

WALKING IN THE ALPS

A comprehensive guide to walking
and trekking throughout the Alps

Kev Reynolds



CICERONE

WALKING IN THE ALPS

BY

KEV REYNOLDS

About the Author

Kev Reynolds is a freelance author, photojournalist and lecturer whose first title for Cicerone Press (*Walks & Climbs in the Pyrenees*) was published in 1978, and has been in print ever since. He has produced many books on the Alps, a series of trekkers' guides to Nepal and, nearer to home, several guides on walking in southern England. He also contributes regular features for the outdoor press, writes and illustrates brochures for tourist authorities, and occasionally leads walking or trekking holidays in various high mountain regions. The first honorary member of the British Association of European Mountain Leaders (BAEML), and a member of the Alpine Club, Austrian Alpine Club and Outdoor Writers' Guild, Kev's enthusiasm for the countryside in general, and mountains in particular remains undiminished after a lifetime's activity. When not trekking or climbing in one of the world's great mountain ranges, Kev lives among what he calls 'the Kentish Alps', and during the winter months regularly travels throughout Britain to share that enthusiasm through his lectures. Check him out on www.kevreynolds.co.uk.

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Front cover: Walkers in the Ar Pitetta glen above Zinal in the Pennine Alps. The backing wall of ice-clad mountains runs from the Weisshorn to Lo Besso.

For my wife, without whose
love and support this book
would never have been written

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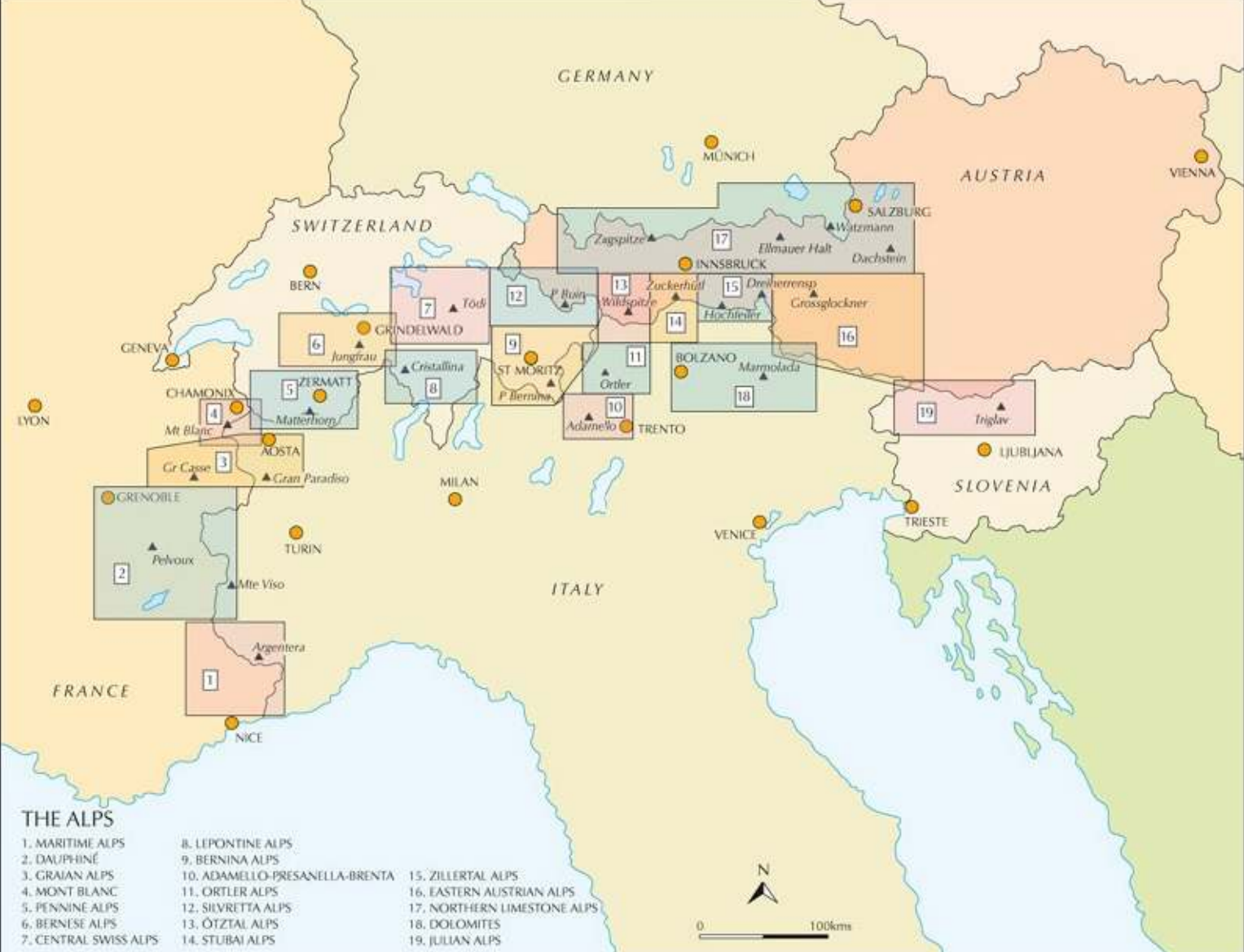
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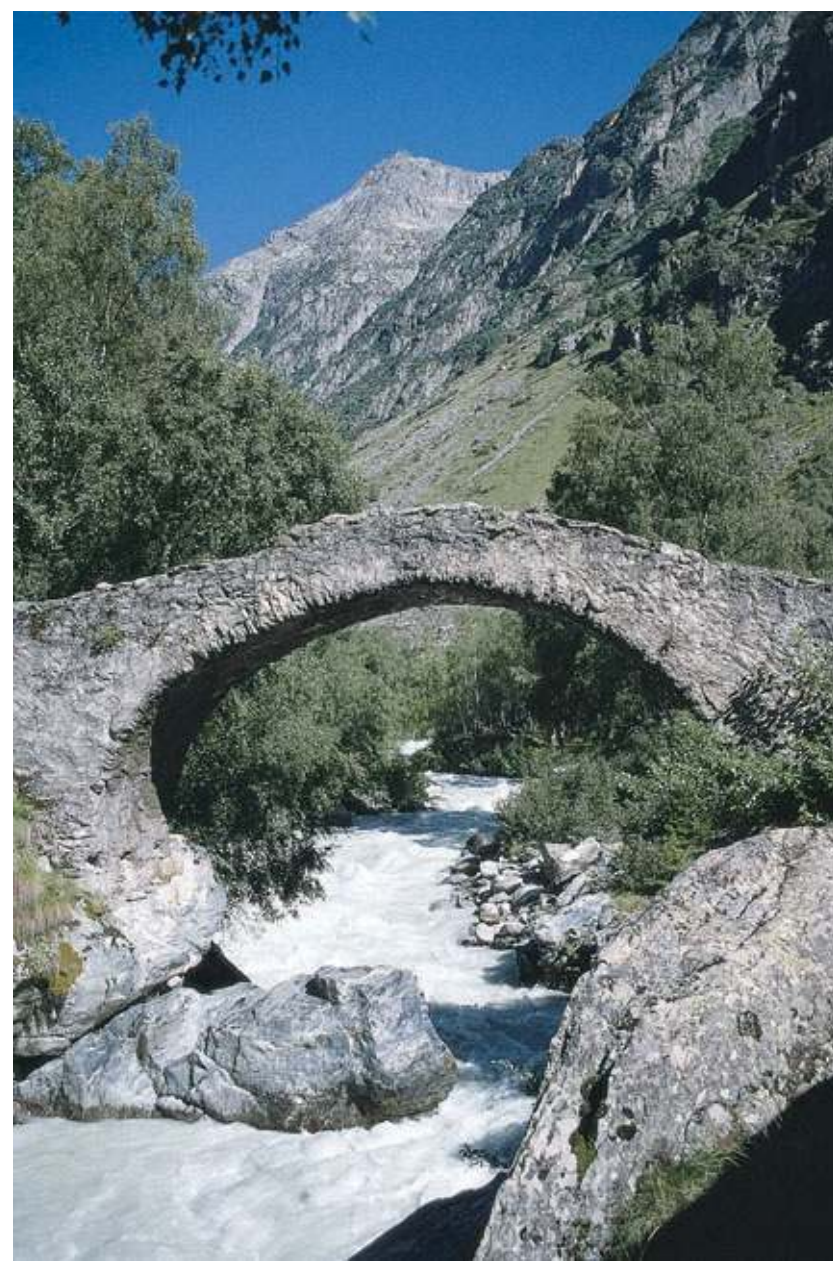
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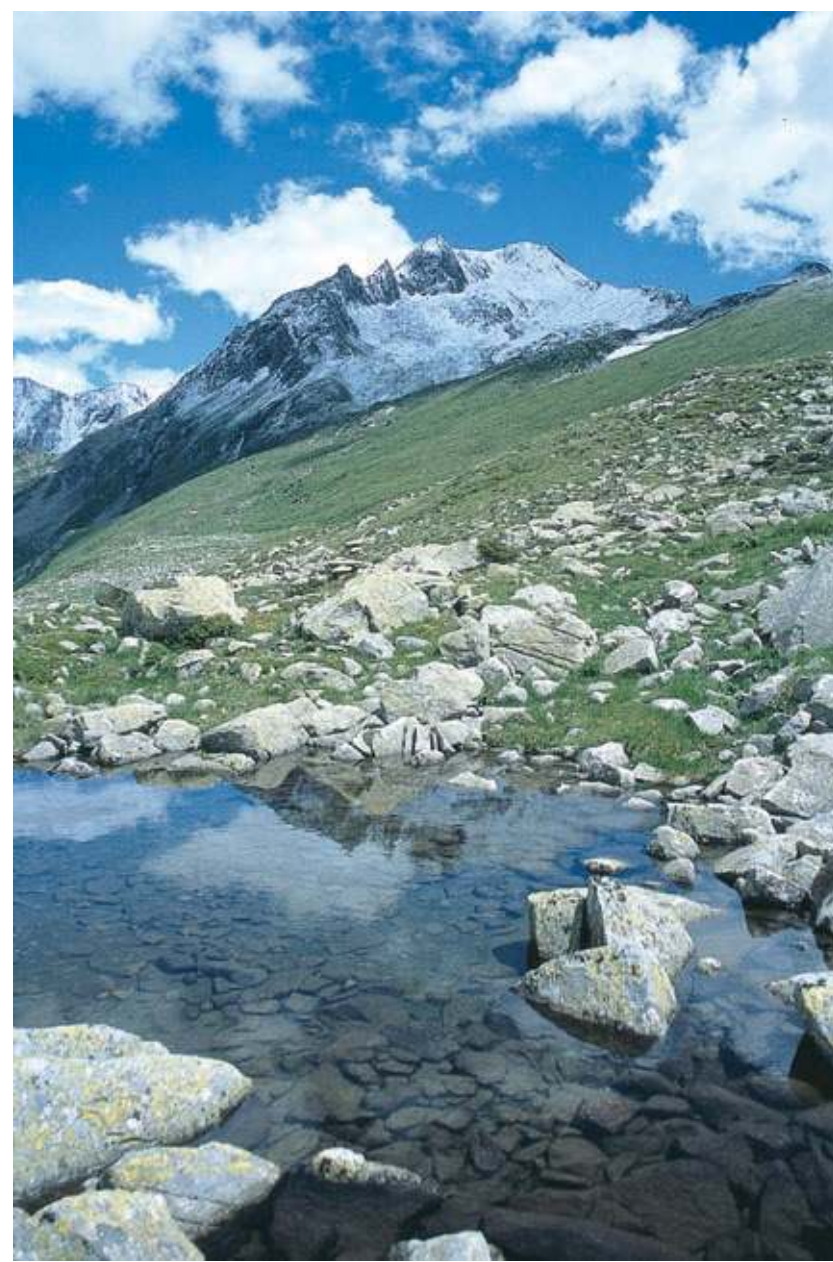


Medieval bridge at the confluence of the Vénéon and Muande (Chapter 2)

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since this book first appeared in 1998, I've enjoyed numerous return visits to the Alps; sometimes guiding, but more often on research for a variety of writing projects or to work out new routes. So the decision by Cicerone Press to adapt the original hardback edition of this book to soft covers has given me an opportunity to update some of the information in the light of new experience, to improve the maps and to add many more photographs. In doing so I'm grateful to all at Cicerone for their continued enthusiasm and expertise, and especially to Jonathan Williams who shares my love of these mountains. As ever this edition owes much to a great number of people whose knowledge, companionship or practical assistance has been drawn upon and so readily given. From the very start Ernst Sondheimer fed me with information, loaned maps and books, and urged me to visit remote glens where the magic of the past is still a part of the present. His lasting encouragement and friendship has added much to pleasures gained in the hills. Other mountain friends gave welcome advice which I readily acknowledge; in particular Martin Collins, Cecil Davies, Brian Evans, the late Andrew Harper, Roland Hiss, Anne Shipley, and Walt Unsworth. Both the Swiss and Austrian National Tourist Offices were generous with their assistance, as was Marion Telsnig at Thomson Holidays. Hamish Brown, the late Janet Carleton (formerly Janet Adam Smith), Cecil Davies, Brian Evans, Anne Shipley and Walt Unsworth kindly allowed me to use quotations from their letters, books or magazine articles which add quality to the text. Despite my searches I have failed to locate the copyright owners of several quotations used, and apologise to them for this. One surprising and welcome bonus that resulted from the first edition was contact with a niece of J. Hubert Walker who wrote the 'original' *Walking in the Alps* which inspired this book. Through her I learnt a little of the background of the man, which was most enlightening. Finally, as ever my wife continues to share magical days in the Alps, and provides the all-important back-up at home to enable me to concentrate on my writing. My thanks to her, and all the above, is greater than I can adequately express.

Kev Reynolds



The snow-laden Hohe Wand (3289m) above the Pfitscherjoch (Chapter 15)

INTRODUCTION

Extending in a huge arc from the Mediterranean coast near Nice to the low wooded hills on the outskirts of Vienna, the Alps are the world's best known mountains. Over the past two centuries every peak, ridge and valley has been mapped and explored, every glacier measured, every natural beauty described, advertised and, in some way or other, exploited. Library shelves groan beneath the weight of books that record the range's history, detail its geology, or recount tales of adventure on rockface and icefall illustrated with stunning coloured photographs, while guidebooks by the hundred, in who knows how many languages, provide all the detail required to move with a degree of confidence and safety from valley bed to snow-capped summit.

Over 50 years ago J. Hubert Walker published his classic *Walking in the Alps*. This finely crafted book was directed at the British hill walker and mountaineer 'of modest attainment' who had not yet grown familiar with the greater heights of the Alps. It was a selective book, of course, both in the Alpine groups described and in the routes suggested, but it succeeded in everything the author set out to achieve. With the most elegant prose Walker unfolded the Alpine landscape so that it became as clear as if one were studying a series of photographs, and with instinctive skill led his reader into some of the loveliest of all valleys, onto hillsides that would display the finest views, and over passes that gave the greatest contrasts. Without preaching, and without stressing his own accomplishments, Walker gently advised where the best walks and climbs were to be had, and then made suggestions for filling a holiday of a week or more in a round that would provide a sense of achievement and enough memories to last a lifetime.

For over three decades Walker's book has been my Alpine bible. It has been, and still is, a constant source of inspiration and pleasure; there's not a dull paragraph in it. But of course, in half a century the Alps have changed – by this I mean some of the mountains as well as valleys and villages. Glaciers are receding fast; some have disappeared completely. Some of the glens much loved by Walker have been flooded for hydro-electricity schemes. Once remote hillsides are now adorned with chairlift and cable-car, and bulldozed pistes scar mountain flanks where before only the chamois strayed. And with an explosion of interest in all forms of mountain activity, footpaths have multiplied and at times the busiest all-but resemble shopping malls in the run-up to Christmas. That is not to suggest the Alps are finished, played out, or 'destroyed' in their wild and pristine sense, as claimed by some activists at the sharp end of the climbing world, but there are certainly more honeypot regions now than Walker himself would have known. Penned a century and more ago, the description, 'the Playground of Europe' was never more apt than it is today. There are still wonderlands left, though, thank heaven; still a few permanently inhabited villages where no roads lead and where the only means of approach is by walking for a couple of hours or more. There are walkers' passes and lonely alps virtually unvisited from one year-end to the next – yes, even in Switzerland – and trails to follow in mid-summer where you can find as much solitude as you wish. And the glory of the high Alps remains as fresh as it always has been. If you know where to look.

Walker's book continues to feed dreams. However, in order to make those dreams come true it needs updating to fit the Alps as they are in reality today. For several years I'd been assembling notes in order to do just that, when I received a phone call one day from Walt Unsworth (now retired) at Cicerone. 'Do you know Hubert Walker's *Walking in the Alps*?' he asked. 'We'd like to publish something along those lines, bringing Walker up-to-date but with wider coverage, and hope you'll take it on.' This, then, is the result. It's a volume that, in trying to cover virtually the whole complex

Alpine chain, attempts the impossible. From the start I acknowledge its failings for I know that before the ink is dry on the page, the occasional passage contained in this book will be obsolete, thanks to the evolution of Alpine development. I offer my apologies and beg the reader's understanding.

Like its namesake this book sets out to describe some of the loveliest Alpine regions from the point of view of the walker who is, after all, in the most favoured position to witness and enjoy mountain scenery in all its abundant variety. The motorist is divorced from all that is best in the Alps by being restricted to the highway. The non-active tourist is confined to mechanised means of uplift, the climber's attention is for the most part taken up with the intricacies of his chosen route, while the downhill skier needs full concentration in the rush to get to the foot of the slope without accident. Only the mountain walker, the individual with good general fitness, a modicum of scrambling experience and an eye for the hills, can move far enough and at the right pace to enjoy the full range of wonders that the Alps so generously offer. This is the person for whom this book is written. It attempts to reveal the multitude of opportunities available. Not with precise route descriptions, a number of which may be found within available guidebooks mentioned in each chapter's summary, but by giving a nudge in the right direction. Happily, detailed guidebooks do not exist for each and every individual district described, and I have specifically avoided giving too much information about some of my favourite areas about which little has been published, for it is good to retain that element of surprise that may only be experienced when you make a 'discovery' of your own. Hints will be found within these pages as to where some of these special places lie, but you'll have to work them out for yourself, while other routes and multi-day treks are treated to rather more detail.

In the early days of the Alpine Club there was a kind of division between those who saw themselves as 'centrists' and those who claimed to be 'ex-centrists'. The first class of mountaineer based himself in Grindelwald, Chamonix or Zermatt, say, and from there struck out to climb the local peaks, after which he would always return to the same valley hotel. The 'ex-centrist' on the other hand (and first-rate examples of this class were F. F. Tuckett and Martin Conway), would travel from one region to the other across passes and glaciers on their way to climb. The same could be said today of the mountain walker. One walker chooses a particular valley base and goes out day by day to wander the local trails, the other fills his rucksack and sets out from hut to hut or camp to camp on a tour lasting anything from a few days to a month or more. There's much to be said in favour of both methods of approach, and lucky the man who has the opportunity to enjoy each one! In this book I've taken account of both the 'centrist' and 'ex-centrist' point of view, for the Alps are big enough to encompass both, and to reward in generous fashion.

An attempt has been made to define the topography of each Alpine group in turn, for in order to work out a tour of any region it is first necessary to understand what features will confuse the onward route. Major valleys and their feeder glens are looked at with an eye to spending a day or so enjoying their tarns, ridges, meadows and distant views. Where huts exist these are often mentioned as an overnight base or as the goal for a walk which returns to the valley at the end of the day. Later, when multi-day tours are considered, these huts will often form the only lodgings. Mostly I have avoided routes that stray onto crevassed glaciers, the assumption being made here that equipment such as ice-axe, rope and crampons will not automatically be carried on a walking holiday. Some of the summits visited by Walker are similarly dismissed from this present book for much the same reason, although I have included certain peaks that demand little more technical skill than would be required to gain modest summits in lesser ranges. I have also outlined one glacier tour in the Bernese Alps as a sample illustration of the delights to be had in such travel – once the necessary skills have been acquired and

equipment carried.

As suggested at the beginning of this Introduction, the mountaineer's library is a rich one, and following Walker's lead I have chosen to quote here and there passages that to me sum up the essence of most districts under review. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly we can hold a mirror to the Alps known by those who preceded us, and learn from their experience. And secondly by so doing I hope to introduce newcomers to the Alps to writers of the past, for they have much to offer. At the end of each chapter I've given a list of books from which further enjoyment may be gained.

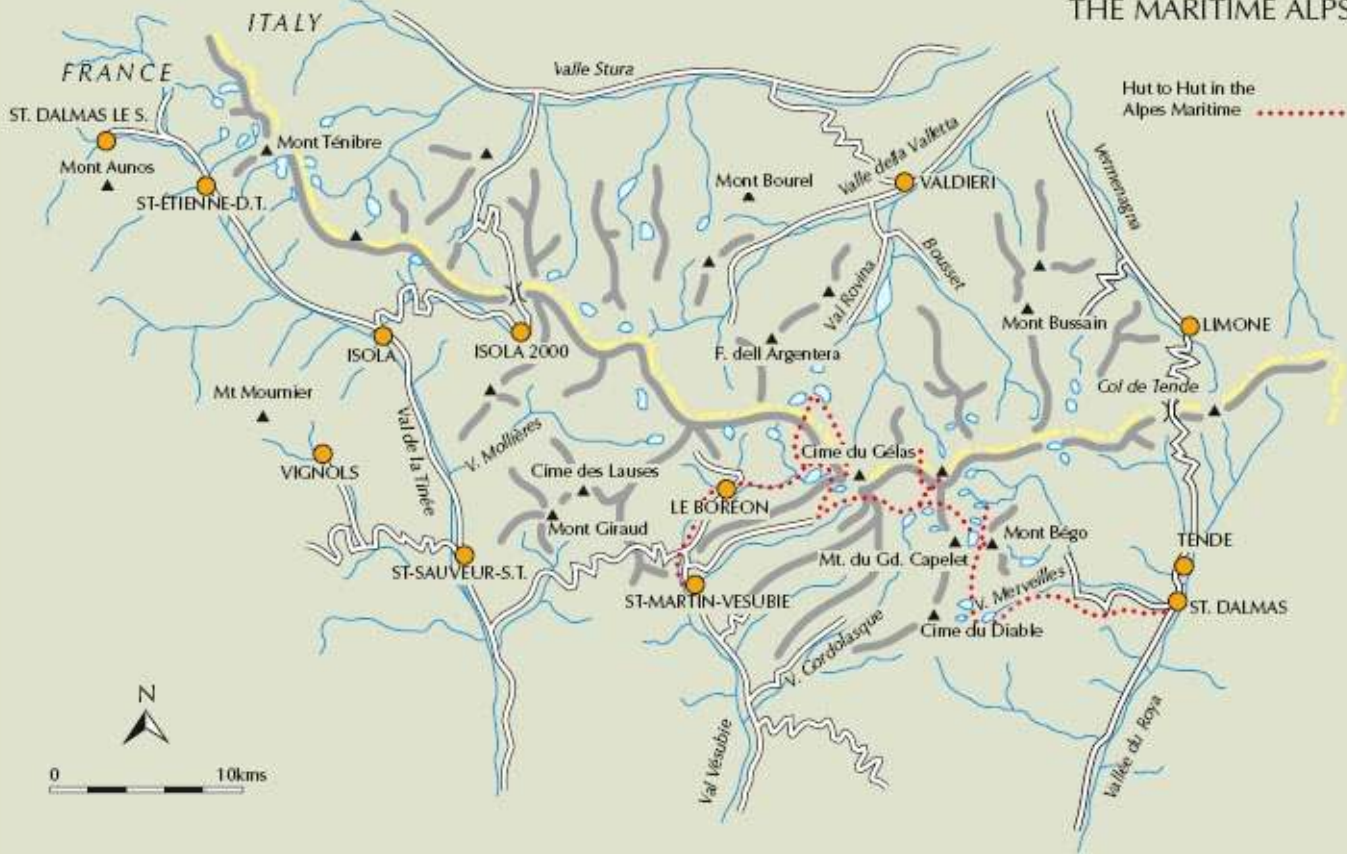
The Alps of course is a vast subject, and the more we walk and the more we read, so the chain seems to grow in extent; but as was once pointed out by R. L. G. Irving, its very size increases the possibility of my having added something new to those whose experience of the range is greater than my own. With each valley traversed and each successive pass gained, so I become more aware of how much there is yet to see – such are human limitations in a world so full of scenic goodness. I cannot claim to have explored every corner of these mountains whilst undertaking research for this book; nor is one lifetime sufficient to do more than scratch the surface. But it has been an immensely satisfying project, built on the back of dozens of active seasons stretching back to the mid-sixties. What a marvellous excuse to revisit mountains and valleys first wandered decades ago! And what an opportunity to explore other parts of the Alps that I'd never managed to see before! Yet still there remain enough tours untrod to last another three lifetimes ...

In this book I make no claim to match Walker's erudition, only his enthusiasm for these peaks, passes and valleys. His was the initial inspiration. May this present volume serve to inspire you to dream, and then lead you among the mountains where I fervently hope you will harvest as much pleasure as I have gained whilst walking in the Alps.



The Lötschental, near Eisen in the Bernese Alps (Chapter 6)

THE MARITIME ALPS



Chapter 1

THE MARITIME ALPS

There is a wild sense of remoteness about the southernmost group of the Alpine chain that belies its proximity to the Mediterranean. In little more than an hour's drive from the hotels and palm trees of Nice, for example, it is possible to be wandering through uninhabited valleys as rough and rocky as any in Europe, where the skyline is stark and uncompromising and where trails can so easily vanish in a low drifting mist.

Moulded against the grain the Maritime Alps spread across the general alignment later developed by the South-West Alps, their configuration here running from north-west to south-east and with the Franco-Italian border being such as to tilt the French side toward the south, thus providing Riviera resorts with a protective wall. Hot air drifts up from the Mediterranean to be confronted now and then by cooler airstreams flowing south from snow peaks of Dauphiné. Where the two meet frequent thunderstorms occur, and as the first of the loftier mountains, Mont Bégo (2872m) in the Merveilles attracts more than its fair share. Being a ferritic peak lightning strikes are commonplace, and it is this high incidence of lightning activity that is put forward as one possible theory to explain the huge number of Bronze Age rock engravings discovered nearby – the engravers being intent on placating the mountain gods.

By comparison with ranges farther north, the Maritime are not high mountains, for none of the summits reaches 3500 metres – the highest being Punta (or Cima) dell'Argentera at 3297 metres. The lower valleys are sub-tropical, the upper regions a wilderness of stone. There are no glaciers of any extent, snowfields are relatively insignificant and many of the more notable peaks are accessible to walkers with some mountain experience, without calling on technical climbing skills. Yet the Maritime Alps are truly Alpine for all that, with numerous jade-green tarns, great screes and boulder-choked corries, and spiky, rugged little rock peaks that not only provide sport for the climber drawn by the promise of a favourable climate and the odd day spent festering by the sea, but also create a backcloth of considerable charm to a wilderness camp adopted by the walker seeking somewhere a little different, a rarely-publicised region (outside of France, that is) that is not without its challenge.



The Vallée des Merveilles is a wonderland of rock and water

The group is a geological hotch-potch. In places limestone dominates. Elsewhere gneiss, sandstone, metamorphic schist and outcrops of granite form the base materials of which the mountains are composed. Of wildlife chamois are the most numerous and on the Italian flank alone there are estimated to be somewhere in the region of 3500 individuals. The Italian Alpi Marittime also claims some 650 ibex, thanks to a programme of reintroduction from the Gran Paradiso area that began in 1920. Alpine marmots abound, and under the protection of the Mercantour National Park, mouflons – a form of wild mountain sheep – have been introduced from Corsica. Wild boar and wolf, now rare in most other regions of the Alps, are said still to inhabit some of the lower valleys on the Italian side of the border, while the birdlife is also rich and varied. But it is the flora of the region that is so outstanding. The three small reserves of Argentera, Palanfré and Alta Valle Pèzio claim more than 3000 species of plants, many of which are extremely rare, while the Mercantour heartland contains half the native flowers of France, and around 40 that are unique to the area.

The official designation of the range gives Col de Tende as its south-eastern limit and Col de Larche forming the northern link with the Cottian Alps. In truth, however, the mountains extend eastward from Col de Tende as the Ligurian Alps, a definition not always recognised on maps of the area, and dismissed by Coolidge (whose classification of the Alpine chain in the 19th century largely stands today) for their lack of Alpine characteristics. The heart of the range contains the highest summits and probably the best walking opportunities, and is neatly concentrated on the adjoining Parco Naturale dell'Argentera on the Italian slope, and Parc National du Mercantour on the French side, the latter being the most recently designated Alpine park in France, established in 1979 against a great deal of locally-generated opposition.



Parc National du Mercantour

Within the 68,500 hectares of the park no building is permitted, hence the controversy that surrounded its formation, for plans had been proposed to create a downhill ski area there. So it is that walkers and climbers may roam today among uncluttered landscapes and enjoy a degree of solitude the more remarkable for its absence in some of the better-known ranges further north.

Between the Mercantour and the sea the Provençale countryside is characteristically cleft by narrow gorges scoured out by tributaries of the Var, and through which minor roads provide access from Nice to St-Martin-Vésubie, with a goodly assortment of hotels, *pensions*, *gîtes d'étape* and campsites, holds the key to exploration of the eastern Mercantour; St-Sauveur-sur-Tinée and St-Étienne-de-Tinée do likewise for the central and north-western sections. We'll take the Haute Vésubie first, since most of the highest mountains are located here along the Italian border.

Haute Vésubie

Several tributary glens feed into the main Vésubie: the Vallon de la Gordolasque which spills down to Roquebillière, Vallon de la Madone de Fenestre which drains westward and enters the Vésubie by St-Martin, and the Vallée du Boréon to the north of St-Martin. At the head of the first of these glens stands the Cime du Gélas (3143m), highest of the Mercantour peaks and second highest of all the Maritime Alps – Punta dell'Argentera being located entirely on the Italian side of the border. Several lakes lie under the frontier ridge, and Refuge de Nice, a hut belonging to the French Alpine Club (CAF), provides a suitable base with accommodation and meals available in the main summer season. A narrow road projects for some way through the Vallon de la Gordolasque, and when this ends at

Pont du Countet a trail continues, climbing between Mont Neiglier and Cime de Roche Garbière, to reach the dammed Lac de la Fous and the hut about two hours or so from the roadhead. Mont Clapier (3045m) dominates the scene above the hut to the north-east.

From Refuge de Nice (2232m) a number of opportunities present themselves for cross-country walking tours and single-day outings, including the ascent of neighbouring peaks, or the possibility of crossing into Italy where the Italian Alpine Club (CAI) has a few huts too. The ascent of Mont Clapier on the frontier ridge is a great attraction here, its summit providing a panorama whose extent in good visibility is said to include the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa in one direction, the outline of Corsica in the other.

West of Mont Clapier lies the old smugglers' way into Italy via Pas de Pagari (2798m), which leads to the Rifugio Pagari in a little under three hours, while to the east of the Nice hut several small tarns linked by clear streams are passed by the GR52 which makes a multi-day tour of the district. South-east of the hut Lac Autier is trapped in an old glacial cirque overlooked by Mont du Grand Capelet, a peak whose ridges form part of the wall dividing the Vallon de la Gordolasque from the Vallée des Merveilles.

Vallée des Merveilles

The Vallée des Merveilles is more easily reached from the Vallée du Roya to the east, where the road from Nice passes into Italy via the tunnel under Col de Tende, and a minor road breaks off at St-Dalmas-de-Tende to provide access by way of either the Vallon de la Minière or Vallée de Valmasque. However, walkers who have spent time at the Refuge de Nice are able to make a direct approach by following the GR52 over the 2693 metres Baisse du Basto towards Mont Bégo, then either crossing the Baisse de Valmasque (2549m) and descending to the Merveilles hut, or heading north alongside three lakes to stay in the Refuge de Valmasque.

This is a fascinating area and a justifiably popular one too on account of the rock engravings, said to number more than 100,000, scattered over a landscape of boulders, tarns and slabs. Archaeologists believe that the primitive agricultural race responsible for all these pictographs made special journeys to the area round Mont Bégo to carve out images and symbols – all of which are found above the 200 metre contour. Since so many are oriented towards Mont Bégo, it is thought that the mountain was looked upon as having particular religious significance. The engravings are now protected under French law; it's forbidden to deface or stand upon them, and wardens patrol the main sites. Guided tours are arranged during the height of the summer season from Refuge des Merveilles, and explanatory booklets are on sale at both the Merveilles and Valmasque huts.



Picturesque St-Dalmas-le-Selvage is located about 4 kilometres north of St-Étienne-de-Tinée

West of Refuge des Merveilles a well-marked route crosses Pas de l'Arpette (2511m) to allow walkers to return to the Vallon de la Gordolasque, thus giving an opportunity to create a circular tour before moving on to the next valley worth exploring from a general base at St-Martin-Vésubie.

Vallon de la Madone de Fenestre

This is the Vallon de la Madone de Fenestre which drains roughly east to west from another tarn-dashed headwall topped by Cime du Gélas, the distinctive peak which also looks down on the upper Gordolasque valley. The GR52 suggests an obvious link with Refuge de Nice by way of the Pas du Mont Colomb, and walkers who have been based there would be better served by crossing that pass instead of making a very long valley detour. Those with their own transport may have other plans. In which case a road invites motorists through the Fenestre glen from St-Martin to the Refuge de la Madone de Fenestre set among a group of buildings at 1903 metres, a distance of about 12 kilometres from St-Martin. By virtue of the easy access (minibus service from St-Martin) it's the busiest of all huts in the area, and there's no shortage of ideas for walkers spending a few nights there. Above the Madone hut the little Lac de Fenestre lies under the frontier ridge below Col de Fenestre (2474m), an easy and popular destination for walkers. The pass, from which views stretch beyond the Piedmont plain to Monte Rosa and the Matterhorn, carried a Roman road from St-Martin to Entracque – which proves its strategic importance. Walkers can now use this as an obvious way down to the Rifugio Dac Soria on the Italian flank.

The ascent of Cime du Gélas is popular, especially by the *voie normale*. So too is that of the neighbouring Cime St-Robert when tackled from the south. But there are lots of little tarns to visit too. Not only those that sparkle among crags walling the upper glen over which lies the Gordolasque valley, but south-east of the hut where the five Lacs de Prals are found in a large grassy basin on the far side of Mont Caval. A circuit of Mont Caval could easily be made whilst visiting these tarns from the Madone hut.

Both ridge systems that defend the Fenestre valley have walking routes along and across them. At the western end of the southern crest stands the peaklet of Cime de la Palu (2132m), a noted local viewpoint. From Madone de Fenestre a trail climbs up to the saddle of Baisse de Ferisson, then follows the ridge westward over Mont Lapassé and several other tops, before reaching Cime de la Palu and descending then through woodland to St-Martin at the end of a memorable five-hour walk. The north wall of the valley has a matching route on which Cime de Piagu (2338m) is the highpoint. Both routes could be used by walkers on their way out of the glen.

However, those who are planning to move on in order to make further explorations of the district should note that another CAF hut is easily reached from the Refuge de la Madone de Fenestre. Situated near the head of the Vallée du Boréon and backed by a girdle of cliffs, Refuge de Cougourde is gained by way of Pas des Ladres (2448m). An alternative approach is by way of the hamlet of Le Boréon in about three hours.

Vallée du Boréon

Le Boréon is a small cross-country ski centre with hotel and refuge accommodation located at the mouth of the wooded Vallon de Salèse, about eight kilometres from St-Martin. This tributary glen is of interest for its access to more walking country, while the main valley here, the Vallée du Boréon, is the third of those named above which converge on St-Martin. Non-motorised visitors should be able to reach Le Boréon by minibus from St-Martin, while those who walked over Pas des Ladres to the Cougourde hut may well be drawn to the frontier ridge which makes a headwall above it, for yet again there are ways over into Italy where Punta dell'Argentera looms above the upper Valletta valley. But those who choose Le Boréon as a base in preference to the hut have frontier crossings to consider too at Col de Cerise (2543m) and Col de Frémamorte (2615m), both of which descend on the north side with plenty of scenic interest to the Valle della Valletta in the Parco Naturale dell'Argentera. Alternatively a recommended there and back outing leads to the turquoise Lac Nègre by a trail from the jeep road at Col de Salèse.



*The tranquil Lac de Trecolpas in the upper Vallée du Boréon, Mercantour National Park
Val de la Tinée*

The next major valley system to the west of Vésubie is that of the Tinée river which rises near the north-western limits of the Mercantour National Park in a mountain cirque topped by the Rocher des Trois Évêques. Val de la Tinée is deep and narrow, in places dwarfed by huge overhanging cliffs. Above St-Sauveur Vallon de Mollières is a tributary whose upper reaches form a link with Le Boréon via Col de Salèse. At Isola, halfway between St-Sauveur and St-Étienne, a road breaks out of the main valley and twists its way in a sinuous journey to the hideous, purpose-built ski resort of Isola 2000, and continues from there over Col de la Lombarde into Italy. But the main Tinée valley draws the motorist on to St-Étienne-de-Tinée where there are hotels, *gîtes d'étape* and a campsite, sufficient to prove tempting as a base for a few days. The ultra long-distance GR5 route, which makes a traverse of the French Alps from Lake Geneva to the Mediterranean, comes through here, while more local trails climb the frontier side of the valley where numerous tarns lie cradled among wild and stony corries. Refuge de Rabuons is perched up by one of these tarns at an altitude of 2500 metres. Refuge de Vens is another, located further north at 2360 metres. Both have trails leading from them that stray over the border into Italy where other rifugios may tempt the enterprising walker into devising a hut-to-hut tour in the hills above the Valle Stura, from whose lower reaches access is given to the Parco Naturale dell'Argentera.



Parco Naturale dell'Argentera

The Italian Alpi Marittime boasts a few small glaciers draped among the north-facing slopes of the highest peaks. Like their French counterparts the upper valleys display a chaos of rocks, boulders and screes, but alpine meadows abound too, fringed here and there with stunted mountain pines. Outside the Argentera park, and located to the east of Col de Tende (Colle di Tenda), the dolomitic Marguare (2651m) soars above the karst plateau of Conca delle Carsene which is honeycombed with vast sink-holes – a stark contrast to the granite of the Argentera where streams dash silver streaks from slope to slope and dozens of tarns rival those of the French side of the border.

The key to access to the Parco Naturale dell'Argentera is Cuneo, the first town of note on the Italian side of the mountains if coming from France via Col de Tende. A minor road breaks away from the Tende road at Roccavione, south of Cuneo, and heads south-west along the Valle della Valletta. Beyond Valdieri this divides and subdivides again with southern branches delving deep into the park through the Vallone della Rovina and the glens watered by the Gesso di Barra and the Bousset. Wild camping is prohibited in the Argentera park, but there's an official campsite in Valdieri, and hotel accommodation in Valdieri, Sant'Anna di Valdieri and Terme di Valdieri.

Valle della Valletta

With Punta dell'Argentera spreading itself in a large imposing mass between Valle della Valletta and Vallone della Rovina it is natural that this should be the focus of attention here. The mountain consists of four main tops rising from an extensive ridge system thrusting forward from the main frontier crease in a south to north alignment, and there are four huts scattered on or near its various slopes: Rifugios Remondino, Genova, Bozano and Morelli. All, apart from the Genova hut which is reached from the Rovina glen, are approached by way of the Valle della Valletta or one of its tributaries, while Rifugio Franco Remondino (2430m) is also accessible by a tough cross-border route from Le Boréon by way of Col Guilié – on this route an ice axe may be deemed an essential piece of equipment due to extensive snowfields on the north side of the frontier ridge.

Without being drawn into activity on the highest peaks though, the walker will still find much to occupy his (or her) time here. From Terme di Valdieri where the Valletta forks, for example, a mule track laid during the mid-19th century when the whole area was declared a hunting reserve for King Vittorio Emanuel II, leads through forests and rocky outcrops, up to a region of lakes trapped in the stony wilderness of the frontier ridge: Lagos di Valscura, del Claus and delle Portette. An unguarded hut (Rifugio di Questa) stands on the north shore of this last lake at an altitude of 2388 metres. The three lakes are linked by a rough path that may be followed down to a fourth tarn, and beyond this into the lonely Freddo valley which eventually feeds into the Valle Stura near Ruviera.

Other tarns are accessible from the Valle della Valletta roadhead. Consider, for example, those which are lodged on a broad terrace under the frontier ridge near Cime de Frémamorte; a charming string of tarns and with a one-time military route enticing over the border into France to Col de Salèse. Instead of crossing that border at Col de Frémamorte, however, the Cime itself might appeal – there is a track which crosses screes below the south-east ridge and goes to the summit without difficulty.

GTA (Grande Traversata delle Alpi)

It is here in the Alpi Marittime that an epic 633 kilometre route begins its journey through the western Italian Alps. The GTA explores some of the most delightful mountain landscapes in Italy on its 47-day trek from Viozene near Ormea, to Molini di Calasca in the shadow of Monte Rosa. Gillian Price's guide, *Through the Italian Alps*, gives all the information a walker needs to tackle what promises to become one of the great Alpine treks.

Having treated the heart of the Maritime Alps to a rather selective introduction, pointing out just a few of the opportunities that exist for walkers among some of the finest valleys, it seems opportune here to devise a tour of the region from hut-to-hut using the GR52 as a rough guide, but with a few diversions thrown in as a way of illustrating the district's appeal. It will be a challenging route in places, and depending on one's ambition for peak-bagging along the way, it might be useful to carry an ice axe. If a straight hut-to-hut route is envisaged during the summer months, such equipment can be left at home.

Hut-to-hut in the Alpes Maritimes

Our route makes an east to west traverse, mostly on the French side of the border, and begins at St-Dalmas-de-Tende in the Vallée du Roya. St-Dalmas can be reached by train from Nice, and the first day will be spent walking up the Vallon de la Minière to Refuge des Merveilles. A minimum of two nights should be spent here in order to visit some of the pictograph sites, and to climb Mont Bégo or Cime du Diable (2685m). An alternative to spending two nights at the Merveilles hut would be to spend the second night at Refuge de Valmasque. This would still allow time to see some of the rock engravings, and to climb Mont Bégo.

Moving on cross the saddle of Baisse du Basto to Refuge de Nice, passing on the way some of the finest accessible rock engravings of the Merveilles region. Good visibility is needed for this crossing for in mist the way is not obvious. Once there time should be spent exploring the area round the Nice hut; Mont Clapier may be climbed by enterprising walkers with a little scrambling experience, and it may also be tempting to cross the border by Pas de Pagari in order to spend a night in the Rifugio

Pagari. Much will depend, of course, on the amount of time available.



Rock peaks above Refuge de Cougourde carry the Franco-Italian border

To continue the route westward go round Lac de la Fous, then climb up the west flank of the valley to Pas du Mont Colomb (2548m), and there make a diversion to the right for the ascent of the easy 2816 metre Mont Colomb which rewards with some splendid views. On the descent from the pass take caution if snow is still lying. An ice axe may be useful here in the early part of the summer. The trail leads down to Madone de Fenestre and the refuge, and once again there are plenty of distractions to delay further progress on the hut-to-hut traverse. Among the excuses to delay are possible ascents of Cime St-Robert and Cime du Gélas, and the temptation to stray across Col de Fenestre to visit Rifugio Dado Soria. It would also be feasible for strong walkers to descend in Italy after a night at the Dado Soria hut, and head through the valley of the Gesso di Barra to its junction with the Rovina glen, then return towards the frontier ridge via the Vallone della Rovina, spend a night in the Genova hut, and next day return to France by way of Col de la Ruine above Refuge de Cougourde. This would give a brief introduction to the north flank of the mountains.

Hut-to-hut in the Alpes Maritime – Route Summary

- Day 1: St-Dalmas-de-Tende – Refuge des Merveilles
- Day 2: Refuge des Merveilles – Mont Bégo (or Cime du Diable) – Refuge des Merveilles
- or: Refuge des Merveilles – Mont Bégo – Refuge de Valmasque
- Day 3: Refuge des Merveilles (or Refuge de Valmasque) – Baisse du Basto – Refuge de Nice
- Day 4: Refuge de Nice – Mont Clapier – Refuge de Nice
- or: Refuge de Nice – Pas de Pagari – Rifugio Pagari
- Day 5: Refuge de Nice – Pas du Mont Colomb – Mont Colomb (optional) – Refuge de la Madone de Fenestre
- or: Rifugio Pagari – Pas de Pagari – Pas du Mont Colomb – Refuge de la Madone de Fenestre

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