

# Europe's Alpine Diamond Region

*Michel Rivoire*

**A**t the crossroads of the Alps, Geneva, Switzerland, Lyon, France, and Turin, Italy are located within a strategic economic and transportation nexus between the North and South of the European Union (AYE). The region they bound is among the most populated and economically active on the continent located at the boundaries of the main two economic axes of the Common Market. With the emergence of the AYE, such "natural" regions are coming together in recognition of their common interests as the impediments of national boundaries are lowered. Though quite heterogeneous, multicultural, and multilingual, the people and communities in this trination region have discovered that they share many economic, social, cultural, educational, and political aspirations.

The story of how areas in three countries on each side of the Alps came together to create an instrument for regional collaboration is a drama in three acts.

## **Act I: Inception**

**March 1982:** A delegation of American mayors landed in Europe. They were members of the U. S. association, Partners for Livable Communities which, as its name suggests, advocates quality of life issues, particularly in urban and suburban areas. These American mayors were visiting Europe simply to see how their colleagues across the Atlantic were dealing with urban problems (housing, communications, transportation, crime, racism). But they also came to strengthen international ties.

As luck would have it, this is exactly what the French Rhone-Alps region and its capital city, Lyon, were looking for as well. The American delegation was diverted between Geneva and Paris and found

itself in Lyon for two days, a stop not foreseen on their itinerary. Friendships were formed, and in Lyon we decided to create a European chapter of Partners! But the participants from Lyon felt somewhat distant from their American colleagues, so we went to Geneva to meet Claude Haegi, the future mayor of that international city, with a proposition.

We received a polite welcome, slightly Calvinistic, almost cold. Visibly, the magistrate from Geneva was wondering what these people from Lyon were doing in his office. Even though a mere 93 miles separate the two cities, we felt a little like men from outer space, lost on an unknown planet. But quickly things warmed up and the meeting ended with a concrete plan: together, Geneva, Lyon, and Turin would host the first European symposium of Partners in October of 1987.

No sooner said than done, Giuseppe Dondona, the deputy mayor of Turin, and Piero Gastaldo, director of the Agnelli et Franco Mellano du Politecnico Foundation, of Turin, became players. At this highly successful European-American conference, relations grew warm, not only with our counterparts from across the Atlantic, but between many participants from the regions of Europe who met for the first time.

The "Alpine Diamond" as a forum for collaboration became reality on December 24, 1988. Charles Millon, recently elected as president of the Rhone-Alps region, had a few friends to lunch. The budding collaboration between Lyon, Turin, and Geneva naturally came up as a topic of discussion. On a paper tablecloth in the cafe, I sketched out the triangle formed by the three cities. At its heart is Europe's highest peak, Mont Blanc. Finally, Claude Haegi, from Geneva, came up with the perfect name, and, a few hours before Christmas, the Alpine Diamond was born.

What remained was to determine its mission and organization. As talks progressed, it was decided that the Alpine Diamond would include the city and canton of Geneva in Switzerland, Lyon, and the Department of Rhone-Alps in France, and Turin and Italy's surrounding Piedmont region. The organization's role would be to facilitate collaboration between the people of these three areas on the one hand, and between the public and private sectors of the regions on the other. Several other ideas were put forth. I reassured everyone that "The people that decided to build the cathedrals were a little crazy and ideas that are a little crazy are sometimes necessary to keep people from going completely crazy!"

The pioneers of the Alpine Diamond met again several months later in Annecy, France at the invitation of Dr. Charles Mérieux, a man who is never far away when questions of the future are being discussed. A first manifesto was drafted. The aim of the organization: to serve as a catalyst for transborder cooperation between the adjoining regions in France, Italy, and Switzerland. The manifesto made clear that the organization would not become a political or administrative structure, but instead facilitate collaboration between the public and private sectors and serve as a forum within which men and women of the region can come together, reflect on, and cooperate in planning common initiatives.

### **Act II: Getting Underway**

To develop and consolidate the organization's influence on a global scale, and at the urging of industrialist Christian Roiron, Lyon created an International Council in 1989. Geneva, followed by Turin, joined the council. The council includes representatives from the rest of Europe and North America, as well.

The Alpine Diamond's first act was to publish a tourist map of the three-country region.

Then, the three regions decided to present their common candidacy, as the Alpine Diamond, to the European Commission in Brussels for designation as the "European Capital for Culture" in 2002.

Much to our amazement, recognition of the ini-

tiative came much sooner than anticipated.

In June 1994, the Alpine Diamond, through the auspices of Partners for Livable Communities, was honored by President Bill Clinton and received from Henry Cisneros, secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the "Award for the Most Livable Communities." This led Claude Haegi, of Geneva, to conclude facetiously in private: "Normally we never get thanked for things that we do. With the Americans, we are rewarded before we've even done anything!"

### **Act III: The Hard Part**

More formal regional cross-border cooperation is now developing all across northern Europe. Many regions, such as Euregio, are organized into legislative and executive branches and members are elected. The France/Geneva region is one of the most active formally organized cross-border areas in Europe.

Nonetheless, the Alpine Diamond is firm in its desire to maintain an informal character. It is, and wants to remain, a crucible for ideas, a place for meetings where elected officials, social/ economic players, and citizen's groups can gather to visualize the future for their region and set the standards and targets for cooperative regional development.

### **Creating a Shared Sense of "Region"**

To create a common regional spirit among the people of the area requires serious and sustained commitment on the part of public opinion leaders. That initiative is underway. As elsewhere in the world, many national boundaries in Europe (or state boundaries in the U. S.) unnaturally sever or separate long-standing human, economic, social and physical relationships. In our own region, for example, the facts are hard to deny (much of it was once included in the "Kingdom of Savoy").

Parish registers are filled with stories of men and women who, since antiquity, have criss-crossed the Alps, oblivious to national borders as they lived their daily lives. They have married, borne children, conducted business, built roads and dams, migrated in mass. This constant movement, these comings and

goings, via this pass, through that tunnel, from one valley to another, has in fact forged a shared identity among the alpine people. These lifetime and generational ties are far more important than ever-changing customs checkpoints or national frontiers in the location of which the local people never had a say.

National frontiers, like so many arbitrarily-drawn political boundaries, can slowly suffocate the impulse among people to open up and discover one another. A man-drawn line on a map becomes more real than the genuine realities of human life.

Yet a youth today who moves to the beat of immediate, global, satellite-provided information; who travels like our ancestors, but faster, farther, more often; and who constantly compares things and forms opinions—such a contemporary youth quite rightfully wonders whether neighbors are really alien and different, maybe even an “enemy.” The lines on the map mean much less to young people today.

In the Alpine Diamond, we do not want to subtract from anyone's national identity. In fact, we believe our region is deeply enriched by the differences between the cultures. It is a strength of our collaboration. But we do want to undertake those cooperative actions that will be beneficial for all of the 12 million inhabitants who today reside in the region—beneficial for the economy; beneficial for the environment; beneficial for the quality of our life, which is already quite special and famous.

It is especially important not to mistake this emerging regionalism in Europe for a sort of “minationalism.” Instead, regional initiatives in the New Europe should primarily allow for a more effective response to the needs and aspirations of people. As Denis de Rougement wrote:

A community of people is not the end of the individual, but rather a means for them to better reach their personal goals. The ultimate goal is not a powerful community, but rather more freedom, and greater individual fulfillment. The community is the place where we go beyond individual egos... We should remember what Kant said about the individual: the individual is what, in man, can never be used as a tool.

## Emerging Objectives of the Alpine Diamond

What then do we want to achieve?

**Quality of Life:** We want to propose a new paradigm for society, evidently urban, built to enjoy for the long run what nature and our ancestors bequeathed us. We have a land blessed by the gods: a diversity of history, geography, and climate, a great deal of potential in our economy, our universities, tourism, and culture.

Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka are fighting it out in their “corridor” of transportation. Los Angeles, overgrown, is losing its identity. And not to mention (and madden) several large metropolises closer to us, we can enjoy somewhat “slower” development that will probably offer us new, or at least different, opportunities.

Are we able to propose a credible alternative to the “megalopolis?” Must one become bigger, denser, and more crowded with tourists, at the risk of becoming known as the most polluted? Must we be the first to get to 100 million passengers per year at one single airport? Must we build the biggest permanent stadium, or claim the most extensive subway system in the world?

We propose different regional ambitions.

**Interaction of People:** First, regional collaboration and intimacy based on “visiting one another and making better use of each other's products”—which means that our region should be truly “permeable.” Our services and governments must be client-oriented, providing services and meeting the client's needs, from where he or she chooses to live, to where he or she wants to travel.

The question of “how?” remains.

Not only skeptics question how to we are going to accomplish our objectives. We ask ourselves the same questions.

I foresee several solid paths toward the future:

**Transportation and Connectivity:** To facilitate this interaction, close attention has been focused on the interconnections between transportation systems: the trans-European fast-train linkages; the airports; the urban transportation systems in Greater Lyon, Geneva, Turin, Grenoble, and Saint Etienne.

As we try to improve connections between cities, we are dealing with the entire "transportation chain," from home to work, to meeting places, ensuring the most direct possible access between the systems of urban transportation of each area. Additionally, the availability and interconnectivity of the systems of transportation will be enhanced.

We want this interconnectivity in order to simplify the lives of the peoples of the Alpine Diamond and bring them closer together. We want to give them the means to wield influence on the world stage, while at the same time showing that we are able to develop our own region in a new and better way.

**Culture:** Everyone is on board, and the current project to finalize our common candidacy as the European Capital of Culture is, in this respect, very symbolic. But we hope to establish self-reinforcing relationships between the region's libraries, dance companies, orchestras, and scientific and professional organizations.

**Education:** We dream of close educational and research relationships between our own Alpine Diamond universities, research centers, and laboratories. We can add to what we have already set up between the Rhone-Alps and French-speaking Switzerland, and open up our universities to hundreds of thousands of future students from all over the world—a major new world center of education! What a leap forward if our schools of higher learning were able to team together!

**Tourism:** We have the largest area of ski slopes anywhere in the world—already functioning as a regional network. The mountains and lakes are world famous and can be developed, managed, and promoted as a regional asset, rather than separately.

**Promotion:** This calls for capitalizing upon the multiculturalism and bilingualism of our regional media. We propose organizing together the largest sporting events in the world, and then capitalizing upon our media to expose these events to the world.

**Media:** Working with Euronews and our respective television stations, we will try to invent the television of tomorrow, useful for interactive exchanges in education, medicine, health, research, science, culture, and entertainment.

**Economic Development:** We will try to build an economy for the future, developing research centers, scientific parks, and technology centers and linking them through interchanges of people and ideas and students and joint projects.

**International Presence:** We will constantly strive to attract international organizations and activities to locate within the Diamond. With Geneva's already strong presence in this role and the growing number of international organizations, such as INTERPOL, locating in Lyon, we are on the way to achieving this goal.

### **A Mountain As a New World Capital**

The deputy mayor of Tel Aviv, to whom I presented our still-in-the-making plans recently, answered me, "Ah, the new Mont Blanc, what a beautiful challenge. To want to make a mountain the symbol of a world capital!"

Exactly, that is our goal in the Alpine Diamond. ■

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