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**On the Future of
Mountain Guiding**



Mountain business: Edward Whymper's image of the Compagnie des Guides in Chamonix. (*Alpine Club Photo Library*)

I qualified as a mountain guide in 1996 after a 20-year career as an architect. As an architect I had spent every holiday and quite a bit of flexi-time in the hills, from the Cairngorms to the Karakoram. I looked forward to turning my hobby into my job and vice versa. And so I brought the exuberant enthusiasm of an amateur climber to my work, which would be increasingly based in Europe. The sky was blue with promise and I can say now that promise was fulfilled, for me at least.

Even though I was by then in my mid forties, like everyone else starting

out in a new job I was quite naïve. So my feeling that the guiding world in the late 1990s was more freewheeling may just be subjectivity born of my newness in the role. But I do think that the British Mountain Guides are a tighter and more professional body now than they were in the mid 1990s when I started. It seemed that all I had to do was show up in the Alps, show my carnet and I was good to go.

Of course, it didn't stay like that. Even before I moved permanently to France at the turn of the millennium I had thought it a good idea to apply for my *carte professionnelle*, my 'carte pro', a form of identification required by many occupations in France. While I didn't have to take any new exams, this did require me to get my original guiding certificate translated into French by an officially recognised translator. I had to do the same with my birth certificate, except that in France a birth certificate is more like a life certificate, since it is updated with marriages and children.

In early 2016 the European Union introduced the European Professional Card (EPC), the 'Carte professionnelle européenne', allowing some nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, estate agents and mountain guides to move around the European Union using their existing qualifications. But its arrival has made the authorities pay more attention to where and how mountain guides are working.

Brexit has further complicated this situation and I am now going through the process of becoming a French citizen. This one issue alone has cast a long shadow over the future of British guiding. On top of that is the more existential crisis of climate change. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that the challenges I faced in my first 25 years as a guide will be less significant than those facing young guides in the next quarter of a century. Will guiding even exist? To try to answer these questions I need to go back to some basic definitions.

The Meaning of Profession

To practise a profession, to be a professional is to be a member of an association that guarantees its client public two things: competence and integrity. These guarantees are backed by tests and examinations (competence) and sanctions (integrity). A body that claims to be professional but does not control its members in this way is little more than a trade association or a political lobby.

Professions have differing levels of recognition by the government depending on the country. For example, in the UK the highest level of recognition protects both the name and the work. A good example is medicine. A lower level in the UK recognises the name but not the work. For example, it is illegal to call yourself an architect if you are not registered with the Architects Registration Board but it is not illegal to perform architectural services without being registered.

The lowest level of recognition is none at all and in the UK this is the case for mountain guides. While it would be illegal to misrepresent yourself as a guide certified by the International Federation of Mountain Guide Associations (IFMGA) or a member of the British Mountain Guides (BMG), there's nothing

to stop you calling yourself a guide and working as one in the UK. This is not the case in France, where the level of recognition for guides as a profession is at the highest level, like doctors in the UK. The name and work are both recognised and protected. And this level of recognition is more or less the standard throughout the Alpine regions.

IFMGA

The mountain guide community is overseen by the IFMGA, which is essentially a federation of the national associations. In short, while it is the federation that certifies us, we are members of our national associations such as the BMG, which are, in turn, members of the federation. Each nation is entitled to one member association (more or less). The federation sets a common technical standard, which the member organisations have to meet before their guides can be IFMGA-certified. It is an extremely good system, with high standards of safety and technical competence. IFMGA certification is accepted throughout Europe and much of the world where mountains are prominent.

Each national association sets its own syllabus but needs to meet the overall IFMGA standard. The BMG achieves this using four key areas of examination: rock climbing, winter (ice) climbing, alpine climbing and ski touring. This was more or less the same for all member associations until 1990 when Peru was admitted to the federation without the skiing element. Three more non-skiing nations were added: Bolivia in 2004, Nepal in 2012 and Ecuador in 2017. In 2019, the first multinational association, the Eastern European Mountain Guide Association (EEMGA) was admitted as a skiing association. The IFMGA now comprises 25 member associations, although there are in fact 27 members listed since Italy has three IFMGA members associations (Aosta, South Tirol and the rest of Italy) but only one Italian voting representative. And no, please don't ask how that works.

A somewhat controversial element was the approval of the four non-skiing associations. Their members are not recognised for guiding in Europe. Allowing non-skiers to join the federation was justified on the basis that the respective countries have large glaciated mountains but no skiing facilities. The arrangement seemed a little asymmetric to some guides who wondered if the IFMGA had considered swapping the skiing element for a high-altitude guiding exam.

There was, however, an alternative, possibly more compelling, motive: the political one, since it ensured that visiting IFMGA guides would be allowed to operate in those countries. In other words, it could be described as a transactional arrangement. This was perhaps in response to Tanzania, where all climbers on Kilimanjaro are required to use a local (i.e. non-IFMGA) guide. This year, 2023, the Nepali government has ruled that all trekkers in national parks (with the current exception of the Sagarmatha National Park) will have to hire a local guide. This is a ruling that will certainly affect lone trekkers and western trek leaders. It remains to be seen if that ruling impacts expeditions and foreign IFMGA guides.

EU and Regulation

When in January 2016 the EU created the EPC to help professionals travel and work throughout the EU, those who thought it would replace the complex documentation required for working in the various Alpine countries discovered the small print included the stipulation that ‘the EPC does not replace the “traditional” recognition procedures foreseen by the Professional Qualifications Directive.’

As I said, when I began my guiding career mountain guides simply needed to show the IFMGA carnet in guest countries, possibly because guides were fewer in number and the existing work permit regulations were lax or largely ignored. From 2016, national authorities began to be more interested in enforcing the regulations for temporary work authorisation. This may have been a result of the increasing number of non-EU guides working in Europe but was also an unforeseen consequence of the EPC initiative. Be careful what you ask for.

In combination with Brexit, the EPC has been no friend to the British guide. It is now time-consuming and difficult for British guides to get an Italian work permit and almost impossible for British guides to obtain an Italian EPC. On the other hand, guides are rarely, if ever, asked for the permits in Italy. Obtaining permission is somewhat more efficient in Switzerland but the corollary of that is the Swiss penchant for delivering swift and hefty fines to those carrying incorrect paperwork. The situation for foreign mountain guides in Spain appears to be unresolved in terms of bureaucracy. In all cases, it is not recommended to have an accident without holding the correct paperwork in any of these places.

Meanwhile the demand for mountain guiding work appears to be growing, especially for the popular iconic mountains. This might be a consequence of the mountaineering industry’s growing profile, hot-housed by social media: the ‘Insta effect’. We will have to wait and see if it’s a passing fashion. What does seem clear is that with increasing guiding work, including cross-border guiding, there will be calls for enforcement of local regulations. Guides can confidently look forward to a more tedious regulatory environment.

Climate Change

Another huge question for mountain guides is the changing climate. While the daily and annual temperature data look somewhat spiky, even random, the changing shape of glaciers shows a clear reversion to the mean. Glaciers across the world are mostly in retreat, notwithstanding the so-called Karakoram Anomaly (the Hunza basin glaciers did not decline between 1975 and 2017).

The most obvious example is right here in Chamonix. In 1988 the Monteners train and téléphérique led to the edge of the Mer de Glace. By the early 1990s that part of the glacier was thinning at about one metre per year, which, for tourists and returning Vallée Blanche skiers, added about three steps a year from the ice to their ride home. By 2019, just before the pandemic, the rate of thinning had increased to 18 steps a year. Post-Covid-19, the rate



A modern mountain guide at work on the Aiguilles d'Entrèves. (*Maxime Gilbert*)

has accelerated to 35 new steps. That is approximately 10m of ice lost each year. To the increasingly tired skiers (and their old guides) hauling their heavy Vallée Blanche skis back to the téléphérique, those 580 steps seem endless.

There is a similar story at Concordia, that icon of Swiss glaciers. When the first hut was established it was possible to walk off the glacier to the hut. Year by year, in an evolutionary adaptation like the giraffe's neck, or the elephant's trunk, it was easier to add a few more ladders than move the hut. Now there is a magnificent mountain refuge 200m above the glacier, in a location where no one of sound mind would choose to place one.

By the end of the 21st century most of Europe's minor and several of the major glaciers will have disappeared. By halfway through the century the valley ice-climbing season will barely exist. It has already been reduced from four months when I began in 1996 to a little more than six weeks in 2023. Nearly all Gaston Rébuffat's 100 classic climbs have had major glacier or bergschrund changes. The rising permafrost altitude has destabilised many mountain refuges and several routes.

None of the above is very surprising and the guide community has long understood that it will have to adapt. What the future holds for guides may be best understood in relation to the topic at the beginning of this article:

professional recognition and regulation. Guides in Europe have a unique level of training and competence in high mountains and glaciated territory that contributes to their recognition. With climate change literally stripping away ice climbing, will guides have to overlap more with rock-climbing instructors and ski instructors?

This may affect the Austrian and German IFMGA guides less as their nations' guides associations govern skiing and rock-climbing instructors as well. In the remaining Alpine countries – France, Switzerland and Italy – the mountain professions are fractured and less qualified instructors have their own separate organisations, as is the case in Britain. In the non-Alpine European countries I can only say I don't understand the Spanish organisation and I am told the Polish one is even more complicated. But one has to ask if a long-term challenge to alpine guides from climate change will appear in the form of competition from less qualified organisations.

The Future Predicted

It is possible that a much advocated-for decrease in short-haul air travel will impact the guiding world's European client base, though alternative means of travel may offset that. It is probable that carbon-intensive activities such as heli-skiing will become increasingly controversial. This could also affect ski lifts and if the net result is an increase in ski touring (as has been seen since Covid-19) that would be no bad thing. It is more than probable that the regulatory environment both in the Greater Ranges and at home in Europe will be more challenging for mountain guides. It is near certain that many areas with glaciers will see their glaciers disappear and the winter guiding season will, on the whole, shorten.

What is absolutely certain is that the next generation of enthusiastic mountain guides will adapt their routes to the changing climate, find excellent outings which did not previously exist and continue to delight in the real challenges of life, which are not to be found buried in layers of bureaucracy but up there in the air and light. This I can say with confidence looking through my window at the Chamonix Aiguilles.