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Hiking, Part 2

Heart of Whiteness

PARIS, France June, 2000

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

My friends were already removing the sealskins from beneath their skis when I reached them at the summit of the pass. It was the fifth day in a week-long trip in the French Alps, and my feet were killing me. I am not new to blisters, but it was the first time I had *bruised* blisters. Our guide, Jean-François Tripard, waved at me to come his way.

"Jean Benoît, I must show you something."

"Is it necessary?"

"How are your feet?"

"I was trying to forget them."

"You'll find this interesting. Something historical."

"I climbed this pass: *that* was history."

"No, I'm serious. Come."

I trudged toward him. Jean-François stood next to a sort of milestone carved into very brown granite. A blue *fleur-de-lis* was painted on one side of the stone, a white cross on the other. The number, 1823, meant the year, not the altitude. This marked the old border between France and the Duchy of Savoy. Nowadays both sides are French, but the fortunes of the area have shifted frequently, as proved by the number of abandoned French and Italian bunkers we had seen the previous couple of days.

A survey of how the French perceive their space and the world would be incomplete without a look at their borders. In the last year or so, I have had the opportunity to visit by hiking or skiing most French borders. Le Vosges, Alsace, Lorraine and the Black Forest make the German border. Le Jura makes the Swiss border. The Alps form the Swiss and Italian border. And the Pyrenees serve as the Spanish border.

Borders have always fascinated me. Maybe because I grew up near one. In Canada, where I come from, border is all there is. Most Canadians live on a 100-kilometer-wide band near the frontier, leaving the immensity behind to its loneliness. Maybe my interest in borders comes from what they mean: a line between the familiar and the unknown, for the sake of which so many horrors were perpetrated and so many great deeds have been accomplished. Real borders are just as fascinating as ancient ones, like that of France and Savoy.

The first such historical fossil I encountered was the one known as the Blue

A small hamlet near Briançon. The heights behind are what we climbed on the first day — for starters.

Line of the Vosges (see JBN-9). Last August, in the Vosges, I was hiking with a friend when I came across a gray granite stone, with an "F" marked on the west side, and a "D" on the east side. F for France, and D for Deutschland. There were stones every 100 steps or so. They were planted there when the Germans annexed Alsace and Lorraine in 1870 as a result of the Franco-Prussian war — the only one of those two countries' conflicts they kept between themselves. Two days later I happened to meet a sawmill operator who had just broken his blade on barbed wire and shrapnel buried inside a tree. The location of the border is not debated anymore, but so many people died for it over three wars that one cannot but be moved by the significance of stone posts nobody has bothered to remove since then. Borders are people, and they are history.

In North America, most borders are geometric conventions save for the Great Lakes and the Rio Grande, which makes up half the frontier with Mexico. The rest follow parallels and meridians. The lines dividing states and provinces are equally arbitrary. Yet borders do strange things. Even when it's only an imaginary line, people cook, speak, behave, vote and relate differently on each side. Borders do that.

In Western Europe, natural barriers make borders, and this has affected the world-view of all its people. Consider the British Isles. It is almost commonplace to relate the defiance of the British to Europe to their insularity. Yet all other great European countries are just as insular. France is typical: oceans and seas make three sides of the country. The other three sides are towering mountain ranges that essentially cut France from the outside — the exception being Belgium, although the plateau and the deep canyons of the Ardennes have long closed most of the Franco-Belgian border.

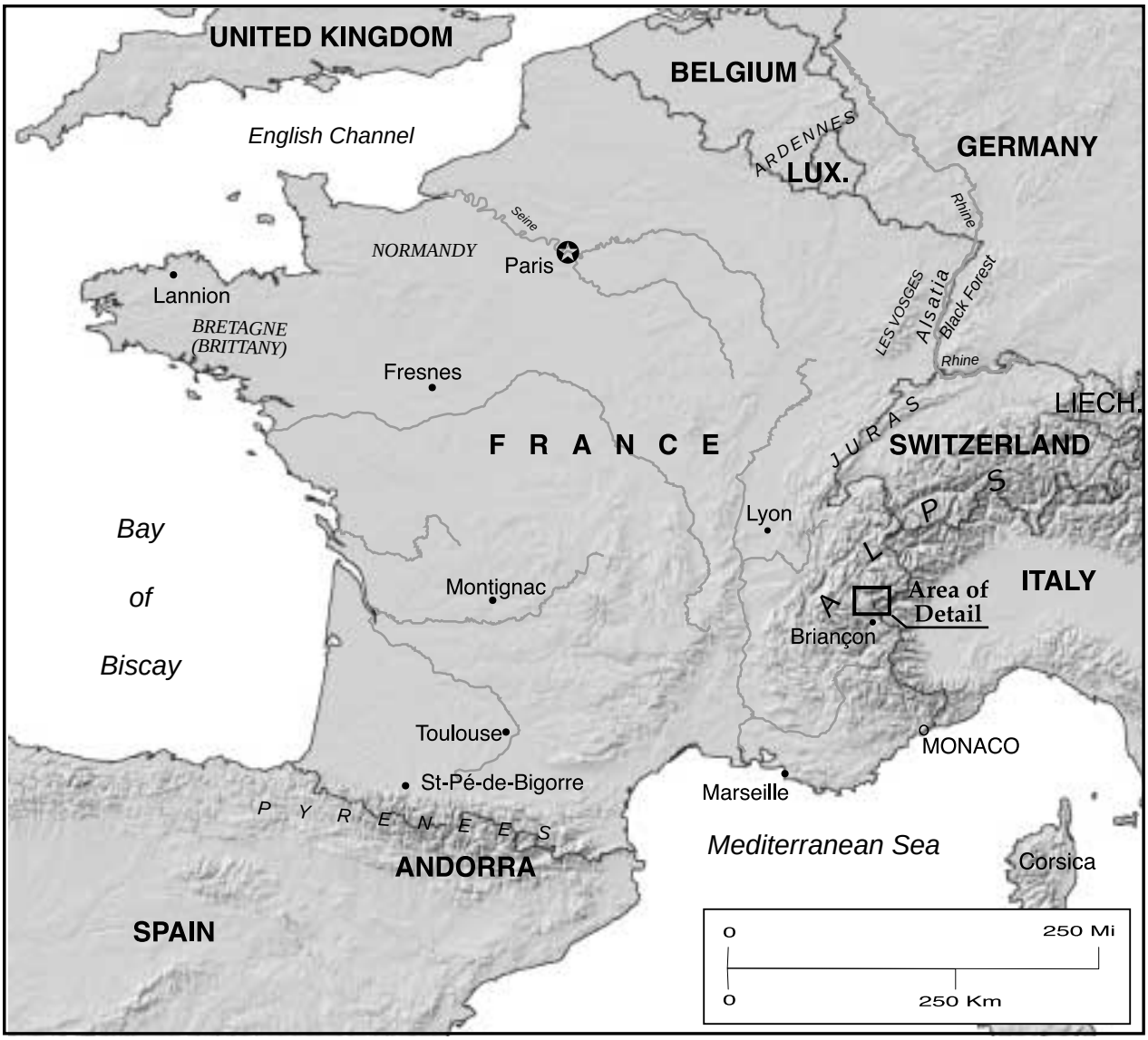
Natural barriers also make the frontiers of Germany, Spain and Italy. Some of these borders, like Savoy or the Basque country, have even become places in their own rights — buffers of strangeness that not only divide the familiar from the barbarous but are themselves wild. For a long time, getting past these obstacles was a fantastic task. Until the middle of this century, there were only three passes across the entire frontier between Spain and France. In Western Europe, borders provoke awe.[1]

So I just couldn't say no when a friend from the hiking club, Gilbert Granger, invited me to join him and three of his friends for a week-long, guided ski trek in the French Alps north of Briançon to places like Névache Pass, mount Thabor and *Vallée Étroite* (Narrow Valley) in March 2000. There are no ski centers where we were going. For a Canadian, this sort of environment is generally found in that gigantic nothingness called the Great White North, or in the Rockies — so remote and desolate that people prefer being dumped by helicopter, do their snowy thing and leave, since there are hardly any refuges. But the French don't think of helicopters because they can find pure awe right in between France, Italy and Switzerland — and you can get there by train.

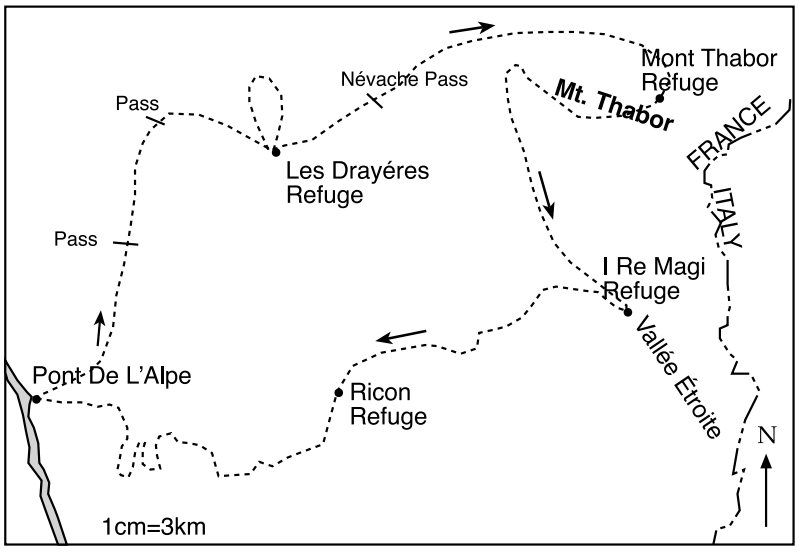
* * *

When the five of us arrived at our rendezvous point, Jean-François ("Jef") Tripard was waiting for us. Jean-François is a professional guide. Being a guide is a serious matter in France: to get the diploma and the professional card, candidates must take four years of training and courses at the school of professional high-mountain guides in Chamonix — where the first company of guides was created in 1823. For 15 years, Jef has worked as head guide for an outdoors operator called D'Allibert. For fear of becoming thick from working too much behind a desk, he has negotiated a few month of freedom each year to

[1] A note to French readers of this newsletters. There is no exact translation for the term *awe*, since it refers at once to a feeling of respect, fear and wonder toward the sublime or the sacred. Terms like "awesome" and "awful" are related, although the latter has come to mean "very disagreeable."



do some freelance guiding — for people like us.



Jef is a quiet man, as good guides should be, and tall, with a very tanned face. We shook hands and weighed each other's bags — something companions on a long ski-touring journey always do as a show of concern for one another, since an overloaded companion can cause delays, get exhausted or even get injured because of a pack that's too heavy. Although we were to sleep in well-equipped refuges along the way, each of us had to carry clothing, lunch food for a week, winter clothing and emergency gear up and down high passes in a 12-kilo backpack. Jef distributed the mandatory two shovels among our group and gave to each of us a miniature radio transmitter-receiver for the detection of avalanche victims. And off we went.

Little snow had fallen this winter, and we climbed the first 200 meters with our skis on our backs to get to the snow. This was where we put the skis under our feet. Ski mountaineering is half cross-country, half alpine. From a distance, the equipment looks like standard alpine skis and boots. The difference is that the binding has clamps that free the heel and allow a cross-country step — more comfortable for walking uphill. The technique has nothing to do with telemarking because, for

The alpine team: (left to right) Gilbert Granger, Jean-François (Jef) Tripard, Monique Roux, Hélène Rogier and Jean-Pierre Clément.

going downhill, the boot's heel is locked tight into the binding, as it would be for normal alpine skiing equipment. The problem is how to adhere to the snow. Centuries ago, one hardy Norwegian got the idea of tying sealskins beneath his skis. The millions of hairs bite into the snow and give good traction going up hill — better than fish scales. Nowadays the "sealskin" has given way to more practical adhesive velvet, but the result is the same and the name has stuck.

That first day would be a long haul: 1,200 meters of climb over two passes and seven kilometers of descent to the first refuge. Fortunately, the weather was perfect: not a cloud — *le Grand Beau*, as they call the big Blue. High above, a short column of ant-size skiers was crossing a field of boulders. Climbing in the shadow of the mountain, I could admire the size of the snowbanks in the lee of the rocks. During storms, the wind must blow with murderous power.

Fifteen minutes into the climb, I knew why Gilbert and his friends go ski-trekking each year with Jef. Not all guides are competent. Some become frustrated when they have to slow themselves down for clients who force them to do the easy stuff instead of challenging the outdoors as they dreamed of doing. At 46, Jef is the perfect guide: prudent, perceptive, encouraging, capable of pushing his clients without ever sounding condescending, insulting, or angry — and above all, knowing when to stop. I was the beginner of the group, the youngest and the only one Jef didn't know, so he kept a close watch on me at first. In particular, he insisted that I pace myself at a relatively slow rhythm. As I would soon discover when I found myself behind, there is no way to catch up with the others by moving faster. Each boot and ski weighs about four kilos, and the air is already thinner at 2,000 meters. Because starting a motion is more demanding than the actual motion, the only way to go faster in a sustainable way is to actually make a longer stride and keep it up.

As we passed the boulders and left the protective shadow of the mountain, the scenery became whiter and more savage — elemental. All was snow, and stone, and air — round, and hard, and aerial. I love winter more than summer and practice cross-country skiing extensively, but I had never seen the kind of texture and volume-effects such a mantle of snow can produce. It was as if, in the beginning, all was a white sheet on which shades of grey and blue were applied to make the land and the sky.

There would be few signs of humanity during the coming week: only tracks of skiers converging on refuges, abandoned shelters and bunkers near the border, and the occasional group of trekkers like us. Each pass opened a new perspective, but most of the time the scenery changed progressively as we made our way between towering needles of granite, piles of moraine and 50-meter-high snowbanks. This was my first contact with the Alps and my companions, who all live near Briançon, knew the area even better than our guide does — they could name most pointed summits. A couple of days later, when we reached the summit of Mount Thabor (3178 meters), we could see Mont Blanc (4807 meters).

The Alps looked like nothing I know, and it took me a while to understand the true Arctic nature of the place. A couple of days after our departure, as we skied down the *Vallée Étroite,* I realized I was seeing trees for the first time in days — it came as a shock. For me, this was a first. The upper Alps is an Arctic desert, but an Arctic desert in southeast France — not that far from Africa, when you come to think about it. The strangeness of the place became obvious on the fifth day when I noticed that the sky was yellow.

"Bizarre," I said. "What's that?"

"Probably dust in suspension," said Jef. "We get this

after a sand storm in North Africa."

This awe-inspiring scenery had one practical advantage: it made me forget my feet. Every hour or so we paused to drink and chew something. Lunch was just a snack with more consistence, with cheese, bread sausage, and cake — the alpine standard.

Such pauses were the best times to get acquainted with my companions. I already knew Gilbert, who had taken me to the Black Forest in January (see accompanying text), but it was the first time I'd met Monique, Hélène and Jean-Pierre. I would get closer in particular to Jef and Jean-Pierre, who were full of wit and anecdotes about the place.

During the very first pause, Jean-Pierre pointed to a peak yonder and a very long and steep snow slide, about 600 meters high, where he and two companions had a near-fatal climbing accident in 1958. It started when one of them fainted from the heat and fell, pulling down the other two who were all roped together. They rolled down the entire length of the steep slide, over 600 meters, without any possibility of stopping. Jean-Pierre hit bottom the least injured of the three — he only had a spike planted in his calf — and managed to get some help. One of the two other victims spent the better half of the year in the hospital. Jean-Pierre was out of the hospital eight days later, feeling well enough to retrieve their scattered equipment. From this anecdote, I learned that this lively and athletic man was exactly the age of my father, which made him old enough to serve in Algeria as a *chasseur alpin* (mountain infantryman) in 1958.

"I'm 61 and a half, actually," he said, stressing the *half.*

* * *

As we reached the top of the first pass, *le Grand Beau* was replaced by a sudden storm. The view disappeared instantly in a swirling white-out. The strong wind carried a mixture of snow and hail. We could hardly hold on to our jackets, mittens and toques as we put them on. We removed the sealskins from our skis and got ready to go down.

When they're alone, ski guides like to treat themselves to a straight downhill run in order to do the longest slalom possible, but this means only more climbing when there is another pass to cross. Instead, Jef took us on an almost perpendicular route for 2.5 kilometers in order to minimize the climb to the second pass. Downhill skiing with a big backpack is difficult, and I had trouble adjusting — especially since I hadn't done any alpine skiing at all for 18 years. In places the icy slope was a jolly 70 degrees, and the white-out hid the bottom of the *cirque* (bowl) we had to turn alongside. Jef impressed me with his uncanny talent for finding the passage that would take us as far as possible. My ski technique must have come back quickly, because I found myself alone on a spur with him, ahead of everyone else.

"Did you see the avalanche?" he asked as we waited for the others.

"An avalanche? Right then?"

"No, you would have heard. No this one fell some time ago. Look at it! How impressive!"

What impressed me was that he could make out any detail at all in the white-out. I even removed my sunglasses to see better, but there was nothing to see: just a white sheet of snow in a large *cirque*. But as we skied down, we came across a chaotic surface about 100 meters wide by nearly a kilometer long: this was where a family of four had perished a few months before.

To be sure, this is a hostile environment. Avalanche and snowstorm stories provide a main topic of conversation during meals and pauses. They are the main obsession of guides — aside from losing a ski or the collapse of a snow ledge — and the principal reason why we hire them. Guides are trained to detect signs of changing weather, and of potential avalanches. Jef is particularly good at it because he spent two years monitoring avalanches — as a conscientious objector refusing to do

From time to time, we would come across a horde of trekkers. Here our guide Jean-François in a summit conference on top of Névache pass.

his military service. In very snowy years, good guides know where and how to set off preventive avalanches simply by cutting the surface of a snow slide. On the third day, on top of Névache pass, Jef intentionally caused the collapse of a huge snow ledge just by slapping his ski at the right place.

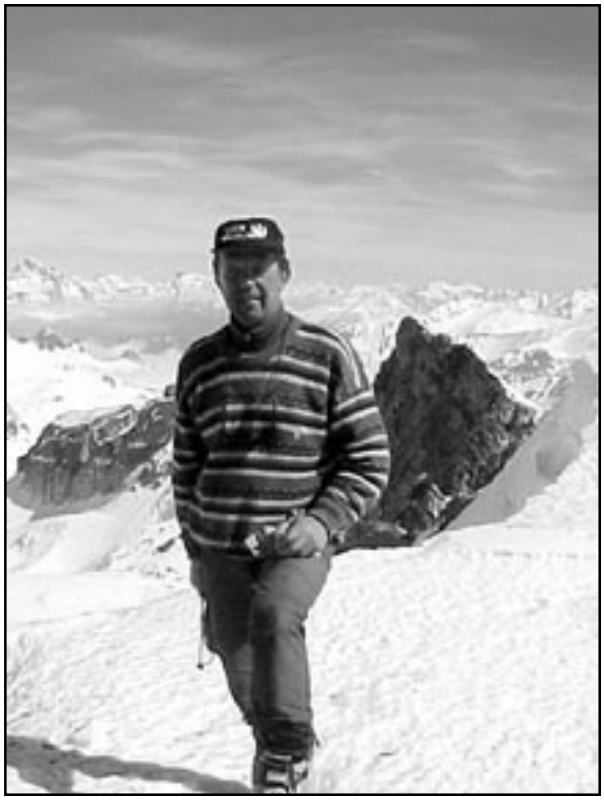
"Just to show you!" he yelled, as I watched the huge block of packed snow thunder down the slope.

The best way to prevent death by avalanche is to avoid such places entirely, but when you absolutely have to be in the Alps, the secret is to stay away from avalanche-prone spots and follow the guide's steps — unless you've happened upon a crazy guide. If an avalanche comes, the way out is to flee downhill and hope to be carried on top of the mass — that's the theory, and Jef actually did this once. When an avalanche area cannot be avoided, skiers are best to ski at a distance of 30 meters from one another. There's hardly a chance to find anyone under the snow unless the victim was carrying the safety radio transmitter-receiver against his or her chest. One of the straps of the radio is tied to a locking key. When the radio's key is locked — as it always should be when a skier is leaving a refuge — the device sends a beep every second. If one skier is buried under an avalanche, his companions remove their own radios, unlock the transmitter key and switch on the receiver. The radio can then receive signals from the victim's radio. The device's sensitivity can be adjusted from 60 meters to 20 centimeters to locate people beneath the snow.

In my opinion, people themselves are much more a risk than avalanches or storms, because they often overlook dangers, underestimate difficulties or start behaving badly out of exhaustion or bad judgment — one more reason to have a levelheaded guide. For instance, on the second day of our trip, during a blasting storm where we could barely see 20 meters in front of us, Hélène decided she had had enough and sat right where she was without telling anyone — a dangerous thing to do in such conditions. Jef was able to talk her into getting up, but the point was that she probably did not realize she was a risk to everyone, not only to herself — and neither did we, really. Exhaustion does that.

* * *

Alpine refuges are havens against storms, avalanches and tantrums. In Europe, there always seems to be a refuge at the right place. Most of these refuges are old farms or shepherd huts. Alpine clubs own most of them, and have enlarged and modernized them. The location of refuges and the distance between them don't happen by luck: settlers occupied the area long before the automobile came into fashion. Until 75 years ago, the favored mode of transport in the Alps and the Pyrenees was the leg, and nothing looks more like a day of walking than another day of walking — whether you're a third-millennium, short-legged journalist with a generous girth



Jean-Pierre Clément on top of Mount Thabor (3178 m). Across the mountains in the background runs the 12-kilometer Fréjus tunnel between France and Italy. The natural barriers are such that the French need eight tunnels to communicate with neighbors.

or a sixteenth-century, goitrous, inbred goat shepherd.

The first refuge, Les Drayères, was by far the biggest we saw, although not the quaintest. It is a big affair with 65 beds in about 10 rooms. In the refectory people from a dozen groups were having wine, beer, cider and Coke. These refuges have two uniform features: a change room for the boots, which has the moose-in-rut smell of hockey changing rooms, and rubber clogs for all.

During our trek, we sleep in five different refuges and not one is the same. *I Re Magi* (The Wise Men), next to the Italian border, is called a refuge because clients slept in dorms and ate the same thing, but it has almost a hotel. At the other end of the spectrum, Mont-Thabor had no running water. All Mont-Thabor "refugees" are greeted with an empty 10-liter tank and sent to the lake on water detail. And the outhouse is 100 meters away, over a precipice. Given the amenities available, the refuge has the merit of being quiet, and the breath-taking view is only for the brave and the rustic.

The down-side of refuge life is the dormitory. Because trekkers sleep in bunks all in the same room, snoring is a big social issue, the equivalent of the runs in Latin America. I always declare myself a snorer, to avoid trouble, but in Jean-Pierre I found my master. Jean-Pierre is the Compleat Snorer: creative, consistent, sonorous, with an inspiration verging on genius. He once volun-

The author on water detail at the Mont-Thabor Refuge.

teered for sleeping tests and the doctors told him that: 1) he was inoperable; and: 2) they had never heard such a phenomenon. He would wake me up, at times, and I would just lie in my bed laughing — in recognition of pure genius. Jean-Pierre could in fact cut a CD of his snoring to train people suffering from snoring-intolerance. Maybe he could get movie rights for it, or win a spot in a talent show. People, like insects, seem to have a preferred frequency. Although Jean-Pierre's was significantly louder, Gilbert kept laughing at my snoring.

"Gilbert," I told him one morning. "Imagine yourself in Uzbekistan, sleeping in a flea-infested yurt with a snoring Uzbek next to you. What would you do?"

"I don't see it that way, Jean Benoît."

"How so?"

"*You* should be in Uzbekistan."

Two types of people serve as refuge-keepers, depending on how far the place is from the road. Refuges closest to the road, being little inns, are run by inn-keepers and have personnel. In those farthest from a traveled path, you have to deal with wardens who tend to be the earthy type — and the farther, the earthier. Some have been there for so long that it is almost impossible to tell whether the wardens look like their places, or whether their places look like them. For instance, in Les Drayères, the paintings and 19th-century pictures of North American Indians are totally in character with the two wardens. One is a big, bearded redhead looking like a cross between a bison and General Custer dressed in saddle-blanket fabric. His colleague is a black-haired hippie with the head of Cheech, in the Cheech & Chong series.

My favorite warden, however, was the Free-Tibet virago who held the fort at Mont-Thabor. She had decorated the place with pictures of Tibetan and Nepalese life. I had a long chat with her and found that although

Swish!

she was a great conversationalist, she also could be magnificently unbearable. As she said, she couldn't travel in a group. Like all wardens, she was self-employed, but the refuge belonged to the *Club-Alpin Français.* She got a cut for every boarder, and sold meals entirely for her own profit. The business was good enough for her to live for a whole year on just five months of work — from March 6 to May 6 and from June 15 to September 15. And then, *Ciao*, chums. She traveled the rest of the year — in Central Asia, sleeping in yurts and feeding on yak-milk yogurt. She was not fully isolated, since she had a phone, but in the 15 years she's been there, she never managed to convince the owners to install running water, a toilet or even remove the asbestos tiles around her sink. I suspect she actually liked the backhouse, since it was guaranteed to keep away people who didn't want to rough it.

Climbing the Herzogenhorn (1415m) in the Black Forest. Behind the mountains in the background is France. By order of appearance: Gilbert, Alain, Jean-Claude, Jean, Henri and Jacques.

You cannot expect the greatest cuisine from self-employed, isolated wardens whose groceries are delivered only once a year by helicopter. Yet, the worst of them can put together a meal that is better than student mush. The standard refuge meal is composed of a gallon of salty soup, followed by stewed meat accompanied by pasta, rice, lentils or potatoes au gratin, followed by cheese, and dessert, all of this with wine by the pitcher.

The French have a reputation for making a feast out of nothing, but the Italians probably outdo them. On the fifth night, at *I Re Magi*, we got the six-course feast. First: an antipasto of red cabbage with anchovy vinaigrette, white cabbage in mayonnaise, and cheese in olive oil and basil. Second: spaghetti with tomato sauce. Third, the specialty of the house: rabbit with pasta and lettuce. Fourth: the cheese. Fifth: Tiramisu for desert. Sixth: grappa. The owner must have liked our appetite as much as we liked her cooking because she gave us a bottle of Moscato d'Asti for the road the next morning. We drank it at the top of the next summit while contemplating the next day's obstacle — and that evening's next refuge!

An oddity: cords of wood are a frequent sight in Germany but not once did we smell burning wood.

* * *

French borders are not only awe-inspiring but the people who inhabit them are strange. Most inhabitants of the *Vallée Étroite* speak Italian and many don't have a good understanding of French — something odd in France these days, but reminiscent of those years when only a minority of the French spoke French. Fact is, the locals were Italian until France annexed their valley in 1945.

Mountains make imprecise borders, and people circulate freely, to the point where a traveler can rarely tell who's what by hearing the locals, or looking at them. In the Jura, the chain of hills between Switzer-

A Swiss shed. The shape is typical of winter places like Switzerland, Germany, the Vosges, the Jura, and the Alps (in particular Savoy).

land and France, people on both sides are French-speaking. Telling them apart is next to impossible: the locals on each side speak with long-drawling vowels typical of the French Swiss. In the Alps, there are few differences between the French and Italian sides. Many French places have Italian names, and vice-versa. In the Pyrenees, the Catalans to the east and the Basques to the west inhabit both sides of the border and are fairly uniform culturally. But in between, the Pyrenees make such formidable barrier that people on both sides have little in common — it is in fact the most impermeable border of France.

Borders based on natural obstacles become a milieu generating their own habitat, with strange peoples in the middle estranged from either side. For that matter, this also applies when the natural obstacle is not a mountain but water, like the English Channel — the Breton culture in France survived because of its ties with the Welsh and the Irish, and the present-day Breton revival actually came from England.

In all cultures, the strangest of the strange are the independent-minded *montagnards* (highlanders, mountain people). Wherever you go in the world, mountain people are always fierce and rarely welcoming to strangers. Consider the Kurds, the Nepalese, the Tibetans, the Bhutanese and the Afghans, to name a few. In France, they are the Alsatians, the Savoyards, the Catalans, the Corsicans, the Basque, the Bretons. Consider Switzerland, that little federation in the mountains. The Swiss speak three languages and form a country that was never really conquered. They are ferociously neutral to the point that they won't belong to the European community and to the United Nations! This superb independence of the Swiss can be attributed to their character as well as the terrain they occupy. A Switzerland in Flanders would be unthinkable.

Previous newsletters showed how much old divisions between the various people that make up France are still visible. Until about 300 years ago, France was like the Balkans, and it was a great accomplishment of the French to unify this bunch. The last pockets of resistance are now on the border. Just as much as natural barriers make frontiers in Western Europe, the people living in these barriers are also the frontier themselves.

* * *

On our ski-trek's last day, I chatted with another skier from another group who was passing me just as we were reaching the ultimate pass. After a few minutes of conversation, he asked:

"How long have you been in France? For the week?"

"Over a year."

"Ah! That's why you speak French so well!"

Touché, *monsieur le Français.* He must have seen I was

My friend Eric Lehmann poses in front of a 3-D model of the Vosges Mountains he made as a part of his Ph.D. thesis in fine arts on the Blue Line of the Vosges.

about to strangle him with my sealskin because he winked at me to tell me it was just a joke.

Obviously, he knew the sensitivity of Quebeckers to the issue of language.

The French are very quick to point out the difference between themselves and those that come from beyond their borders. This has offended me quite often, until I discussed it with Jean-Pierre.

"You're too sensitive, Jean-Benoît. The French still regard one another as strangers."

It is true that they constantly mock each other's accents in ways I am just beginning to realize — often very subtly. This type of behavior is often depicted as exclusively a Parisian behavior, but in reality, all the French do this — Parisians do get a rough time outside of Paris. In fact, this behavior of mocking one another is a vestige of their ancient balkanization.

In many regards, they are still strangers to one another. Jean-Pierre is a case in point. He lives in Le-Monêtier-les-Bains, north of Briançon, a village well known for its thermal springs. Jean-Pierre is not a local, but he married a woman of Monêtier, and worked there for years as an entrepreneur in tile floors. He loved the place so much that he thought of doing his civic duty by offering himself up at the municipal election, to become a city councilor. People liked him, but he never got the job.

"I had no chance because I was regarded as a stranger. I asked the elders, 'What does it take to be regarded as a local?' And they said, 'seven generations at the cemetery.'"

Seven.

And *I* come from Canada? ❑

MY GERMAN FORAY

Last January, I spent a week of cross-country skiing in the Black Forest, southwest of Germany. Geologically, the Black Forest is the German counterpart of the Vosges mountain range to the east on the French side. I had two reasons for going: I wanted to have a contact with German culture and I wanted to see for myself what sort of influence the French had had on Germany. Over the last 250 years, the border has shifted many times from the Rhine to the summit of Les Vosges range to the east — the famous Blue Line. It was fixed on the Rhine 55 years ago — for now. The Germanic influence in place names, in speech and in architecture is obvious on the French side. But, as it turned out, the French influence on life east of the Rhine is null.

The following should be read as a series of impressions of Germany from someone who did not speak the language at the time — I have studied at the Goethe Institute for four months since then, and can now hold a conversation. These observations raise more questions than bring answers. Only further trips and discussions with Germans or *habitués* of the country will clarify these.

Language. One misconception this trip helped clear is the supposed language-proficiency of the

German, who are said to be considerably more bilingual than the French. There is no doubt that when they do speak English, they speak it much better than the French — partly because German and English have diphthongs in common.[2] But I doubt more of them speak a second language than the French. In *Südschwarzwald* (southern Black Forest), it was fortunate that some members of our group could make conversation in German, because few Germans could make conversation in French. Henri had learned the language at school during the German occupation of Romania. And Jacques had worked in German factories during the war. Jean-Claude Bouvet, a comptroller at Renault who had run a few plants in Mexico, could get along because he knew enough Spanish — which the Germans seem to speak as much as they do French.

Eating. It is amusing to consider how much diet varies from one Euro-country to the next. For instance, the term "Continental Breakfast" describes the flimsy French (Parisian) breakfast of croissant, bread-and-butter, and *café-au-lait*. The term was obviously coined by the British, who breakfast on fried eggs, bacon-and-sausage in brown sauce and square toast fried in the fat — or on porridge, when they feel like eating light. Amusingly enough, the Rhine is another "continental" divide. Obviously, the Germans seek protein too in the morning, but they eat their eggs hard-boiled, with cold meats and cheese — and prefer cereals to porridge. When I asked our innkeeper on the first night if she could fry me a few eggs and some of that ham, she looked horrified.

Beds. The Germans also have a different way of sleeping — not that I slept with Germans, but they don't do a bed up in ways that seem natural. The French are generally not comfortable if the blanket is not tucked under the mattress at their feet. The German beds are all uniformly sheetless: the sleeper's feet are supposed to be loosely ventilated at the end of the duvet. I don't understand the philosophical difference connected to this custom, but it does make for some bad nights.

Fireplaces. The Germans have a very different conception of homeliness. In Les Vosges, and in the Jura (to the south), it is not rare to see a blue line of low-lying smoke in the middle of each valley. This is because the French burn all the wood they can in wood stoves or fireplaces. In the Black Forest, it took me about four days to realize that we crossed entire valleys without smelling as much as the smoke of a match. They don't burn wood. Period. Is it because of higher population density? Or because they respect regulations? Or because they were affected by wartime rationing? Or is it because the pine tree they grow does not burn well? Or because they produce so much coal?

Outdoors. The Germans became urbanized much earlier than the French — and it shows in their passion for outdoor sports of all kinds, even walking. In fact Germans love walking so much that they open winter trails in the woods just for hikers — separate from cross-country and snowshoe trails. From a strictly outdoorsy point of view, I enjoyed the trip thoroughly, although it was much less wild than expected. The network of trails was dense and much more varied in nature than in the Swiss and French Jura. The demography of the Black Forest is visibly denser than that of Les Vosges.

Winter. I had a shock when I contemplated my first ski-jump in the village of Menzenschwand. I had never seen one before: they tower at about 70 to 100 meters in the air. Every other village seemed to have one, like hockey rinks in Canada. Winter is a common cultural trait that unifies the livelihood of people in the Black Forest, the Vosges, the Jura, and Savoy. Thousands of years of living buried in snow for many months has strongly affected the organization of space and the architecture in a way that is almost absent in a country like Canada. The earliest colonizers of North America came mostly from the British Isles and western France and could hardly tell the difference between snow and frost. Canada would be a very different country today if the French had had some Swiss, Savoyard, Pyreneans to send in Canada instead of Norman and Loire-valley plowmen. Canadians think of themselves as the real pro's of winter because the thermometer goes down below minus 20 a couple of weeks per year. But at the risk of offending winter-loving Canadians (not all do), they don't have a monopoly, and in many respects, they are just amateurs.

The dwellings of the locals are very specialized. Roofs are low to keep the heat near the floor, and strong to support masses of snow. The interiors are not drafty, and are surprisingly light. Very long cornices keep away the drifting snow. The Germans, as well as the Savoyards, paint houses black and dark brown to capture the sun's heat as early as possible in the season. They even pile wood in a way that will keep it dry in the spring. Where all this comes from is more than tradition: it has risen from the land itself.

[2] Diphtongs are two-element speech sounds that begin with the tongue position for one vowel and end with the tongue position for another, like in the "ou" of "out". Diphthongs are very characteristic of English and German. French is almost totally devoid of them, except for three: the a-i of *abeille* (bee), the wa of *loi* (law) and the u-i of *huile* (oil). The French, like the Spanish for that matter, barely hear other diphthongs and have trouble pronouncing them. The only French speakers who are familiar with diphthongs are the Belgian and the Quebeckers – because of outside influence, which explains why Quebeckers in France are often confused with Belgians.

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