

The Breath of the Mountain

The enchantment of the mountains in the post-Covid era

a project of Francesco Pierini
in collaboration with
Peakshunter Mountain Guides

"Is it possible to transform mountain regions whose economies rely on mass tourism with a new form of tourism that is more sustainable? Is this shift rational and economically viable? What are the potential advantages? What consequences can we foresee?"



The project: how the idea was born

In recent years, the predominance of the touristic idea over exploratory one has gradually led to an unsustainable approach towards the mountains and the alpine environment: economics interests have prevailed over the idea of approaching the mountain to discover spaces and traditions of the highlands, and overshadowed the most profound and true values of the mountain.

The current historical moment marks an important phase of rediscovery of the highlands; the need to move away from mass tourism, no longer sustainable, provided an unprecedented opportunity for more thoughtful, quality tourism.

The project was born from the idea of documenting how the mountain is returning to its origins as a *"mind-freeing space"* and no longer a crowded destination for mass tourism, thanks to disciplines such as ski mountaineering and ski-touring. As a result of the health restrictions, we are witnessing a new interest in activities gradually abandoned after the boom of the ski lifts: today these disciplines renew their original meaning, and a newfound dimension of the mountain spaces, including the need to respect times and prerogatives that these spaces demand, in exchange of priceless opportunities for fun and well-being.

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Technical and logistical support by Peakshunter Mountain Guides

Clothing and equipment by Ferrino Outdoor

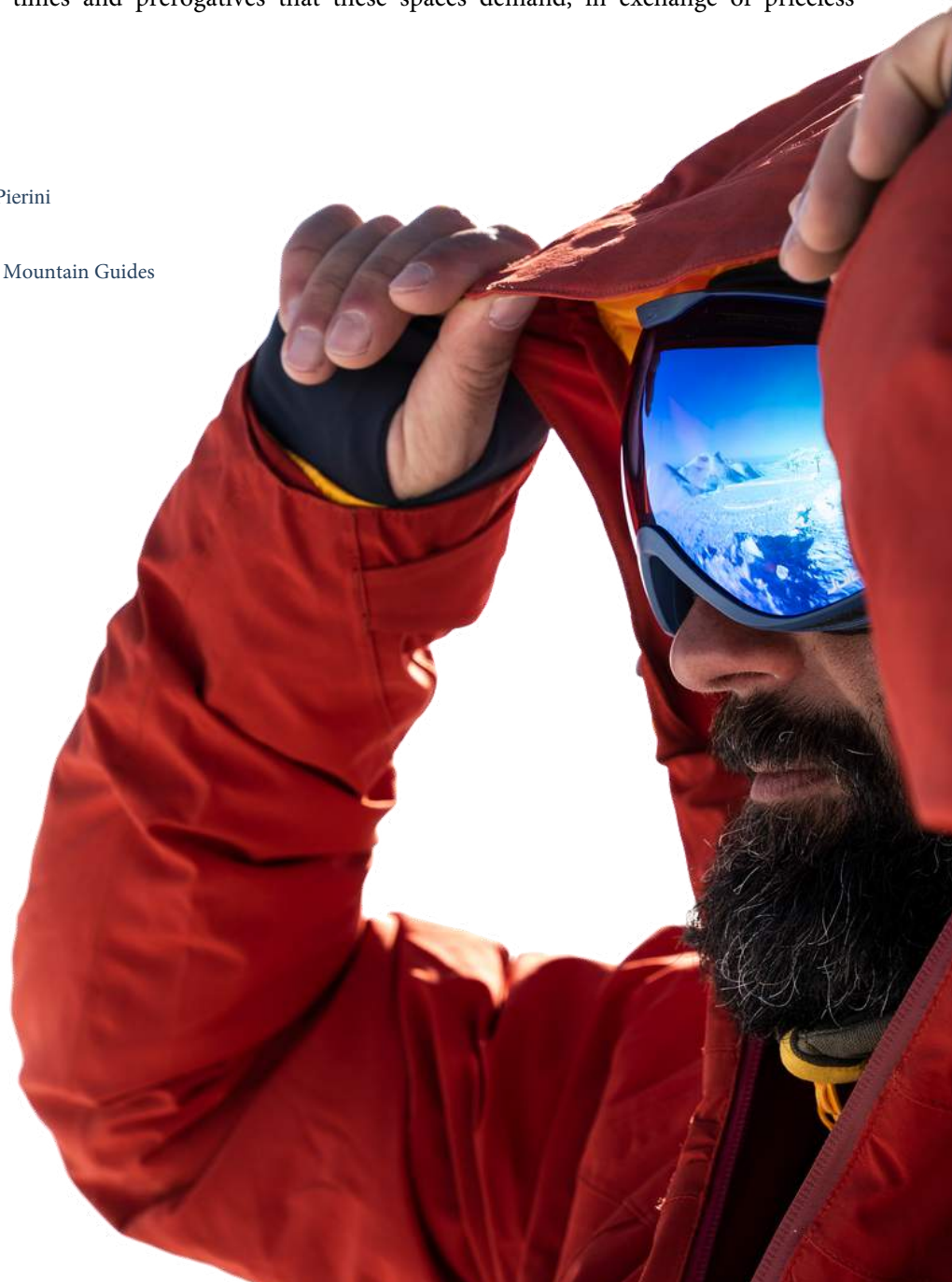
Translation from Italian text by Paolo Peries

THE PROJECT

The project was born from the collaboration between Francesco Pierini, a photographer specialized in outdoor shooting and Peakshunter Mountain Guides, certified professionals in activities, tours and trekking for mountain enthusiasts.

THE ORIGINAL IDEA

We started from the idea is to tell by significant picks an itinerant journey and document the recent return of the mountain environment to a space of freedom and exploration, also thanks to disciplines such as ski mountaineering.





Why ski mountaineering?

Ski mountaineering, of all the high-altitude non-competitive disciplines, is perhaps the one that best interprets the concepts of freedom and respect for the environment.

No man-made motor infrastructure, no environmental impact, and no crowds. Just the mountain to be discovered at walking pace, respecting the time of nature, reaching the top with hard work in order to enjoy the boundless views of the valley leaving free space for imagination and inspiration. As far as the eye can go, beyond the thin line of the horizon. Taking a step back in history, there are those who would say "*necessity sharpens intellect*": ski mountaineering is born as a way of travel during the winter season and it was precisely this need that moved the precursors of this discipline in their first experiments. of ascent and descent techniques, equipment and materials, very different from those available to enthusiasts today.

Ski mountaineering, in its most authentic essence, embodies the spirit of exploration and discovery that man finds in direct contact with the landscape and nature, far away from his comfort zone, habits and "urban" dimension.

This is why ski mountaineering will be the focus of this journey, the thread of this emotional story, the authentic dimension wherein you explore your physical and mental resilience to efforts and challenges.



Mountain communities: traditions and changes

In order to understand the changes in our lives in the mountains today requires a different approach, due to of the necessary adaptations that the pandemic has introduced. It can be useful and particularly enlightening to analyze the role of the mountain community in the period before the post-Covid world. The mountains, and in general the Alpine territories, have always been a unique space, a sort of refuge from stress and from the frenetic pace of urban life, a refreshment for body and mind, a destination for escape and physical and spiritual regeneration. The mountain today is an increasingly precious and sought-after environment precisely by virtue of these qualities, especially after this period of great instability and general disorientation that has led to a re-evaluation of the importance of open spaces and the value of nature. The mountain has often been spoken of as a "*mind-freeing space*", a place where harmony and human well-being are essential and indispensable aspects, albeit in a dimension of great rigor and necessary adaptation to natural factors.

At the end of the Second World War, many inhabitants of the "*highlands*", including artisans, farmers, breeders and custodians of the practices of traditions mountain culture, were "taken" to feed the workforce of the industries in large cities. With rare exceptions, this process has led to a decades-long dismantling of entire mountain communities, and the depopulation of numerous valley areas, often causing the disappearance of small socio-cultural realities and fragile local economies. Today, during the various lockdown periods, we have come to better understand their importance and uniqueness.

In many of the abandoned villages and more isolated rural areas, however, there are small traditional businesses and local craftsmen who have remained tied to their passion in order to conserve their local identity, memories and the legacy of the elderly: in recent years, thanks to these sporadic but resilient small family worlds, a network of micro-economies have rediscovered this dimension of "zero kilometer" local production, combining the value of certified excellence and "*homemade*" quality.

Effects of the pandemic

Something has suddenly changed: in the last 10 years, some territories have gradually witnessed a radical and unexpected turnaround, in a return of young people to rural life, to the hills and, finally, also to mountain landscapes.

Covid-19 represented a turning point in this escape from cities, further accelerating awareness of the limits of urban life, especially in emergency situations such as those experienced globally during the pandemic.

Returning to the mountain as a place to live and "breathe", a frontier with spaces and values that are proven to be decisive for health and the quality of existence, demonstrating to the new generations that they are much more than a place for recreation and entertainment. In many alpine and mountain contexts we are now witnessing a gradual repopulation: a process that does not involve holiday areas or exclusive locations frequented by tourism in second-homes or near ski resorts with five-stars reception services for weekend consumers in "hit and run" mode.



On the contrary, we are witnessing a return to areas long forgotten, more isolated and often more difficult to reach, for a more radical lifestyle choice, aimed at the idea of a medium-long term transfer, appreciating the proximity to an authentic and uncontaminated nature, sometimes even wild and re-evaluating the values of human and relationships, which places like these are able to transmit.

This gradual return to a more intimate and more aware human presence in the mountain has led to greater appreciation of the culture and spaces of the "highlands", to the rhythms and balances of the Alpine territory, and especially to the relationship with its inhabitants and local traditions.

The illusion of being able to "buy" the alpine experience through an online booking of an "all-mountain" package comes face to face with the impediments to mass tourism imposed by the restrictions and severe limitations that the global pandemic has imposed, on everyone. Economic availability is no longer synonymous with guarantee of access, indeed often the determining factor is the ability to give up certain comforts and adapt to the mountain environment, very different, in many aspects, from the city life.



The perception of mountain refuge operators

Last year in June, the results of an interesting study entitled "Mountain tourism in time of COVID-19: The perception of the managers of the Alpine huts" were published. The research by Riccardo Beltramo and Stefano Duglio, Professors at the University of Turin, in the NatRisk Interdepartmental Center (Research Center on Natural Risks in the Mountain and Hill Environment), aimed at collecting the opinions of operators in the alpine hospitality sector and particularly of alpine huts managers after the first phase of Covid and the experience of pandemic-related lockdown.

The study¹, conducted on about 600 managers from all over the Alps, reported major changes in modalities of advertisement and booking, and in the kind of guests. Many operators first discovered the importance of the internet and social media in promoting hospitality and advertising specific activities; tourists were mostly hikers and trekkers, followed by families and organised groups, mountaineers and a growing number of mountain bikers. Less numerous were climbers more accustomed to day-trips or independent outdoor sleeping arrangements, not in need of sheltering. Additionally, many responders reported serious concerns about ongoing climate changes affecting the mountains as well as the whole planet.



¹ Source: Riccardo Beltramo and Stefano Duglio, "Il turismo in montagna in tempo di CoViD-19. La percezione dei gestori dei rifugi delle Alpi": research by the NatRisk Interdepartmental Center - Research Center on Natural Risks in the Mountain and Hill Environment of the University of Turin - June 2020

Over 50% of operators reported a substantial increase in costs driven by the need for safety compliance in relation to the pandemic, including expenses for modifications of common areas to allow for social distancing, increased disinfection of communal spaces, equipment and tools, and purchase of PPI and personal disinfectants (with an estimated 20% to 40% increments from the previous year).





Refuge managers are 'de facto' mountain entrepreneurs working in a very demanding business sector. Their work not only requires multiple skills, and different knowledge and expertise, but also occurs in an extremely challenging environment where multiple factors need to be accounted for (water and energy resources, risk of avalanches and landslides, difficulties re-stocking supplies, accessibility...).

Therefore, these managers are generally very aware of the need for a new approach to the tourism industry, about the need for clear rules about access and use of natural areas: the mountains must be savored, not drained or destroyed to serve large crowds of users with misplaced expectations. The mountains should not be abused and changed, cannot be tamed and transformed in the name of profits and seasonal trends. Refuge managers are generally prone to collaborate or support initiatives promoting sustainable tourism; they voice the importance of environmental issues against large structural interventions impacting morphology and mountain environments.

Back to the natural beauty of the Mountain to safeguard and restore its wilderness; where humans are guests, only welcomed if they accept to be part of a complex ecosystem, of a harsh habitat ruled by natural elements. A wilderness granting strong emotions but demanding respect, knowledge and awareness of the limits imposed by the mountains itself, fragile and strong, beautiful and rough, harsh and luxuriant, welcoming and solitary. A breathtaking place, where humans are lost in the overwhelming space and in the blinding blue of the sky above the peaks.



Mountain tourism: views for the future

We asked ourselves... is it possible to transform mountain areas whose economy is based on mass tourism with a more sustainable tourism? Would this shift of approach be a rational and economically viable choice? What advantages could follow? What consequences can we foresee?

Three factors are affecting tourism in the mountains: the winter season, available accommodations, and foreign tourists, generally wealthier and prone to higher expenses. The winter season is the driving force from an economic standpoint.

‘If the winter brings an added value equal to 100, the summer added value is on average one half. Looking at the type of accommodations, hotels generate three times the economic return compared to B&Bs, and five times that of campsites; hotels offer additional services for a higher cost increasing the added value of tourists for the territory. [...] If we think in terms of added value of each tourist, we don't need to focus on quantity, so it become possible to focus on sustainability.’²

Having understood this premise, it is clear how important it is to address the issue in terms of “quality” and overcome the concept of “consumerism” in tourism in order to embrace a new perspective more centered on issues of quality and sustainability.

² Source Diego Cason, ISTAT Datawarehouse e uffici statistica regionali e provinciali, May 2020



Unfortunately, the mountain has recently experienced a real attack by “*instagrammers*” and “*social influencers*”; whose approach is rarely aimed at stimulating knowledge and awareness in their potential users, but rather merely focused on the number of likes collected. A purely aesthetic and commercial approach likely engages tourists more interested in the “summit selfie” than in the experience lived to reach the destination. A perception of the mountain as a place to conquer, the summit as a bucket-list collection and nature only as poorly-focused background.

As a result of the greater attraction of the mountain in the post-Covid era, mountain tourism will have to choose who to target and whether or not to invest in structured services, converting existing structures for new needs. It is time to decide whether to trigger a process that can generate more added value for the territory while at the same time guarantee greater protection for the environment and the entire eco-system. Likely this could be achieved by investing in small and medium-sized enterprises, increasing the number of people who want to spend longer periods in the mountains or even work there, utilizing smart-working formats and opportunities, creating not only tourism-oriented companies, but also new know-how, because the future must be in quality and sustainability.

In regard to smart-working, we have witnessed the use of “vacation-homes”, in their new post-pandemic function of “work-homes”, ideal places for remote work. Also, a new use of “*high-altitude space*” inside shelters or ancillary spaces of the ski lifts as possible co-working and smart-working stations with offices overlooking exclusive panoramas (such as Mont Blanc glacier).

Therefore, it is time to propose a new idea for the mountains, in which outdoor activities, such as ski mountaineering, trekking, nordic walking and mountain biking, can feed new desires for exploration and bring back a more conscious and sustainable tourism to areas badly hit by the economic consequences of continuous lockdown.





More and more mountain enthusiasts are inspired by different hopes and expectations, no longer focused on factors such as comfort and easy accessibility, but instead open to more authentic and stimulating experiences. They want to move beyond the comfort-zone that we are accustomed to – with infrastructures and large numbers – and chase their deeper needs such as freedom and the desire for adventure and exploration.

The mountain is synonymous with silence, a peaceful place where if you meet others on the path or in the woods, socialize with empathy, discover the joy of sharing, and initiate a mutual learning through the value of dialogue. These are the values that we are looking for, the values that the mountains are teaching us to rediscover and appreciate. The beneficial effects that walking in open and uncontaminated spaces can offer: a natural medicine against stress and depression, increase immune defenses, and physical well-being.

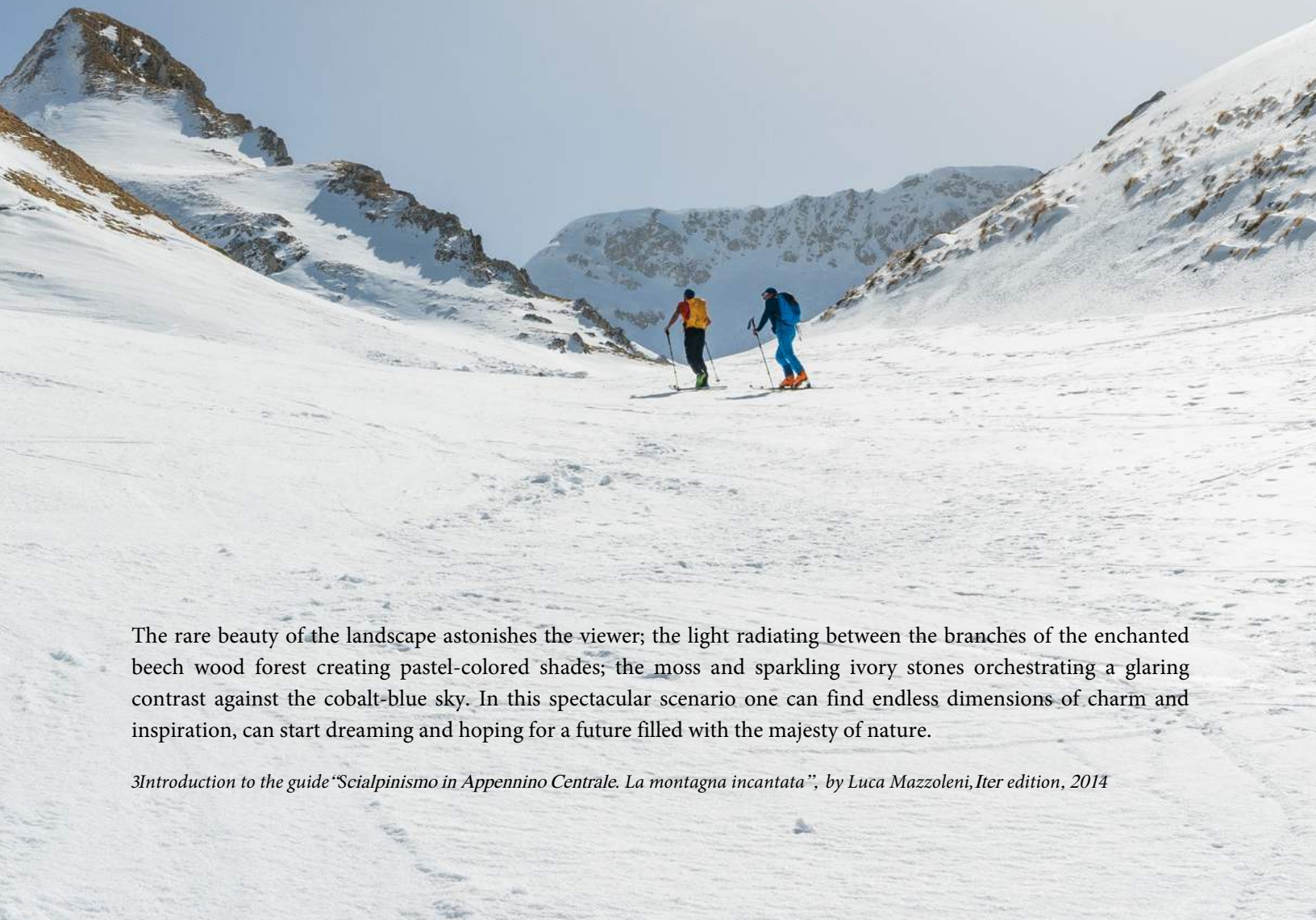


From project to experience: An idea becomes reality

The traveling itinerary through the mountains of Gran Sasso originated from the idea of rediscovering the most authentic and solitary skiing experience, and has proven to be a multi-dimensional journey in a severe, fascinating, and technically challenging route.

The mountain's treacherous and never trivial paths nourished the desire of exploration that was the heart of the project; the challenge intensified every perception, and deepened the feeling of overcoming one's limits. It's a truly unique mountain environment, where we rediscover, through the traveling journey, the desire to explore places with skis on our feet; to go back to the wildest and truest elements of nature, away from the spiritual and emotional loss that the Covid pandemic has brought to many people's lives, away from the fears and insecurities that this pandemic has left in all of us. The choice of a tough but spectacular mountain, the highest and most well-known of the entire Appennino, was mandatory.

*“[Gran Sasso] is the true reference point, the center of gravity for everyone in the Appennino region of mountaineering, skiing, climbing, and even for the most casual hiker.”*³: The mountain's uniqueness fascinates us; it does not look like the Alps, nor does it resemble the Dolomites, with the surprising steepness of its slopes, and the immense size of its valleys, stretching out as far as the eye can see.



The rare beauty of the landscape astonishes the viewer; the light radiating between the branches of the enchanted beech wood forest creating pastel-colored shades; the moss and sparkling ivory stones orchestrating a glaring contrast against the cobalt-blue sky. In this spectacular scenario one can find endless dimensions of charm and inspiration, can start dreaming and hoping for a future filled with the majesty of nature.

3Introduction to the guide "Scialpinismo in Appennino Centrale. La montagna incantata", by Luca Mazzoleni, Iter edition, 2014



The changes taking place: the voices of refuge managers

After this experience, we wanted to gather contributions from the Alpine and Mountain world regarding issues addressed by this project as a live account of mountains professionals deeply affected by the changes of this time. We believe that these very voices can truly, without filters, provide hope for the necessary process of transformation towards future improvement. A sustainable approach to mountain activities must be outlined together with plans for promoting this new approach and implementing necessary changes. These plans must be shared with those mountain enthusiasts who really understand the mountain and respect its rules, in open spaces as well as in the structures that make them accessible. From the Gran Sasso we went back along the Appennines to the Valle d'Aosta region, where we met with some well-known operators and owners of mountain refuges, who generously contributed their thoughts.

Corinne Favre, owner of the refuge Quintino Sella, in the Monte Rosa massif, close to the winter resorts of Champoluc - Val d'Ayas. The refuge serves as a base for mountain climbing at the peaks of Castore and Lyskamm; it lies about three hours away from the Champoluc/Gressoney ski resorts, and it can be reached using non-tourist routes of medium difficulty. Corinne is also the main manager in Campo Base hut, a mainly winter resort close to Champoluc ski resorts.

"As for Quintino Sella, the changes needed for COVID infection prevention have been in addition to the ones for the renovation of the shelter. Overall, we believe we have improved the way we work and the comfort of our customers by halving the capacity of the shelter. This did not heavily affect the overall attendance because bookings have been distributed over every day of the week (and not just over the usual long-weekends). It is hard to reassure customers that we are strictly compliant with sanitation and social distancing. Sometimes it is a challenge to convince foreign customers to comply with rules such as face-masking (mostly last summer, when many countries were still unaware of the Covid-related risks). We believe that our relationship with customers has improved: we see a greater willingness to accept some rules for everyone's good. We have introduced changes in sanitation and staff coverage that we plan to carry on after the pandemic is over, because they have discovered a more sustainable way to work with our customers. All in all, the shocking experience has brought upon some positive changes and we are confident that the next summer season will be here soon! Let's keep our fingers crossed!"

Armando Chanoine and Mauro Opezzo, managers of Turin and Monzino shelters on the Italian side of Mont Blanc, very well-known refuges for international visitors and for mountaineering enthusiasts since "old school" great times.

"The overall perception, despite social distancing and reduction in seat numbers, is that many people are accessing the mountains and practicing outdoor sports to pursue "freedom" in the high-lands. Monzino has always been a sanctuary for mountaineers, but last summer saw an exponential increase in tourism. Branches and trekkers, usually oriented towards quieter destinations, have climbed up just to eat some polenta or enjoy the immense panorama, challenging themselves to the climb or relying on a professional guide. The mountaineers, especially Italians, regular visitors from the area and perhaps experiencing economic challenges, have opted for longer trips to seek the higher-altitude without the usual stop in the refuge for a drink or a meal before carrying on with their journey."

Tiziana Berthod, owner of the *Federico Chabod* refuge in the National Park of Gran Paradiso, starting point for the mountain climb to the only Italian peak among the 4000 Alps peaks, a classic destination for tourists, hikers, and families.

"It is undeniable that the situation created by the COVID epidemic forced us to accept and implement profound changes in our day-to-day work, with the understanding that large tourist numbers are likely the mirror of a past that will never return. The restrictions posed by distancing protocols, rigorously implemented last summer, determined a 60% user decline compared to previous years. Despite our hard work over the summer months, we were barely able to cover our costs, with some help from a decrease in rental expenses. The need for recurring cleaning of all areas, and the increased sanitation measures had a major impact both in terms of cost and for staff working hours. But the passion for our work is pushing us to develop new ideas and motivations: the refuge remains a destination for hikers and families, as well as climbers and trekkers, both Italian and foreign. We hope that the mountain will continue attract as a place of escape, so that we can continue to be a point of reference and to provide refreshment and hospitality to many. We look forward with hope and confidence for the future."

These interviews confirmed perceptions and feelings collected during our trip to the Gran Sasso and inspired the reflections we wanted to share with this project: on the one hand, the persuasion that the mountain must return to be a place of freedom and exploration, from the another the awareness that something has definitely changed, but not necessarily for the worse. Maybe the isolation experience we all lived during the last year could be an opportunity to re-appreciate the authentic values that nature and high lands have always transmitted to us.



Closing remarks

On our way back from our journey to the Appennines, the image of the still ski-lifts resorts in Campo Imperatore and Prati di Tivo sparked some considerations about the future of traditional ski tourism activities, following this past winter when ski resorts have been largely replaced by disciplines such as ski mountaineering . This transition is very clear to us, and it is confirmed by managers of major international brands, reporting increased sales of skis, equipment and clothing for activities not based on availability of ski lifts. In the mountain regions mostly affected by the lifts closure and by the forced isolation from travel bans between Regions of alpine skiing areas (such as, Valle d'Aosta - Monterosa, Cervinia, Courmayeur areas - Lombardia or Trentino Alto Adige), ski enthusiasts turned to ski-mountaineering in order to keep in contact with the mountain and the snow during this winter and spring. Some huts, although closed, have become destinations for daily itineraries, along climbing paths normally covered by lifts, the perfect places for a short stop to rest, changing clothes, get a warm drink or an energy bar. Refugees retain their original function as reference points for users, happy to find a reassuring destination. They represent places well known before the lockdown, they bring memories of a past time and perhaps slightly overcrowded time. Today mountain refugees offer, together with the landscapes that they guard, a new capacity for users eager for autonomy, solitary exploration, and open to new challenges with skis and skins on their feet.

Reaching a refuge after hours of hard work and big efforts: an extraordinary way to find yourself in a new dimension, to rediscover emotions and find new sensations, opportunities for a challenge to many, and of profound inspiration for a few.

A truly special way to find yourself and be reborn (perhaps) better than before.

Bibliography and sources

- Luca Mazzoleni, *"Scialpinismo in Appennino Centrale. La montagna incantata"*, Iter editor, 2014
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