

A “Magic Bubble” and a “Place of Strength” – When Images and Connections Shape the Swiss Alps

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Abstract

This chapter reflects on the production of locality in a specific urbanized, tourist, and cosmopolitan region of the Swiss Alps. Through the example of two ski resorts in the canton of Valais, we examine the ways in which people from different horizons connect to mountain places and the dynamics between human practices, imaginaries, and place.

To understand the role of representations when visiting or settling in the Swiss Alps, we use ethnographic interviews conducted in Verbier and Zermatt with people who, for different reasons, live, tour, or work there. The reputation of these international resorts is actively produced and maintained through tourism promotion, whose conveyed imaginaries are embedded in the discourse of residents. In addition, the historical and social specificities of Zermatt’s bourgeoisie and Verbier’s liberal attitude help to understand how these factors influence the way residents interact with the place and the landscape.

The chapter explores how the cohabitation in Verbier and Zermatt among wealthy second-home owners, creative entrepreneurs, tourists, permanent residents with migration backgrounds, precarious seasonal workers, natives, and the mountain other-than-human entities, with their affinities and tensions, contributes to (re)composing locality. In the end, the distinctive ways of dealing with otherness in Zermatt and Verbier partly determine the modes of relating to the place and thus the production of locality.

Introduction

Mountains, like other places located “outside the city”, have been considered since the 1990s as ideal places to live in, particularly for people searching a better quality of life. The idea of a “good life” – one that is connected to nature, landscapes, sunshine, quietness, and leisure, is mostly present in the imaginary of an urban middle-class. New ways of living “in the mountains”, “in the countryside”, or “by the sea” result from recent changes in human mobility. This transformation has been driven by globalization, improved transport infrastructures, and technological advancements, which favour new kinds of jobs and flexible ways of working, particularly in wealthy countries. In neoliberal contexts, for instance, some urban citizens can afford to choose either to adopt a multiresidential lifestyle (alternating between several places of residence, with or without a fixed place of work), or to migrate to non-urban or less urban spaces. This type of migration has been referred to by various terms: lifestyle migration (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009), amenity migration (Moss, 2006), or multilocality (Perlik, 2006), depending on which aspect of mobility is emphasized (way of life, amenities, economy, and access to facilities, respectively). The common idea behind these types of individual moves from one living place to another is the aspiration to blur the lines between leisure and work on a daily basis, within an environment considered to be “natural” (Cretton et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2015).

In Switzerland, the places chosen as particularly eligible to live “outside the city” are not, however, “out of the world”. Alpine societies have long been considered as societies that are unchanging, living outside of time, and isolated from the rest of the world (Niederer, 1996; Mathieu and Boscani Leoni, 2005; Cretton et al., 2012). Interactions with the “outside world” and human mobilities are far from a new phenomenon for people living in the mountains. Historically, the Alpine arc has been subject to various forms of mobility since at least the Middle Ages (Head-König, 2011). Population movements in the Alps have historically been motivated mainly by economic reasons – seasonal cattle migration and pasture needs, seasonal work in tourism – but also cultural reasons. For instance, the tradition (and status symbol) of hav-

ing a secondary home in the mountains, called a chalet¹, was already beginning in the 1930s. Of course, human mobilities in 2024 differ from historical human mobilities in several aspects, most notably in terms of the means of transport used, motivations, frequency and international dimension.

Furthermore, the preferred places to live in the Alpine region – particularly for a relatively wealthy group, living on the move – are the ones that have tourist attractions and amenity infrastructure. These places are often visited by the new residents first as a leisure spot, before becoming either a permanent place to live, or a location where to live occasionally, alternating with other dwelling places (Perlik, 2008, 2011; Petite and Debarbieux, 2013; Clivaz, 2013). In urbanised mountain places, as in our case study, the economy is mostly driven by the tourism industry and a lifestyle-amenity-multilocality migration is particularly present in the fields of sport, culture and entrepreneurship (Cretton and Decorzant, 2023). International labour migration workers are also highly represented in the hotel, restaurant, bars, transport, ski lift, or construction industries. For decades, the arrival of those inhabitants, whether they stay year-long or a few weeks/months every year, is both dependent on, and involved in the emergence of new forms of mobility, interactions and sociability (Perlik, 2006; Cretton et al., 2020). Lifestyle migrants, labour migrants, multilocal dwellers, and tourists take part in, and reshape, both the social structures and existing models of social relationships in mountain villages (Richard et al., 2014).

The presence of a new and diversified population, who settle temporarily or more permanently, or who regularly visit these mountain areas, induces both sociocultural and spatial transformations through the interactions they have, or do not have, with the place. Thus, individuals do not simply interact with other individuals, they also relate to their environment, its artefacts and landscapes, through their subjectivities and emotions. Imaginaries about the mountain as a place of nature (filled with snow, rocks, animals, birds, grass, sun, hills, forests, air) have a long history in the Swiss Alps (see Boscoboinik and Cretton, 2017; Leitenberg, 2023; Tissot, 2017). They are also inseparable

1 A chalet is a traditional Swiss construction in mountain areas, built in wood with a gable roof, mainly used as a secondary home (for holidays or weekends), but can also be a main residence.

from human practices of the territory, the place and the space (Debarbieux, 2015; Staszak, 2012).

From Appadurai's seminal writings, locality can be understood as "primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar² or spatial" (1996, p. 178). Given that locality is above all a matter of relationships, and that it is constructed by and in situations of interaction between the various residents and visitors, as well as among humans and other-than-humans, we consider how the locality is produced in a context of global movements. The mountain, understood as a collective construction, a symbolic production born of social interaction and made of shared representations (Debarbieux, 2003, p. 47), is both a source and a producer of varied imaginaries³ (Boscoboinik and Cretton, 2017). Thus, looking at the way humans voice their interactions with the mountain environment they live in, and the affinity and tensions that may emerge from these interactions, this chapter studies different modes of relating to a mountain place, and the motivations behind them. It reflects upon the production of locality, in a specific urbanized, touristic, and cosmopolitan region in the Swiss Alps, as a complex relational dynamic between human practices, imaginaries, and place.

Verbier and Zermatt, Two International Ski Resorts

To have a closer look at ways of connecting to the place, and the role imaginaries play in the context of the Swiss Alps, we focus on data collected as part of a long-term fieldwork in the mountains.⁴ The research study was conducted simultaneously in Switzerland and Spain by two female anthropologists, one working in Valais⁵, a canton in southwestern Switzerland known for its tourist attractions – particularly skiing, hiking, and thermal baths, but also

2 Meaning "scale".

3 Understood as a "set of representations that make sense, separately and as a system, for a given group or individual, making its world apprehensible, comprehensible and practicable" (Staszak, 2012, p. 179, translation by the authors).

4 The research project was titled "Becoming local in mountain areas: diversification, gentrification, cohabitation. A comparison between Swiss Alps and Spanish Pyrenees" (2017-2021). It was financed by the Swiss National Fonds (FNS Project No 10001A_172807) and coled by Viviane Cretton and Andrea Boscoboinik.

5 We warmly thank Andrea Friedli for the interviews and observations made in Valais, the collaboration and the sharing of inputs and thoughts.

concerts, cultural events, and sports contests – and the other in two valleys of the Catalan Pyrenees⁶, also renowned for tourism. The authors of this chapter directed and supervised the whole research.

We selected here ethnographic interviews conducted in Verbier and Zermatt, two international tourist resorts in Switzerland, located respectively in the French-speaking part (Lower Valais) and in the German-speaking part (Upper Valais) of the Valais canton. Both field sites depict the reality of Alpine ski resorts with their strong seasonal demographic fluctuations, omnipresence of the tourism industry, urbanization, and diversification of the population. 79 registered interviews (both formal and informal) were carried out in French, English, German or Swiss German.⁷ They covered different categories of residents in both sites: male and female, new and old residents, national and international, wealthy and less wealthy, independent contractors and employees, regular and occasional visitors. The interviews were conducted using a life course approach. The researcher invited people to talk about their relationship to the place, considering the length of their residence. For instance, permanent residents who came from migration were invited to discuss the reasons for and duration of their settlement. Temporary residents were asked to specify the frequency and length of their stays, their motivations for choosing this place, and their objectives. As for long-term residents, they mainly shared their connections with other residents, as well as their experience of the place and the region. In addition, short, floating and repeated observations were conducted in key places of daily life, such as bakery, public place or grocery store and during international sport, cultural or musical events. Several sequences of empirical experiences were also collected at various times by the two authors from 2011 onwards.

All data gathered through these various tools provided us with a comprehensive background to understand the field. However, for the analysis we are developing here, we have focused mainly on presenting extracts from inter-

6 We sincerely thank Maria Offenhenden for the fieldwork conducted in Val d’Aran and in Cerdanya, for her collaboration, and for sharing her insights and thoughts.

7 In the German part of Switzerland, each canton has its own dialect. Upper Valaisans speak a traditional dialect, “Walliserdütsch”. The interviews were conducted in German, Swiss German and English for the German-speaking part and in English and French in the French-speaking part. All the interview extracts presented in this chapter were conducted by Andrea Friedli.

views, allowing the voices and views of the interviewed people to be heard in their own words. It is important to note that their responses were directed to a Swiss woman anthropologist living in an urban area in another canton. Research participants often tailor their opinions and statements based on the perception of the interviewer. We also noticed that their words present a degree of idyllic and picturesque imaginary. We believe this representation is intrinsic to the imagination that has motivated them to live in or frequent these places, or that has kept them living there. While their words may echo the sentiments promoted by tourist offices, it is their own voices that we wanted to capture and present. These perspectives, as articulated and idealized, play a crucial role in constructing the locality.

We have chosen Verbier and Zermatt because they are emblematic of tourist-related transformations, and both present a high number of foreign residents year-round, not only during high season. Both in Verbier and in Zermatt, around 40% of residents are not Swiss citizens.⁸ They are both internationally renowned tourist resorts and have a significant economic impact on the surrounding villages. For instance, Täsch is a village located about 5 kilometres from Zermatt and is an important hub for travellers heading there –the road to Zermatt stops in Täsch, where travellers must leave their cars and take the train for the last leg of their journey. Beginning of 2021, Täsch counted 56,7 % of foreigners, most of whom are Portuguese – which is the third largest foreign community in Switzerland⁹ – and work in Zermatt. In the same way, Le Châble, where the cable car towards Verbier is situated, is continuously growing to accommodate the increasing number of former inhabitants of Verbier for whom life in the resort has become too expensive. Both Alpine resorts present a cosmopolitan population, with a wide range of socio-economic profiles, from rich second homeowners to precarious seasonal workers. They also present different types of residence (long-term, tem-

8 Verbier belongs to the Val de Bagnes Municipality, where in 2021, the number of foreigners was 27,6%. There are no statistics for Verbier alone, but according to our informants 40% of the population living in Verbier is of foreign origin, and there are “59 nationalities in the municipality” (interview with a municipal officer, 28.02.2018). In Zermatt, 41.1% of the population is of foreign origin. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/regional-statistics/regional-portraits-key-figures/communes/portraits-communes.html>.

9 In 31.12.2022, the Portuguese were among the largest foreign population in Switzerland (11%), alongside Italians (14.5%) and Germans (13.8%). <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/population/migration-integration/foreign/composition.html>

porary) and stays (repeated or occasional). Nevertheless, despite presenting some similarities (mountain environment, good ski slopes, internationally renowned, situated in the same Swiss canton although with different local language, French and Swiss German), their economic and touristic development has been quite different.

Verbier has known a rapid urbanization since the 1960s, with the development of chalets. With its vast sunny mountain plateau, its tourist development began with skiing. Prior to 1950, Verbier was home only to alpine pastures, its people lived from the alpine agriculture and access was difficult – people had to travel up the mountain by foot or on horseback. Verbier’s rebirth began with the laying of a road to the village in 1935, and since then has never stopped. From 1990 onwards, Verbier has known an unbridled development. The resort has grown, building an average of thirty chalets a year, completely changing the village’s disposition.¹⁰ Nowadays, chalet owners are mainly of Swiss and British origin, but also count French, Belgian, and Swedish owners, amongst others. Verbier is known for its international community, for being fashionable, hip and young, a place of parties and of innovation, creation, and development with the presence of several start-ups and co-working spaces. It can be so hectic during the high season that we were told by research participants that some elder retired German owners had decided to move out of Verbier to more quiet places nearby.

Zermatt began its tourist development in the 19th century, bolstered by the presence of the Matterhorn mountain, a site of fascination for locals and foreigners alike. Up until the mid-19th century, Zermatt was predominantly an agricultural community. After the Matterhorn’s first ascent in 1865, however, the subsequent rush on the mountains that surround the village led to an early – and intense – development of tourism towards the area. Today, Zermatt proudly presents itself as the oldest operating tourist resort in the whole Valais. It is highlighted for its mountaineering past, its hotel infrastructure, the absence of motorised traffic (banned from the village); and, last but not least, the copious amounts of shops, including luxury retailers. Nowadays, much of the local economy is based on tourism, with many jobs related to the

10 For more on Verbier’s transformation, see Deslarzes (1998).

maintenance and operation of tourist facilities. Families native to the area¹¹ have kept control of the land, many properties, and the main infrastructures, where a significant community of foreign employees have arrived and settled.¹² Labour migrants in Zermatt have different origins, but by far the most represented community comes from Portugal, and the family networks that emerged mean that people of Portuguese origin have been coming to Zermatt for – at the very least – the last forty years.¹³ They mainly work in hotels, restaurants, city hall services and various activities linked to tourism.

Zermatt, the Aristocrat and Verbier, the Liberal

At a national level, Zermatt is a mythical place, in the anthropological sense of the term: with the Matterhorn as its figurehead, it embodies the myth of the Swiss mountainside. At an altitude of 4,478 metres, the Matterhorn is one of the highest peaks in the Alps, and is well-known for its distinctive shape, that has become a symbol of the Swiss nation. Its pyramid-like appearance, as seen from Zermatt, is regularly used in logos of world-famous brands (such as Toblerone chocolates¹⁴). But Zermatt is also emblematic in a different way, for its “Bürgergemeinde” (in German) or “bourgeoisie” (in French), that plays a crucial role in the area. This institution, specific to Switzerland, is a remnant of medieval law (cf. Guex, 2016, p. 38). It is – put simply – a local community, in which solely the original inhabitants of a commune or former bourgeois

11 We understand “native” families or “native” individuals as families or individuals who are born and have grown in the place for several generations. Some individuals may have left and returned but are identifiable by their family name, often rooted in the history of a place. In this paper, “native” is synonymous with “historical inhabitants” or “locals”.

12 For the tourism development in Zermatt, see Guex (2016).

13 In Valais, as in the rest of Switzerland, the Portuguese started to arrive in the 1960s. From 1990 onwards, the conditions to immigrate to Switzerland were eased, following the Schengen agreement on the free movement of persons. In 2020, “Portuguese” is the most represented nationality in the canton of Valais (8.0%), more so than French (3.0%) and Italian (2.7%). <https://www.vs.ch/documents/529400/8641714/2020+08+27+-+COM+-+Statpop+2019.pdf/c01b155e-7a28-e5e6-01d0-16344dcb490a?t=1598450326675>

14 Nevertheless, Toblerone had to remove the use of the Matterhorn logo because chocolate production has been transferred from Switzerland to Slovakia in 2023. With a Swiss law enacted in 2017, the Swiss Confederation has taken measures to protect its image. Foreign companies are required to remove Swiss symbols if the product is not exclusively produced in the small Alpine country.

participate, and not new inhabitants.¹⁵ In Zermatt, native families – such as the Julen, the Perren, and the Biner – are referred to (by themselves and others) as “the Mattini”, meaning people from Zermatt since many generations.

Louis Courthion (1903), a keen observer of Valais society at the beginning of the 20th century, highlighted the clan structure of traditional Valaisan society, built around and by the family. In many ways, Zermatt still embodies this historical structure of collective ownership, especially compared to Verbier which appears to be much more liberal in regard to land property (see Cretton and Decorzant, 2023). This distinction is well-known by the natives and the long-term residents, as emphasized by Michèle¹⁶, who works in the real estate industry and has lived in Verbier since 1987: “Here [in Verbier] it’s exactly the opposite of Zermatt. Many big hotel families in Bagnes¹⁷ have sold their hotels for a fortune” (Interview in French on 26.4.2018¹⁸). Quite the opposite, in Zermatt, they were mainly kept in the native families’ hands.

In her study on tourism and local development in three places in the Swiss Alps, Guex (2016) describes a “conservative economy” in Zermatt, characterized by property remaining in the hands of the historical “bourgeoisie”. She shows how this socio-economic conservatism contributes to forging the “authentic” character of Zermatt, thus reinforcing its image as an authentic alpine resort (Guex, 2016). This reputation, highly promising for tourism, is actively promoted by the Zermatt tourist office and, as we shall see, is firmly embedded in the imagination and discourse of residents. In contrast, Verbier’s specific development pattern is primarily motivated by what Cretton and Decorzant (2023) call the entrepreneurial risk-oriented practices shared by both insiders and newcomers. Nevertheless, Verbier’s tourism promotion also emphasizes the spirit of a privileged place, but rather in the sense of a

15 The “bourgeoisie” no longer exists in all cantons, but in Valais it is specifically anchored in the cantonal constitution. It is defined as “a community under public law responsible for carrying out tasks of public interest laid down by law” (Ruff, 2018). Today, the cantonal law on the bourgeoisies gives them specific tasks, the most important of which is the management and maintenance of bourgeois heritage. This is often composed of forests or mountain pastures, sometimes of buildings or rental properties and even, in some cases, of ski lifts, businesses, hotels or restaurants. For the sake of clarity, we will refer to it as “bourgeoisie” in the rest of the text.

16 All participants names have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

17 Val de Bagnes is the municipality where Verbier is located.

18 All translations from French and from German have been made by the authors.

playground full of adrenaline, energy, and adventure (Fig. 1), which is also a sentiment echoed by the residents themselves, as we will see in the next sections.



Figure 1 – Promotion of Verbier as an infinite playground, November 2017. Photo and Copyright 2017 by A. Friedli.

Verbier, a Magical Bubble

Like other lifestyle migrants met in Verbier, Bart knew the resort first as a tourist, then as temporary worker (ski instructor) before finally deciding to settle down there in 2016:

I'm Dutch, I came here first time ehm... 23 years ago on a holiday. I did a season... eleven years ago. A winter season. And.... I fell in love with Verbier. The reason why I fell in love with Verbier is that there is an international vibe, an international

community. If I look at the reason I moved, it is because I love mountains. I grew up in Holland in a flat land where you don't have any mountains. And I love to be in nature. (Interview in English on 29.5.2018)

This Verbier enthusiast particularly appreciates being able to do his work commute via mountain bike, go for a short run in the mountains in the summertime, or ski for a few hours in winter. His lifestyle embodies a new way of looking at daily life: alternating, or even merging, leisure time and working time in a natural environment (Cretton et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2015). He has found in Verbier his ideal life setting: nature, sport facilities, “vibes”¹⁹ and entrepreneurship.

Most of the interviewed participants show a strong emotional attachment to Verbier, even Swiss citizens who do not settle there but visit regularly like Laure, a 27-year-old Valais native who lives in the lowlands. Every time she mentions Verbier, her eyes shine: “I think it's the fun, the freedom, the cool side of the mountain, the sporting aspect and then there's a little bit of the artistic side that develops because there are [also] musicians there ...” (Interview in French on 13.11.2018)

Laure describes Verbier as a “bubble” and as being “magic”, two words that sprinkle her account of why she sometimes brings her friends with her:

Come on, you feel good, and in summer you're in a bubble, you don't feel like you're in Valais and you're with people from all over the world, you meet new people, you feel like you're in a parallel world, often you see this magical side of Verbier and there are a lot of newcomers who feel that way too.

Martin too feels like he is in a special and privileged place in Verbier. This multinational resident (Swiss, British and Swedish) has lived in the resort since 1980: “I decided this is home”. For him, Verbier is a unique place: “compared with a big part of the world, we're living in a bubble”. His friend Paul, an Italian-British former business manager and part-time Verbier resident, confirms:

¹⁹ “Vibes” is a term commonly used by the research participants to refer Verbier as a place with a specific atmosphere, including the feelings, the state of mind, the spirit of the place and people.

Verbier is a bubble, we live in a bubble, there are no problems in Verbier, you know, everyone is happy, everyone says “hello, good morning” on the street, the bus driver, the locals, all the problems are left in the valley. You don’t bring any problems up here. We are happy, we live like in cotton wool, we are protected up here. And I honestly feel like that... I feel when I’m in Verbier, I feel protected, nothing can get wrong with me. Everything is cool and happy. (Interview in English on 15.5.18)

Both of them, Paul and Martin, love skiing. Martin explains how he first decided to come and ski in Verbier with a group of friends when they were students, after skiing in many places in Switzerland. For him, the advantage of Verbier, at the time and now, is “the mixture of English and Swedish and Norwegian”.

As exemplified by the above cases, Verbier’s social network, filled with international people and characterized by a friendly atmosphere or cool attitude that most participants feel, reveals a spot that is particularly attractive to those who have accumulated a certain amount of network capital over their travels (Cretton and Decorzant, 2023) (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 – Networking in the snow during the Verbier Art Summit, February 2020. Photo and Copyright 2020 by A. Friedli.

This kind of social resources can be understood as “the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with individuals who are not necessarily proximate, which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit” (Larsen and Urry 2008, p. 93). Like stated by Cretton and Decorzant (2023, p. 278), “in some ways, Verbier lovers are similar. They share a passion for skiing, art or business, or they already know each other from having met in another *en vogue* spot. (...) They all share a genuine love for the place”. This affection towards the ski resort is mostly expressed in terms of attachment to its people, mountains, skiing, snow, events, the vibes. This is a well-known process within snow sport cultures. As shown by Holly Thorpe (2017), especially in snowboarding, transnational snow sport migration contributes to producing transnational identities, a sense of belonging to the world, or global citizenship.

In addition, the process of promoting Verbier as a paradise for freeride, as an incredible playground for outdoors activities, or as a great place to push your own limits, is daily maintained and nurtured as part of a successful promotional strategy. Indeed, to carry out its mission to attract various profiles in the resort region, Verbier Promotion has identified five visitors’ customers profiles (Verbier sport, Verbier adventure, Trendy, Authentic, VIP) with their associated consumption habits, events and ambassadors (Broch, 2019, p. 52). A sort of interweaving between network capital, experiencing snow sports, and the location, wrapped in effective promotional discourse, can explain a certain attachment and sense of belonging to the place, a strong feeling of experiencing something privileged, like being in a bubble, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. Nevertheless, relations to, and feelings about Verbier are expressed in a different way when the reasons for choosing to settle there are not ski, art or business, as we will now explain.

People’s Politeness

In 2018, our colleague Andrea Friedli met Silvia in a local restaurant in her village, located at the foot of Verbier. At the time of the interview, Silvia had been working for six years as a cleaning lady and housekeeper in a chalet at the ski resort, which was owned by a Scottish man. Silvia is a woman of Por-

tuguese origin who came to work in the valley in 2003. Her aim was to earn money, but she ended up meeting her future husband, a fellow worker at Verbier, and decided to stay. Later, they bought a house down in the valley. During the interview, Silvia talked about the region, Verbier and its inhabitants, as if she had always lived there, in the way that someone who is profoundly rooted somewhere talks. She described the repercussions of certain national votes (related to second homes and land use planning) on the valley with great emotion, distinguishing herself from the people of the plain ("the law they vote down"). She liked to tell how much she appreciates Switzerland compared to Portugal:

What captivated me in Switzerland is... it's really the rules, the... the civics.... It's really something... I was so touched... because you cross the road, you greet each other... you know? You pass by someone here even if you don't know them... you have to say hello, because if you don't... for example at the beginning I wasn't used to... I was ashamed, you know, because in Portugal you don't say hello to someone you don't know. (Interview in French on 28.2.2018)

Greeting passer-byes in the street was noted by several research participants as something specific to the place that they particularly appreciate. Lisa is a 43-year-old woman, born in Zimbabwe and raised in Venezuela and Portugal. She was employed in Portugal as an accountant for a very small salary until her sister, a resident of Verbier for 17 years, invited her to join her. Lisa spends nine months of the year in Verbier as a cleaning lady and returns to Portugal for three months during the summer. She said she appreciates the friendliness she felt in the casual interactions:

Even if you are walking around, people say 'Bonjour' with a smile, with an honest smile... 'Hello'. It's not like in Portugal, if you say 'Good morning', they'll be like 'Who is she? What does she want?' (...) But here people are really polite, really friendly, really... honestly friendly. (Interview in English on 8.10.2019)

She expressed how she literally fell in love with the place:

It's not just the money, it's... yeah, this place for me is special [looks towards the mountain]. It's beautiful, this is my sixth year and I still walk the dogs from the clients in the morning, and every morning when I walk the dogs, I see... and I even cry sometimes... because it's so beautiful. (...) And I love snow!

Lisa manifests her attachment to the place, especially the mountain called the Grand Combin, with a lot of emotion. She talks about the shapes of the clouds, is mesmerised by the stars you can see at night and the clear sky, and she compares it with Portugal, where, according to her, you can see much less of the night sky. She concludes: “Yeah, it's my special amazing place”. This is also the case for Silvia, who repeats over and over again how much she likes Switzerland, appreciates the politeness there, and the fact that people say hello to each other in the valley. She is proud that her three sons are considered to be locals, while emphasizing the “beauty of our valley”, describing it with strong emotions and with value descriptors like “simplicity”. This woman, who arrived in the region 15 years ago (at the time of the interview) from a very small village in Portugal, has completely internalized the local norms of behaviour and ways of speaking. She says she regrets that there is no longer any trace of “the spirit of the mountain”, “the family side”, as it was when she arrived. She considers that the place has become more anonymous, urbanised, with far fewer social gatherings. “The feeling of belonging to the mountain has been lost”, she says reluctantly, and then she specifies: “You no longer have an aperitif at 11 am... you see, this friendly spirit is a bit lost” (Silvia, interview in French on 28.2.2018). For her, nowadays, people do not take time to meet and share a convivial moment together as was the case in village life “before” [at the time of her arrival].

Through prior research conducted in Valais, we showed how people who choose to migrate based on love, labour or leisure all adopt, more or less of their free will, a strategy to participate in social life. This can be spending time in bistros, participating in village activities and festivities, or joining a band (Cretton et al., 2012). All these tactics enable contact with the local population and help them to become visible in other people's eyes. Like the sports enthusiasts mentioned above, Silvia and Lisa have developed a special attachment to the place. Despite not participating in winter sports, they nevertheless built up a network of connections over time through their integration into the local workforce (Friedli and Boscoboinik, 2023).

Capital Network

Capital network is not the specificity of an upper social class, it rather cuts across various groups of people, from very rich second homeowners to penniless backpackers and seasonal workers. The kind of specific atmosphere found in Verbier is something attractive for wealthy foreigners like Paul, middle-class people native from Valais – particularly young adults like Laure – but also for average immigrant workers like Lisa or Silvia. For instance, before working as a housekeeper for a Scottish man in Verbier, Silvia also worked as a caretaker in the commune's multipurpose communal hall. As a result of this highly visible public function, she knows a lot of people in the valley and has a significant network.

It has been shown that to be socially integrated in a village in Valais, like in other villages in Europe, it is necessary to socialise to be seen, recognised, and identified by the local population (Cretton 2013, p. 69). Like Silvia, Lisa who had been living in Verbier for six years at the time of the interview, states that she has an extensive network of people from different origins (“Swiss, English, French, Spanish... from everywhere”) who live or work there:

I started working with Nicola and then you meet the people who work with you... and then you meet the friends of the people who work with you... the family and the people you work for... and their family... and that's how you start the connections ... (Interview in English on 8.10.2019)

Unlike Paul and his friends, Lisa and Silvia do not go skiing or mountaineering between two hours of cleaning. It is quite the contrary, as Lisa (who optimises her working hours during the winter) explains: “I can work some days like... 18 hours and have two-three months without a day off... or a morning off or an afternoon off... nothing... just working.”

It is a well-known fact that seasonal staff work hard during the high season. Their presence at Verbier comes as a result of the tourist urbanization of the mountains (Stock and Lucas, 2012), as well as the presence of a new urban population that demands services. Consequently, there has been a growth of the hospitality industry and corresponding geographical moves of so-called “low skilled workers”, often labelled as “saisonniers”²⁰ or “new saisonniers”

20 It is necessary to point out the hierarchies that can be found (see also Bourdeau, 2016)

(Guzzi-Heeb, 2014). These groups come to Verbier during the high season, from December to April, and work in hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, but also in the building industry, roadways, and infrastructure. They are largely marked by low-level employment, low wages, economic insecurity, and a form of cultural and social invisibility. Laure, the young Valais native living in the lowlands, encounters them regularly when she goes to Verbier to volunteer at the Verbier Festival during summer, or for skiing in winter. She affirms that seasonal workers are “fighters, they really want to work! (*Ils en veulent!*)” (Interview in French on 13.11.2018). Despite the precarity and uncertainty of their working contract, the temporary employees express an emotional attachment to the place, constituted of positive feelings towards the environment, particularly the mountain, the landscape, the people that live there, and the festive spirit of the resort, sometimes compared to that of other party destinations like Ibiza.²¹

Zermatt, Represented as a Place of Strength

Like in Verbier, nature, mountains and landscape are all very present in the interviews and observations conducted in Zermatt. Foreign tourists take pictures of the landscape, but even regular visitors and residents mention the fascination of lights and shapes to be captured. Doris, a young woman in her late twenties, grew up in Zermatt but left for her studies. She recalls that in her childhood there, Zermatt combined aspects of the mountain village (*das Bergdorf*), the authentic (*das Ursprüngliche*), the proximity to nature (*die Naturverbundenheit*), the rootedness (*die Bodenständigkeit*) and was simultane-

within the category of “saisonniers”, such as the differentiation between “labour migrants” and “working tourists” (Uriely, 2001). The latter can be described as workers whose labour is valued for a strong professional identity, such as sports instructors (ski instructor, mountain guide, paragliding, climbing, river rafting, etc.). They can be self-employed, proposing their services autonomously, or accept temporary jobs in ski schools. The so-called “ski bums” (young tourists who work in a bar in the evening and go skiing during daytime) are also “seasonal working tourists”, whose social status and visibility is different from those working as technical and service employees in ski lifts, hotels or restaurants.

21 For instance, see the series of articles by Romane Mugnier dedicated at the beginning of 2024 to the festive life and drug use among ski resort employees, including those in Verbier. Heidi.news. <https://www.heidi.news/explorations/tout-schuss-dans-la-cocaine/a-verbier-est-dur-de-recruter-des-employes-qui-ne-se-droguent-pas>

ously extremely international, with the presence of both the tourists and the Portuguese seasonal workers (*Gastarbeiter*) living there.

The local natives tend to prefer hidden places, preferably between tourist seasons. Clara, another young woman, born in Zermatt and with no connection to the tourism industry, is fascinated by the excitement of Asian tourists. She evokes that they stand at five o'clock in the morning on the bridge from where there is a nice view of the Matterhorn with their camera in hand, ready to take "the" picture (Fig. 3). And she comments: "And I think it's really beautiful how they can enjoy a mountain, actually a stone!" Next, she explains the characteristics of tourists according to the seasons:

In summer, there are a lot of Asian people, and you have very little contact with them, many of them don't really speak English. They are just out and about in their group, and they just look at the beauty of this village. And that is, that is super. And after that, it's the mid-season and there's no one there. And in winter, it's the winter season and, hum, yes, people come for skiing, each season has its own speciality. And I have to say, I don't like being in the village in winter.

(Interview in Swiss German on 6.11.2018)

She herself prefers hiking in the "Lost Valley" (*das Verlorene Tal*), a place only known to locals, only accessible by foot. She affirms to enjoy seeing the colours in autumn and the arrival of the first snow. As for Kate, a Swiss German woman in her forties who does not live in Zermatt but has been coming for the last 20 years, particularly on weekends with her friends, Zermatt is a special place as well. She calls it a "place of strength" (*Kraftort*), the only place in the world where she feels a special kind of energy. She does not go there for skiing, but for the atmosphere. She says: "I go there to recharge my batteries, and I always feel reborn when I return from Zermatt." (Interview in Swiss German on 8.10.2018). She continues:

I think any place with a view of the Matterhorn is a kind of place of strength for me. (...) Simply put, the Matterhorn has something magical about it. (...) I can't explain it to you. I have 100,000 photos of the Matterhorn on my mobile phone, and every time I'm there, I see something different or feel that today it's even more beautiful than the last time. It's just very special. There's something extremely attractive about that mountain.



Figure 3 – Taking a picture of the Matterhorn, November 2022.
Copyright 2022 by V. Cretton.

The Matterhorn is one of the dozen places in and around the resort that the Zermatt Tourist Office recommends as being particularly photogenic, and thus promotes as photopoints²² (Mourtazina, 2019). Taking pictures of the

22 <https://www.matterhornparadise.ch/en/Experience/Top-Experiences/Photopoints>

Matterhorn is encouraged to the point that the tourist office has established a touristic route, indicating the best viewpoints (photopoints) from which to photograph the famous mountain (Fig. 4). There are additionally many individual tactics for capturing the “best picture” of the Matterhorn, including one particularly perilous strategy to avoid capturing other tourist photographers’ arms and heads in the shot (Mourtazina, 2019).



Figure 4 – Taking advantage of the photopoint in Zermatt, November 2022.
Copyright 2022 by A. Boscoboinik.

The Matterhorn is a highly identifiable mountain with its distinctive pyramidal shape. Its unique profile makes it a strong symbol, widely featured in advertisements, postcards, media, and marketing campaigns, rendering it omnipresent. The legendary story of its first successful ascent (by Edward Whymper in 1865) further enhances the mountain’s mythical aura, and its fame attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. These combined factors have made the Matterhorn one of the most photographed mountains in the world, confirming that Zermatt’s promotional strategy is so effective that the myth has become reality, convincing everyone that the Matterhorn is indeed mythical.

This attraction to the Matterhorn, as well as the changing nature of the mountain, is also expressed by João, a man in his fifties of Portuguese ori-

gin, living in Täsch with a Swiss woman. João came to work at Zermatt when he was 18 years old. His career has gone through much iteration: he has worked in a restaurant, in the building industry, as a driver, with cable cars, in a waste disposal centre. In the end, he decided to stay because he likes the place. His way of loving the place is voiced as following: “There is good air and nice weather most of the time. It is really great. You have good water. The water here is great” (Interview in Swiss German on 21.11.2018). Although he does not like to ski – he says he has never learned it properly –, he loves hiking in the mountains and taking pictures:

And I say, if you look back every ten minutes and take a photo of the same mountain, you’ll see at the end, no two photos are the same. Even though you photograph the same mountain, every photo is different. The light changes, the perspective changes, and I enjoy taking pictures. This phenomenon only exists here, in the mountains.

João particularly appreciates walking in the mountains, when according to him, the view changes with almost every step. He has also discovered “magical places”, as he describes them, where nobody else goes and where nature, according to him, is purer. “You see nothing, no human intervention. You can walk up to the glacier and touch it.” Besides the mountain and the glacier, there is also a lake that he considers “magical” and where he loves to swim, despite (or perhaps because) it is near the glacier and the water temperature is five degrees. He seems very proud to know every single path in the area. “Yes, I know them all. I know every path. I have really been everywhere here.” He explains that this is thanks to his friendship with a colleague – his former employer – who belongs to one of the ancient native families of Zermatt (“Yes, that’s why I know”, he says, “we sometimes went to places where there was no hiking trail”). He recounts how they wandered the mountains together, looking for crystals and fishing. Besides the landscape, João also mentions the animals in the forest and how he used to go hiking and “hunting with his camera”²³ as he puts it, only to photograph the animals. “I would wait and see where the wind was coming from, and observe what the ani-

23 João : “Das ganze Jahr habe ich gejagt. Weisst du im Sommer, die ganze Zeit habe ich einfach gejagt.” A.F.: “Was denn für Jagd?” João: “Mit der Kamera.” (21.11.2018)

mal was doing. Sometimes, I watched the chamois for hours, and the animal watched me. I used to do that a lot”, he said. João states he truly considers Zermatt to be his place, where he feels at ease and where he belongs.

Like Lisa and Sylvia in Verbier, João arrived in Zermatt not for an imagined connection to the landscape but more prosaically for work. However, he also chose to stay for “the beauty” and “the magic” of the place. This magic, he remarks, is anchored in the natural elements: rocks, water, glaciers, and animals. When someone asked him if he was going back “to his home” in Portugal, he answered: “Here is my home” (see also Friedli and Boscoboinik, 2023).

As we see above, none of the research interviewees in Zermatt talk about the “vibes” or the festive spirit, like the research participants in Verbier did. In Zermatt, attachment to the place is stressed in relationship with the landscape, the mountains, the snow, the light, the temperature, the air, the water, and the spots to be photographed. In Verbier, the feelings related to the place are expressed in terms of fun, of the international and cosmopolitan ambience, where the “après-ski parties are the best in the world” (Jenny, a tourist in Verbier, interview in English on 30.11.2019). This does not mean that the beauty of the landscape is not acknowledged in Verbier, or that the party aspect is entirely absent in Zermatt. Many cultural events and festivities are mentioned by the interlocutors in Zermatt, but their scope is less widespread than in Verbier; or rather, according to their words they do not primarily characterize the resort.²⁴ Be that as it may, on both sides, there is a deep influence of promotional discourse in the statements of the interviewees.

The “Mattini”, the Tourists, and the Others

In Zermatt, the interviewees regularly made the distinction between the hosts (the natives of the place, the “Mattini”), the guests (the tourists) and the others (mainly the Portuguese workers, but not only²⁵). This was less the

24 For instance, there is the Zermatt Unplugged - a music festival every spring, the Summer Folklore Festival, sport contests and events, and many Portuguese and local related celebrations.

25 People from 60 countries live in Zermatt. <https://gemeinde.zermatt.ch/unser-dorf/einwohnerstatistik>

case in Verbier, where the collected discourses mainly emphasize the “community spirit”.

The polarization between local inhabitants (hosts) and tourists (guests),²⁶ or the distinction between insiders and outsiders, has been questioned in the anthropology of tourism since the late 1990s, with a focus instead on the porosity between these statuses (see Debarbieux et al., 2008; Loloum, 2015, 2018). More recently, it has been shown that the metaphor of hospitality (Rickly, 2017) can be fruitful for analysing the redistribution of symbolic roles and statuses within a heterogeneous population in a specific location. Questions such as “Who is the local and who is the foreigner?”, “Who is the host, who is the visitor?”, “Who receives and who is welcomed?” are explored in this context (see Friedli, 2020). Despite the porosity between these categories, they can still be a source of issues and tensions for the individuals involved, particularly concerning legitimacy, original ancestry, and access to property. For instance, Reto, a man in his fifties who was born and raised in Zermatt (but is not a native “Matti”²⁷), left the village for his studies and settled in another canton. He regularly returns to Zermatt because his family owns an apartment in the resort. During the interview, he describes Zermatt’s native population in terms of “clans”: “Each local family is like a clan, you have the clan of Julen, the clan of Biner, the clan of Perren” (Interview in French on 17.2.2020).

The concept of the clan has a long history in Valais, where it generally refers to extended families often associated with political affiliation and religion. In his book *Le peuple du Valais*, Courthion places it at the foundation of Valais society (1903, p. 155–163). He notes that “the clan” has its roots in high-altitude villages, describing it as a “very small milieu” (a village, a rural circle). In these small communities, the particular interests of the clan often take precedence over those of larger governing bodies or central administration. Today, the term “clan” still refers to Valais families of local origin who hold economic or political influence.

From the interviews made in Zermatt, tensions between members of the bourgeoisie (Zermatt “bourgeois”) and members of the municipality (not

26 These stereotyped distinctions remind the title of the volume edited in 1977 by Valene Smith (“Hosts and Guests”), that marked the beginnings of the anthropology of tourism.

27 “Matti” is used for singular of “Mattini”.

Zermatt “bourgeois” citizens)²⁸ were depicted by Peter, a 65-year-old American living in Zermatt since 1988 in the following terms:

These indigenous citizens basically feel that Zermatt belongs to them and their families. This dichotomy [bourgeois/non-bourgeois] is also within the different families. I mean they are still... even to this day, there is still so much envy between the residents and the local native from Zermatt who owns the hotels (Interview in English on 8.4.2019)

Since 1996, the establishments of Zermatt’s bourgeoisie (hotels and mountain restaurants) have been united under the label of the Matterhorn Group.²⁹ Zermatt bourgeoisie owns hotels and restaurants at high altitudes, has a large share in the ski lift company and owns 1,000 hectares of forest. In addition, many bourgeois families still own and operate hotels privately (Guex, 2016, p. 41). Today, the bourgeoisie numbers around 1,200 people³⁰, mainly from families that have historically originated in the area.

When talking about the traditional families of Zermatt, the word “envy” (*Neid* in German, *Niid* in Swiss German) appears in almost every informal discussion collected with the interviewees. However, this does not mean that all participants were critical of the “Mattini”. For instance, Kate, a Swiss woman who visits Zermatt regularly, explains that even though the wealthy “Mattini” are considered by the rest of the residents to be very snobbish and aloof, she herself does not share this feeling. “The only difference is that they might be wearing a \$3,000 jacket while you might be wearing an H&M jacket.” (Interview in Swiss German on 8.10.2018). Kate mentioned that the seasonal workers appreciate the “Mattini” because they employ them. She says she believes that if the seasonal staff return, it is because these local families are “good employers”. No matter why she made these statements, her words reveal the marked distance and hierarchy between the native families and the others.

28 See note 16.

29 <https://www.matterhorn-group.ch/en/home/>

30 Zermatt population at 1.11.2023 includes (without the seasonal workers) 5,733 inhabitants (2,537 foreigners, 1,823 Swiss, 1,209 Zermatt bourgeois and 164 resident citizen) <https://gemeinde.zermatt.ch/unser-dorf/einwohnerstatistik>

As seen above, the relationship between João, of Portuguese origin, and his former employer, a “Matti”, who went hiking together, shows that friendship can also be forged between “immigrant” and “local”, employee and employer. However, despite the heterogeneity of each group of residents, the population of Zermatt is depicted in terms of essentialised and stereotyped social groups in the discourses, which can be summarized as: the “Mattini”, the Portuguese workers³¹ and the tourists.

For most of the interviewees, whether long term residents or natives, tourists appear to be more tolerated than truly appreciated. Similar to Verbier, the very rich tourists in Zermatt have a reputation for not mingling with others, often having their own ski instructors and generally staying away from the other tourists. “Some have their own cooks, so you do not meet them in restaurants” (Kate, interview in Swiss German on 8.10.2018). The majority of tourists arrive by train³², and many come just for the day to see the Matterhorn. Peter, an American who has lived in Zermatt for more than 30 years, affirms: “So they come up, they look at the Matterhorn, then they take off and leave. Lucky enough for us...” (Interview in English on 8.4.2019). While Simon, a young native from Zermatt, explains:

We are dependent on tourists (...). We, as Zermattians, try to give them the best holidays possible, so they come again next year, that they appreciate it (...). And they should also have this “feel-good experience”. They don’t come here to look for friends (...) sometimes you spend some time with them, but you don’t make friends. You just want to be friendly. (Interview in Swiss German on 17.11.2018)

Stereotypical portrayals of the Zermatt population provided by the research participants seem to oddly mirror the pyramid shape of the Matterhorn as seen from Zermatt. They depict a classic pyramidal social hierarchy: the “true” locals, who benefit from ancestry, political and land rights are at the top; the foreign workers, who run the local economy are in the middle; and the tourists, who are essential to both groups due to economic necessity, are

31 The stereotype of the hard-working, football-loving, beer-drinking Portuguese is very much in evidence throughout the Valais, as we have shown in previous research (Cretton et al., 2012). In Zermatt, it is exacerbated.

32 Car-free Zermatt can be reached by train, taxi or helicopter.

at the bottom. This does not entail that social hierarchy does not exist in Verbier, but it is neither signified, nor expressed in the caricatural terms displayed in the discussions about Zermatt.

Conclusion

As we have shown, locality – as a phenomenological property of social life (Appadurai, 1996) – is produced, lived, experienced, felt, expressed, and voiced by a multitude of individuals who share a geographical location at different times of the year and have in common a kind of fascination or love of the place. Native mountain dwellers have long practised multilocality: in winter in the village, in summer on the mountain pasture and in the fields, and in autumn in the vineyards. Similarly, the new multilocal or temporary residents in the mountains also develop anchoring and belonging to places. They make friends, develop social networks, watch the mountains, and feel the landscapes to the point of sometimes being overwhelmed with emotions.

Locality is then produced in close connexion with the imaginaries about mountains and their ecological components: snow, forest, stones, sunshine, air, water, altitude. The imaginaries about animals (chamois, birds, wolves, sheep or goats), flora (trees, alpine meadows, flowers) and other elements (rock, torrent, lake, glacier) also contribute to the “production of locality” (Appadurai, 1996; see Chapter 9). Moreover, these perceptions not only affect the ways people relate to the place, but they are also reproduced through the pictures taken and easily shared with others, via social networks.³³ They can thus nourish other representations and motivate actions by others, who might then decide to come see for themselves.

The cohabitation in Verbier and in Zermatt between wealthy second-home homeowners, foreign creative entrepreneurs, tourists, permanent residents with migration backgrounds, precarious seasonal workers, and natives contributes to (re)composing locality. This experience of locality depends on their

33 As Mourtazina has shown, the digital technology has made possible a range of new activities like the management (archive, consultation, classification, memory), the communication (dissemination of images on social networks) and image editing (Mourtazina, 2019, p. 10).

interactions with each other and with the mountain – how they relate to the place at different times of the year, according to the seasons, events, or their own wishes. This does not mean that tensions between new and old, foreigners and locals, wealthy and precarious – whatever these categories may embody – do not exist. Rather, it shows that these tensions, in and of themselves, also contribute to the production of locality and its different layers.

The cosmopolitan discourses in Verbier present a more inclusive image than those collected in Zermatt, which explicitly reflect social and class divisions. Nonetheless, the accounts of people with less network and economic capital frequenting Verbier, such as those working there temporarily, speak not only of the beauty of the landscape but also of the specific community feeling of the place. This does not mean that there is no class segregation in Verbier, but rather that the interviewees do not express it in terms of experienced or perceived hierarchy.

It seems indeed caricatural to suggest that Zermatt represents an aristocratic type of resort (older, pyramidal class hierarchy, local owners versus foreigner employees), and Verbier a more bourgeois type (younger, liberal, foreigner owners). Nevertheless, it appears that these distinctive ways of dealing with otherness, the aristocratic and the liberal, partly determine the modes of relating to localness and the production of locality. When the land is considered inalienable and in the hands of the historical natives, the only possible option for “others” (non-natives, be they workers, tourists or non-historical residents) is to be an outsider (guests), invited to admire and take pictures of the landscape, and to enjoy the mountains, the scenery, the animals, along with all the associated emotions. On the other hand, when the natives consider the place to be a property that can be “shared” with “others” (thus, marketable), it becomes possible for the outsiders to be involved in community life and act (nearly) like locals, to the point of feeling lucky to be living in such a comfortable “bubble”.

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