

For the love of risk? When Local Inhabitants' and Outsiders' Imaginaries Match: The Case of the Verbier Resort in the Swiss Alps

¿Por amor al riesgo? Cuando los imaginarios de los habitantes locales y de los forasteros coinciden: el caso de la estación de esquí de Verbier en los Alpes suizos

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Abstract

This article focuses on a mountain region in the Swiss Alps that has built an international name for itself since the 1960s upon a specific ski resort, Verbier. From the very beginning, the locals involved in the development of the place were risk-takers, revealing an entrepreneurial spirit that lasts up until now. Over time, the mountain resort has attracted outsiders who share a taste for risk-taking, not only in the field of sport but also in the worlds of finance, art or business. Some emblematic Verbier projects chosen for this article (Xtreme, E-Bike Festival, Art Summit, Mountain Hub) perfectly embody the concordance of interests between locals and non-locals when it comes to exploiting the mountain capital of the place. While highlighting the wider socio-economic and political context in which it is embedded, the paper emphasizes how the whole process of promoting Verbier internationally as a global playground for risk taking, through various win-win corporate strategies negotiated between locals and outsiders, might provide a kind of “vernacular cosmopolitanism”, or “rooted cosmopolitanism”. Beyond the specificity of the case study, it explores how global and local forces interact and intertwine to affect mountain locations and reshape the imaginaries and values of locality.

Keywords: Verbier; Swiss Alps; locality; risk-taking; transnationalism; vernacular cosmopolitanism

Resumen

Este artículo se basa en un estudio realizado en Verbier, una estación de esquí ubicada en los Alpes suizos que se ha forjado un nombre a nivel internacional desde los años sesenta. Desde sus inicios, los habitantes que participaron en el desarrollo del lugar fueron personas que han tomado riesgos, lo que revela un espíritu emprendedor que perdura hasta hoy. Con el paso del tiempo, la estación de montaña ha atraído a personas que comparten el gusto por el riesgo, no sólo en el ámbito del deporte sino también en el mundo de las finanzas, el arte o los negocios. A la vez que se destaca el contexto socioeconómico y político más amplio en el que se inserta, este artículo muestra cómo el proceso de promoción internacional de Verbier, como arena de juego global para la toma de riesgos a través de diversas estrategias corporativas en las que todos salen ganando, podría proporcionar una especie de “cosmopolitismo vernáculo”, o “cosmopolitismo arraigado”. Más allá de la especificidad de este estudio de caso, el artículo explora cómo las fuerzas globales y locales interactúan y se entrelazan afectando a los lugares de montaña, remodelando los imaginarios y los valores de la localidad.

Palabras clave: Verbier; Alpes suizos; localidad; toma de riesgos; transnacionalismo; cosmopolitismo vernáculo

This mountain [Bec des Rosses] is very scary (...) You must take the time to pay attention to everything but you have to go down in one go without stopping, as fast as possible. So, it's against basic safety principles, and on top of that, there are 7000 spectators, a helicopter broadcasting¹, so it's really hard to deal with because if you make a mistake, it can be fatal (Xavier de Le Rue, snowboarder and rider who has ridden the Verbier Xtreme 15 times, 25.03.2020).²

This article focuses on a mountain region in the Swiss Alps that has built an international name for itself since the 1960s upon a specific ski resort, Verbier. For the past 25 years, this reputation has grown, in particular through the Freeride World Tour, an off-piste skiing competition, which takes place in several stages. The final stage, the Verbier Xtreme, takes place on the legendary Bec des Rosses mountain face, the “monster that humbles”, as named by the 2021 Freeride World Tours champion, Elisabeth Gerritzen. When the young Swiss woman won the title, she was the first female freerider to win the Xtreme Verbier twice in ski, telling the media it takes a love of risk to throw yourself off the Bec des Rosses like that (l'Entretien de la Rédaction, 2021). She also admits to feeling grateful to be still alive after the descent.

Verbier has the reputation of bringing together “risk lovers” not only in the field of off-piste skiing, but also in other sports, such as mountain biking, paragliding or base-jumping. Here, the risk is not a purely objective reality but rather a form of commitment and a way of being in the world. Risk is not seen as a threat but as a rewarding element, and its confrontation provides an even higher sense of satisfaction to those who have freely committed themselves to it; a risk that is freely consented and valued (cf. Raveneau, 2006, p. 586). In relation to sport, Verbier is similar to other places around the world which are privileged spots to observe transnational mobilities in action sport cultures (Thorpe, 2012b, 2014, 2017) that entails relationships between insiders and outsiders (Hayes, 2001) like amenity migrants (Moss, 2006) or lifestyle migrants (Pavelka, 2018). Transnational tourism generally includes vast movements of people (tourists as well as tourism workers), capital (investments, tourist currencies, and remittances), technologies of travel, and the circulation of closely related tourism media and imaginaries (Salazar, 2011; Burns & Novelli, 2008; Hall, 2005; Sheller & Urry, 2004).

The historical entrepreneurship perspective of local inhabitants has contributed to help lay the foundations and has shaped the promotional infrastructure for what Verbier has become today. As part of research that we have been carrying out in this region since 2011, we collected a number of stories that paint the picture of a place which attracts risk takers, the image of a friendly place where everybody can feel good and mingle with others. Social representations about the resort, for instance as “a mountain spot to be” or “a place where everyone meets regardless of social status”, can be found in other places in Switzerland and around the world like Canada or New Zealand. Such descriptions are often seen as an outsider's view of the valley, commonly perceived to be opposed to the representations that the natives of the place have of their home. But as we will emphasize, inner and outer desires

¹ In addition to two drones, more than ten cameras and an HD control room (see Ats, 23 mars 2019).

² Quoted by Fageot, 2020. All French quotes in this article have been translated into English by the authors.

and interests also converge and match on many points, in particular when it comes to promoting and expanding the resort internationally.

Argumentation and structure of the article

The article states that the attraction for risk taking which brings together Verbier lovers is rooted in the history of the ski resort. From the very beginning, the locals involved in the development of the place were risk-takers, revealing an entrepreneurial spirit that lasts up until now. Over time, the mountain resort has attracted outsiders who share a taste for risk-taking, not only in the field of sport but also in the worlds of finance, art or business. The paper exemplifies the process through which outsiders managed to convince local officials of the relevance of their projects for the development of the resort – whether as the host for an international freeride skiing competition, an international music festival or an international co-working space – to result in a win-win strategy.

As we will see, the spot is appealing to people who accumulate a certain amount of “networks capital” (Larsen et al., 2006), 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 & Urry, 2008, p. 93). Like Thorpe (2017, p. 538) has shown, transnational snow sport migration may stimulate “new subjectivities”, or a kind of “diasporic consciousness” marked by multiple (or partial) identifications.

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. Above all, the article shows that the promotion of Verbier is desired and encouraged by a group of historical inhabitants, in collaboration with others.

While highlighting the wider socio-economic and political context in which it is embedded, our analysis emphasizes how the whole process of promoting Verbier internationally as a global playground for risk taking, through various win-win corporate strategies negotiated between locals and outsiders, might provide a kind of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Werbner, 2006), or “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Appiah, 1998). Beyond the specificity of the case study, it explores how global and local forces interact and intertwine to affect mountain locations and reshape the imaginaries and values of locality.

Presenting the fieldwork and data

To develop and document our reflection, we have gathered several sequences of empirical data, collected in a long-term project³ in four mountain valleys (two in the Swiss Alps and two in the Spanish Pyrenees), each including an internationally renowned tourist resort and its “hinterlands” (surrounding villages). The aim of the fieldwork was to conduct ethnography in urbanised mountain locations, as inserted into a global tourist field. In total, 141 qualitative interviews, a year of participant-

³ Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (2017-2021, SNSF: 10001A_172807), entitled “Becoming local in mountain areas: diversification, gentrification, cohabitation. A Swiss Alps-Spanish Pyrenees comparison”.

observation as well as short, middle and long observations were conducted by two female researchers, one in Switzerland and the other in Spain⁴.

This article explores in-depth data collected in Valais⁵, a canton in Southwestern Switzerland known for its tourist attractions – notably skiing and thermal baths in winter and outdoor activities in summer (such as mountain biking or walking and hiking). This Alpine area counts a number of well-known resorts as well as many surrounding villages, which experience the economic and social benefits of resort activity. In this respect, the Verbier region remains exemplary, as the observations and 40 interviews conducted with natives (people who were born and grew up there), temporary residents (seasonal workers, multi-locals and tourists) and new permanent residents (people with a migration background who settled there) show. A worldwide village, Verbier is an emblem of the global process of political and economic transformation (Savage et al., 2005) which has resulted in new ways of living in the mountains in western industrialized countries (Boscoboinik & Cretton, 2017; Cretton, 2018; Cretton et al., 2020; Friedli, 2020). At the time of the survey in 2018, it had 3,158 permanent residents⁶ – more than 60% of whom came from abroad, particularly from France, England, Portugal and Sweden – and also features a high rate of second home owners (over 50%).

Unlike most research in the field of migration and mobility which are interested in following a specific group of people in order to understand their routes (Geoffroy, 2007; Benson, 2013), our approach is primarily concerned with understanding a place of settlement, crossed by numerous mobilities, both translocal and transnational. The mountain territory where we conducted our fieldwork embodies a space of shared imaginaries and practices, an iconic place to observe how the various profiles of actors and groups, from here and there, make, cross, shape and practice it.

Mountain capital

The twin processes of the culturalisation and the economic exploitation of natural landscapes, like mountains, are closely intertwined and mutually reinforced through the tourist industry (Boscoboinik & Cretton, 2017). Inspired by Garrod et al. (2006)'s concept of countryside capital, we propose here the concept of mountain capital to frame the economic and symbolic benefits for mountain communities that are generated through sustainable use of the natural environment. This idea also includes, by extension, the nature or mountain capital that provides the imagery to promote “tourist destinations, activities and attractions for tourists and contributes to local traditions and customs that make a visitor’s stay memorable” (Eimermann, 2016, p. 57). In Verbier, the nature/mountain capital played an important role in the development of the resort. Indeed, very early on, from 1900 onwards, the Verbier plateau was considered to be a holiday resort⁷, and weather appears to play a role

⁴ The fieldwork in Switzerland was carried out by Andrea Friedli and the one in Spain by Maria Offenhenden whom we warmly thank.

⁵ Our in-situ interviews were also supplemented by a large set of media interviews and literature, especially concerning the FWT founder, whom we were unable to meet.

⁶ It can increase up to tenfold, i.e. over 30,000 people, during the peak of the winter season, even up to 40,000 people according to some sources.

⁷ The first chalet for excursionists dates back to 1900, built on the Verbier plateau at an altitude of 1,800 meters. Renting or buying a second home grows in the 1920s (Deslarzes, 1998, p. 75).

throughout the development of the resort. In a 1945 federal report on tourist resorts in Switzerland, Verbier's climate was presented as offering the exceptional possibility of making a model climatic resort. The account also highlighted the closeness to major urban areas: Geneva, Lausanne, Fribourg, a reservoir of 300,000 city dwellers likely to be interested in "this first-class ski centre" (Deslarzes, 1998, p. 105)⁸. Added to this were the outstanding climatic values of the place, Verbier being considered as "one of the sunniest places in Switzerland" (Deslarzes, 1998, p. 105).

The first chairlift, in 1950: A local risk-taking

The key founding event that launched the economic growth of the resort was the construction of the first chairlift in 1950, as a collective act from about thirty Verbier natives who got together to take out a collective loan⁹. Some witnesses (Deslarzes, 1998, p. 112) reported that the people of Verbier did not hesitate to sign for this loan, even though it was well beyond their means. This collective risk-taking – strangely reminiscent of the operation of the "commons"¹⁰ – can be considered as a founding act of entrepreneurship of the station. As one of the co-founders of the resort said in 1970:

The inhabitants of Bagnes have always had a taste for risk. (...) The intense tourist development of the Bagnes valley is not the effect of chance. It is not an imported product. It is the fruit of a spirit of initiative and enterprise. (Tissières, 1970, quoted in Berthoud, 1982, p. 247)

From the very beginning, some Verbier locals have been involved in the development of the resort. Already in 1951, they hoped that Verbier would take "its place among the most beautiful and largest winter resorts in Switzerland"¹¹ and in 1957, in *the Gazette de Lausanne*, Verbier was compared to America: "A sign of America, Verbier, a mushroom village" (Deslarzes, 1998, p. 118).

As the historical perspective shows, the mountain and climate capital was soon used to develop the resort, and to attract tourists and clients. By 1937, the Verbier Development Society had grown in parallel with the Valaisan Tourism Union which is no coincidence, as they both shared the common objective of making Verbier a renowned tourist resort. Of course, the subsequent development of the station was not without tensions and inner differences of interest. However, it seems to have benefited greatly from the convergence of interests between various groups of actors, both insiders and outsiders, up until today.

⁸ Such assets have been developed towards an internationalisation of the resort. The Verbier website explains how to get there via the airports of Geneva, Zurich, Milan and Sion, positioning the site on the borders of Europe (France, Germany, Italy, Austria), see <https://www.verbier.ch/hiver/mobilite/venir-en-suisse/>.

⁹ A loan of 200,000 CHF. See Deslarzes (1998, p. 110-113). This is the founding act of the Télervier ski lift company, then called Télésiège de Médran SA (renamed Télervier in 1967). Today, the group employs over 800 people during the winter season, with a turnover of 37.5 million euros in 2020/2021. <https://verbier4vallees.ch/fr/a-propos-de-nous/un-peu-d-histoire>.

¹⁰ The consortage determined the use of common goods such as water, forests and alpine pastures and were responsible for building and maintaining collective installations such as the bisses, paths, alpine pasture facilities and ovens (see Decorzant et al., 2019).

¹¹ First *rapport de gestion* by Rodolphe Tissières, in 1951 (Deslarzes, 1998, p. 112).

When insiders and outsiders' ambition match

Petite (2005, p. 66) shows how the “Verbier social group”, being obliged to deal with a territory that functions according to a tourist economy, is acutely able to play with objects and representations that are often exogenous and heterogeneous, in order to give meaning to its world. Already in the fifties, “the people of Verbier and Bagnards are participating well in this development and receiving many benefits from it” (Deslarzes, 1998, p. 115). In any case, all the native people we encountered during fieldwork told us that the commune benefits greatly from foreign investors in Verbier. In the words of a local real-estate agent: “for a community, for a municipality, what is important is that these people spend money in the municipality.” (Interview 26.04.2018) And from the mouth of this 28 year-old¹² Verbier woman:

You can yell at them, but the people who sold them land to these English people, well, they're local people, so you can yell at them, but it's your father, it's your aunt, it's your family who sold the land, they're local people, they saw the dollars in their eyes and they said, there's money to be made and they didn't necessarily think any further. (Interview 23.08.2018)

Some emblematic Verbier projects chosen for this article (Xtreme, E-Bike Festival, Art Summit, Mountain Hub), among many other smaller projects, perfectly embody the concordance of interests between locals and non-locals when it comes to exploiting the mountain capital of the place. The entrepreneurial spirit, its values of risk, of no limits, its objectives of conquering markets (national and international), is praised, supported and maintained by some locals, as the history of the resort shows. Much of the promotional work is now carried out by Verbier Promotion, the marketing organization whose mission is to promote the Verbier destination internationally, increase its visibility and acquire new visitors to the destination.

Xtreme, FWT and E-Bike festival

The story of the Xtreme is first and foremost that of its founder, a freerider and entrepreneur. Born to British and Swiss parents, he first came to Verbier (where he currently lives) at a very young age. He likes to tell media how in 1994, when he tamed the Bec des Rosses with a friend in order to shoot scenes for a film, he was able to sense the spectacular potential of this face which culminates at 3,222 meters in the Swiss Alps. How then, both friends set out to organize a competition for the best freeride specialists, and how the bold idea was endorsed by the local rescue society and municipality in 1996. The success of Xtreme was such that in 2008, the entrepreneur freerider founded the Freeride World Tour, that circuit of five competitions that became the world's first freeride ski and snowboard contest, with the final –Xtreme – taking place in Verbier. Interestingly, this competition model is inspired by surfing: “From the outset, we were inspired by surfing, a sport with which we shared a passion for surfing, nature, an international outlook and a certain lifestyle.”¹³

¹² At the time of interview.

¹³ Interview by L'Echo magazine, 20.03. 2021.

Petite (2005) has shown for the Verbier region how tourist elements, at face value very disconnected from the territory on which they are based, are mobilized and reappropriated by the inhabitants of the place, proceeding as much by imitation (of certain tourist or event-based forms) as by distinction from exogenous models. As we see, not only are people frequently on the move, but cultures, objects, capital, business, services, media, images, information, and ideas also circulate across the globe (Urry, 2007; Faist, 2013; Salazar, 2017; Cretton et al., 2020). Originally inspired by the surf circuits in the world's oceans and adapted for a freeride ski and snowboard circuit in the world's mountains, the FWT is, in 2021, a well-oiled machine employing fourteen people a year and representing an annual budget of 5 million Swiss francs, of which 1.4 million is dedicated to the Xtreme (L'Echo magazine, 20.03.2021) ¹⁴.

In 2018, building on these successful winter events, the Xtreme founder presented to the commune of Bagnes (of which Verbier is part) a new project of sport event for the summer season: the E-Bike festival, dedicated to electric bikes (Mari, 2019). It displays the ambition to create something out of the ordinary, to replace the Freeride in winter, with the aim of bringing new customers to Verbier during summertime (Mari, 2019). The concept – imagined by its management company (the Freeride World Tour management) – convinced the municipality of Bagnes, opening the view into a new niche adapted to the region, allowing the tourist development of the area to be extended to more visitors ¹⁵.

In any case, the municipality agreed to subsidize the event each year, like it did for Xtreme ¹⁶, for five-year periods, in exchange for an annual return from the organizer. The FWT also approached Verbier Promotion, to undertake a collaboration in terms of selling the event across medias and commercials. As Mari (2019) details in his study on the introduction of the Verbier E-bike festival, there were common economic and tourist interests between the local municipality and the FWT Management, that provided a win-win situation.

At a symbolic level, Xtreme, FWT and E-Bike festival exemplify the sports event factory that attracts and ties together “risk sport lovers” in Verbier, from the average tourist to the world's best competitor. They embody a match of interests and converging views between outsiders and insiders, that can be found in other fields too.

Art Summit

The President of the *Verbier Art Summit* also lives partly in Verbier. The fourty-three year-old Dutch woman ¹⁷ founded the non-profit association in 2013 with two other women. The female entrepreneur conceives the Art Summit event to be a catalyst for innovation and change. Similar to FWT, she also had dealings with the municipality and local institutions – both before and after launching the Art Summit – “to talk about what we were doing with the summits, what our strategy is, what

¹⁴ The event is broadcast live around the world, mobilising a team of 50 people to ensure production. The cost of this production has risen in 24 years from CHF 200,000 to CHF 1.5 million (see Ats, 23 mars 2019).

¹⁵ The reputation and professional success of FWT director since 1996 certainly played a role as well in convincing the commune.

¹⁶ The commune supports the event with CHF 500,000 per year (L'Echo magazine, 20.03.2021).

¹⁷ At the time of interview.

they want for tourism” (Interview 26.03.2019). Notably, she negotiated a lot with Verbier Promotion to propose for instance, among other things, an Art Package to the customers. “Yeah, I speak a lot with my organization, constantly with all local parties” (Interview 26.03.2019). Beyond showcasing yet another win-win partnership with the commune (which also supports financially the event), Art Summit brings to light the network of international relations of upper-class individuals around its female president:

It’s the networks of our founding members, who talk to other people in the art world in their own countries or when they travel. Like, yesterday I spoke to a Swedish founding member who was on her way from Barcelona to Art Basel Hongkong, and I am sure she will talk about the summit and ask people to come next year. (Interview 26.03.2019)

As in many other ski resorts, tourism in Verbier brought about an urbanization beyond the cities (Stock & Lucas, 2012) and it is nowadays a local economic center with a strong international and cosmopolitan flair that is famous beyond skiing. As developed elsewhere (Cretton et al., 2020; Friedli, 2020), Verbier also attracts pop starlets and royals, helping to make the resort an exclusive place, as is the case with the *Verbier Festival*¹⁸ and the *Verbier Art Summit*. Both these international events, featuring upper-class clientele, can be defined as cosmopolitan, in Hannerz’s sense of “an intellectual and esthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, and an ability to make one’s way into other cultures” (Hannerz 2006, p. 200). A cosmopolitan event made for cosmopolitan and local audiences, the Art Summit has the ambition to broaden minds, like the president expresses during her talks with us: “it’s really to broaden people’s minds and to open up new ideas” (Interview 26.03.2019).

Hannerz presciently proposed some useful distinctions between cosmopolitans “willing to engage with the Other”, locals, “representatives of more circumscribed territorial cultures”, and transnationals (1992, p. 252), frequent travellers (usually occupational) who share “structures of meaning carried by social networks” (1992, p. 248–9). Nevertheless, the oxymoron “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Werbner, 2006, p. 496) seems more appropriate to define the above situation in that it joins the notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment. For instance, before launching the Art Summit, the president was in touch with people linked to the art world, who also hold management positions in other museums across the globe (Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom, France). The founding members were a mix of Swiss, German, British, Dutch, Belgium, and French. “It was immediately international”, she said. These art lovers share together a connection with Verbier, as most of them own a secondary home in the resort. They surely have in common a capital, not only economic but also social and cultural (Bourdieu, 1984).

Mountain Hub and Fintech

Thirty-five at the time of interview, the creator of the Mountain Hub in Verbier is a Dutch citizen who first came to the resort in the mid-nineties to ski. He later “did a season” as a ski instructor in 2007, before deciding to settle there in 2012.

¹⁸ An international classical music event that takes place each summer since 1994.

The young entrepreneur particularly appreciates to be able to go to work on his mountain bike, to go out for a short run in the mountains at noon in the summer or to ski for a few hours in the morning in the winter. His lifestyle embodies a new way of considering daily life: alternating, or even merging, leisure time and work time (Cretton et al. 2020). He told us:

The reason why I fell in love with Verbier is that there is an international vibe, an international community (...) And I love to be in nature. (small pause). I'm a workaholic. I always think about how to do something or how to create something out of nothing or develop. I love branding, that's most of my work career. I'm working in branding and marketing consultancy. (Interview 29.05.2018)

His co-working space not only offers a place to work, but also support services to start-ups, established businesses and individuals:

- I have different sectors that my clients are involved in. Some sectors are very popular these days. My clients would like to meet others. Where we talk about investments, startups, we talk about fintech [financial technology], cryptocurrencies...
- Mmh mmh...
- Cryptocurrencies... these topics, for example, are very fashionable these days and I even see people here asking: "Ah, is there anyone in fintech?" (Interview 29.5.2018)

Mountain Hub's creator shares with Art Summit's president and Xtreme's founder a cosmopolitan network and capital. The ability to be mobile or to be in a mobile environment (e.g. working in a shared space) can be understood as a social capital (Kaufmann et al., 2012), also described as "motility" (Kaufmann et al., 2004) or "cosmobility capital" (Salazar, 2011). It can also be seen as an "identity marker" for people who are part of so-called creative environments (see Friedli, 2020) and value criteria such as flexibility, mobility and performance: in short, key values of neoliberalism, according to Luc Boltanski (2006; see also Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). The Mountain Hub embodies the matching of various interests, life goals and subjectivities, including those of entrepreneurs from outside and those of locals. As its director told us:

By living here, I discovered that there is a very good mix of interests as well by the local people, if you integrate well. The local people are interested to get input from outside (...) This town is full of different cultures which is amazing. The vibe is very nice in town. (Interview 29.5.2018)

The idea of "rooted cosmopolitanism" (Appiah, 1998) seems to be relevant, to mean the cosmopolitanism that begins from involvement in morally and emotionally significant communities while embracing notions of open-mindedness to the world, the transcendence of local or ethnic difference and the moral responsibility for and incorporation of the other (see Werbner, 2006). Above all, it looks like transnational or cosmopolitan capital may stimulate "new subjectivities", or a kind of "diasporic consciousness" marked by multiple (or partial) identifications. As Thorpe (2017) showed for many of the snow sport migrants she interviewed, they believed themselves to have become "global citizens" as a result of their travels.

What emerged from our interviews is that Verbier is often defined as “a big family”, whether by the Xtreme team, including organizers and riders (“We all know each other, we’re all used to working together and it’s always a very good atmosphere”¹⁹), or by the Art Summit network (“They are all very big art collectors, they are now super pleased that they’ve met. They’re bringing their friends to the summit”) (Interview 26.03.2019), or even by Mountain Hub (“the international vibes and community”). This specific atmosphere is examined in the following section.

Network Capital and Fun

The international acquaintances, friendliness or cool attitude that most of our interlocutors feel in Verbier reveal a spot that is attractive to people who have accumulated (here and there) a certain amount of “networks capital” (Larsen et al., 2006). That is 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 & Urry, 2008, p. 93).

Like Thorpe (2017) has shown with her studies on snow sport cultures, especially snowboard, transnational snow sport migration helps in producing transnational identities, a sense of belonging to the world, or global citizenship which can result in an attachment and sense of belonging to several places, at various degrees. As early depicted by Hummon (1992), one’s sense of place can be influenced “by the frequency of mobility, the conditions of mobility (voluntary and constrained moves), the timing of mobility in terms of life stages (e.g. retirement), and the patterns of mobility (e.g. homecoming)” (p. 276). Whether they are regular tourists, temporary residents, multi-residents, young or old, male or female, one can say that for Verbier lovers, the area “plays a pivotal role in constructing transnational identities” as their “total attachment to a single place loosens, so dividing their attention and presence between two places or more” (Duncan, 2012; Hannerz, 2002; Jackson et al., 2004). This is, at least, the case for a Dutch family we met during our fieldwork, who moved to Verbier in 2019. The father has kept his job in the financial sector in London, spending four days of the week in the British capital and three days in Verbier, where his wife and their three children live. We also met a British-Italian financier who spent his childhood between Italy, Switzerland, Monaco and England. As an international wealth broker, he has lived in London, Stockholm, Oslo, New York, and Tokyo. On several occasions, he has practiced multi-residence, alternating for twelve years between London and Verbier before moving to Munich, while continuing to visit Verbier (once or twice a month by car from Munich), London and Malta, which has become his new place of residence since the beginning of 2018.

Cosmopolitan atmosphere

Network capital is not the specificity of an upper social class, it rather cuts across various groups of people, from very rich second home owners to penniless backpackers and seasonal workers. Indeed, the kind of cosmopolitan atmosphere found in Verbier is also something attractive for the ordinary local people, especially

¹⁹ Claude-Alain Gaillard, guide in charge of the security of the Xtreme for 20 years interviewed by Fageot, 2020.

the youths. Laure, a 27 year-old Valais native²⁰, who lives in the plain and worked for a while at the *Verbier Festival* before starting to skiing in the resort, puts it in the following terms. She loves spending time in the resort area mainly for its “magic”:

It's the fun, raid, freedom, cool side of the mountain, the sporting aspect and then there's a little bit of the artistic side which develops because there are the musicians who are there. (Interview 13.11.2018)

Laure has been going up to Verbier for 6 or 7 years in winter. When she goes, she goes skiing for a while during the day and stays for the after-ski “because it's nice”. She stays up every time she can “and then it's nice because you go up with your stuff and you know it's going to be a little week-end break.” (Interview 13.11.2018). The girl shares a room in a chalet that she describes as “a dream chalet, one of the last ones left like this, all old, all small and it's the little chalet of paradise, there are lots of freeriders in it.” (Interview 13.11.2018). Unlike art collectors and wealthy second homeowners, Laure does not belong to an upper economic class. She does, however, have her own network of international riders and locals who share together transnational values and ideals, a taste for fun, risky ride, meetings, and parties²¹.

World tour and exporting models

Groups of skiers and riders, art collectors and money makers in Verbier all relate in some way to the techno and New Age subcultures studied by D'Andrea (2006). Though not necessarily because they live on the margins of the system (as evidenced by the businessmen!) but rather because they evolve within the framework of circuits very specific to their own groups of interests. New York or London, for business and art; or Hakuba in Japan, Kicking Horse in Canada, Arcalis in Andorre²² or Fieberbrunn in Austria, for the FWT's events and riders.

The networks of freeriders, contemporary art enthusiasts and creative entrepreneurs found in Verbier are also akin to the climbers captured in ethnographic clarity by Rickly (2014, 2017) in the US: majority male, enthusiastic and passionate, who are used to meeting up with peers to socialize and mingle in specific spots across the world. They all produce and nurture feelings of belonging to certain places they frequent (more or less assiduously, depending on the season). They similarly develop social relationships and friendships with other mates whom they meet up with at events, festivals and other circumstances. They bring back ideas, styles and trends, as shown by the Xtreme founder being inspired by surfing when he launched the freeride event. Notably, he also drew inspiration from elsewhere for another of his events: for the E-Bike festival, he was inspired by the Whistler model and the success of cycling in general in this Canadian four-season resort, located in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia (Mari, 2019).

²⁰ At the time of interview.

²¹ For an analysis the hedonistic social interactions and lifestyles at the core of the snowboarding culture, see Thorpe (2012a).

²² Replaced by Baqueira-Beret for the FWT 2022.

Connected places: Whistler and Verbier

The similarity between Verbier's E-Bike event and the Canadian model of Whistler has been documented: it is a question of imposing the biking sport in summer as the equivalent of skiing in winter (Mari, 2019, p. 53). At a managerial level, this can be seen as an innovation model of "exporting a successful example" (Maret, 2019, quoted in Mari, 2019, p. 53). Very similar to Verbier's beginning, Whistler's initial development (in the late 1960s and early 1970s) "was fuelled primarily by its ability to meet the demands of skiers seeking extraordinary mountain terrain and outstanding snow conditions" (Moore et al., 2006, p. 136). Since then, and increasingly rapidly since 1980, it has gradually been transformed into a complex resort town that became, much like Verbier, a lifestyle community for a growing number of amenity migrants (Moore et al., 2006, p. 137). Verbier's connections to Whistler – and other renowned spots located in mountain area particularly suitable for high level off-piste skiing/snowboarding²³ – are maintained and reinforced by the individuals who frequent such circuits (in D'Andrea's sense) of the ski places to be. A common knowledge of these spots helps to develop shared experiences, subjectivities and friendships between individuals that go beyond physical locations. For example, we talked to a contemporary female artist and former snowboarder, who has lived in Verbier since 1998. She recalls that while she was doing a season in Whistler years ago, she was sharing a room with the father of one of her son's friends (who now lives in Verbier as well). Similarly to D'Andrea's neo-nomad circuits from Ibiza to Byron Bay through Goa, or Rickly's climbers mountain tour, from Hueco (Texas) to the Red River Gorge (Kentucky) and Yosemite (California), the various routes that pass through Verbier help to shape the special atmosphere that makes groups of people recognise themselves in their shared values and experiences from elsewhere. Like this 65 year-old²⁴ Italian-British former manager and multi-resident who lives in Verbier puts it: "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". (Interview 15.05.18)

Attracting clients to the "infinite playground"²⁵

To carry out its mission to attract various profiles in the resort region, Verbier Promotion has identified five visitors' customers profiles²⁶, with their associated consumption habits, events and ambassadors (Broch, 2019, p. 52). Interestingly, one of them, the "Verbier adventure" profile is defined as looking "for emotion in the activities. He/she comes with friends for adrenaline or with his/her spouse to share moments of pure emotion while escaping the tourists. He/she mainly practices freeride skiing, heli-skiing, paragliding, ice climbing and snow-shoeing" (Broch, 2019, p. 51). The ambassadors for this customer profile are two Xtreme champions (Géraldine Fasnacht and Xavier de Le Rue), who commit to talking about Verbier whenever they are abroad. Not surprisingly, the event that might interest this

²³ On the specific conditions of the natural environment in Whistler, see Hayes (2001, p. 20-48).

²⁴ At the time of interview.

²⁵ Verbier Promotion's communication strategy 2019-2020, which is still in force in 2022 to sell the VIP pass (Verbier Infinite Playground pass). See <https://www.verbier.ch/ete/inside/vip-pass/>

²⁶ "Verbier sport", "Verbier adventure", "Trendy", "Authentic", "VIP" (see Broch, 2019, p. 52).

adventure profile is the Xtreme, just as the Art Summit is supposed to attract the VIP visitor customer profile.

This promotional strategy is edifyingly embodied in the words of this frequent visitor to Verbier, a multilocal US freelancer whose Belgian partner's family owns a secondary residence since several generations in the place, who expressed during our interview:

At the Art Summit, you know, we were founding members of it, we were talking about the kind of people that Verbier attracts and I said to them: it's risk takers. It's people who take risks in business, and who take risks skiing and they take risks paragliding and mountainbiking and take risks hiking and... They are not interested in like being formal. They are interested in sport and the mountains, you know, and in endurance and in competition and in showing everybody, that's... and in collecting art as well, they are risk taking in any aspect of their lives. (Interview 16.07.2018)

As we saw, the “natural” wealth of the site – climate, extent and location of the plateau and ski runs, even the fascinating and mythical North Face of the Bec des Rosses – and friendly cosmopolitan atmosphere and vibes are not false. On their own, however, they are not enough to attract Verbier's consumers and lovers, whether they be tourists, snowboarders, freeriders, businessmen and businesswomen, art collectors, multi-residents, very rich or less rich. To sell Verbier internationally as a marketing product *and* as a symbolic place, it is still necessary to maintain and renew the real structural framework set up for this purpose, by appealing to imagination. This is needed to promote the resort and to seek out new clientele. For instance, since the 2010s, Promotion Verbier focuses on the Chinese market (Paillard, 2015), just as the Verbier Development Society had focused on the English market in the mid-seventies. This Verbier local resident and experienced real estate agent remembers:

It was a bit fashionable to go to Holland. I went there in 1975 and I saw that there were many Swiss people but we were drowned in the mass. So I thought about it, and I said to myself: we have to go to England, they are opening a ski show in London. As I already had contacts with the British, I set up a shop there. I was the only Swiss. I was like a funnel and it worked very well. We had 4 % of British nights, you can check, 4 % of British people and we went up to 18 % in no time, in four, five years. (Interview 03.12.2018)

It should be noted that the impressive structural scaffolding put in place by local promotional companies (Verbier Promotion, Verbier Development Society, municipality) to attract local and international customers does not prevent (on the contrary, it might explain why) Verbier lovers are being sincere when they say they adore the place for its specific worldwide and nice atmosphere. Like our Italian-British multi-local interlocutor expressed:

For me, one of the attractions of Verbier is that it doesn't matter your background, if you have a Royal title or you are a ski bum, living on 10 swiss francs a day, everybody gets on in this village, like no other ski resort in Switzerland. It's not like Zermatt, or Gstaad or St. Moritz, Klosters or wherever you go. This village everyone is welcome in. (Interview 15.05.2018)

Conclusion: When transnationalism shape localness

As we saw, a certain taste for risk, understood in a broad sense, is one of the elements that has served as a driving force for the development of the resort of Verbier and this kind of liberal spirit now brings the locals and the people who frequent the resort closer together, beyond social or national barriers. Everything happens like this way of doing has been embraced by the populations that gravitate around the resort of Verbier as well as by the institutions in charge of its promotion.

The whole process of promoting Verbier internationally as an “infinite playground” is part of a wider socio-economic, political and historical context, where interests between insiders and outsiders are constantly negotiated through various win-win corporate strategies. This might provide a very specific atmosphere which can make one think of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Werbner, 2006) or “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Appiah, 1998).

The match between projects initiated by local or international entrepreneurs *and* the economic and tourism interests of the local community is part of Verbier’s specificity. It is embodied in the articulation of the site’s “natural” resources (sunshine, location, climate), the boldness of certain entrepreneurs, and the operating infrastructure put in place by the locals in collaboration (on some projects) with external contractors, with the aim of satisfying the common expectations of both. The risk-oriented practices that both insiders and newcomers spearhead appears to be a true force that drives the development of the resort. It also contributes to shaping a specific place identity, made of transnational and local subjectivities that come and go, sometimes clashing and at times matching.

The flow of ideas, projects and people circulates across the planet, from the ocean to the mountains, from surfing to skiing, from Canada to Switzerland, from metropolitan centers to Alpine villages. It takes over certain of the places that are ready to receive them, like Verbier, contributing to bringing together related subjectivities and individuals who share a common network capital. In some ways, Verbier lovers are similar. They share in common a passion for skiing, art or business, or they already know each other from having met in another en vogue spot. They recognize each other, whether they are sportpeople, art collectors or financial specialists, as all sharing both a certain taste for risk-taking and a genuine love for the place. This place, whose tourist potential was identified by the locals from the very beginning of the resort, has been consistently exploited ever since. But beyond all of this, the case of Verbier – as an international alpine tourism resort – shows that Alpine inhabitants, far from being docile or exclusively subordinate to outsiders and their views, know very well how to involve and take advantage of situations that concern their path and their future. In their own way.

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