

DESALP TRAIL

Welcome to Chemeuille!

After having eaten on the beautiful terrace of the restaurant located below, we propose you to accompany us on the didactic path dedicated to the desalp!

Discover the Hérens breed and mountain agriculture, life on the mountain pasture, in the mayen and the different stages of cheese making. The illustrations were made by Derib.

Educational trail :

- LENGTH: 4.2km
- NEGATIVE ALTITUDE DIFFERENCE: 753 m
- STARTING ALTITUDE: 2'159 m
- FINISHING ALTITUDE: 1'394 m
- APPROXIMATE TIME : 2h00

Come on, follow us!

It starts at the Chemeuille mountain pasture which is a few meters higher and ends at the hamlet of Lannaz.

FOR THE RESPECT OF THE FAUNA AND FLORA,

Thank you for :

- Keep your dog on a lead.
- Do not leave your rubbish in the nature.
- Stay on the marked path so as not to disturb the animals

THE DESALP

Welcome to the Chemeuille mountain pasture, at the start of the Désalpe trail !

The day of the désalpe corresponds to the moment of the descent of the herds to the villages after having spent nearly 3 months here on the mountain pasture, between 2000 and 2800m.

This particular day is a real day of celebration for all the breeders! We are so happy to be back with our herd which has been entrusted to shepherds during the whole summer. For the occasion, some cows are sometimes decorated with ribbons and flowers.

While in many regions the cows go straight back down to the village to take part in parades, here we are still used to stopping for a few weeks in our mayens. Situated just a little lower, between 1500 and 1800m altitude, they allow our cows to enjoy the beautiful autumn days and the fresh grass of the heights before going back to their cowsheds in the villages.

Follow us along the path taken by our cows at the time of the « désalpe ». At each stage, we will give you some information to help you understand our life as mountain farmers!

Marie : For the next stop, meet in front of the Chemeuille restaurant to take your souvenir photo in front of the Dent-Blanche

Pierre : Follow us on the desalp trail ! You will learn a lot about our life as a mountain farmer and our region!

1. LIFE IN THE PASTURE

At the end of June, we hand over our herd to the shepherds of the alpine pastures, as do most of the breeders in the region. Our days can then be devoted to harvesting the hay that will feed the animals during the winter while the cows enjoy eating the very high quality grass that grows at an altitude of almost 3000m.

Here, a small team of shepherds takes care of more than a hundred cows owned by more than a ten breeders. For them, life on the mountain pasture is not all relaxing ! Their day begins at around 4am for milking. Once the milk has been collected, the herd moves to the pasture, under the supervision of the master herder and his helpers.

During this time, the cheesemaker transforms the harvested milk into butter and serac cheese with an incomparable taste, which he stores in the cellar of the alpine chalet. Every day, he takes care of all the wheels of cheese by carefully rubbing and turning them.

During the first part of the summer, the herd returns to the shade of the barn around 11:00 am to avoid the heat. After the second milking, the herd will come out again at about 5 p.m. until nightfall. From mid-August onwards, the herd spends the whole day outside and only returns to the barn to spend the night.

Pierre : If during the summer, the cows enjoy three months of holidays, for the shepherds to whom we entrust our herd, life is rather difficult and there is no lack of work !

2. THE COWS OF HERENS

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Hérens cow is an excellent walker that moves easily over difficult and steep terrain. It is particularly well adapted to our Alps. This breed lives in a herd which is very coherent and has a very precise hierarchy. The animals are of medium size with a large, muscular body and strong, imposing horns.

BULLS

- Height at withers : 127 – 137 cm
- Chest size : 185 – 220 cm
- Weight : 650 – 1000 kg

COWS

- Height at withers : 124 – 133 cm
- Chest size : 180 – 215 cm
- Weight : 450 – 850 kg

At birth, a Hérens calf weighs between 30 and 50 kg. As adults, the cows can weigh up to more than 850kg and still be very agile !

COLOURS

The coat of the Hérens cow ranges from light brown to dark black, with all the nuances in between. Today, the most common colour is solid black, but this has not always been the case. There are also "pies", white patches on the underside of the belly, on the tail and along the back. These cows with this particular coat are called "Evolénardes" and are the pride of the breeders who have preserved this rare genetic characteristic.

THE BELL

Every cow has a bell on it, which is called a sonnette in French. The main reason for this bell is to help us find a cow that has lost its way. But Hérens cows are also able to recognize each other, in the night or in the fog, simply by the sound of their bell !

Marie : Wahouh, look at this landscape, our cows relaxing in the grass in front of the majestic Dent-Blanche! Isn't it beautiful ?

2. LIFE AT THE MAYEN

The mayens are old buildings made of wood and stone, located halfway between the villages and the mountain pastures.

They welcome families and herds in spring and autumn for a few weeks' stay just before the inalpe (the ascent to the mountain pasture) and just after the desalpe. They traditionally consist of a living area, a barn for storing hay and a stable where the animals sleep.

The weeks in the mayen have always been regarded as a holiday for the herding families. Although some of them still make delicious little tommes with the milk from the milking, the main task of the whole family is to look after the herd.

So we have a lot of free time to have fun, build huts or play cards. We also make routhuchió, sticks that we carve ourselves to grill saveloys or melt cheese on bread in front of the fire, the famous rùchia.

We also love to play the same games as our grandparents did back then. The wooden cow game is our favourite. Do you want to try?

Marie: With my brother, we made two cows out of hazel wood and carved beautiful horns on them. Who wants to play against me in the cow game? I warn you, I've been practising all spring!

RULES OF THE GAME

- The hazelwood cows are made of 2 parts.
- The one with the bark is their back and the other side is their belly.
- The game is played as a duel.
- Each player chooses a cow and throws it on the ground at the same time.
- The player who lands the cow on its belly wins a point, while the player with the cow that lands on its back loses.
- Victory is decided by the best of 3 throws.

3. QUEEN FIGHTING

At any moment, the Hérens cows feel an instinctive need to know who is dominant and who is dominated.

When in doubt - and especially when they meet for the first time at the Inalpe, the first day of the alpine pasture season - they engage in impressive head-to-head and horn-to-horn confrontations to determine which is the strongest.

A very precise hierarchy is gradually established between all the cows, each one knowing exactly which ones are stronger than it and which ones have already been defeated. But throughout the season, this ranking is constantly challenged by new confrontations that may lead to a gain in rank.

The cow that dominates all the others is declared Queen and takes command of the herd. The cow that holds this title on the day of the desalp is designated Queen of the Alp for the current year, which brings great pride to her breeder and to the whole family.

These natural fights that take place within each herd and on each mountain pasture have fascinated breeders for centuries. As early as 1920, they had the idea of organising official jousts to compare their cows while at the same time organising a festival, the profits of which are used to develop projects aimed at improving breeding conditions.

Pierre : Each year, the Hérens Arena in Les Haudères hosts at least one of these games at the end of April. We sometimes hear that our cows are "pushed" to fight. I assure you, it is really their natural behaviour ! And don't worry, although the fight may seem violent, injuries are extremely rare !

4. CHEESE MAKING

On the mountain pasture, in the mayen, as in the village, the milk of the Hérens cows is transformed into butter, serac, tommes and raclette cheeses for which the region is famous.

Here are the different steps in the production of Raclette cheese, from the cow to the table:

THE MILK

The milking of the cows allows a certain amount of milk to be recovered. In winter, each farmer delivers his production to the cheese factory in Les Haudères. In summer, the milk is either delivered to the cheese factory or processed directly on the mountain pasture.

THE CHOICE AND TREATMENT OF MILK

When the milk is delivered to the cheese dairy, it is filtered and checked for quality. For the production of Raclette cheese AOP (Protected Designation of Origin), the cattle must be fed almost exclusively on grass or hay.

CURDLING THE MILK

Curdling consists of slowly heating the milk by stirring it constantly in a cheese vat and adding rennet. The result is a gelatinous mass comparable to yoghurt.

CUTTING THE CURD

When the curd is obtained, it is sliced to obtain the cheese grains. These determine the type of cheese: the smaller they are, the less water there is and the harder the cheese will be.

THE SHARPENING

The cheese grains are stirred and heated. If the aim is to obtain a hard cheese, the heating temperature must be higher. During this stage, the curds become increasingly firm.

MOULDING AND PRESSING

When the cheese mass has reached the desired consistency, it is poured with the whey into perforated moulds. This allows the whey to flow out and only the cheese remains. The cheese is then pressed, which removes more whey to give the cheese its final shape.

THE SALT BATH

The wheels of cheese are immersed in a salt bath to allow them to harden and form a rind. This protects the cheese from external influences and stabilises the shape. The salt also enhances the taste of the cheese.

MATURING AND REFINING OF THE CHEESE

During this period, the cheese mass turns into a firm paste, the rind develops and holes are formed inside. The duration depends on the type of cheese and its size.

For Raclette PDO cheese, it lasts at least 3 months. The maturing process consists of letting the cheese mature in the cellar by rubbing and turning them over very regularly.

QUALITY CONTROL

The last step is to examine the cheese. The opening of the holes, the quality of the paste, the taste and the appearance of the cheese are evaluated. The cheeses are graded and awards are given to the best cheesemakers. Once the cheese has passed these tests, it is ready to be sold... and tasted!

5.TERRACED FARMING

Since it has always been difficult to work the steepest slopes, our ancestors developed them by building horizontal terraces supported by small stone walls.

This method prevents erosion and slippage of the good soil downwards while providing better infiltration of rainwater into the soil.

These flat areas, often with a southern exposure, were used to grow cereals (wheat, rye, etc.) for several hundred years until the beginning of the 20th century and the industrial revolution.

Since then, these areas have been covered with grass and have become hay meadows of exceptional quality and diversity.

This titanic work shows to what extent farmers are aware of their role as "landscape gardeners" by limiting the establishment of shrubs. They participate in the preservation of an open and diversified landscape.

Marie : We are on the upper part of the hamlet of Lannaz, where the layout of the landscape with its shaped terraces allowed the cultivation of cereals and thus allowed our ancestors to feed themselves.

6.MOWING THE GRASSLANDS

In our mountains, snow covers the meadows for a good part of the year. It is therefore imperative to have enough hay in stock to feed all our cows during the sometimes long winters.

Harvesting is usually done in two stages. The haying period takes place during the months of June and July. A second mowing, called regrowth, takes place in September. If all goes well, the grass is cut, shaken once, turned over, rolled up and harvested. This takes 2 or 3 days. The hay harvested during the summer will be entirely consumed during the following winter.

The whole family helps each other with these sometimes arduous tasks, especially when temperatures are very high or, on the contrary, when a storm suddenly threatens and one has to hurry to get the whole stock under cover in the barn!

Mechanisation helps the farmers' work a lot. Not so long ago, the scythe, the pitchfork, the rake and the mule were the only tools our grandparents had! The latter are still often used when the terrain becomes too steep or too uneven for the machines.

We don't hear it enough, but the maintenance of these meadows makes an important contribution to the preservation of our country's biodiversity. The survival of certain insects, birds and flower species depends directly on our work!

The meadows and pastures of the region are often part of an agri-environmental ecological network aimed at preserving biodiversity by providing an ideal biotope for species to be protected.

Pierre : Look at this load !

The mule is ready for a big crowd during the traditional midsummer procession. This takes place every year on 15 August in the central street of the village of Evolène and honours all the skills that our ancestors have passed on to us. Old-fashioned haymaking is one of them!

Marie : Hopefully, the methods of making hay have evolved over the years and tractors and other machines have made their apparition ! This allows our animals (and us too) to have a little less hard work. Isn't that so, Pierre?

7.THE HAMLET OF LANNAZ

You are now arrived at Lannaz, the end of our walk on the Désalpe trail!

Lannaz is a historic hamlet, protected and classified as a heritage site of national importance. It currently has only fifteen or so year-round inhabitants. The village is built in the shape of a ring, where the ancestral houses and the chapel form a circle around a meadow. The latter was built in 1711 and is dedicated to St. Lawrence.

The hamlet is located at the start of the road to several mayens and alpine pastures. This is particularly true of the hamlet of Arbey, which is famous for its lake and its incredible view of the Dent-Blanche.

Legend has it that in the song "Les Trois Cloches", written by Gilles in 1939 and made famous years later by Edith Piaf, Lannaz is referred to as the famous "village at the bottom of the valley".

We hope you will leave with a lot of new knowledge and a positive image of agriculture and farmers.

The cohabitation between our way of life and that of the guests who stay in the region is not always easy (cowbells at night, manure spreading in the meadows surrounding the chalets, etc.)) but the valley's agricultural activity ensures the maintenance of our landscapes, offers excellent local products, preserves biodiversity and provides a living for many families in our beautiful region!

We look forward to seeing you soon on the mountain pasture, at the queen match or in the restaurant over a good raclette!

See you soon!