LA VUE DES ALPES ←→ TÊTE DE RAN

History and anecdotes (1880-1950)

2.12.2023 → 14.4.2024 - Photographic walk

advat

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The history and prestigious past of La Vue des Alpes (alt. 1283 m) and Tête de Ran (alt. 1329 m) passes are closely linked to the improvement of the roads and means of communication, undeniable factors within social and economic prosperity. The 19th century saw the opening of the first public establishments designed to welcome – in summer as well as in winter – the military, travellers and tourists enjoying leisure activities in the early days of paid holidays. People climbed the ridges to eat, drink, sleep, go sledging, bobsleighing, and skiing, attend sporting events, contemplate the view, pick daffodils and also… to dance!

From path to road

As well as marking geographical and meteorological boundaries, the two passes also mark political boundaries. The first paths, made by land-clearing settlers in the Val-de-Ruz, date from the end of the 14th century. They remained winding, chaotic and mediocre, not to say neglected, until the end of the 18th century, despite the increasing economic importance of La Chaux-de-Fonds and Le Locle. To get from Valangin to La Chaux-de-Fonds, you had to travel along dirt roads that were barely fit for use, via Les Loges, Haut des Loges (now known as La Vue des Alpes pass), the Prés de Suze, the pass of La Brûlée (south-west of La Motte), Boinod, Mont Sagne, Les Crosettes, the Creux des Olives (Bois du Couvent) and the present-day Rue du Grenier. In those days, the county of Neuchâtel was responding to the needs of the wine-growing, pastoral and agricultural activities of the Littoral region and adapted its road policy accordingly. It was not until the early 19th century that a link to the mountains became a priority under the French regime of Prince Berthier, who wanted to create a passageway for troops from Franche-Comté to Valais, then one of Napoleon's fiefdoms. Prior to this, crossing the pass was challenging, especially in winter. A strategic road was therefore constructed between the Val-de-Ruz and La Chaux-de-Fonds (1807–1812), which was maintained using the system of « corvées », a harsh form of servitude. As a result of the new road, the path from the Val-de-Ruz to Le Locle via the Tête de Ran pass, Mont Dar, La Sagne and Entre-deux-Monts fell into disuse.

In 1844, a regular stagecoach service linked La Chaux-de-Fonds to Neuchâtel in five hours, before suffering competition from the railways when the rail tunnel under La Vue des Alpes was opened in 1860 (making it possible to reach Neuchâtel by train in an hour and twenty-five minutes and return in an hour and forty-two minutes). It should be noted in passing that the watchmaking town of La Chaux-de-Fonds, which was booming economically, saw its population triple between 1850 and 1900.

From gravel to tar

By the early 20th century, trade and tourism were booming but the roads were still dusty and muddy in summer and icy and slippery in winter. Spectacular accidents, often fatal, began to occur and were widely reported in the press. It should be pointed out that roads were cleared of snow only by means of a towed triangle and that there was little if any gritting before the Second World War.

In 1929, the Touring-Club and the Automobile-Club of Switzerland asked a certain Charles L'Eplattenier (a painter and teacher) to rethink the trajectory of this notorious but essential route through La Vue des Alpes pass. His proposals were rapidly set aside as expensive and too far removed from the idea of digging a tunnel linking the Petites Crosettes (La Chaux-de-Fonds) to La Jonchère (Val-de-Ruz), a programme promoted by local engineer Jules Curti. However, there were to be a few notable improvements to this busy stretch of road, such as tarring the carriageway (1930-1931) and bypassing La Motte to avoid La Brûlée pass (1954). However, it was not until 1994 that communication between the Littoral and the Mountains was finally enhanced by the opening of the road tunnel under La Vue des Alpes.

Place names

The name « Vue des Alpes » was not used in this area until 1843 when the Neuchâtel council (Conseil d'État) granted the municipality of Fontaines the right (droit de *schild*) to build a hotel bearing the name « À la vue des Alpes » in Les Loges. The Haut des Loges pass, used by many troops from 1814, was named Vue des Alpes, and only got the name La Vue des Alpes pass at the end of the 19th century.

As for the name « Tête de Ran », its etymology calls for some deciphering. The peak (« tête », meaning « head ») rises to an altitude of 1421 meters. The term « ran » is more controversial; in the Neuchâtel dialect, it refers to a pile of wood, but some people also associate it with steep rock faces (« rans » or « rancs ») or to the name of the Dorant family. Are these fabrications of a cartographer, geographer or printer ? Over the centuries various spellings have appeared such as Teste Dorant (1630), Teste de Rang (1707), Tête de Rang (1713) or even Tête Dérand (around 1925).

As for the pass itself (alt. 1329 m), d'Ostervald's revised map (1838-1845) refers to it as « La Sauge », where the Tête de Rang inn was built around 1810.

Nowadays, the name « Tête de Ran » refers both to the peak (familiarly called La Bosse) and the pass.

Historic photographs

Taken by amateur or professional photographers, the images presented on this walk are all preserved in the audiovisual department of La Chaux-de-Fonds's town library. They are genuine archive documents (some more than a century old) and have been slightly retouched before being reproduced in large format. We felt at times it was important to leave some major traces of their history (scratches, burns, stains, folds) and to display striking images even though they are slightly out of focus, over-exposed, or blurred because of long exposure.

ADVAT

This open-air photography exhibition is brought to you by the ADVAT (Association de développement La Vue des Alpes — Tête de Ran). In 1986, a group of entrepreneurs set up the ADVA in response to a dezoning project in the Montagne de Cernier area. In 2010, the association extended its activities to include Tête de Ran and added a final **T** to its acronym. Today, the ADVAT focuses more specifically on the region's potential for tourism (sports and leisure activities, accessibility, catering), while ensuring a harmonious relationship with the natural environment. The first edition of this exhibition is limited to the period from 1880 to 1950. Further editions are already under consideration.

Support ADVAT

If you wish to support the ADVAT and its activities, then please consider becoming a member of our association or buying a set of postcards.

Points of sale: Buvette-Relais de La Vue des Alpes, Centre nordique de La Vue des Alpes, Téléski du Crêt-Meuron, Buvette de Derrière Tête de Ran, Juice Food Truck Pétillant Tête de Ran, Tourism Offices of La Vue des Alpes, Cernier (Evologia) and La Chaux-de-Fonds, Payot Libraire La Chaux-de-Fonds, Laiterie de Chézard-St-Martin.

Please respect the images and the environment, take your rubbish away with you, and keep your four-legged friends on a leash. Thank you!

Information and activities
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