



Support for Migrants as a Form of Territorial Struggle: Endogenous Solidarity in the Roya Valley

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11.1 A VALLEY CROSSED BY THE BORDER¹

Two-thirds of the Roya Valley, a relatively small area crossed by the Franco-Italian border, today belongs to France.² The valley starts and

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²This configuration is recent; the border has moved twice over the last 160 years, revealing its mobile and temporary nature, and more generally debunking the notion of "natural" borders. In 1860, before Italy's unification, the currently French villages of the Roya Valley belonged to the Savoy Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia, together with Nice. In 1860, Breil-Sur-Roya, Saorge, and what is now Fontan—an independent municipality since 1871—became French; after the Second World War, in 1947, Tende and La Brigue were also transferred to France's jurisdiction.

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ends in Italy, stretching along the 59 km of the Roya River; from the Col de Tende—a 1871 m high alpine pass that separates the Ligurian Alps from the Maritime Alps—all the way to the sea at Ventimiglia. The valley's five French villages (Breil, Saorge, Fontan, Brigue, and Tende) are home to a rough total of 6000 inhabitants; protagonists in the welcoming of migrants after the border closure in June 2015. These are surrounded by Italian territory, to the north, south and east. To reach Nice or, more generally, France, the shortest and quickest route is the motorway. The nearest junction is Ventimiglia. Dwellers of the valley frequently travel to the Italian city, for example, to do their shopping.

For the valley's French inhabitants, passing through Italy is also a very familiar occurrence; from the mid-1990s, with the introduction of Schengen, until before 2015,³ there were no controls and the border could be crossed without even realising it. From 2015, with the introduction of systematic controls and territorial militarisation, the border has generated a structural blockade to transiting migrants: thousands of persons from Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, the Ivory Coast, and many other locations, have come to a standstill in situations of marginality while waiting for an opportunity to cross the border.

Although the Roya Valley had already hosted a series of mobile checkpoints and controls of various nature since 2015, the actual militarisation process—with border forces and military personnel of all kinds spreading throughout the territory—materialised from summer 2016⁴ (Gachet-Dieuzeide 2018; Giliberti 2020). This process occurred just as the flow of migrants crossing the valley became growingly visible. At the same time, the reaction from local inhabitants, many of whom hosting the migrants in their own homes and supporting them in the continuation of their journey, consolidated in response to the emerging problem affecting their territory.

³In 2011, during the Arab Spring, a short period of systematic checks at the Franco-Italian border occurred, blocking escaping Tunisians. At this time, several Roya Valley inhabitants had already intervened with their support.

⁴Figures released by solidarity networks and mediated by the European parliamentarian José Bové (<https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/1-invite-de-8h20/1-invite-de-8h20-25-jui-let-2017>) speak of a cost of 60,000 Euro per day for the militarisation of the Roya Valley—i.e. 420,000 Euro per week, 1,800,000 Euro per month, 21,900,000 Euro per year; totalling tens of millions of Euros.

In an attempt to cross the border, *shebab*⁵ crossed mountains and rural territories, developing new prohibited transit routes into Europe (Queirolo Palmas 2017). In this way, counter-maps took shape, facilitated in the various territories by actions of hospitality and support to the migrants. One of the key elements of the contemporary crisis of migratory policies is the burgeoning involvement of civil society, making its stand (Fontanari and Borri 2017) in the political-migratory *battlefield* (Ambrosini 2018). Solidarity networks towards those who cross the border are not a historical novelty in these territories. On the contrary, they involve descendants of open and supportive households that have, over the centuries, helped heretics, deserters, Jews, and partisans in their clandestine mountain crossings between Italy and France (Tombaccini-Villefranche 1999).

In the contemporary context of the “reception crisis” (Lendaro et al. 2019), we define “solidarity” as the varied set of actions aimed at supporting migrants in transit, based on different motivations, registers, and reference practices, are not provided an economic counterpart, and extraneous to the formal reception system (Giliberti and Queirolo Palmas 2020). Some authors, in referring to solidarity—a concept strongly used also in emic terms—and to its heterogeneity, propose the expression “umbrella notion”, because the term covers a wide spectrum of registers of action, actors, and practices (Birey et al. 2019). *Solidaires* can be private citizens, who organise themselves into informal groups or associations, and place themselves between the poles of a more humanitarian or more political approach, through practices of civil disobedience (Lendaro 2018).

This paper arises from ethnographic research based on field immersion and participation in local life, facilitating the construction of a “common action” (Queirolo Palmas and Stagi 2017) with the different players in the field.⁶ The main techniques used are participant observations in multiple contexts of valley life and the collection of oral sources,

⁵The term *shebab*, with which Ventimiglia’s solidarity groups refer to transient peoples, meaning “young” in Arabic, proposes a generational identity that counters a crystallised identity on migratory movement.

⁶The immersions in the field were carried out assiduously and continuously from January 2017 to June 2018, although after that I went back and continued to go back to the valley for research purposes.

made up of twenty-nine semi-structured interviews, along with countless informal conversations reported in the field diaries. The research also generated a short documentary on solidarity practices.⁷ This paper covers the fundamental elements of the valley's solidarity experiences and the characteristics of the endogenous networks that help migrants and contribute to other territorial struggles, which, generally speaking, form part of a dimension of resistance to neoliberal policies (Giliberti 2020).

11.2 PRACTICES OF HOSPITALITY AND TRANSIT SUPPORT

Even when the border has been crossed, in the French territory, systematic controls in French territory are carried out within 20 km of the border (Gachet-Dieuzeide 2018). Once stopped, illegal migrants generally face *express deportation* on account of border authorities (Aris Escarcena 2018). Most aspiring crossers experience several times before an eventual successful crossing. This is a sort of *game of the goose*,⁸ where a migrant enters France, is deported to Ventimiglia, they try again, are deported again, and so on, until the majority eventually succeed in their attempt. Territorial monitoring data from Anafé (2019) reveals that people attempt to cross the border up to fifteen times before succeeding. Philippe, a *Solidaire* from the valley who is very active in multiple mobilisations, reports:

Here in the Roya Valley we are seeing this continuous rotation of people who arrive in the valley but are then blocked by the authorities and are deported to Ventimiglia... We have met people like this who have tried a lot of times before managing to pass. Several hundreds of soldiers from many corps, with all sorts of different weapons, night vision goggles, motion detectors... an invasion of the forces of order, drones, helicopters... we are witnessing a rather nonsensical story in this rural valley... (Philippe,⁹ 33 years old, mountain guide, October 2017)

⁷The documentary “Transiti. Una valle solidale”, that arises from this research, made with Massimo Cannarella and produced by the Visual Sociology Laboratory of the University of Genoa, can be viewed gratis at the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyRToR6j5_4.

⁸Similar in scope to the popular game of “snakes and ladders”.

⁹The names of the interviewees are fictitious, in order to guarantee their anonymity.

Some valley's *Solidaires* have been active in their support to migrants who have been stuck on the Italian side of the border since June 2015 (Giliberti and Queirolo Palmas 2020). Anne, who immediately became one of the key persons in the valley's solidarity movement, upon returning from holiday, found a message on her mobile phone from a friend, stating: "I want to speak to you to see what we can do for the migrants...". Like her, other people in the valley had realised that some days earlier systematic border controls had been re-established.

This is an event that has deeply affected the territory achieving long-term stability following the declaration of *état d'urgence* by the French State in November 2015. The subsequent translation of its main features into common law as part of the 2017-1510 anti-terrorism law passed by President Macron's Government has rendered border controls even more structural. A series of inhabitants felt the need to respond, firstly in Ventimiglia, considered part of their valley, and then in their own villages, as Anne herself tells us.

For me, the Roya Valley goes as far as Ventimiglia... and France is the country to which I belong, in which I pay my taxes, which decides how... this situation is a direct consequence of my country's decisions. For me, it is therefore completely logical to be at the Balzi Rossi, to hold assemblies with the Italian *No-Borders*, to support people blocked at the border, even though the true crossing of migrants in our valley started later.... (Anne, 57 years old, employee, April 2018)

An activity based in Ventimiglia, which has attracted strong participation from the valley's inhabitants, is that of food preparation and distribution, despite a municipal order prohibiting this activity, formally for health-hygiene reasons, but in practice representing a criminalisation of humanitarian action.¹⁰ Depending on the historical period, between one hundred to several hundreds of meals were prepared, up to a peak of 800–900 meals per day in summer 2017. The Roya Valley *Solidaires*, coordinated through the association *Roya Citoyenne*—which receives donations and

¹⁰This municipal order is similar to orders prohibiting the distribution of basic necessities (Aris Escarcena and Da Silva 2018), which, in the hyper-prohibitionist context of recent years, have featured in other locations, such as Calais and Paris (Queirolo Palmas 2017). In Ventimiglia, that measure was introduced in August 2015 and initially revoked in May 2016 following widespread criticism; it was reintroduced in August 2016 to be then definitively revoked in April 2017, remaining in force for a total of 19 months.

finances the purchase of ingredients—continuously provided meals for about a year. This was implemented via a rotating structure of village groups: one weekday fixed for each village, helped by support groups from neighbouring valleys (Vallée de la Bevéra, Vallée de la Vesubie, among others). The data collected by *Roya Citoyenne* points to 150,000 meals being prepared and served by the valley dwellers in 2017 alone, when they were then replaced by the international solidarity supporters of Kesha Niya.¹¹

From summer 2016, transiting migrants stuck at the border started to pass through the valley with great intensity. At this time, many inhabitants felt compelled to address the situation in their territory; indeed, on their way home, they would see injured *shebab* at the roadside and would spontaneously intervene. Sensing a sort of moral obligation in not being able to leave people in distress lying in the road, some of them started to take the migrants home (Lendaro 2018; Giliberti 2017).

People felt obliged to take a stand... when you're in the car, you're driving and you see someone walking for two days, at the height of summer when it is scorching hot or in the middle of winter when it's snowing and all he's wearing is sandals and shorts, you can't just watch and do nothing... (Jeff, 61 years old, operator for disabled people, June 2017)

If there are people in great difficulty at the roadside, you have to stop and take them home... this is spontaneous, you can't do anything else.... (Michel, 33 years old, farmer, April 2018)

In the valley, part of the population thinks in these terms and so began the practice of widespread hospitality in private homes and on agricultural land made available by an alternative farmer of the valley, Cédric Herrou, who became the media's protagonist of the cause. This hospitality endeavour is coordinated by the association *Roya Citoyenne*,¹²

¹¹ *Kesha Niya Kitchen*—meaning *No problem Kitchen* in Kurdish—is formed by members known in the valley as *the Vikings*, since the majority are German. The *Vikings*—who, together with other migrant support groups, specialise in food preparation and distribution in locations of border struggles—worked in the field of Grande-Synthe, near Calais, before collaborating with *Roya Citoyenne* at the Franco-Italian border.

¹² *Roya Citoyenne* (<https://www.roya-citoyenne.fr/>) is an association established in 2011 around the principle of mobilisation against the absorption of the valley by CARF (Communauté d'agglomération de la Riviera française) and for the defence of the *Roya*

with the aim of liaising supporters and crystallising the sense of solidarity that was starting to build in the valley. A significant portion of the valley's solidarity is expressed through this association. However, several other experiences of migrant support—similarly and spontaneously took shape in the territory without being linked to the association platform—predominantly smaller, informal networks that remain actively unpublished¹³ (Giliberti 2020).

The valley, originally a marginal and peripheral rural location, became a focal place for migratory routes towards France and Northern Europe. In particular, from spring until the end of summer 2017, dozens of migrants entered the valley every day.¹⁴ It is impossible to establish exactly how many migrants passed through and stopped in the valley, staying in private homes and at the Breil campsite, but the figure is likely in the 1000s. The agricultural land of Breil alone—where a hospitality record was established—witnessed about 2500 people pass through, with peaks of 250 migrants at the same time in summer 2017. In addition, more than a hundred homes of *Solidaires*, spread across all villages, accommodated dozens of migrants over time—in some cases even a few hundred. In January 2017, in the village of Saorge that is home to around 400 inhabitants, roughly sixty people were accommodated simultaneously in private homes, thus involving almost 20% of the population present in the village at that time. These are surprising numbers, particularly when considered in relation to a total valley population of about 6000. Anne, who was

Valley community. In May 2016, its statutes were modified so as to be dedicated to the migrant issue, when a series of citizens already active in support to migrants, decided to work together to collectively organise solidarity action.

¹³The issue of media coverage, discussed in detail in other contributions (Giliberti 2020), was subject to debate and division within the solidarity networks. On the one hand, it implies political pressure and thus enables certain results to be obtained in support of the cause, but, on the other, it facilitates the increase of militarisation processes and hinders border crossing for transient peoples.

¹⁴Following the first conviction of the Maritime Alps prefect issued by the Court of Nice—there would be four in total—in spring 2017, the *Solidaires* obtained an unwritten protocol that temporarily ratified the right to allow migrants to pass through police checkpoints or railway station. This was subject to sending a named list, and would allow migrants to file an asylum application in Nice. That legal corridor facilitated the substantial increase in migrant numbers along that route and involved thousands of people using Cédric Herrou's campsite as a logistical base. In the space of a few months, the State denounced the agreement it had reached and once again denied the right of passage towards France, and with it the prospects of filing an asylum application in Nice.

very active in organising hospitality in the local area, told me with wide eyes: “there came a time when we no longer knew where to put them... and we looked everywhere for people who were willing to accommodate them...”.

The solidarity network was well coordinated and, if someone spotted migrants in the valley, someone else near the location was swiftly contacted by telephone to pick them up before the police intercepted them. Migrants would then be accommodated. In a militarised territory, *Solidaires* intercept arriving migrants in an attempt to take them under their wing before police forces are able to find them and return them to Ventimiglia with a *refus d'entrée*. Migrants arrive on foot, by mountain paths or by railroad tracks, in some cases on buses or trains, or accompanied by *passeurs* or *Solidaires* themselves.

Yesterday morning, while we were interviewing Christian, his telephone rang continuously; all the calls were about the issue of transiting migrants, in particular, people who had seen them and were calling someone to intervene. Sometimes, it was the migrants themselves, calling to agree on what to do; some *Solidaires'* telephone numbers are in fact, by word of mouth, spreading to Ventimiglia. A very effective system of sympathisers has been created; they contact each other by telephone so that those who live closest to the location of interception can intervene and accommodate the migrants in their homes before deciding what to do, avoiding their rejection to Ventimiglia. The majority of migrants remain in the valley for a few days, sometimes several weeks; sporadically, some of them stay longer, before leaving again (...)

Yesterday evening, while walking through the valley, at the church in Breil, we came across a completely helpless Eritrean boy who had some wounds on his feet and had no idea where to go. He spoke to us in Tigrinya and the only thing we could understand is that he had come on foot from Ventimiglia and that he wanted to go to Paris. The church warden was about to throw him out but, on the streets in Breil, he would have been seen by the police and taken back to Ventimiglia. We telephoned Christian and explained the situation to him; barely five minutes went by and a girl with her little daughter seemed to take the boy in. “For the time being, I will prepare a hot meal for him, she said, then we will figure out what to do with him and how we can get him to Paris. We will contact people who are in places along the journey to see if we can get him there gradually”, the girl told us; we wished the Eritrean boy good luck, pleased that he would be spending the night in a warm house in Breil and not on the cold streets of Ventimiglia. We were also pleased that his path could

continue, also thanks to the contacts of the *Solidaires* that are steadily growing alongside their actions. (Extract from the field diary, February 2017)

A transit infrastructure is generated, consisting of scattered territorial networks in connection with each other—like that of Ventimiglia, the Loup Valley, Marseille or Paris—reminiscent of the United States nineteenth-century “Underground Railroad” (Foner 2015). An underground network of solidarity houses and safe havens—which allowed the black slaves fleeing the plantations to travel up the American continent towards the north until reaching Canada—is arising again today in Europe, where people and networks of crossed territories are facilitating the propagation of migrant routes (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020). The actions of American abolitionists of the past echo those of European solidarity groups of the present.

11.3 ENDOGENOUS SOLIDARITY FOR A TERRITORIAL STRUGGLE

The solidarity taking shape in the valley is, at its core, an expression of part of its inhabitants; persons who have chosen to live in that place. It is an endogenous solidarity, enacted by about 150–200 families, around 10% of the population of the Roya Valley. These *Solidaires* are coordinated collectively and participate in different activities: they host migrants in their own homes, help transportation in support of migrant routes, distribute basic necessities, collaborate in actions of political and legal reporting of border violence, and accuse public powers when they fail to apply standing laws on the right to asylum and on the acceptance of unaccompanied minors (Giliberti 2017). The valley’s endogenous solidarity—which, in some cases, defines itself as humanitarian—is expressed intimately, by hosting people in their own homes, but also politically, by demanding new migration policies and new societal models (Babels 2019). The heated and unresolved debate between humanitarian action and political action, as analysed in-depth in other contributions (Giliberti 2020), forms the basis of the valley’s solidarity.

A dominant presence within the solidarity networks is that of the *neorurals*, characterised by a well-defined political and ideological choice, inspired by the principles of de-growth and the search for alternative realities (Latouche 2011; Rahbi 2014). Almost all people who form part of

the solidarity networks were not born in the Roya Valley from indigenous families, but arrived there voluntarily as part of their own biographical journey. They mostly came in the late 1970s, choosing an alternative rural life, and in a series of cases inspired by “paths of anti-capitalist utopia” (Fréméaux and Jordan 2012).

When you look at the members of the *Roya Citoyenne* or even our more informal and less media-publicised networks, except in some cases, you will see that the majority of these people are neorurals or descendants of neorurals, essentially... They are people who came here with values, which they have safeguarded and conveyed to their children... They are people who are rooted in the Roya Valley and have consolidated certain values, who are at the foundation of the support in favour of migrants. It is primarily an issue of values and beliefs. Here, in the valley, people who express these values have relationships and connections between them that are stronger than in other places, as they are less numerous; we see each other often, generating socio-cultural and friendship networks which are perhaps stronger than those of urban contexts.... (Marcel, 55 years old, botanist and mountain guide, April 2018)

Marcel told us about networks consisting of people who have chosen to live in this context and who have become its main players, participating in the affairs and in the construction of the territory’s identity, with which they strongly identify. They are the same people who participate actively in civil struggles for the defence of the territory. From the demand for maintenance of the local railway line and public services, such as the valley’s post office and schools, to mobilisations against the huge work with strong environmental impact of the double tunnel of Tende, or that against the imposed membership of CARF—an administrative inter-communality of the coast and not of the valley, designed for tourism and not for sustainable rural life—as analysed in-depth in other contributions (Giliberti 2020).

The life choice inspired by community and alternative values of neorurals is undoubtedly a key element for understanding the solidarity approach towards migrants. A question of values, therefore, as Marcel suggested earlier, of lifestyle and alternative approaches. These are crucial in understanding the social composition of the people of the valley, as explained by Marta and Filippo.

Certainly, the neorural composition influences ... people who have chosen to come and live here because it is a naturalistically interesting valley, there is little tourism... people who have chosen a lifestyle ... this determines a great opening of solidarity ... to say: no one is left behind. The composition of the population seems to me the clearest explanation (Marta, 30 years old, unemployed, April 2018)

Growing up in alternative lifestyle clearly produces a different society... fortunately that in certain campaigns, with certain alternative lifestyles, something moves ... I too have often wondered why the campaign in certain cases produces greater solidarity... this seems to me the clearest track (Filippo, 34 years old, operator for disabled people, April 2018)

The *Solidaires* of the territory want to ensure no people of the valley are in danger, or in a situation of extreme marginality, forced to sleep on the streets. Hospitality constitutes the primary part of this sensitivity towards the defence of the territory and becomes a form of territorial struggle in which citizens want to have a say in the decisions effecting and affecting their valley. The solidarity action of the Roya Valley, which takes shape in response to a territorial crisis that obliges its inhabitants to take some form of a stand, presents specificities linked to the rural context. A key element is the autonomy generated by this alternative campaign, in which people are used to taking care of themselves to solve concrete problems related to their daily lives, and do the same when the territory starts being crossed by migrants in adversity. In other words, if there is a problem on their territory, this group of people tend to take care of it.

The characteristics of this context facilitate the endogenous dimension: everyone knows one another, from frequently meeting during daily village life. Coordinating and fuelling solidarity action is facilitated by the dimension of friendship. The various solidarity networks—expressed in the plural, with different registers of action, from *Roya Citoyenne*, to *Défends ta Citoyenneté*,¹⁵ to non-mediatic groups (Giliberti 2020)—are all composed of people who have made a choice of de-growth linked to a community spirit. The life choice inspired by communal and alternative values of neorurals is undoubtedly a key element for understanding the solidarity approach towards migrants (Mollard 2017). A question of values, then, as different local actors suggested, conceived in terms of “defence of the territory”.

¹⁵The behind-the-scenes player in the experience of the Breil campsite.

The expression “defence of the territory”—at the centre of the mobilisations that take shape in the valley—is problematic as it is claimed by ideologically opposed parties that hold opposing views. From what and with what aims should the territory be defended? Answers can differ significantly. On one side, the neorural alternative perspective aims to defend the territory from dominant neoliberal policies that, following Bourdieu (1998), produce an attack on the collective civil dimension due to the imposition of the logic of capital, which generates intensive exploitation and marring of the territory itself, as well as employment insecurity and global enslavement. On the other side, the opposite view claims a defence of the territory precisely against the action of alternative movements, seeking to preserve it, for example, from the reception of migrants in recent years. The association *Defendre la Roya* whose name is emblematic with respect to the territorial defence paradigm, close to the local *Front National*, was established with the sole aim of obtaining the dissolution of *Roya Citoyenne*, accused of being an organised gang trying to aid illegal immigration.¹⁶

Those positions, opposed to hospitality and hostile towards migrants and their support, in some cases involve reporting the actions of sympathisers to the police, and are generally close to the conservative perspectives of the native families—the so-called *familles de souche*. They demand an exclusive autochthony, as opposed to those who have arrived in recent decades, and hold a significant portion of power over the territories. Conflicts thereby arise within the valley population, revealing the existing social boundaries internal to the population, which are further marked by the border-crossing practices and their consequences. Neorurals are typically defined by the *familles de souche* as *hippies* or *Indians*. The socio-cultural border between those who claim to be natives and those who arrived during recent decades suffers the direct consequences of the closure of State borders. The historic distance between autochthones and neorurals thus constitutes a fault line for interpreting the positioning of the valley’s inhabitants on the issue of migration.

From autumn 2017, very few migrants arrived in the valley due to the increasing militarisation of the territory and the repression strategies implemented by authority forces. In addition, sympathisers have been criminalised; at least thirty people have been arrested and there are a

¹⁶The application, submitted to the Administrative Court of Nice in November 2017, was unsuccessful.

dozen trials underway relating to the facilitation of illegal immigration (Giliberti 2017; Gachet-Dieuzeide 2018). In this context, heading to the valley is no longer convenient for migrants. The criminalisation of solidarity underlines the vulnerability of the networks and effects a decrease in migrants' confidence in this migratory route. It seems that information is spreading among the migrants that crossing the Roya Valley in order to reach France is no longer an effective tactic: "No, it is best not to go to Roya. It will end badly there", an Eritrean boy stuck in Ventimiglia told me in winter 2017.

Since the passage through the valley has become residual, *Roya Citoyenne* has been engaged more in the activity of legal reporting of border violence, in collaboration with a pool of lawyers, as well as a progressive struggle for the State to respect its laws on the right to asylum and the acceptance of unaccompanied minors. The activities have always characterised it, being carried out in networks with national and international associations. Part of the *Solidaires* continues its activity of political, legal, as well as media and cultural lobbying.¹⁷ The future of this migratory route, just as that of territorial struggles, remains undetermined. It is through territorial struggles—which fully include solidarity towards migrants, that new models of society have been promoted in recent years in a rural context such as the Roya Valley.

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¹⁷A clear example in this sense is the summer Festival "*Passeurs d'Humanité*" (<https://passeursdhumanite.com/>), already carried out twice (2018 and 2019)—when the passage in the valley was already residual—organised during the course of four days in the valley's villages by the association *Les ami.e.s de la Roya* from Paris, in collaboration with the sympathisers of the territory. A multitudinous event which attracts hundreds of people to the valley, drawn by issues of hospitality but also of food self-determination and rural sustainability. It offers academic conferences that host specialists of various types, round tables for collective debate, theatre shows, and concerts.

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