

Via ferratas in nature and landscape

What Club Arc Alpin (CAA) says about it



The Via ferrata boom

Via ferrata-climbing is recognised as a mountain sport and has enjoyed increasing popularity in the last few decades.

The use of Via ferratas are embedded both in the programs of the alpine associations within the CAA as well as in the courses offered by private organizers. Via ferratas offer some kind-of mountain experiences, however far from traditional climbing, in comparatively extreme landscapes, and without extensive previous experience.

On the other hand Via Ferratas represent a negative impact on the natural mountain environment both through the actual positioning of the installations/routes in the rock as well as through the consequently increased presence of humans in remote and fragile mountain environments, causing pressures predominately on wildlife and vegetation.

There are different types of Via ferratas, from traditional fixed routes in exposed terrain to Via ferratas alpine terrain to sports routes which are generally established in lower, easily accessible locations for the purpose of sporting experiences.

For some years now a trend of developing new Via ferratas has appeared across the Alps, and in some areas they are already abundant, in some areas this trend seems still to continue. This development is primarily encouraged and supported by the tourism sector, including mountain guides.

The trend is heading in the direction of increasingly difficult climbs with many technical installations which represent a violent impact on rock faces and mountain environment overall.

The member associations of CAA are of the opinion that new Via ferratas should be constructed at most as "classical" via ferratas in different difficulty levels. Via ferratas which are enriched with adventure installations that degrade the alpine landscape to nothing more than a backdrop ("fun" Via ferratas), are strictly rejected.

The assessment of Via ferrata projects includes the Via ferrata itself, and its approach and descent path.

Via ferratas - YES, BUT...!

The member associations of the CAA consider Via ferratas and their use to be an interesting complement to mountain sports possibilities. As with all infrastructures in the mountains, however, there are questions regarding their negative effects and limits:

- Via ferratas alter the nature of the local landscape, which loses its original character.
- Via ferratas draw large numbers of visitors and the associated traffic, which can have negative effects on nature and local population in mountain areas.
- Via ferratas raise new issues of safety, training, personal responsibility and accident prevention.
- There is a threat of a "build up" to increasingly elaborate installations and an uncontrolled "arms race" between competing tourism destinations.
- Via ferratas threaten the alpinism ethics, particularly in the segment of "climbing by fair means".

In its **2008 "Mountaineering Charter"**, the CAA formulated the requirements for new Via ferratas as follows:

"Limits should be set for the development of the mountains with technical alpine equipment; the unspoiled high mountain region with its outstanding value in terms of experience must not be subject to development with equipment. The construction of

Via ferratas, canyon routes, climbing gardens, etc., should be restricted to areas close to the valley which are developed in terms of traffic engineering and can deal with pollution in ecological terms. The description of routes in guides and topos should be carried out with the necessary consideration for the specific local cultural and ecological features.”

The member associations of the CAA have established their own specific positions regarding Via ferratas. They are available for download on the internet sites of the corresponding associations (via the CAA website www.club-arc-alpin.eu). Some of them have taken a step further by adopting a general ban on new Via ferratas, for their own organization as well as on a general basis.

Planning and construction of new Via ferratas - CAA requires

The alpine associations are experts for mountain sports, trail maintenance and alpine environment. Therefore their involvement in the planning and realization of new Via ferratas is of crucial importance. Information on future projects and the publication of planning documents have to be communicated in time.

On the basis of its charter and the positions of its member associations, the CAA requires:

- **A conservative and regionally-coordinated development approach which excludes the construction of “sports/fun” Via ferratas (refers to ÖAV definition)**
- **Inclusion of all – including critical – interested parties, in particular alpine associations, at an early stage of the project.**
- **No new Via ferratas in isolated, natural high mountain areas.**
- **Mountains whose peaks are only accessible by climbing may not be the subject of Via ferrata route development.**
- **Check all the alternatives for locations of planned Via ferratas in the area.**
- **Establishment of new Via ferratas only in touristically or otherwise developed areas accessible by public transport or mountain railways.**
- **The following conservation areas should be excluded from any construction of new Via ferratas:** all protected areas (national, regional parks, natural monuments, nature reserves etc.), Natura 2000 sites, landscape protection areas and biotopes.
- **Strict observation of official authorization procedures.**
- **Consideration of concerns for the protection of nature in new projects by involvement of experts in the planning phase and during construction:**
 - Exclusion of areas with occurrence of sensitive animal species ¹
 - Exclusion of areas with occurrence of rare plant species or plant species with isolated populations (especially rock plant species).
- **The requirements of the Habitat Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora) and Birds Directive (Council Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds) have to be followed.**

The CAA and its approximately 2.4 million members recommend all local and regional authorities and tourism stakeholders to observe these criteria in the planning and authorization of new Via ferratas.

Revision of the paper of 2009, approved by the CAA General assembly on September, 16th, 2017 in Malbun, Liechtenstein.

¹ For example : breeding areas of golden eagle, bearded vulture, peregrine falcon and eagle owl; courtship and breeding areas of capercaillies, ptarmigan, black grouse and rock partridge.



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