

The School High in the Alps

This is the Chamonix Valley in France. Mont Blanc is just a few kilometres away, although not visible from where I am standing. Any town in this valley is a good base camp for skiing in the winter, and hillwalking in the summer. But this resort is not primarily for holidaymakers. Perched on the hillside just above the small town of Les Houches, this is a good place to study physics. It is a school, and one of which the French are proud.

The school has just one lecture theatre, the venue last year for sixteen workshops, two summer schools and one pre-doctoral school. The theatre seats just sixty-five. Aside from the location, this is a characteristic quality of the Les Houches school: the lecture theatre is deliberately small so that everyone can participate.

I am standing next to the building that houses the lecture room now, looking south towards the jagged snow-laden peaks that obscure Mont Blanc. Around me the snow from recent heavy snowfalls is beginning to melt. Behind me a path leads to the bedroom chalets. To my right a path leads down the hill towards the restaurant, below which there is a bar and games room, which become places of intense discussion when there are researchers around.

I took the ski train from Martigny in Switzerland to get here last night, then a taxi from the station in Les Houches, and I was offered a three-course meal in the restaurant on my arrival. The meal gave me the opportunity to talk to Cécile DeWitt-Morette, who founded the school some forty-eight years ago.

First question: why situate the school so high up in the Alps? The location had to be free of distractions, to allow unadulterated discussion of physics. And the spectacular scenery was to be used to attract lecturers. (The land, and the farm buildings that housed the school in the early years, was owned by the father of a friend.) Second question: why set up a school in the first place? To augment a university education in theoretical physics, and so close the gap, all too present in 1951, between education and research.



The hillside location in the Alps was successful in attracting lecturers. Professor DeWitt-Morette has calculated that of the lecturers who came during the first seven years, 19 later won a Nobel prize. Three of the students did, also, and Professor DeWitt-Morette proudly states: their "first exposure to modern theoretical physics was a Les Houches eight-week-long session".

The restaurant in which we sat last night did not exist in the early years, everyone ate at a local hotel. Outside the restaurant there is a hut where once a local farmer stored valuables safe from fire. The hut, not large enough to house a car, was the bedroom for two people in the early years. It had running water, but no way of heating it. The early years are re-

ferred to as the "heroic era".

Professor DeWitt-Morette was Director of the school for 23 years. The school she founded has been open during the winter since 1977. The summer sessions, shorter and more specialized than originally (although still long at one month) are now aimed at active researchers rather than students. EU-funded research networks (and others) hold workshops in the months surrounding the summer courses. And six years ago it was decided to expand the sleeping facilities, so that each person who arrives can be offered their own room. The buildings are to be officially opened today (mid-March).

The school has diversified from its original path of theoretical and high-energy physics. The current director of the school, François David, wants the school to continue to diversify into biological sciences, to encompass physics's expanding landscape. On the timetable for 2001 the school currently has quantum gravity, superstrings, M-theories and biological physics.

Evolution at the school is certain. A natural quality to what is Europe's oldest summer school.

Corrections and callibrations

As an editor, you always have to be careful when publishing lists, and names. The names of two physicists were misspelt by us in recent issues. In the list of winners of the Hewlett-Packard Eu-

rophysics Prize (EN 29 5 page 182) we left out Andries R. Miedema who shared the prize in 1980 for his work on the thermodynamic properties of metals and alloys • In the list of proposals for new prizes (EN 30 1 page 11) the

name of Hanes Alfven was wrongly spelt as Hanes Alfin in the explanation of the proposal made by the Plasma Physics Division of the EPS. send your corrections and callibrations to eneditor@univ-mulhouse.fr (The editor)