

## Transcript of podcast episode „Voices along the Via Alpina – Zoé Lemaitre“

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

**Hello and welcome to this new episode of the Voices along the Via Alpina podcast, a podcast by CIPRA. For 25 years, the Via Alpina has been connecting people, cultures and landscapes across the Alps. Our multilingual 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 Delphine Segalen, I work for CIPRA France, which is based in Grenoble. We are going to talk about women who work in the mountains. I am delighted to welcome the young director Zoé Lemaitre, who travelled the entire length of the Via Alpina from Slovenia to Monaco in 2023 to document the work of women who have chosen the mountains as their home. Mountain hut warden, mountain guide, professional skier, shepherdess, climbing instructor, mountain rescue trainer. She has made a film entitled Via Alpina sur les pas de pionnière (Via Alpina in the footsteps of female pioneers), which will premiere in Grenoble in September 2025. Thanks to a partnership with CIPRA International, the film will also be released in Liechtenstein in December. Welcome Zoé and thank you for accepting this invitation to talk about your experiences along the Via Alpina.**

Thank you.

**To begin with, could you introduce yourself, tell us where you live, how old you are, your background and your current professional activities?**

I live in Grenoble. Currently, I am dedicating myself 100% to the production of the film on a voluntary basis and I alternate this with periods of market gardening, which is seasonal work. Until now, I worked in performing arts administration, mainly in show production, particularly in Italy, in major Italian institutions such as the Villa Medici and the Venice Biennale.

**In 2023, you travelled the entire length of the Via Alpina alone, from Slovenia to Monaco. How did you come up with this idea?**

First of all, I wanted to meet women who work in the mountains along the way and give a voice to these inspiring women. I also wanted to confront loneliness, which is something that weighed on me in my daily life and that I had never experienced for more than four days of hiking alone. So this was 120 days of walking through the Alps, which was much longer, and I really wanted to confront it and understand what it means to live alone. The idea came to me because I was living in Venice and wanted to walk home to Grenoble. Obviously, I couldn't do it at first because I had all my suitcases with me, but then I went back to the eastern side of the Alps so that I could cross the entire range to Monaco.

**And how did your friends and family react when you told them about your plan to cross the Alps on foot?**

They were quite confident. There were a few concerns, in particular I was told, "But you're going to cross it, you're going to leave from Slovenia, but it's a country, be careful, but it's completely, well, it's not knowing the reality of this country at all to project fears onto this place." So no, in general, people were quite confident about my journey. But it's true that there were some fears, especially among my friends and family, about crossing the Alps

alone as a woman. But you have to go beyond those fears, the fears projected onto those around you, and listen to your intuition. When your heart is in it, anything is possible.

**And where does this motivation for long-distance hiking come from? Was there a key moment, a turning point in your life in relation to this?**

I hadn't done many long-distance hikes. I had done the GR5 with a friend. So the logistics were shared between two people, which is completely different from going alone. But my appetite for long-distance hiking comes from the fact that I love being truly immersed in nature for a long time, living at the pace of nature, observing and really being on a sensory journey, much more so than if I interspersed the trip with more urban breaks. So I really love living in contact with the elements for a long time.

**And as we said, you didn't just hike. Throughout your journey, you interviewed women who work in the mountains, refuge wardens, mountain guides, glaciologists and shepherdesses. Today, you are making a video documentary about these women. What do you want to convey to people with this film?**

First of all, I want to raise awareness of these women's careers because there are very few of them in the mountain environment. Among mountain guides, only 2%, 3% are women in France. So I wanted to highlight their careers and the qualities they demonstrate in their daily lives, and also to show their daily lives, their lives, and their work in the Alps. I also wanted to show their strength and give them a voice, quite simply.

**And how did you get in touch with these people? Did you select them in advance? Did you do research or did it happen as you went along?**

Some of the women I met in the field by chance. I hadn't planned to meet them, but in the end they agreed to be in my film. Others I had contacted beforehand. Through email exchanges, we managed to meet up or not. Because there were some interviews I couldn't do during my time in Alpina due to the logistics involved and the need to organise a day's walk. So I met them afterwards, returning by bicycle or train.

**And what particularly impressed you about the women you met?**

I really liked their approach to the mountains, which was very respectful. And I also think that the mountains connect the people who travel through them and give them a very humble approach to life. So that really struck me. And then there was also the desire to share the mountains. In particular, the mountain guide who was very keen to share the landscapes with people who don't necessarily have the technical skills to access them. The climbing instructor in the natural environment too. The desire to share, humility, strength and also resilience. Because you also learn to make the most of everything in the mountains. And you also know that the mountains are not immune to accidents. So I think it also teaches you a different relationship with life and death. And she gives a very simple and direct meaning to the obvious things in life, the small pleasures of life. She also learns to be content with little.

**And during your journey, you had to carry all your video equipment in your rucksack. So, in fact, you had to limit the weight of the equipment. Were there any specific technical aspects to filming these interviews, particularly because you were travelling?**

It's not easy to carry all your equipment with you to make a film. Especially because you need to be self-sufficient in terms of energy. So I took a solar panel, the most powerful

portable solar panel available, which allowed me to recharge my two external batteries and my three internal camera batteries so that I could take pictures at any time. I also chose a hybrid camera, which allows you to change the lens, but also, and more importantly, to adjust the settings. So, I didn't set off with a GoPro, if only to be able to adjust the video settings myself. I also had microphones for the interviews.

### **And what language were the interviews conducted in?**

I did interviews in English, Italian and French. I had a few conversations in German, but my German skills are very, very limited. And yes, you can also hear Slovenian in the film, but I don't speak Slovenian at all. Okay. There is a crowdfunding campaign underway on Ulule. The link is available in the episode description.

### **Where is the campaign at right now and what's the next step?**

So, this campaign is to fund the post-production of the film. That means all the aspects related to mixing, colour grading and subtitling the film, which involves a lot of different languages. It also covers the French version, with French subtitles, to make the film accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing people. The Ulule campaign is still ongoing and will close in a few weeks, in August, or July-August. But our current need is really to have the resources to subtitle the film. Because there is a lot of work to be done in terms of translation and subtitling. So, there you have it.

### **Do you already have any screening dates and locations to share with us?**

So, the film will be screened as part of Documentary Month in Isère, in several media libraries and libraries in the Isère department. There will also be a screening in Chan, Liechtenstein, on 11 December, in partnership with CIPRA International. And I'm currently applying to various mountain and adventure festivals. So, depending on the response from these committees, I would very much like to be screened at the Femme Montagne festival, Ciné Montagne, the international adventure festival in La Rochelle, which is based in Bordeaux, and also at Trang. That's it. The preview will take place in mid-September in Grenoble, and the date and location will be confirmed shortly. Okay.

### **And remind us, when is the documentary month?**

It's in November 2025 and early December, well, the first day of December, but mainly November. Let's get back to the Via Alpina.

### **How long did it take you to walk the entire Via Alpina?**

I left on 5 July 2023 and arrived on 2 November 2023. So it took me four months to walk the entire route, which is 120 days of walking.

### **What was your most difficult memory?**

I got caught in a storm near Isola 2000. It was a red alert. It was called Storm Aline, and I had a really rough time in the raging elements, with the wind, rain and cold. I managed to take refuge in a cable car hut where I waited for it to pass before calling for help from someone I knew who had given me their contact details a few years earlier. They lived in the valley just below and very kindly put me up until the storm subsided. It was very trying. I really had to pull myself together and draw on my mental resources to cope with this storm, which I faced head-on because I was on a ridge at the time. I walked 8 kilometres along the ridge in the wind, and the wind was swirling in all directions, right and left. It wasn't a normal wind that

blows in one direction. I was soaked to the skin and, at that moment, all I wanted was to be dry and warm.

**And conversely, what is your fondest memory of the whole crossing?**

My fondest memory was a bivouac in Austria in the Lechtal Alps with a magnificent lake with turquoise blue waters, I was going to say eyes, with turquoise blue waters with soft light green volumes and majestic bouquets everywhere and the lapping of the water. It was truly a moment suspended in time after a demanding climb.

**And in your opinion, what distinguishes the Alpina trail from other long-distance hiking trails?**

It's a trail that crosses all the countries of the Alpine arc. There is a very important cultural and linguistic diversity. And so, I think that's really the strength of the Alpine life. What I also appreciated was always being in the mountains and crossing these mountainous landscapes, quite far from civilisation, because that's really what I was looking for: wilderness.

**And how did you experience your arrival in Monaco?**

It was difficult to come ashore, but it was necessary because it was starting to snow, it was getting cold, the water was freezing in my water bottles, and the marmots had already started hibernating. I thought to myself, well, maybe it's time to go back down to the valley, especially since the mountain shops were closed. So my bag went from 15 kilos to 25 kilos to carry all the food. Every time I found a place to stock up, I bought 10 kilos of food because I was so hungry. So I reached the limits, let's say, of a travelling trip, especially one that was completely self-sufficient. Especially since I wasn't equipped for snow, so that motivated me to descend without any regrets. But otherwise, I also continued the adventure thanks to my film, which allowed me to continue reliving these landscapes, these encounters and to be immersed in this trip for more than two years. Because I've been working on the documentary for more than two years.

**That was the question I was going to ask you, was the return to reality not too difficult?**

It was difficult and easy at the same time because after four months alone in the Alps, I had already succeeded in my challenge of confronting solitude and being comfortable with it. But also because I had the feeling that anything was possible. I had been so far removed from all the frameworks and norms that society imposes on us that I felt I could really do whatever I wanted with my life at that moment. It was extremely exhilarating, and it was a lesson I really appreciated learning in a very concrete way. Then, little by little, as I became sedentary again and started working, those feelings faded a little. But deep down, I still feel certain of it.

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

I wish it continued success in promoting environmentally friendly hiking and enabling carbon-free activities in the Alps, which need to be protected. And I wish it success in bringing together all the people of the Alps and organising a great Alpine celebration. I don't know what we could imagine, but it would also be transgenerational. I think it's important to bring people together around the mountains.

**Well, thank you very much for this conversation, Zoé. Maybe we'll meet again in 25 years for the 50th anniversary of the Via Alpina. I've already got a few grey hairs. This was an interview with Zoé Lemaitre, who crossed the Via Alpina in 2023, interviewed professional women working in the mountains along the route and made a documentary film. If you would like to hear other episodes of the Voices along the Via Alpina podcast or find out more about the project, visit our website [www.cypra.org slash en slash voices-along-the-via-alpina](http://www.cypra.org/en/voices-along-the-via-alpina). You will find this link in the description of this episode. Interviews will be added throughout the year. My name is Delphine Segalen and thank you for listening to our podcast.**