
STEPHEN GOODWIN

Who Cares About 'The Playground of Europe'?

The source of the Soca comes as a surprise. All day we've been on or by this river, walking, rafting, even swimming it, and always it is in a hurry, foaming over shingle beds and carving in bow waves round boulders. Yet here at its cave mouth the karst spring of the Soca is still, a night-blue well, its surface so devoid of ripple that beyond a margin of limestone pebbles its depth is difficult to gauge. I linger, then turn and scramble out of the cave bed, traverse out of the ravine and follow the zigzag path down



122. The 10-day route for the Alpine Convention's SuperAlp¹³ starting in Bovec, Slovenia, on 19 June 2009 and finishing at Gressoney la Trinité on 28 June.

the wooded hillside. Apparently at other times the water of the *Izviru Soca* surges up in such volume that the cave is unapproachable.

This was day one of the Alpine Convention's SuperAlp¹³ and a winding 10-day journey from the Triglav National Park to the shadow of Monte Rosa had begun heavy with symbolism. But I can see this is going take some explaining. (See above for the route.)

The Alpine Convention is an international treaty between the eight countries of the Alps and the European Community. Its aim is to promote



123. The source of the Soča in a cave bottom. A photo similar to this, taken closer, appeared on the cover of the Alpine Convention's 'State of the Alps' report on water and completely mystified me until I peered into this karst well. (*Stephen Goodwin*)

people, 30,000 animal species from brown bears and bearded vultures to salamanders, and 13,000 plant species, edelweiss, gentian, saxifrage, you name it.

These statistics were not high in our minds as we rafted down the Soca from Bovec beneath a clear blue sky, though we did wonder whether the wooded hillside on our left might have harboured bears. Slovenia is the brown bear stronghold of the Alps; in fact it is something of a bear 'bank', with withdrawals for reintroduction projects elsewhere.

Musings on the bear would be interrupted by the noise of churning water as Soca twisted between boulders or down rapids; we'd ready our paddles and wait for instructions from our skipper, bikini-ed Betty from Budapest. 'Right back, left forward, go, go...' With none of the seven of us in the raft sharing the native tongue of another, and no one, except Betty of course, having a word of Hungarian, there tended to be a momentary delay between the command and its execution as each of the crew, except me, did a quick translation from accented English. Fortunately the Soca,

the sustainable development of the Alps – the largest single ecosystem in Europe apart from the Mediterranean – through cross-border co-operation. There is no great bureaucracy – a staff of five at the headquarters in Innsbruck and three in a branch across the Brenner Pass at Bolzano running on an annual budget of €800,000, drawn from the member countries. An extra five staff in Chambéry, financed by the French government to the tune of an additional €400,000, dealing with protected natural areas, was integrated into the Convention's Permanent Secretariat in 2006.

In case you're wondering, the eight Alpine countries are Italy, Austria, France, Switzerland, Germany, Slovenia, Monaco and Liechtenstein. The 'mountainous' parts of them covered by the Convention – including valleys and towns therein – totals 190,568 sq km along a 1,200km arc. Within this are 5,954 municipalities, 14 million

124.

Memorials to man-made tragedy:
Above: headstones for the 1,910
victims, some never found, others
beyond identification, in the
Vajont dam disaster, Italy, 1963.

125. Below: a symbolic 'mud'
cannon stands on the hillside
above the site of the mine tailings
dam at Stava, Italy, that burst in
1985, killing 268 people.

(Stephen Goodwin)



along the 14km we rafted, is a
forgiving stream. Only Stefano,
a photographer from the Aosta
valley, fell overboard, and he
was soon recovered, once his
designated rescuer, Lei Wang
from *China Pictorial*, Beijing,
had stopped laughing.

(A bunch of journalists out
on a 'jolly', I hear the cynics
say. Well, 'Up to a point Lord
Copper'. But there's always a
purpose. And why not enjoy your work along the way?)



Our alpine odyssey had begun on the Soca for several reasons. One, Slovenia holds the presidency of the Alpine Convention (it rotates, EC style); two, the Soca, or the Isonzo as the Italians know it before it flows into the Gulf of Trieste, is very much a border river and a reminder of what happens when neighbours choose conflict instead of co-operation. The mountainsides we rafted beneath were a bloody battleground in 1915-17, the Soca/Isonzo Front. And three, the theme of SuperAlp!³ was 'water'. From the *Izviru Soca* we would, over the coming days, stand on the banks of the Drava, a tributary of the Danube, the broad and free Tagliamento, the tightly channelled Piave and Adige, the infant Rhine and the glaciated headwaters of the Po. We would visit projects to re-wild rivers by releasing them from canalised banks, Swiss mountain villages that had resisted inundation by dam builders and two in Italy where the greed and arrogance of dam builders had resulted in horrendous loss of life.

On the eve of our journey, the Convention published its second experts' report on the 'State of the Alps' entitled *Water and Water Management Issues* (the first, in 2007, focused on transport). Couched in the language of scientists, and taking care not to tread on sensitive political toes, it none the less makes clear that alpine communities will have to face up to big changes. The warming of the Alps – running at twice the global average –

with milder, wetter winters and hotter, drier summers, is expected to bring more rockfall, floods and droughts. The Alps may be the 'water towers of Europe' but with the flow from those towers increasingly unpredictable, the Convention report underlines the need for cooperation between communities and states in restraining consumption and guarding against damaging floods and drought. A stern finger is pointed at the ski industry's mania for snow cannons, particularly at lower altitude resorts that should be looking for alternative ways of generating tourism income. Ironically while snow cannons were a mark of shame a decade ago and barely mentioned by



126. Tranquility in the centre of Splügen, an architecturally rich old Swiss village that fought off proposals to submerge all of this beneath a giant reservoir. (Stephen Goodwin)

resorts, now they are regarded as a key selling point. You could hardly have a starker demonstration of global warming than the north face of Triglav, on our horizon late on day one. One hundred years ago a glacier stretched right across the lower face, today you have to strain to pick out the remaining patch. Most of the melt has occurred over the last 30 years.

The 'State of the Alps' reports with their wealth of detail – rather like House of Commons select committee reports – are intended to assist the multifarious bodies whose decisions shape all the human aspects of the Alps, from whether peaks remain unsullied by cablecars or heli-skiers to how to ameliorate crowded transport corridors like the Brenner or the Aosta valley. It's about the high Alps we enjoy as mountaineers, the rail and road links we use for access and the valley towns we descend to for a glass or two and a hot shower. And that's why the Alpine Club should care about the work of the Alpine Convention.

In the spirit of the Convention's commitment to sustainability, our journey along the alpine arc was done as much as possible on public transport, though for some out-of-the-way riversides we had to

resort to the SuperAlp!¹³ minivan. (SuperAlp!¹³, incidentally is the title the Convention has given to this annual public relations exercise, and 2009 was its third year.) My calculation is that we travelled on 29 trains, 17 buses, two ferries (lakes Como and Maggiore), two electric cars, two cable cars (over the Passo dei Salati linking the Alagna and Gressoney valleys), two electric bikes, one mountain bike and of course the raft on the emerald Soca. And we hiked a stretch of the Via Spluga, an ancient trade route



127. Grossglockner (3798m), highest mountain and symbol of Austria and centre of one of the biggest national parks in Europe, the High Tauern National Park. (*Matevž Lenarčič*). This photo plus 127, 130 and 131 appear in Lenarčič's inspirational book, *The Alps: A Bird's Eye View* (2009).

linking the upper Rhine valley with Chiavenna in Italy.

Our rather erratic-looking course is explained by the Convention's need to fly the flag in areas that have given it support and where projects are underway that exemplify its work. Visibility is crucial. The awkward truth is that of those almost 6,000 municipalities in its patch, most have either never heard of the Alpine Convention or have no idea of what it does. And too often even when communities are aware of the Convention it is regarded with suspicion, as another of those interfering outside bodies that wants to preserve nature at the expense of local business, be it mines, ski-lift operators or farmers.

One of the most heartening stops on our tour – and instructive in the role that can be played by mountaineering associations – was the dog leg up to the village Mallnitz at the southern end of the railway tunnel beneath the crest of the Hohe Tauern in Austria. Mallnitz is the province of Carinthia's gateway to Hohe Tauern National Park, a sprawling mass of 3000m peaks – more than 300 of them – receding glaciers and relatively unspoilt high valleys. And Mallnitz has a claim to fame in mountaineering that will be a cause of celebration in 2012. On the Tauern crest, just east in the line of the tunnel, stands Ankogel (3250m) which has the curious distinction of being the 'oldest glacier peak' in Austria, in that it was the earliest moderately difficult glaciated peak to be climbed - way back in 1762, twenty-four years



128. The 800m-high south face of the Marmolada (3343m) and the Cimon della Pala (3184m) viewed from the south-west. (*Matevž Lenarčič*)

before the first ascent of Mont Blanc.

Mallnitz is thus a worthy member of the family of 27 'Mountaineering Villages', an initiative of the Austrian Alpine Association (ÖAV), putting into practice ideas of sustainable Alpine tourism. The basic deal is that these small mountain villages – populations no more than 2,500 – don't go in for any gross developments, instead preserving their natural and cultural

assets, and in return they get help with marketing, training and appropriate infrastructure. (Regrettably I heard bolted *klettergartens* mentioned in this last category. Surely not!)

Other villages in the family include Vent in the Ötztal, Ginzling in the Zillertal and Kals at the southern foot of the Grossglockner. For several of the villages the project is an attempt to reverse decline and depopulation due to being overshadowed by big

ski resorts. All of the villages have alpine huts in the ranges around them



129.

Routes ancient and modern: heading out of the Rheinwald, Switzerland, on the medieval cobbles of the Via Spluga, the hair-pins of the modern road beyond,



130. . .and close to the Splügen Pass (2115m), the border with Italy. (Stephen Goodwin)

and it is this tradition of mountaineering that is seen as the anchor to the whole enterprise.

The Mountaineering Villages initiative owes a lot to two men – Peter Hasslacher of the ÖAV and Marco Onida, Secretary General of the Alpine Convention – who have seen their ideals come together. By giving its support and acting as a facilitator, the Convention has helped Hasslacher secure funding of €800,000 – half from the EC and half from Austrian environment ministry. Onida described it as a ‘solidarity project’. The need for protection of the natural environment in conjunction with culture was felt as a shared value, both by those who lived in the Alps and those who visited, he said. ‘The history of Alpinism is a history of men and women who changed the destiny of the mountain villages. That in 2009, villages united by this common history cooperate in order to pursue new forms of tourism, despite the challenges that this might sometimes imply, is of great significance.’

For Hasslacher it was one more step on his ongoing campaign for the

welfare of the Austrian Alps. When I first met Peter Hasslacher, in 1983 at the ÖAV's Innsbruck headquarters, he was battling a proposal by Tyrol's water and electricity utilities to draw water from every glacier stream on the south flank of the Grossglockner and Grossvenediger ranges and collect it in a gigantic reservoir near Kals. The scheme would have killed stone dead the embryonic Hohe Tauern national park – at least within Tyrol province, the wildest of the park's ranges. It looked like a David v Goliath struggle at the time; but as anyone who has ski-toured or climbed here since, perhaps descending by the foaming glacier-fed cascades of Umbartal, will appreciate, David prevailed. Today the park covers 1,900 sq km, straddling the provinces of Salzburg, Carinthia and Tyrol. Big utilities were not the only threat; many in the local communities, particularly farmers, viewed the park with hostility, fearing its preservationist ethos; 25 years later fears have allayed and there are nearby villages wanting to come within its border.

Winning over public opinion and persuading people that the Alpine Convention is about development as well as conservation is an important part of Marco Onida's work. But the visceral attachment of farmers to the landscape can also make them allies. On the bank of Drava at Dellach im Drautal, Carinthia, we heard how a farmer had turned over fields to a re-wilding project in order to recreate the Drava of his childhood. (Of course, he wanted a parcel of land away from the river in return.) The man had learnt to swim in a river that could flood over shingle banks into lagoons, since when canalisation had made it deeper and fast flowing. That the upper Drau/Drava had been liberated hereabouts was obvious from the pools and silt on the track after days of heavy rain. We picked our way along to a point overlooking ponds dug by local schoolchildren, firemen and other volunteers amid a jungly floodplain forest. Willow and tamarisk is colonising the gravel banks while the yellow-bellied toad and the wolf spider are returning to the swamp.

Such were the stories we heard as we stepped off the trains and buses of SuperAlp's watery itinerary. The rain that had swollen the Drava had turned the Iller into a surging grey beast when we arrived in Immenstadt im Allgäu, Bavaria. Meanwhile the eastern foothills of the Alps near Vienna were experiencing the heaviest rains for 50 years. 'Flukatastrophe' shouted the *Kronen Zeitung*; 10,000 soldiers had been mobilised against the flood. However the highlight in the Allgäu was not the area's latest efforts to contain the Iller but its commitment to sustainable tourism. We travelled the 10km up-valley from Immenstadt to Sonthofen in a soaking *peleton* of electric bikes, just as the town hopes its tourists (and residents) will get about when not hiking up into the hills.

Next day in Switzerland I used an electric bike (solar charged of course) to good effect on the steep track from Thusis to the gorge of the Viamala on the upper Rhein, cruising up as younger comrades with ordinary mountain bikes had to dismount exhausted and push. As usual, Onida had several points to make: another demonstration of eco-transport, drawing



131. The Altesch glacier, biggest glacier in the Alps; an outstanding example of the formation of the Alps and the study of eco-systems, including the 'dying' of glaciers due to climate change.
(Matevž Lenarčič)

attention to the scenic hiking route through the Alps from Thusis to Chiavenna which provides green tourist euros for villages along the 65km cultural trail (W M Turner painted on the Viamala) and telling the story of Splügen, that 70 years ago fought off an

attempt to dam its valley. Villagers, whose ancient houses would have vanished beneath the reservoir, resisted all manner of pressure and inducement and, crucially, were able to use their very Swiss right to vote 'no'. Thwarted in the Rheinwald, the hydropower developers simply looked over the crest of the Alps into Italy and built their dam in Valle di Lei.

In Italy we saw what happens when man thinks he can master Nature

132.

Monte Rosa – Dufourspitze (4634m), Switzerland's highest peak, flanked by (left) Lyskamm and (right) Zumsteinspitze and Signalkuppe.

(Matevž Lenarčič)

– saw it in the vast mounds of rock and soil that slid from Monte Toc on 9 October 1963 to fill the Vajont Dam, and in the 1,910 identical headstones at Longarone – one for each of those who perished as a wave 170m high swept over the dam and down the valley. Early warnings of the instability were ignored and even when the mountainside was visibly slipping there was no attempt to alert the population. Renato Migotti, who showed us round the special cemetery, was one of the few survivors, 16 years old at the time, dug out from beneath the mud. As president of the survivors' association, Migotti tells the Vajont story as a warning to geologists, engineers and their corporate employers. 'Unfortunately we did not learn that much,' adds Migotti, and particularly he is thinking of Stava, 22 years later.

Stava lies at 1250m in a small valley above the Val di Fiemme in Trentino – less than 100km west of Vajont as the crow flies. Here we were met by another man heading a group keeping alive an 'active memory' of a man-made disaster. Graziano Lucchi was living away from Stava on 19 July 1985 when a tailings dam at a fluorite mine on Mt Prestavè collapsed, spewing mud down the hillside at 90kph and killing 268 people. The tailings dams had been built on sloping, marshy ground and surveys had pointed up their chronic instability. Jail sentences for multiple manslaughter were handed down, but legal proceedings dragged on and nobody actually served time behind bars.

'Water was the main cause for the tragedy, but water can't be blamed,' said Lucchi. 'It was all man's fault. People have used water carelessly, without the slightest respect for it or for the mountain where it flows from.'

The autonomous province of Trentino is a declared supporter of the



goals of the Alpine Convention and as a part of the Alps where drought could become a particular problem it takes seriously the need to restrain water consumption. Trentino and neighbouring Bolzano produce most of Europe's apples, a thirsty crop, but persuading farmers to switch from 'diffuse rain' – whirling sprays – to less wasteful forms of irrigation isn't proving easy. Trentino too is engaged on river re-naturalisation projects, such as on the Brenta. And as winters warm it has embarked on a 'gradual conversion' of its tourism economy away from its 50 percent dependency on skiing. Lorenzo Dellai, the provincial governor, said Trentino could not give up snowmaking altogether, however it would focus on improving larger existing resorts and had 'given up' on developing smaller areas, particularly at lower altitudes.

The urgency for those lower resorts to find alternatives to ski incomes was underlined on the last day of SuperAlp!³ when we visited the Angelo Mosso scientific institute that stands at 2900m, just below the ridge dividing Alagna and Gressoney valleys, south of Monte Rosa. An outpost of the

University of Turin, it was built in 1907 and was the scene of early research into physiological effects of altitude. Prof Ardito Desio made use of the institute in preparing for the Italy's successful ascent of K2 in 1954. In June 2000 the building was struck by lightning and completely gutted by fire; re-building, even with the aid of cable cars and helicopters, took longer than it had in Mosso's day when all materials had to be carried up from the valley. Re-opened in 2007, the institute is now largely devoted to public education with a museum and displays on snow crystal and avalanches.

The institute's main role today for the scientists – who keep a room in the attic – is in the collection of meteorological and snow cover data, a valuable record that goes back to 1907. Interestingly, winter snow depth has remained pretty constant above the 1900m contour, though with increased temperatures the snow tends to be wetter. However, as researcher Michele Freppaz explained, the most noticeable change has been in the 1000m to 1600m 'middle' level where precipitation increasingly falls as rain. The impact is felt not merely by skiers as lower runs disappear but by forest and valley eco-systems. In some places trees are dying because they no longer have the insulation of a reliable snow blanket in winter.

Should we care? As the hack pack bounced down the Gressoney valley, off-road on mountain bikes for the very last transport mode of the trip, the Alps seemed every bit the carefree 'playground' suggested by Leslie Stephen's memorable book title. Gressoney and Alagna were keen to show off their efforts towards 'soft' tourism but the mountain villages need a corresponding response from their visitors – climbers, hikers, skiers, whoever – to be convinced that sustainable development is the way to go. They might also look to those who enjoy the snow and ice to join the lobby for big cuts in carbon emissions.

For the last couple of days SuperAlp!³ was joined by Annibale Salsa, president of the Club Alpino Italiano, and of course we had already seen the mutual support for the Convention of the ÖAV. Marco Onida, himself no mean mountaineer, sees the alpine associations as natural 'ambassadors' for the Convention's objectives. 'The fact that the UK Alpine Club is not from a member state of the Convention should not constitute a reason not to play a role; after all, we have 14 million residents in the Alps but some 120 million tourists,' says Onida.

'Alpine clubs from third states could be ambassadors for messages such as sustainable tourism and mobility, nature conservation and so on. Moreover, the UK is the cradle of Alpinism, as everyone knows. If in an ideal world all the ministers of the Alpine states received letters from presidents or members of Alpine clubs such as AC, this would give the Alps more political visibility. Maybe I am too idealistic, but I do believe that building an 'Alpine public opinion' – and it is public opinion that shapes policies – necessarily requires the involvement of all those who, one way or another, travel to the Alps, live in the Alps or care for the Alps. This includes for sure members of the Alpine Club.'

