especially when you mention that you often sleep in a tent. Naturally, I picture a very large, very heavy backpack in my mind. Your

backpack is probably... Unfortunately, I haven't seen it; you don't have it with you.

No.

It's probably relatively small compared to other long-distance hikers. What can we imagine it to be like? How many pounds is it? And how well does it actually work to have, in quotation marks, little with you?

Well, my backpack is packed full. The base weight, without food or drink, is 5 kilos. 4.8 to be precise. With everything in it. For example, a tent and a sleeping bag.

5 kilos with a sleeping bag?

Yes. That's really not much. It's less. I've also reduced my load considerably and limited myself to the bare minimum. Others are probably traveling with 15 or 20 kilos. Yes, that could be. I met a long-distance hiker who hikes with a base weight of 9 kilos. We talked on the trail and it was interesting to compare what he has with what I have. There are some things that aren't really necessary to take with you. Yes, for example, I don't have a change of clothes with me. That way I can keep my weight down. So I made sure that I had what are known as the Big Three, which are the sleeping system, the shelter, i.e. the tent or tarp, and the backpack. If you can keep these under three kilos, then you've already done a lot right. And then you can reduce other things. Other equipment. It's not necessary for long-distance hikers to be ultra-lightweight. It's just that it's a lot more enjoyable when you're not carrying too much weight on your back. Especially when you're climbing a thousand meters and then descending 800 again. And the sun is beating down, it's relatively easier to hike with a lighter backpack. And I don't miss anything. There may be small conveniences that I miss, but I couldn't carry them with me anyway.

Did anything or anyone inspire you to do this?

Yes, I've read many reports and books about such things. Through reading these books and other long-distance hikers, I learned about or even discovered this ultra-light way of traveling. And I realized that it fascinates me a lot because I like to carry my whole life on my back. How do you say it? Just what I need to travel or to live. And if that can be done ultra-light or light, then it fascinates me. And that was the incentive or the reason why I said to myself that I also want to travel with little luggage and few material things.

Is it also about getting there faster?

That's not the primary reason. Of course, I can get there faster or cover more kilometers per day. But the main reason is that I don't have too much on my back. That means I don't have pain in my shoulders or hip belt. It takes the strain off my knees, joints, and muscles. I also have poles with me. The fact that I have little luggage means that I can travel faster. But it's not about speed for me.

So you don't look at your watch and measure the time: Ah, now I've climbed this many meters in this amount of time.

No, it's not about performance for me.

Last year, we met a trail runner here. His name is Jake Cutterall, originally from Great Britain. He ran the entire Via Alpina, the new route that covers about 2,000 kilometers, in just 34 days. That was a new record. Of course, he had a team in the background that traveled with him in a camper van and so on. And then he actually always slept in the camper van. They took care of the food, catering, and so on. So he really only had to think about running, he had his hydration pack with him and that was it. You're on your own, bivouacking in between or sleeping in a tent. What do you think about such achievements or about this way of completing the Via Alpina as quickly as possible and setting a new record? For me, the motivation is to complete the Via Alpina.

I'm doing a long-distance hike and, of course, the athletic aspects play a role. But my motivation is not the sport itself, but really being on the move, enjoying being able to stop along the way and maybe sit by a lake for an hour. Or when I arrive at the hut early, I take off my backpack, grab my water bottle and climb another 300 meters to the next summit. Or I chat with people at the huts or along the way and get a feel for the pulse of the people who live there or are also hiking. It's not just about the athletic achievement. But of course, what he did in those 34 days is an incredible achievement. It's crazy. 2,000 kilometers. What's important to me is the motivation to really be out there on a long hike and enjoy the time, rather than getting from A to B as quickly as possible.

I think you've summed up really nicely what long-distance hiking is all about. It's precisely this slowness. Taking a break from the fast pace of everyday life. That's probably what fascinates most people. You also hike alone. So you're not doing it with your partner or other people. You certainly meet a lot of people. But ultimately, you spend a lot of time alone. What are the advantages and disadvantages of hiking alone?

In my opinion, the advantage of hiking alone is that you are only responsible for one person, and that is myself. After a while, you can estimate how many kilometers you can cover in a day. And you don't have to make any compromises. It's just you and yourself. But in my view, these are not compromises. It's simply what I want to achieve. For me, that is clearly the advantage. You don't have to consult anyone else. When hiking with someone else, it's always important that one person walks at one pace and the other at another. Or perhaps their physical condition is different. The disadvantage of hiking alone is that you don't get to interact with other people. That's why I prefer to stay in huts from time to time or more often. Then I can engage in exciting conversations or games or tell funny stories, listen to other people in the huts. You don't have that when you're traveling alone. I would say that's a disadvantage for me.

You also volunteer for Via Alpina. How did that come about?

It's a funny story. I was doing some planning and researching on the website. I had two or three questions, so I wrote an email. Nora replied to me at the time. Nora, who was in charge of the Via Alpina office. Exactly, sorry. It turned out that the old routes had been canceled, as far as I know, for resource reasons. So I asked if I could perhaps help, not financially, but with my free time. And that's how it came about. Somehow I got involved and was able to support them, or rather you, with research tasks and designing various visual plans and maps.

We are, of course, very grateful for this, because there are few resources, including financial ones, to further develop the Via Alpina. There is now a new website, but that also took years. So, unfortunately, there is no large organization behind it. This makes volunteer work all the more valuable in order to promote and further develop the Via Alpina. So in this respect, we can also launch an appeal to anyone else who is interested in getting involved. You are always very welcome to contact us. You have also met other long-distance hikers along the Via Alpina, others who are also walking this trail. But in general, when you meet people, how do these encounters differ from the acquaintances you make in everyday life?

These are completely different encounters, with completely different people. When I meet people in huts or on the trail during my hikes, they have the same interests as me. That's why a connection is automatically formed. You have the same interests and immediately find a topic to talk about. Maybe you'll also discuss other topics, which is usually the case because the ice has been broken. And in everyday life, I think you meet a lot of people who may not have the same interests, but you still get to talk to them or sometimes have to, depending on the situation, for example at work. Everyday hiking and normal everyday life are two completely different things, because the people I meet on my hikes have the same interests. And the people in my normal everyday life don't always have the same interests. And that sometimes creates a certain distance.

So what makes long-distance hiking, especially the Via Alpina, unique for you?

Well, long-distance hiking for me, apart from the Via Alpina, is a way for me to find peace, there's no noise in my head. I'm on the move and I'm in a flow. And I really like that because, let's say, the irrelevant things in life are gone. The distracting things. And I really like that because you're out there on your own and often all you think about is eating and sleeping. And in between, you walk. And what makes the Via Alpina special is that you can combine it with our beautiful Alps, which are right on our doorstep here in Europe.

What advice would you give to others who might now be tempted to embark on this Via Alpina adventure? What would be your most important piece of advice?

I think that depends very much on the needs of the individual people who want to hike. But I think, from my point of view, it's important to make sure you don't take too much with you, that you maybe make a packing list and then sit down and ask yourself, what do I really, really need, what do I really want to take with me? And then take things out and determine the weight of what's left, weigh everything and then see where you can maybe save some more. The bottom line is that it's not important to travel ultralight, but I think it's important to enjoy hiking and be able to concentrate on the essentials along the way, rather than thinking after four days, with pain in your back or shoulders, that you have to stop or that you're carrying too much weight or that something went wrong with the planning. I think that's something I'd like to pass on to people who are planning a long-distance hike like this.

This year, the Via Alpina is celebrating its 25th anniversary. What would you wish for it for the next 25 years?

I think it would be nice if there were a kind of trail community. On the American trails, there is the BCT and others, and there are so-called trail communities, i.e., people, there are online communities where you can find out which accommodation or which private individual you can send packages to, i.e., so-called trail angels. It would be nice if there were something like that on the Via Alpina too. Let me give you an example from my own experience: I ordered something and had to set up an Austrian postal account while I was traveling, so that I could pick it up at an HBOL station with a code. And the idea is that, for example, a private individual says, "Yes, you can ring my doorbell and send the parcel to me, and I'll accept it and you can ring my doorbell between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. and I'll give it to you." Communities like that would be nice, or if you're on the road and can pitch your tent in someone's garden or maybe do some laundry, i.e., wash your clothes, quickly throw them in a washing machine and then move on, because there aren't many laundromats anymore.

Do they even exist anymore?

Yes, I was in Innsbruck and was able to do my laundry in a laundromat, and otherwise I often did it in hotels. Sometimes they offer laundry service, but often they don't, and then you just wash your clothes in the sink. In the sink, yes. In the sink, exactly. And that would be nice, I could well imagine, and I think it would work. But I think it depends on the willingness of the people who live along the route, yes.

Think about it if you're listening and you live somewhere along the Via Alpina. Check where the trail runs, maybe near you, and just get in touch with us, because then we could of course also communicate that there are people who support us alpinists along the way with such little things. These are often small everyday things like doing laundry or maybe even pitching a tent or something. So that's probably a big help for someone who's on the road. You also get to know the people who live along the trail, which is also exciting. Thank you very much, Sascha. You've given us a really honest and detailed insight into how you're doing and what it's like along the way. Thank you very much for that.

You're very welcome.

[Sign-off]

I wish you a wonderful second half of your journey and hope you arrive safely in Monaco. You can also follow him on Instagram or check out his blog. There you will find his diary entries along the way, as well as valuable tips and information on planning and equipment, in case you are considering hiking part or all of the Via Alpina yourself. By the way, feel free to listen to the other episodes of our podcast series Voices along the Via Alpina. We have already met Dominique Siegrist, the Alpine researcher and hiker, and we also met a young filmmaker, Zoe Le Maître, in Grenoble. My colleague Delphine spoke with her. The conversation is in French, of course, and this young filmmaker also hiked in 2023, interviewing pioneering women along the way, and is now in the process of releasing a film about it. It can also be seen here in Liechtenstein, and she has submitted it to various mountain film festivals elsewhere in the Alps. The conversation is definitely worth listening to. Then, on International Mountain Day in December 2025, there will be a live podcast. You can already look forward to that. Thank you very much and goodbye. My name is Michael Gams. This project is financially supported by the Prince Guido Feger Foundation in Liechtenstein.