

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 27 (2000)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Open policy for Val de Travers
Autor: Tschanz, Pierre-André
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907664>

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Open policy for Val de Travers

BY PIERRE-ANDRÉ TSCHANZ

After a period of stagnation and decline, the region is now looking to the future

LES VERRIÈRES, the last Swiss community on the Neuchâtel–Dijon–Paris route, owes its fame to the arrival of General Bourbaki's French troops in 1871, seeking refuge. This event was reproduced in the famous Bourbaki Panorama, now on display in Lucerne.

Les Verrières is situated at the western end of the Val de Travers. The only valley to cut through the Jura mountain range, Val de Travers covers 166 km², comprising 73 km² of productive forestry as well as eleven communities including La Côte aux Fées ("The Fairy Coast"), whose poetic name is reminiscent of absinthe – a spirit also known as "the green fairy" and much sought-after since it was expressly banned by a federal referendum in 1910. The valley is also home to Môtiers, where Jean-Jacques Rousseau sought temporary refuge, and the industrial centres of Fleurier and Couvet.

As a peripheral region, the valley has to struggle to promote its interests. Crisis, restructuring, privatisation and fusion as a consequence of globalisation are causing economic, social and cultural problems and threatening public services and jobs. Over the past 30 years one quarter of jobs in the

region has vanished. Now there are only 4720 jobs for a population of 12,500.

Economic change

But enough of the doom and gloom. Members of the Association for the Val de Travers Region, a private organisation which represents the local public services, are focusing on modernising and improving the quality of the infrastructure (schools, sports complexes, public transport, roads). "We want to create jobs in the valley and reduce the number of commuters, because we don't want to be seen as a dormitory region," says Christelle Melly, regional secretary of the association. "For us it is essential that residents put down roots in the community."

The economic structures of Val de Travers have undergone enormous change over the past twenty years. The main industrial sector of watch-making/mechanics has declined and been overtaken by the service industry (45%). But the sector continues to play a key role. "What we have lost in quantity, we have gained in quality and diversification," explains Eric-André Klauser, President of the Association for the Val de Travers Region, citing the new high-tech enterprises who have settled in the region (for example

the engine manufacturer Etel) and luxury watch manufacturers such as Parmigiani Fleurier SA.

Cross-border co-operation

The Association for the Val de Travers Region has set up a regional development programme whose main aims are to lend more political weight to the region by reforming local political institutions (preparations are under way to merge all eleven communities) and enhance the dynamism of regional resources. The programme also aims to open up the region to neighbouring regions, be they in Neuchâtel, the Canton of Vaud or France.

This open policy supported by neighbouring peripheral regions is reflected in the foundation of the Jura Work Community. In the tourism sector this consortium has led to the creation of a museum pass valid for Franche-Comté as well as the alpine regions of Neuchâtel and Vaud, renovations to hiking trails and the restoration of the Salt Road linking the royal salt mines of Arc-et-Senans with Switzerland via the Val de Travers. The valley is rich in tourist sights (museums, stained glass church windows, art and sculpture, asphalt mines, natural attractions, hiking and mountain bike trails) which could be better exploited. "But to do this we must make improvements in the hotel and hospitality sectors," emphasises Philippe Tisserand, Director of the La Pressta asphalt mines in Môtiers Travers.

Inter-regional co-operation also extends to energy, transport, garbage disposal and healthcare. Val de Travers, which receives federal and cantonal subsidies in the order of CHF 17 million for the promotion of investment in alpine regions, firmly believes in its future. The dynamism of the Association for the Val de Travers Region and "especially the regional conscience and the population's enormous flexibility", adds Christelle Melly, will overcome any political indifference and rigidity.

View of the elongated Val de Travers, with Fleurier in the foreground.

