The borders of Savoy

Like a traveler, discover Savoy through the eventful stories of its border. Cross the mountains, go through customs, bypass the defensive posts, and exchange with our Italian neighbors, and you will unveil a little-known heritage.

Safe trip !

Abbaye de Hautecombe

Pierre-Châtel

Little Saint Bernard Pass

Chambéry

Montmélian

Les Échelles

Modane

Mont Cenis Pass
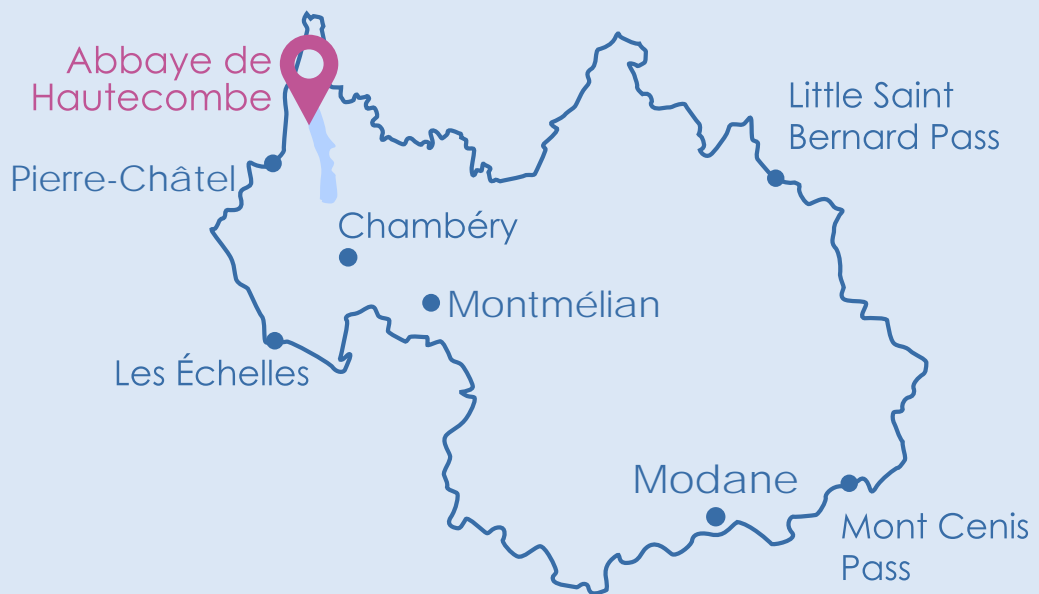
CROSSING

Torrents, marshes, and snowy passes-the first borders that the traveler met were natural. Nevertheless, people have always traveled since valleys and high passes have been used since the Neolithic period.

You had to travel miles to cross the Rhône in the 17th century. The river narrowed around Pierre-Châtel. You could cross it via ferry if you purchased a right of way. A fortified monastery watched over this border area.

Come hell or high water

In the Alps, waterways were subject to devastating floods, which due to snowmelt, kept wreaking havoc on the valley's lands, making them impassable. Had rivers not been dammed yet, you had better use high-altitude mountain paths.

Seyssel and its bridge on the Rhône
The Rhône, a natural border, cuts the town of Seyssel in two- the right bank belonged to the Kingdom of France and the left to the duchy of Savoy. The sole bridge to cross the river was located on the latter bank.

The passage of the Echelles to cross the Chartreuse

Crossing the first mountain range took much work ! Fortunately, natural passages simplified the task. Already, around 12 000 B.C, people used this gorge dug over the ice age to cross the Chartreuse.

The first steps were built later, during the Gallo-Roman period, hence the name of the site : les Echelles ('échelle' meaning ladder from Old English hlæder «ladder, steps"). In the 17th century, the Dukes of Savoy decided to build a road to facilitate the passing of men and carts. Considerable work was undertaken ! A colossal ramp was created to raise the level of the plain.

The passage of the Echelles in 1674

Bernard, the patron saint of mountain climbers, gave his name to the dog that rescues people in the mountains.

Under the protection of the gods

In prehistoric times, the Alps were not considered as a border. Snowshoes put on their feet, people already used ice-bearing passes like the Little St Bernard Pass. Following the Roman conquest, a road was built to facilitate the passing of soldiers and servants of the Empire. Men and their mounts found shelter in a mansio- the forerunner of the present-day hospice.

To protect themselves, travellers invoked deities such as the Gallic God Graius, later known as Jupiter in Roman times. Saint Bernard is often represented holding the devil in chains. He put an end to the pagan tradition and took on the role of the protector of travellers in the name of the Christian faith.

Accompanied by their dogs, monks used to welcome and rescue travellers until the beginning of the 20th century.

Saint Bernard of the Alps.

# On foot, on horseback or by train

Vertiginous precipices, steep slopes, and violent storms : crossing the mountain is quite an adventure ! But still feasible. The Romans built the first routes. The Carolingians and then the Counts and Dukes of Savoy kept developing them.

In the Middle Ages, the Mont Cenis pass beat the Little St Bernard's used since antiquity. Travelers who wanted to cross the pass to go to Italy had many opportunities, as they could use the sedan chair, horseback, or train.

The diligence at Lanslebourg
Cars went through Mont Cenis in pieces in the 18th century as the road finished at Lanslebourg. Vehicles were dismantled, transported on muleback, and reassembled on the other side of the pass. Napoleon I ordered the construction of the first passable road. A public transport service was born-the diligence.
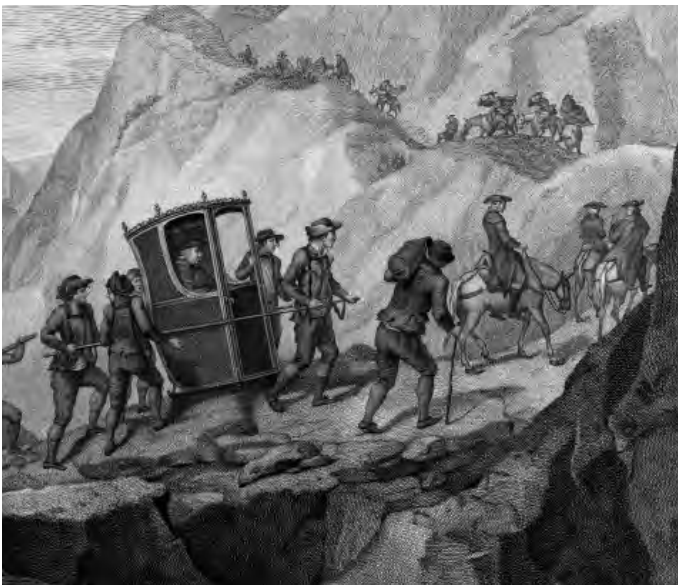
The sedan chair was a widespread means of transport until a passable road was created.

The commissioning of the Mont Cenis railway tunnel in 1871 greatly facilitated the crossing of the Alps between France and Italy.

They crossed the Alps

Hannibal in 218 B.C

Who could have been that crazy as to make elephants cross the Alps ? Hannibal, of course ! The Carthaginian general, who had left Spain to reach Italy, invoked Hercules to accomplish his feat. However, the route he used is still being debated.

Napoleon in 1800.

What panache ! On his fiery steed, Napoleon opens the road of the Great St Bernard for his troops. Like Hannibal and Charlemagne, he wishes to be depicted as a hero. Reality is a bit less glorious since his horse is a docile mule and his parade uniform has been transformed into a drab coat.

MARKING OUT

'One more milestone', says the surprised traveller. Planted in the middle of a bridge, a waterway or in the mountains, these steles engraved with Latin inscriptions, of Savoy crosses, of fleur-de-lis or dates still intrigue… They are the last witnesses of the continuous moves of the border of Savoy.

The notion of border has considerably evolved. Remarkable landscape components like rocks, trees, gallows or milestones punctually drew the border, which was at first blurred and fragile. The border has been then gradually drawn as a continuous line. During the age of the Enlightenment, it was positioned in the middle of watercourses and on mountain ridges.
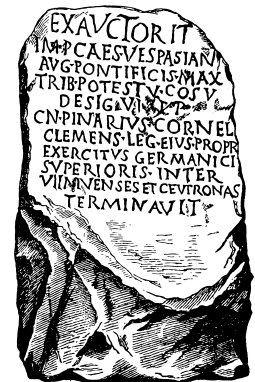
Located in the Aravis range, Haute-Savoie, this Roman milestone marked the border of two Alpine peoples.

These Romans are limited !

15 B.C. Emperor Augustus eventually conquered these indomitable Alpine peoples.

The first pieces of the Savoyard jigsaw puzzle.

Around 1033 : the dynasty of the House of Savoy was born. Humbert the White-Handed became the first Count of Savoy. He received from the Holy Roman Empire a county which straddled the Alps.

1416 : The Count of Savoy Amadeus VIII was elevated to the rank of Duke by the Holy Roman Emperor. Gateway to the Alps, Savoy played a strategic role. The boundaries were extended and it controlled the routes between France and Italy at the beginning of the 15th century.

Compulsory checkpoint

1536 : France wanted to extend its authority in northern Italy, hency why Savoy was a strategic prize. The troops must cross the territory. **Savoy was against this decision- Francis I, King of France, invaded it.**

1559 : The Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis ended the French occupation in Savoy.

The rush to the East

17th and 18th centuries : Savoy was invaded and occupied several times by France. Marriages and diplomatic negotiations addressed the border issue at each peace treaty. Successive demarcations bore witness to these developments. The strategy of the House of Savoy was to abandon its western territories and develop its possessions on the Italian side of the Alps.

When sciences draws the border

1718 : The Dukes of Savoy became Kings of Sardinia.

27 March 1760 : Louis XV and Charles-Emmanuel III signed the Treaty of Turin, which *geometrically* delimitated the Franco-Savoyard border. To do so, they exchanged cities and territories.

Charles-Emmanuel III,
King of Sardinia

Louis XV, King of France

Savoy becomes French

12 June 1860 : Savoy became French.
The King of Sardinia, Victor-Emmanuel II, abandoned his western territories in favour of his project to unify Italy. He asked France for military support to free the north of the peninsula from the Austrian presence. In return, Victor-Emmanuel II, who would later be the first King of Italy, ceded Savoy and the County of Nice to France. The Savoyards were mainly in favour of the annexation.

7 March 1861 : Savoy became a border territory of the newly created Kingdom of Italy. New milestones were erected on passes and summits.

CHECKING

The traveler to France, Geneva or Italy must cross
Savoy, a compulsory checkpoint then. Quite early
in history, people and their goods in circulation were
inspected. The steep mountains forced travellers to
use passes and valleys, an ideal place for tolls.

Tolls on the Roman roads

Tolls already existed during Ancient Rome. Many could be found on the road that crossed the Alps via the Little St Bernard Pass. Mountain peoples first levied tolls in exchange for travellers' safety and road maintenance. But Rome regained control : in 15BC, Emperor Augustus created a tax on goods entering and leaving Gaul.

It's time to pay !

In the Middle Ages, more than 150 road tolls were still spread on the region's roads. To go to Italy, the route of the Mont Cenis was gradually favoured over the Little Saint Bernard as the former was shorter and safer.

Located at a crossroad between the Maurienne and the Tarentaise valleys, Montmelian was ideal for installing a road toll. However, traveling was expensive ! Even more so if you carried goods.

On foot or horseback, crossing the Isère was not free of charge ! Even animals and logs that floated down the river under the bridge were taxed.

Montmélian, 18th century

Border bandits

Enough is enough ! Excessive taxes fostered fraud. In the 18th century, Savoy was a sanctuary for small-scale smuggling that exploited a fragile border with France. Exempt from taxes in Savoy, salt, tobacco, and muslin were smuggled into France. Thousands of smugglers were executed or sent to the galleys.

Do you know our Robin Hood ? Mandrin acted at the border between Savoy and France. With six smuggling campaigns in a year, Mandrin exasperated the administration in charge of taxing goods. A French commando unit of 500 men illegally crossed the border to stop him, which lead to a diplomatic crisis. Savoy demanded the return of the prisoner. Too late ! Mandrin had already been executed... The people's bandit became a true hero.

Nothing to declare ?

3026. - Col du Mont Cenis, Gendarmes Français et Italien et la Borne Frontière.

Savoy became French in 1860. The former border posts disappeared and were set up on the crest of the Alps, on the national border with Italy.

French customs at Mont Cenis,1954.

Papers, please !

People travelled more freely than goods. However, you must show your credentials during the plague or cholera. From the 16th century onwards, the health certificate was introduced again during each epidemic.

From the Revolution onward, especially when the House of Savoy returned to the throne,

checking toughened. Passport and certificate, please !

A good conduct certificate was compulsory at the beginning of the 19th century to travel the Duchy or cross the borders. The mayor of the place of residence issued the certificate on the declaration of two reliable witnesses.

DEFENDING

The traveller met some imposing fortresses on his way. 'But what are they guarding ?' The border, of course ! A purely political construction, tempting to encroach upon...

As far back as the antiquity, the Roman Empire fortified some strategic passages. Many castles were built in the Middle Ages because of the unstoppable conflicts between lords. When the formidable mobile cannon came into being, they became obsolete and were replaced by some massive forts.

Victor-Emmanuel, main fort of the Esseillon forts.

Switching-side forts

In Maurienne, the King of Piedmont Sardinia had five gigantic forts built in 1817- The Esseillon barrier, which aimed at preventing French troops from invading Turin through the Mont Cenis pass. New twist in 1860 !

Savoy became French, and forts switched sides. The defense system then turned against Italy, and the progress of the artillery quickly decommissioned the forts. These stone sentinels have never been used !

The court of honour of the Victor Emmanuel fort, 1903-1904

An unbeatable defence system at the border

New forts, adjusted to the relief, were built at the end of the 19th century. First aimed at protecting the crossing points of the valleys, they later defended the border when posted on the crests. Troops had harsh living conditions there.

In Maurienne, the Fort du Replaton was built in Modane to prevent access to the Frejus railway tunnel.

A concrete border !

Fort Saint Gobain tunnel, Maurienne

The international tensions of the 1930s forced France to build a new defense system along its border, the Maginot line, named after the French Minister of War, André Maginot. In the Alps, forts, outposts and high-altitude barracks were built entirely of concrete.

Mussolini, in return, launched a similar large-scale construction project named the Vallo Alpino (the Alpine Wall). The 1947 Paris Peace Treaty between France and Italy planned to demolish it. However, the U.N. limited its destruction to counter the Soviet threat.

Fort Saint-Gobain block

Real land submarines, the Maginot-type forts, were organised around a central body linked to combat blocks by underground tunnels. Saint-Gobain was up-to-date and well-equipped with heating, water, and air recycling. Living conditions in Alpine forts were much better.

Close watch at the border

The famous Battalion of the Chasseurs Alpins was created at the end of the 19th century, whereas on the other side of the border, the *Alpini* were born.

Winter at the border, near Mont Cenis.
Infantry units occupy altitude posts all seasons.

Potato chores, 1903-1904.

SHARING

Try to picture this ! After 1860, the new border on the Alps crests separated populations from the same country ! Some became French, others Italian. Yet, they shared the same patois and customs and sometimes belonged with the same family.

Goods and know-how kept on circulating among neighbouring valleys despite the border. Piedmontese rice was processed in Modane, livestock moved to summer pastures beyond the crests, and inhabitants used to gather to celebrate some traditional festivals. The border was no longer a barrier but a link between people.

We have always spoken the same dialect between us – the Italian and the French.

An Italian restaurant in Modane.

The peddler- beyond boundaries

Carrying goods on his back, the peddler was used to long-distance walking and, walking and connected people as far back as the Middle Ages. He spread news and ideas by selling books, almanacs and news sheets throughout the countryside.

His arrival was quite a celebration for villagers ! Some peddlers carried a magic lantern. At nightfall, they projected illustrated stories to entertain their audience.

Modane, or the crazy era of a border town

A border town from 1860, Modane experienced a real golden age. The construction of the Mont Cenis Tunnel, that connected France to Italy, made this town cosmopolitan. Modane welcomed many travelers and emigrants in transit. Some Italians eventually settled and participated in the valley's economic development. The population became French-Italian and doubled by the end of the 19th century !

Shops, banks, emigration agencies, and railway services developed. Soldiers, who had come to defend the new border and build forts, livened up the city. The sound of trains, parades, and mechanical pianos thus rhythmed the city life.

RIZERIE FRANÇOIS CATTANEO

MODANE (SAVOIE)

Originally from Genoa, Francesco Cattaneo set up the first rice mill in Modane in 1908. Piedmontese rice was processed and packed on-site. The proximity of the train station was a great asset ! Four rice mills were then set up in Modane and its surroundings.

Moutains that divide yet unify

Chasseurs Alpins (Alpine Hunters) and Alpinis at the border

Chasseurs Alpins (Alpine Hunters) and Alpinis are the children of the nation. They share the same knowledge of the mountains and its dangers. Their great closeness explains why they could not fight in 1940. Hence why more warmonger-fascist troops replaced Italian border troops.

Piedmontese pilgrims at the Notre-Dames du Charmaix chapel, above Modane

Livestock in the Alpine pastures of Bramans

Transhumance unifies the border valleys of Haute Maurienne. The local peasant lacking stables and hay takes his livestock to spend winter in the farms of the Susa Valley, Italy. Italian farmers, in return, keep the calves born in spring. They all meet again in the summer, in the Alpine grazings of the border.

Women of Bramans and Giaglione in traditional costumes

The villages of Bramans in Haute Maurienne and Giaglione, Italy, are twinned, and for a good reason ! Even if separated by high mountains, the similarities between their traditional celebrations, dialect, and costumes are enormous.

SAVOIE

LE DÉPARTEMENT