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Hiking & Nature Watching in Champorcher

Routes Suitable for Everyone

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Introduction

This guide is intended for those who love and appreciate hiking as a way of giving a meaning to the walk itself, observing as a way of getting to know and fully understand nature, flowers, trees, animals and rocks, understanding how history has shaped this valley and its people, wandering around simply to enjoy landscape and nature beauties.

The authors of the guide believe that hiking should be fully enjoyed and be good both for the well-being and for the soul. This booklet is not intended to be a comprehensive guide about hiking in its basic meaning, neither aims to suggest that hiking should merely be a tiresome and exhausting activity.

This guide offers different possibilities for hiking according to the amount of time you have available; from 1-2 hour routes to 6-7 hour ones. That is the reason why the routes have been divided into groups based on time duration. Hiking should mean neither forcing oneself to “hard labour” nor to simply take a quick and boring walk.

There is a wide choice of pleasant routes, trying to avoid, when possible, long walks along the valley floor; hiking along the valley floor can get rather boring, especially when you are not that good at observing nature. When the climbing down would imply simply hiking back along the same way, the guide suggestion is for local buses, which go up and down the valley regularly. In Switzerland, Austria, France and on the Dolomites travelling by bus on the way back is quite common practice for hikers.

The Champorcher Valley offers a wide choice of options for hiking. Summer is obviously the high season, nonetheless autumn and spring are enjoyable as well. The only suggestion is to get well-equipped according to the time of the year and the weather conditions.

This valley long history, as for all the other mountain valleys, has provided us with an important heritage of paths and mule tracks; which are often unknown, sometimes totally abandoned and sometimes converted into roads or ski tracks. All of them just wait to be rediscovered and fully enjoyed.

Suggestions

First of all plan your walk in advance: take the length of your planned route into account and study it in details before leaving. Make sure you have all you might need into your rucksack, but do not overload it.

Be careful: always double-check weather forecast before leaving. Please avoid storms, since you can find yourself in serious danger.

In case you get taken by surprise in a storm with thunders and lightening, please do not take refuge by a isolated tree. In case you have a metal stick with you, do not keep it anywhere near yourself.

Early departure: if possible, the best time to leave is between 7 and 8 am, especially for long routes. Best suggestion, due to instable weather conditions, is to be back within 3 or 4 pm; that is when generally storms are more likely to happen.

Basic items are the right pair of boots and the right socks, meaning that you will be using your feet to hike therefore they must be kept in the best possible condition with comfortable socks and boots able to hold your ankles safe. Even for short hikes please avoid flip-flops and city shoes which surely would cause ankle sprain and damage to your feet!

What to wear: sweater, track jacket and windbreaker are essential. Best choice is for trousers and not shorts.

Please pay attention when it is sunny, in particular with children: have sunglasses, a hat to avoid sun strokes and a good high-level-protection suntan lotion with you.

What to eat: have a good breakfast in the morning before leaving (bread, cereals, milk, jam). Your packed lunch should be simple food, such as dried fruits and a couple of apples for your snacks. Bring some bottled water with you as well; spring water might not always be available along your route. Drink water regularly, it is an important factor particularly when you are on the mountains with children. Do not wait until you get thirsty, drink every half an hour. Drinking water is a top component. For further details please visit the "Accademia di montagna del Trentino" website, www.accademiamontagna.tn.it in the section about nutrition.

Walking sticks: you can easily find very good walking sticks made of light material, very useful. One stick is enough here; two sticks (as in *northern walking*) might sometimes be too much and make you feel uncomfortable. Are you keen on sticks made of ash or hazel tree, so common in the olden days? Why not? Go for it! Just make sure they are strong enough.

Tools to have with you: a small-sized compass for the cardinal points and hand lens to study flowers, beetles and rocks; the latter can be fun, especially if children are with you. The GPS navigation device is not essential. Most of recently-published maps are very well detailed and offer all the useful reference points. Have your mobile phone with you, since it can be useful in case of trouble. Bear in mind that in some areas there is no network available. We suggest, for once, to switch it off and fully live the experience of being in touch with nature, totally far away from the technology we are so addicted to nowadays.

Having children with you: do not force them to hike just for the sake of hiking. Explain them what you are seeing, make them having fun with that and teach them to observe nature and to get curious about it. Routes which are reported as T, T+ and E in this guide usually do not imply any particular danger, but always be careful with children and take their abilities into account when deciding for the length of the route you

are choosing. It is the adults' responsibility to know their children's endurance, not to take routes of which they are not sure themselves or which are not suitable for children abilities. A small and light rucksack with a bottle of water and a couple of their things will surely make the children feel mountaineers. On the www.naturaosta.it website you will find useful general suggestions as well as tips about "mountain hiking with children". However the general rule is that mountain hiking is fun and not hard labour!

A good suggestion is to have children secured, especially in case they are under the age of 10. To do so please use an alpinist rope with small diameter (8 mm) and which is 5 meter long; with this rope you can bound the child to the adult using a knot, which is called simple figure eight. The child walks in front of the adult, while the adult holds the rope tied to his/her belt. Thank to this measure of precaution you can hike more safely and relaxed, without needing to be worried about the children.

Climbing Up & Down: at the departing point there is often a steep climbing up before reaching a certain altitude; at that point the valley will open wider in front of you. You can quickly reach that point by car (for example in Mont-Blanc, Champorcher), but even in these cases hiking offers stunning views and experiences.

When climbing up, proceeding slowly is recommended in order to avoid running out of breath and suffocate. Please do proceed slowly. It gets calculated that hiking a 300-meter difference in altitude usually takes one hour. Here we have decided for a less intense hiking, suggesting 150-200 meters in one hour.

Climbing down can get tiring for your legs and joints. Try to be agile with your legs and use your walking stick. It is in climbing down that the usefulness of the walking stick gets evident: it will feel like hiking with 3 legs instead of 2. Another suggestion is for a good pair of boots whose sole is well-built and well-adherent to the ground. Climb down slowly without rushing, but be sure of yourself and do not hesitate. A bit at a time, gradually you will gain more self-confidence.

Garbage: please do not behave as people used to behave years ago when it was common use to leave garbage just anywhere or even hide it under stones, rocks or in tree cavities, stupidly thinking that it would have decomposed.

Please take your empty cans, bags, plastic and glass items back with you and once back to the valley floor place them into the correct garbage recycling bin. Not even a paper towel or a sweet wrap should be thrown onto the floor, as it instead frequently happens; they do not rot that easily. Same process for the cigarette butts, possibly even worse; put them out properly, store them in a bag and take them with you down to the valley floor.

Please do not light any fire, and be careful with cigarette butts. No smoking is definitely a good advice!

Respect nature: do not be too loud, especially if you would like to see mountain animals such as roe deers, foxes, chamois and birds.

Do not pick up flowers, since after a few hours they will wither anyway. Better idea is to take pictures, so that their memory will stay with us forever. Many flower species are protected and it is forbidden to pick them up. Due to mountain visitor lack of consideration and common sense in the past decades, nowadays same species are at risk of extinction.

Please respect farming: when mountain tracks cross fields or if you see cows grazing on the grass in the field, please keep to the track, do not step on the grass. Tourism and farming should coexist in an

harmonious way and respecting each other. For example, when you stop in a village, please behave respectfully with local inhabitants and do not be curious; in the same way local inhabitants and those who own vacation houses should respect hikers. Village lanes are not private property and hikers are not potential thieves.

Traveling Up & Down by Bus

Chardonney and Hone are linked by local bus service, which runs every 2-3 hours. The time schedule can be found at every bus stop. In Switzerland hikers use buses (or local little trains) quite often. You just need to plan your schedule in advance.

There is a bus line which links Champorcher to the railway station in Pont-Saint-Martin direct; another bus line stops in Hone, and from there you can reach Pont-Saint-Martin either by train (fewer trains stop in Hone than in Pont-Saint-Martin) or by a different bus, which stops along the state highway ("strada statale") 26 just on the other side of the stone bridge over the Dora Baltea river, near the bus last stop to Champorcher.

Mountain First Aid

We sincerely hope that you will not need these emergency phone numbers, but we strongly suggest you to have them with you. Valle d'Aosta has an excellent mountain first aid available; please call them just in case of real emergency, do not abuse their services! Helicopter assistance is very expensive; if you call for it without any real need, the helicopter will not be available for real urgent necessities. Furthermore, in case the emergency phone call has been made for no real reason, the whole cost (helicopter, guides and doctors) will be charged.

118: State First Aid Corps (CUS)

115: State Firemen Corps

800 319319: Civil Protection Corps

1515: State Forestry Corps

How to Use the Guide

Route descriptions in this guide have been written not over-detailed on purpose, since it might get annoying having someone who tells you how to proceed step by step. This guide's main aim is to offer directions for the most important parts.

Together with this guide please have a good detailed map with you; a good suggestion is for the 1:25.000 scale map (published by L'Escursionista) as well as the map published by Champorcher Municipality (Comune di Champorcher). These maps are quite easy and simple to read, and show the contour lines (they denote elevation or altitude and depth) which is very useful. The map price is medium-range. On these maps the tracks indicated as signpost ("segnavia" is actually a number marked in red to be found on rocks or plants and showing the track) are very well indicated; nonetheless other tracks, easy to access as well, are available. Learning about finding your own bearings and map reading will surely teach you how to be independent and how to plan hiking.

Most routes start from one of the many valley-floor villages and the estimated travel time is calculated from there. These valley-floor villages always deserve a visit.

Routes have been here divided based on the traditional difficulty classification; to each route we have added some more details. This will allow you to choose one route rather than another with a deeper sense of awareness, taking your own capabilities into account. This classification has been considered for snow-free routes.

Descriptions and evaluations have been based on deep and practical knowledge and expertise, gained over the years. Nonetheless each of you is responsible for his/her own choices. Hiking along mountain tracks is not the same as walking in town. Please note that choosing an easy route can be as interesting and amazing as a more difficult one, especially if you are able to “observe” nature around you and enjoy it.

In case you do not have any experience at all, please proceed gradually. The routes indicated as T and T+ are suitable for everyone. The routes indicated as E, E+ and EE are intended for those who are in good health, at least a bit trained, wear good mountain boots and have experience. These categories are intended snow-free or with little snow. Please avoid E+ and EE routes in case there is still a lot of snow. Usually routes are snow-free from the end of July to the end of summer.

For none of these routes climbing equipment is required; mountain equipment is nonetheless required.

Route Categories

T: This is for everybody. No difficulties regarding either the route or the length or the security. Please wear appropriate mountain boots and make sure you are in the right mood and condition for hiking.

T+: This is for everybody +, which indicates that this category is as the one above but the route is a bit longer, implies more serious climbing up and down and requires that you have trained before.

E: This is for trained hikers. This kind of route goes along mountain mule tracks or simply more difficult tracks as far as length and difference in altitude are concerned; tracks are well indicated and easy visible but at the same time they can be a bit bumpy and rough and obviously require hikers with self awareness.

E+: This is for hikers +. They are basically as the previous one, just a bit more difficult, which implies steep climbing up and down, tracks a bit more edge-exposed but not dangerous for the hiker. At some points you will even find a fixed rope or iron stairs, which will help you along the way.

EE: This is for expert hikers. It is a long and arduous route, for which experience and physical strength are necessary. Tracks are steep, sometimes not clearly marked, with parts which are edge-exposed.

The duration of each route is approximate here and refers to a medium-level hiker. Each duration might be longer than the one you will find expressed along the actual route. You should also add the time spent to observe and admire flowers, animals and landscapes; plus the time spent for breaks. These breaks are fundamental, especially for long routes.

Champorcher Valley – A Description Dating Back to 1888

“This valley is not that popular, since it lacks of good level hotels and its mountains are not part of any well-known chain. Nonetheless Champorcher Valley is more than worthy: the beauty of its higher part is definitely one of the reasons; another one is the amazing and stunning route which allows to reach Cogne without having to go via Aosta and Aymavilles. The route to Cogne via Bard would take roughly 11 hours by foot.

Champorcher mountains due their importance to the fact that the very first royal site, dedicated to steinbock and chamois hunting, was created there. Please note that this valley gets traversed by a royal hunting route, which connects to the others present in Cogne Valley. This route was first opened in 1862 as per King Vittorio Emanuele II's orders. Nowadays it is quite badly-kept, but it offers nonetheless good opportunity of comfortable hiking, which is not that easy to find along mountain routes. (...)

Once you have crossed one of the valley's canyons, you reach Salleret (1127 mt), first hamlet of the Champorcher village. After passing, with various turns, the cliff called Grand Echellé, on top of which you can see a small chapel, the view in front of you opens wide and you stop in contemplating the Champorcher Valley. Its hamlets lie along the green mountain slopes, among groups of beech trees and ash trees, as if in a painting; the houses, built part in stone and part in blackened wood, show a pleasant variety in style. On your left the valley called Comba della Legna opens wide; which, through the Santanel or Perosa hill (a deep crack along the crest), allows the connection to the Soana Valley.

You can walk through the rich pastures by Mellier, and get to the little chapel in Vignerousa until, climbing up among fields and rocky remains and numerous turns, you reach the main hamlet in Champorcher. This takes two hours and a half from Pont-Boset and four hours from Bard. The main hamlet (1427 mt, 1033 inhabitants, with medium-level hotel called Cantine du Coq and telegraphic office) was built by a cliff which looks like a rock in the middle of the valley and gives the impression of almost rolling down towards the mountain creek. On the top of the cliff you will see the parish church, built on the spot where a castle used to stand; of this castle, which used to belong to the Bard lords and the Champorcher barons, only a tower with no doors (male) and with merlons whose upper part has a swallow-tailed form remains.

Ratti C., Casanova F., Guida della Valle d'Aosta, Torino, 1888, pp. 58-62

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One Hour Routes

These short routes are suggested for easy walks around the villages and their neighborhoods. You will have the chance to observe the village itself as well as flowers and birds.

1- Round Trip Château - Chardonney (T)

This is a common easy walk from one village to the other. To avoid going to Chardonney and coming back to Château along the same road where cars are allowed, on the way out or on the way back you can walk along the local mountain stream, the Ayasse. For example on the way to Chardonney take the main road and on the way back take the track on the right side of the Ayasse.

2- Château Route (T)

Departure and Arrival: Château.

Leave from the parking area just opposite Le Coq bar, leave the fountain behind yourself and climb up among the village houses, towards the parish church. Go down, pass the Medieval tower and go back to the fountain. Cross the street just in front of the Tabacchi (now closed) and climb up the narrow lane which goes to the Town Hall. Turn right, leaving the Town Hall behind yourself, and take the paved street going up to Gontier. Beautiful view over Château.

Where the paved street comes to an end, take the path behind the last house on your left and walk for approximately 100 mt.

You will reach the old mule track, which used to connect Mont-Blanc to Château.

Climb down on your left and go back to Château.

3- The “Parcours Découverte” and the “Percorso della Salute” (literally, The Health Route) from Chardonney to Château (T)

Departure: Chardonney, by the funicular railway square (this is the route described here; you can also have the route the other way around, leaving from Château and then crossing the bridge by the Cesanese Alpine House).

This lovely walk allows you to wander among rocks and larches, and follows the cross-country ski run; this ski run has been reexamined by the “Parcours découverte” for kids, created and taken care of by Mont Avic National Park, as well as by the Health Route by the Champorcher Municipality.

Cross the bridge which from the Chardonney parking area goes towards the funicular railway station. Once you have crossed another bridge over the Laris stream, turn left along the Ayasse stream and take a break to enjoy the beautiful Laris waterfall, just behind the funicular railway building and 140 mt high. From this point, following the cross-country skiing piste, the “Parcours découverte”, created by the Mont-Avic National Park, begins. Take your time to observe the short little stream at the waterfall feet, since sometimes here, as well as along the stream, a beautiful little bird, called the white-throated dipper, builds its nest. When it looks for food, worms and maggots, it dives into the stream and walks along the stream bottom. It is definitely a real underwater fisher-bird! Its presence is recognizable because its whitish excrements are on the stream rocks.

After 200 mt turn right and climb up a not too steep road. Follow the directions supplied by the “Parcours découverte”, which help children as well as grown-ups in learning about the wood environment, the local animals and the local activities, so common in the past. Have a look just in front of you at the other side of the mountain, past the bridge: you will see Chardonney and the above little villages, Ronchas (1460 mt), Perruchon (1520 mt) and Mont-Blanc (1580 mt) higher above. The stunning terracing can still be seen nowadays; local farmers managed to build these terracing on the steep side of the mountain in the village area in the olden days, when they used to grow potatoes and rye, basic elements for the diet of the time.

When you get to the guidepost “Scoperta dei licheni” (which means “discovering lichens”), you can either keep following the “Parcours découverte” climbing down and, after turning left, go back to Chardonney, or take the long way round for another quarter of an hour, turning right and walking along the track which climbs lightly up.

Perruchon Village and the Avalanches

A peculiarity concerns this village. Despite its being almost completely destroyed by avalanches from the mountain above over the years, each time it has been rebuilt and inhabited again and again. Its inhabitants have tried to protect their houses and pastures by building a huge wall along the longitudinal axis, which should break the avalanche and therefore its strength. Nonetheless this precaution has not helped in saving the village far ends, swept away together with men and animals more than once. The most well-known and terrible avalanche was the one on January 15th, 1845, when three men and several animals died; the fury of the wind even razed many houses to the ground. Research for the bodies took up to fifteen days. The last avalanche causing victims was in 1972, when one man died and his son was found under his house remains after ten days.

4- From Chardonney to the Valley Panoramic Viewpoint

Departure: Chardonney, by the funicular railway square.

Form the parking area walk all the way up to the hemp eco-museum and, just before the Bar del Ponte where the paved road comes to an end, cross the Ayasse stream where there is a concrete bridge; take the cobblestone road where in winter time the ski run is located.

When you get to the crossroads, on the right, with direction to Dondena, you have the well-known Scaletta or Echelette, the track which was used in the olden days and is basically a flight of stone stairs; it is not used that often, but, in case you want to climb up to Dondena, this is a very good alternative to the dusty, gravel and unpaved road which from Mont-Blanc goes up to Dondena.

At the crossroads go left, following directions to Laris.

Climb up until you reach the point where the funicular railway cables are. This is our panoramic viewpoint. And this route surely offers a good form of training for climbing up and down.

The climbing up is quick and you are now standing above Chardonney; this is the perfect panoramic viewpoint over the whole valley. In the far distance you can see Rosier, Château with the tower and the parish church.

Opposite there are Ronchas and Perruchon. From this point you can see and understand the work done by man throughout the centuries: he used to build little walls as a way of holding and protecting the local terracing where he had used to grow rye and potatoes up to the sixties in the last century.

Hemp Eco-Museum and the Weaving Atelier by “Lou Dzeut” in Chardonney

Hemp used to be the most utilized textile plant throughout Valle d’Aosta. It was usually grown in the valley floor area, in well-fertilized and watered lands; just afterwards it was brought up to Champorcher, where there was a group of people dealing with its manufacturing. These hemp workers used to range from those dealing with the hemp carding (peigneurs de chanvre), usually men, to those dealing with the hemp weaving, both men and women; the “peigneurs de chanvre” used to work in other valleys and abroad as well. The weaving was at the basis of a fairly good level of canvas (“teila de meison” in local dialect, patois) trade. This canvas was utilized for bed linen, straw mattresses (garde-paille) made of more unrefined materials (sarge), shirts and thin clothes and fabrics (ritte), mainly used for babies and cheese making as well as church vestments. After having been abandoned for a while, this manufacturing got resumed and modernized in 1989 by an association of women, called Lou Dzeut and located just next to the hemp eco-museum in Chardonney. The shop/atelier is also available for weaving exhibitions. Here you can find hemp, linen and cotton fabrics as well as hand-made table clothes, towels, runners, lampshades, tailor-made dresses and souvenirs.

Towards the end of the eighties the Champorcher Municipality bought a house (Miti de Toumà, from the name Thomas, the owner’s forefather) to designate it as a hemp and Alpine housing eco-museum. So far three rooms have been restored thanks to the community “Interreg Spazio Alpino” program: the barn, where there is the wooden weaving loom, the one to have survived the 20th century mass destruction; the next-door “meison”, where the fire was used to cook meals and make cheese; and the “crota” (the basement).

The weaving loom, the true protagonist of this eco-museum, represents a unique example throughout the whole Alpine mountain area thanks to the archaic technology of its hand-managed shuttle (this is a small part, made of wood, which contains the weave string to be weaved to the warp on the weaving loom).

Visits to the museum are available; contact the Lou Dzeut association weaver ladies (ph: +39-0125-37327).

Have a look at the area covered by larches along the steep side on the north side, which goes from Champ-Chevy to Bec Monpey and in a way encloses the valley between Château and Chardonney. Should you wish, you can climb up a bit further until you reach the mountain lodges at the Prarion mountain pasture; in the olden days these lodges were temporary stops (called “tramuti”) for the cattle along their way up to Laris mountain pasture, where they used to spend most of the summer.

5- Quick Route along the Higher Part of Mellier (T)

Departure: Loré village (just past Mellier), by the Beau-Séjour Hotel.

From the Beau-Séjour Hotel leave the parking area behind yourself and take the opposite direction, towards the Vigneroisa chapel.

Once you have reached the chapel, climb up the paved road you will have on your right, just by the playing ground. Cross the main road (be careful!) and take the track to Grand-Rosier with direction “La mare du Rosier”; it runs flat and easy up to the houses in Mellier and then goes down to the Ila stream.

After the last flood in 2000, along this riverbed big “steps” have been literally built in order to reduce the water speed and strength. Do not cross the Ila stream, instead climb down to the village. Just before reaching the paved road, on your left you will see a track which goes to a little wooden bridge. Go this way

and reach another village, Coudreyt. From this tiny and sunny village you can go back along the paved road and, once you have reached the crossroads with the main street, climb up along the mule track which is on your right and comes to cross the Mellier village.

Once you enter the village, you will see the village wood oven, where in the olden days once a year in December the local inhabitants used to bake rye bread, enough to last for the whole winter season; this tradition had been going on for a very long time. Just opposite the oven you will see the village chapel, consecrated to Saint Rocco; it was built once the great plague was over in 1630 and later rebuilt in the sixties. You can easily reach the main road again from one of the many village lanes.

6- Dondena Mountain “Rifugio” (literally, hut) Neighborhood

Departure: Dondena mountain rifugio

You can easily reach the Dondena mountain “rifugio” by car; you can park your car at the last parking area, just before crossing the Ayasse stream. Quite often the Dondena mountain “rifugio” is a relax venue for a drink or a quick lunch; in case you have time, it offers a few good opportunities for quick hiking (roughly one hour).

The first suggestion is as follows. Go towards the Banchi stream; from there take the gravel and unpaved road (No 6) which goes up to Laris. After roughly 20 minutes you will have reached the little bridge over the Banchi stream. In case you are in the mood for it, you can climb a bit further up. There is an amazing view over this valley from the Cima dei Banchi. Up to 20 years ago the Banchi glacier was still there, but nowadays it has almost entirely disappeared. This valley, running up for another 200-300 meters, used to be one of the favourite hunting locations of the first king of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele II.

The other suggested route is to climb up along the gravel and unpaved road towards the Miserin Lake (along the Alta Via No 2). After roughly 20 minutes, climbing down on your right, you will come to a fork in the road: if you go straight there is the track to Fussy Pass, while if you go left there is the track to Fénis and Pontonnet Passes. Cross the bridge over the Ayasse stream and reach the Inseta large plateau. If you want to, you can climb a bit further up along the first spurs, easy accessible to all hikers. Come back along the same way.

Two Hour Routes

7- Pontboset Bridge Route (T)

Departure: Pontboset village centre (west side), just by the Chez Isabel Hotel.

In Pontboset we can suggest a short and easy route, which well adapts to children as well as adults. The most interesting feature of this route is represented by the local bridges, ancient infrastructure which also named the village itself. The central part of the village (Veulla) is located at the confluence of two secondary streams (Brenve and Manda), which offer stunning views as well as geological interest.

From the village centre take the road which goes down towards the Ayasse; do not cross the stream, follow the mule track instead. Passing through a beautiful area with chestnut trees, you will reach the Ayasse bank and the neighbourhood of Frontière village. Once you get there, cross the stream through a wooden bridge, which is held up by steel ropes. Take a break and indulge yourself in observing the beautiful streambed rocks, polished and streak-coloured, and the clear stream waters; classical venue for those who are passionate about canyoning.

After passing the little village of Frontière, proceed downstream; the first part of the track is flat, afterwards it gets steeper until you reach a long bridge over the Brenve stream. Take a break and enjoy the view over this turbulent stream. Go back for 10 meters, and on your left take the steep track which will lead you to the unpaved road. After that you will have reached the paved road to Crest; once there, climb down until you get to the road to Frontière. Turn left and walk for a little while, then turn right and cross the humpback bridge over the Manda stream (Vaseras Bridge). Climb down a little and walk as far as the paved road begins; proceed along this road and then turn right, cross the three-arch stone bridge over the Ayasse (Goyet Bridge) and go back to your departure point. Climb up back along the paved road until you reach the hairpin turn, then turn left and cross the bridge over the Ayasse (Ronchas Bridge). After crossing this bridge, turn right and take the small mountain track going up towards the Vareisa village; once got here, cross the last bridge over the Ayasse, and go back along the left side of the stream. Go back to your departure point climbing down the large mountain track.

8- Quick Route across the Ayasse Area (T)

Departure: Loré village (just past Mellier), by the Beau-Séjour Hotel.

Take the mule track you will find in the middle of the village houses, and climb down passing through the villages of Loré and Verana; once you get to the bottom of this mule track, take the paved road by the bridge over the Ayasse. Go left along the paved road as far as the Creux large plateau and the crossroads with the main road by the Pouse village. Once you get there, you will see, along the mountain side, another mule track, quite large and easy to see, and a little wooden bridge. This is the remaining part of the ancient Royal Road, which used to connect Hone to Château in the olden days and was built in 1862. Take this road and, when you get to a crossroads with some apartment buildings downstream, turn left; cross the field which runs alongside an old bocce court and the parking area in Mellier by the Beau-Séjour Hotel. Here the route comes to an end. In the olden days the mule track used to run up to the chapel in Vigneroisa (nowadays it has been replaced by the paved road), and from there up to Château; the part from the chapel in Vigneroisa up to Château is still in use today.

Extra Route to Outre-Léve.

If you feel like hiking a bit further, once you have reached the bottom of the Verana mule track, turn left and take the paved road as far as Outre-Léve. As soon as you have crossed the bridge over the Ayasse, climb down along a tiny little track to Parier village; here you can still see a “raccard” (traditional mountain granary), located near two new houses and some ruins. In the olden days here local people used to work the wool clothing in the water in order to make them ticker and more resistant; the process consisted of wooden pistons (called “foulon” or “paroir”) working together with a mill, which nowadays is not in use.

The route will now take you along this part of mule track which from Parier goes up to Outre-Léve, surrounded by conifers and ferns, beautiful environment for a short break.

Once you are in Outre-Léve, please take your time to visit the 18th century chapel and its frescoes; these frescoes portray the local saints, among whom the most important are sant’Antonio, portrayed with a piglet as a protector of animals, and san Rocco, portrayed with a dog and patron saint against plague and infectious diseases. This tiny village surely deserves a visit for its village wooden oven used, as tradition, to bake bread and nowadays restored; and for its “raccards” and “greniers” (both of them are traditional mountain granaries) as well. At the end of the village you will find a mountain fountain with fresh spring water. Go back to the paved road and walk back to the bridge and from there follow the directions given above.

9- Mellier – Rosier Route (T+)

Departure: Loré village (just past Mellier), by the Beau-Séjour Hotel.

Go westwards, opposite the parking area. Once you have reached the chapel in Vigneroisa, turn right where you will see a lovely stone fountain where you can stop to taste its fresh spring water. Take the short steep paved road in front of you and in a few minutes you will have reached the main road; be careful when you cross it! After crossing it, take the mule track (No 13A) towards Grand-Rosier (you will read “La mare du Rosier”).

This track, flat at the beginning when you pass the houses in Mellier, goes slightly down towards the Ila stream; cross the stream. This mule track used to be the old road linking Mellier to Rosier before the road open to vehicles was built in 1961.

This mule track from Rosier used to reach the Royal Road to Champorcher exactly at the chapel in Vigneroisa. It runs along, at least for a part, the old irrigation drain, called “ru Mellier”.

Just past the bridge, on your left by the mule track you will see some rocks and stones, sharp-cut as if by a knife. These are marble-cutting tries.

Keep following the mule track. Both upstream and downstream you can clearly see the old terracing walls where in the olden days local people used to grow rye; nowadays here plants and small bushes have grown.

A bit further up on your right you will see the old mule track (No 14C) leading down to Echelly; do not take it and keep walking towards Grand-Rosier.

Once you have reached a crossroads where a wooden cross stands, you will notice a flight of steps on your left to Petit-Rosier; keep to the main mule track, straight ahead. You will pass by a little pond where frogs and little water animals take shelter, called “Aula verde” (literally, “green classroom”) or “Mare du Rosier”; at this point climb up to Grand-Rosier. Once in Grand-Rosier, take your time to visit the frescoed chapel and a painted house, both painted by a Piedmont artist (Sogno). Climb up to the higher part of the village,

where the fountain used as public washhouse is located. From here you can see the mountain track to the Sant'Anna plateau and the old school ruins; the old school collapsed under the snow at Christmas back in 2008. Upstream of the fountain an unpaved road leads down to Petit-Rosier; walk along the paved road for 200-300 meters. At the east end of the village go left and climb down the flight of steps to the mule track. Once you reach the wooden cross, take the mule track on your right and go back to Mellier.

The Royal Hunting Road

In 1861 king Vittorio Emanuele II, as soon as Italy was declared State, decided to build a hunting road network to easily reach the locations where he had been spending his summers for a few years already; Dondena was one of them. Therefore he addressed to the Champocher Valley town councils, proposing the building of a road which would have been accessible to animals and carts as well; the condition he asked for was an adequate help from the local inhabitants.

Champorcher and Pontboset municipalities offered the king's representatives the wood required for the road building and 2200 voluntary and unpaid working days (corvées). The road was built the following winter when weather conditions were not that positive due to snow and ice; as a matter of fact the road showed some problematic issues regarding its support wall solidity and stability. In the following years it was fixed and made stronger and more resistant. The event was such an important milestone in local history that local inhabitants decided to preserve its memory: three priests – Aime Gorret, Pierre Chanoux and Francois Joseph Baudin, engraved the rock with the following Latin words in memory of the official opening of the royal road in 1862:

HANC APERUIT VIAM VICTOR EMMANUEL II – ANNO MDCCCLXII (literally, "We have opened the road, Vittorio Emanuele II – year 1862).

Today some ruins of this old road still exist, some of them still well-preserved. In Champorcher part of it is still accessible thanks to maintenance supplied a few years ago; the accessible part is to be found just above the Echelly tunnel. The mule track runs by an unusual chapel, built on two levels and now in ruins. In the olden days it used to offer shelter where people, mainly women, could rest and pray on their way up to Champorcher from Hone; back then they used to transport goods up along the valley on mule back.

Along the deep valley of Miserin the royal road was completely destroyed when the high-voltage long-distance power line (called Superphénix) was built, in order to have motorised vehicles driving by. Some parts of the old mule tracks can still be seen just before reaching Miserin, near the Nero Lake (7B and 7C).

10- Outre-Léve Route from Ronchas and Borme (T+)

Departure: Outre-Léve.

Once you have reached Outre-Léve (either by car or climbing down from Loré or Château), you will pass by a little chapel with a frescoed façade; after passing the chapel, you will get to the end of the road. Here there are two beautiful raccards, traditional mountain granaries for the cereal threshing; they have been built with tree logs, one on top of the other and fitted together at the corners.

The signpost directs to Salleret (No 3). The arrows painted in yellow on the rocks help.

The mule track runs down along a beautiful wood with rocks covered in moss. In a way this environment reminds of a typical Chinese garden. Proceed until you get to the bridge over the Alleigne stream.

Both downstream and upstream of the bridge you will witness one of the most spectacular views: downstream a sequence of “guie” or “goille” (large and clear mountain lakes), while upstream the steep mountain sides, literally excavated by the stream which has divided into two parts and just past the bridge becomes one again.

Once crossed the bridge (please use the rope to close the gate!), take the mountain track on your right; there are no directions at this point but it is easy to see and it goes up. Once you leave the wood behind yourself, you will come to a field and in a moment by the mountain lodges in Ronchas, just in the mid of pastures. By the mountain lodges the track runs down, coming to cross the one you have left on the way up by the bridge and which goes to Salleret. Turn right, getting to Borme, completely deserted nowadays, which used to be one of the oldest inhabited villages throughout the valley.

This mountain track is well marked-out with arrows painted in yellow on the rocks and runs across the fields; keep to it all the time. Cows and calves often graze here. In order to cross the field use your walking stick to lift up the electric wires or your mountain boots to lift them down; please be careful and do not use your hands! Proceed at ease, and make sure you do not bother the grazing animals.

To go back from Borme you can walk along track No 3 up to Outre-Léve.

You can even climb down to Salleret and from there go back to Outre-Léve along the same way. In case you need to go back to Mellier, you can wait for the bus at the bus-stop in Salleret. Another option is to walk back along the main paved road, but it can get boring and surely dangerous due to cars.

11- Dondena – Giasset lake (T+)

Departure: Dondena, at the parking lot, just before crossing the Ayasse stream.

Do not cross the stream. Take the road which goes up along the left side of the Ayasse (9C); it will turn into a mountain track. After around 200 mt of difference in altitude, you reach the small and lovely Giasset lake.

Across the deep valley just up the Giasset lake (called vallone della Gran Rossa) you can happen to see chamois in case it is not too busy and loud. Young chamois usually play along passageways covered in snow. This is one of the several reasons why being quiet is suggested when you go mountain hiking: if you stay quiet, local animals do not get scared and you are more than likely to be able to see them and take pictures.

The mountain track keeps running towards the Gran Rossa pass and after that along the whole deep valley, up to the Raty lake valley as well as the Vernouille and Muffé lakes.

As far as this route is concerned, after your afternoon break or packed lunch at the Giasset lake, go back along the same road.

Settlements

WHERE can I build my house?

In the mountains it had never been possible to live anywhere you liked, this luxury had never been allowed from the oldest of times.

Three parameters, guidelines about where to build your house had to be strictly followed:

- *Do not build it in the few areas fit for cultivation. The house had to be built at the edges of these areas as well as in areas which could not be used for cultivation or as hay meadows that easily, but at the same time in their immediate neighbourhood. In the mountain villages the houses were crowded together both to provide help to one another in case of necessity and not to waste areas fit for cultivation;*
- *Do not build it in areas which are at landslide, avalanche or flood risk, but rather in areas which are protected by woods at the back;*
- *Build it near freshwater sources; water is fundamental and precious.*

HOW should I build my house?

Improving natural heat use was crucial in an environment where it was cold for eight months a year!

Therefore mountain houses used to be mainly built along the southern side, so that they were exposed to sunlight and natural heat for at least a couple of hours a day. Along Champorcher valley this was the left side (downstream) of the Ayasse, called "endreit" (from "andret" in French, literally "the right side").

Besides it was common use for people to live in the stables where animal heat helped them to stay warm for free. Just next to the stables there used to be the only room where the fire was lit: this was the "meison" (term close to the French "maison", "home", used to indicate the more "familiar" part of the house). It was here that the fire used to get lit to warm up milk, to make cheese and to cook meals.

When in the 19th century the iron stove came into common use, local people began to build a room just above the stables, which used to get warmed up by the stove for a couple of hours a day; this room was called "lou péglio" (literally, living room, sitting room).

Three essential rooms were the basement, located underground and where cheese and other foods were stored (the first to get aged and the others to be kept in a cool place); the "raccard", where cereals, harvested in August, got worked; and the barn, where people used to store the hay stocks, so that the few bred cows or goats could get fed.

12- Dondena Route via Bouc de Roisi (E)

Departure: Dondena, parking area.

Usually when you get to the Dondena parking area, you go straight to the "rifugio". Nonetheless there is another pleasant route, which takes roughly one hour and goes through the last part of Laris woods.

From the parking area take the unpaved road, cross the Ayasse and climb up (do not take the shortcut which goes direct to the rifugio). You will pass by the cellar where cheese gets stored; after that you will reach a turn, where on the right there is the old military base and on the left a small house. More or less opposite the military base and near the house fence, there is a mountain track which runs downwards; there are no directions for it, but it is quite easy to see. Once you have taken this mountain track, you will find yourself in the woods where the track gets very easy to see. Cross the bridge over the Banchi stream and enjoy the spellbinding view. Climb up on the opposite side.

You have now reached a totally unexpected mountain pasture area, Bouc de Roisi, located in a beautiful position. The mountain lodge you will see is surely peculiar: it was plastered with lime, which had been dug

out and burnt in that very same place centuries before; and it was enriched with wooden arched architraves, framing the top of the doors (to be found in the mountain lodges in Panoisa as well).

Keep hiking along until you cross the mountain track No 7D, connecting Laris to Panoisa. Turn right into the larch wood and reach the Pian Peloi mountain pasture. The old mountain pasture block, now in ruins, dates back to the 19th century; once passed that, there is the new one. Follow the track until you reach the unpaved road running down from Laris to Dondena. Turn right and climb down; in a few minutes you will be at the rifugio in Dondena.

3-4 Hour Routes

13- From Château to Outre-Léve and the “orrido*” in Pourtsèt (E)

* “orrido” is a deep rocky canyon, likely to be located where rivers or streams flow down rapidly along ravines and grottos and form spectacular waterfalls.

This route requires more expertise. You can start this route either in Château or in Mellier. The route described here is from Château.

Part A: From Château to Mellier along the Royal Road.

From the parking area in Château go towards the fountain on the square and walk along the paved road up to the turn just after the house with the little tower (on your right). On your right you will see a mountain track, just before the avalanche barrier, which is the old Royal Road and runs just below the main road. Unfortunately the mule track at one point rejoins the main road; after 100 mt along the main road you can go back to the mule track and proceed until you reach the chapel in Vigneroisa. This chapel was one of the first of the Champorcher parish to be built, just near a water source which is still in use today (the fountain by the children play-ground, just opposite the chapel). Proceed until you get to the Beau-Séjour Hotel.

Part B: From Mellier to Outre-Léve.

Just opposite the Beau-Séjour Hotel (in Loré) take the little track you will find in the middle of the village houses, and climb down direct to Outre-Léve (check route 8 – Quick route across the Ayasse area).

You will reach the paved road just by the bridge; cross this bridge and take the large mountain track, just on your right, following the directions to the “orridi” (plural for “orrido”).

Once you have crossed the bridge and walked for 200-300 mt, you will have reached Outre-Léve and the local chapel with the frescoed façade. Outre-Léve is the departure point for many hiking routes across the Alleigne Valley.

Part C: From Outre-Léve to Château.

Along the right downstream side of the Ayasse where the bridge towards Outre-Léve is located, climb up and walk through a tick and cool underbrush area.

You will get to a signpost with directions to the “orrido” (Goilli di Pourtsèt). Take a break at the panorama terraces over the “orrido”, secured with fences and supplied with explanatory panels. You can see a triple water jump. The highest is 80 mt high. Be careful with children!

Once you have climbed up to the top, below along the opposite stream bank you can clearly see the old hydroelectric power station by Enrico Brun, fully in use up to the 1960s; it used to be reached from the parking area in Château (near the bocce court).

Go back to the mountain track and keep climbing up; you will pass some houses (Karlantze) and stables. Once you have reached the top, after around 500 mt, cross the concrete bridge again when you see the “Casa Alpina Cesanese”; from there get to the main road to Château and go back.

14- Ayasse Right Side Route from Outre-Léve to Château (E+)

Departure: from Outre-Léve or Château. The route can be followed in both directions; the one detailed here goes from Château to Outre-Léve.

This is a pleasant and enjoyable route with a lot of climbing up and downs as well as edge-exposed parts, well-secured.

Take the road running alongside the holiday house called “Casa Alpina Cesanese” and cross the bridge over the Ayasse.

Once you have crossed the bridge, turn left, following the “Alta Via No 2, Track No 4H”.

Climb down towards the Karlantze village, and turn right climbing up again (Track No 4H, Alta Via No 2). Do not take the track going direct to Outre-Léve.

Follow the well-traced track across the scree, which is just opposite Mellier. The track gets steeper. Along the top part, a bit more edge-exposed, the track is secured with a wooden railing and even supplied with some fixed ropes.

This track joins the Alleigne Valley mule track and you get to the abandoned houses in Porte, where people used to live throughout the year.

Climb down on your left (track No 4) towards Outre-Léve along the Alleigne Valley historical track.

Once you get to Outre-Léve, you can take a shortcut; turn left and follow the road as far as the bridge over the Ayasse, passing past the frescoed little church.

At this point you can even decide not to cross the bridge and rather climb up following the directions to the “Goilli di Pourtset” orridi. This route has already been detailed above.

The other option is to climb up to Mellier after having crossed the bridge over the Ayasse. After 200 mt turn left and take the mountain track upwards. You will pass through the Verana village, passing by the chapel and the fountain. This way you will get to Loré, just opposite the Beau-Séjour Hotel.

Turn left along the paved road towards the chapel in Vigneroisa. Just by the chapel you will see a mule track going upwards; this is the old Royal Road.

At some point the old Royal Road rejoins the main road, but after only 200 mt you can take it again; this is just before the avalanche barrier tunnel. The Royal Road will prevent you from walking along the tunnel, which can be dangerous and surely is not pleasant at all.

The mule track rejoins the main road once again just by the house with the little tower.

Once you have passed this house, you can either follow the main road or take the mule track again; in case you decide for the mule track, you will end up by a flight of steps just next-to the food-store in Château.

15- Sant'Anna Route (E)

Departure: Grand-Rosier.

This is definitely a pleasant route; leaving from the two beautiful villages of Petit and Grand Rosier, both located in one of the most sunlit spots throughout the whole valley, you will follow this route westwards, from the Sant'Anna sanctuary and through the woods and the rocks fallen from the Bec di Nona.

In Grand-Rosier, towards the edge of the village, there are the fountain used as public washhouse and the old school ruins; the old school was built by the village inhabitants "a corvées" (literally, in Middle Ages the free peasants were due to grant their lords some unpaid work) in the 1920s and collapsed under the snow at Christmas back in 2008. Just passed the washhouse, take the track going up to Plan-Fenetre (No 14; not that easy to see at first). This is definitely a steep climbing up, since it is a 300-mt difference in height.

In Plan-Fenetre you will come to junction: on the right there are a track going down to Issogne and one up to Tete du Mont, while there is one on the left to the chapel in Sant'Anna, easily reachable in 10 minute walk and pleasant for a relaxing break. Every year on July 26th there is the celebration for Sant'Anna and on this occasion people from both Champorcher and Issogne gather there to pray together.

To continue the route follow this track, now flat level, westwards. Below you will see Petit and Grand-Rosier villages. The not being steep and the going through the woods make this a pleasant part of the route.

Be careful! After roughly 15 minute walk (more or less when you reach the No 13B track, going up to Col Possueil on your right) take the track on your left down through the woods. You will reach the Alpe Chioset; keep climbing down along the track which for the last part might become a bit uneasy, since it got ruined when the water system was buried, and has never been repaired so far. Following this track you will reach Petit-Rosier, just 200 mt away from Grand-Rosier.

16- Col di Plan-Fenetre – Tete du Mont Route (E+)

For the route from Grand-Rosier to Col di Plan-Fenetre check the Sant'Anna route just above.

Once in Col di Plan-Fenetre, go right and almost immediately right again, climbing up very steeply.

Some parts of this track have been supplied with fixed ropes and iron steps, in order to make it easier to climb up and down.

From up there you will enjoy a spectacular view over the Cervino and Rosa mountains, a sort of "sneak preview" of the full view you will have once in Tete du Mont.

In fact when you reach the Cross on top of Tete du Mont, you will witness a 360° stunning view.

Be careful in case you have children with you!

On the way back just follow the same route and go back to Grand-Rosier. Another option could be for you to climb down to Barmelle and from there to Salleret; this would be a long climbing down with a 900 mt difference in height along a very steep track. Your knees will be surely put to the test!

17- Alpe Cort to Tsuc Route (E)

Departure: Alpe Cort, just above Mont-Blanc.

This is a pleasant route (both ways) along a track mainly used by shepherds. It is the quickest route from the Arcomy mountain pasture to the highest pastures as well as to climb down to the village. The route can be extended (check the Arcomy route).

This route allows you to reach a peak in a way similar to Tete du Mont, but it is easier and is surely good as a training route. The landscape and the view are nice.

Once you reach the parking area in La Cort, you will see a large direction board signalling the routes. Take the track No 11A, which from the paved road runs eastwards. It is not so easy to see it at the beginning and it might even be covered by grass, but after a bit it becomes easy to see. After a short steep part, the track reaches a higher altitude and you will walk through the woods halfway up. Do not take the track No 11 which goes up, but keep following 11A. After roughly one hour walk, you will reach a water spring; after that the track becomes a sort of short flight of steps until it reaches a beautiful plateau. Follow the track for another 5 minutes climbing down and you will enjoy the stunning view over the Arcomy pasture.

You can take a break at the plateau: it is a nice and quiet spot; or you can take a small track going south-westwards, which after 10 minute walk gets signalled by an arrow sign towards the Tsuc.

This track is a bit dangerous, so please be careful if you have children with you especially when you get to the top.

From up there an spectacular view over the high part of Champorcher Valley as well as over Mellier, Rosier, Château and Chardonney.

18- Cratounà Route (route along the up villages in Champorcher) (T+)

Departure: Chardonney; by the funicular railway square.

This route is a mule track which used to be the track connecting Chardonney to the upper villages in the olden days before the paved road was built. It goes up steep with 250 mt difference in altitude, from Chardonney (1429 mt) to Mont-Blanc (1683 mt). Please climb up easy.

When you are in Chardonney almost at the end of the paved road (by the Bar del Ponte), on the left by the fountain take the flight of steps going up; once you are in the centre of the village, this will become a tiny track.

You will pass by the village chapel, built in 1742 and restored in 1873; it is peculiar because its bell tower is the only one having been built in wood throughout Valle d'Aosta. In 2014 it was restored and returned to its original architectural splendor, and its bells are again in full use. Just next to the chapel you can still see the old village school, which has been restored as well and is now used a local craftsmanship studio for students. Climbing up a bit further more along track No 9B you will get to the paved road and the Rochas village. Cross the paved road once again and follow the mule track up to Perruchon. Walk through this village and spend some time to observe the local raccards and greniers as well as a house which still displays a lovely coloured sundial (called "meridian"). Once you have come to the end of the village, take the mule track again (track No 9B) up to Petit-Mont-Blanc, climbing up along a wall which used to protect the below village from avalanches.

Once in Petit-Mont-Blanc, keep walking along the paved road eastwards just for a few minutes, then climb down along the track by the playground area.

Once you have passed the playground area, there is a panoramic viewpoint offering an amazing view over the western part of the Champorcher Valley. The other part of the valley can be easily seen when you get to the track crossroads just past the playground area (by the power line antenna tower); from there you can enjoy a full view over the villages and mountains on the eastern side.

Should you wish, you can end your route here, going back to Grand-Mont-Blanc along the track north-eastwards where you will come across a magnificent ash tree.

Should you wish to proceed, from the playground area where the antenna tower is climb down along the track No 9E. This track runs along a wall, with part of it on one side and another part on the other side, all the way down. At the end of June along these fields it is flowering and blooming season. Walk along the larch and spruce pine wood, called Cratounà, up to Chardonney upstream. Climb down along a zigzag track, and then along a diagonal track running westwards until you reach Le Pommier apartment building (the highest one); this building takes its name from the field it was built on, where an apple tree, a real rarity at this altitude, used to grow. Be careful along this track because it runs along fields which are now wild and with over-grown grass.

From here go back to the old track running across the village and from there to the departure point. Please take your time to visit the village wood oven, on your left the spot where one of the many mills used to be in the olden days and the typical “De Thomas” house where the only existing example of the old wooden weaving loom is (the hemp eco-museum, detailed previously).

19- Dondena – Rifugio Dondena – Miserin Route (E)

Departure: Dondena.

The Miserin Lake, the rifugio and the sanctuary are part of a classical route in Champorcher Valley.

The route runs along the Royal Road, and can get a bit boring since the original mule track was entirely destroyed when in the 1970s the high-voltage long-distance power line (called Superphénix) was built.

In accordance with the regional law, from Dondena upwards SUV entry is allowed only to those who run pastures and rifugi. Please remember to park your car just before the Dondena bridge. From there walk along the main road to the rifugio or, on your right, take the shortcut which is well-indicated and runs across the fields just past the old hotel, now in ruins.

Just behind the rifugio in Dondena (in case you choose this option), follow the unpaved road which goes all the way up to Miserin; you cannot miss it. After roughly a 20 minute walk, once you get by the Pian de l’Inseta, you will see the track No 8 on your right, crossing the bridge over the Ayasse; from there on the right there is the climbing up to Col Fussy and from there to Mont-Glacier, or on the left the climbing up to Colli di Fenis and Pontonnet. Stick to the unpaved road all the time and climb up to Miserin.

20- Dondena – Rifugio Dondena – Miserin via “Il Colletto del Monte Dondena” Route (E+)

Departure: Dondena.

Here we offer an alternative route from the rifugio in Dondena to Miserin. This route runs along a mountain track which is at high altitude and along the Monte Rascias slopes; this route gets a bit difficult once you have passed the rifugio and up to the “Colletto del Monte Dondena”. Please avoid this route in case there is still snow. From the rifugio in Dondena follow the direction to Laris (Alta Via No 2, tracks No 5, 6, 7). After roughly 15 minute walk, take the track No 7 on your right; it climbs up very steep and leads you to the slope just above the rifugio. Be careful! This track is very steep, nonetheless is very easy to see and follow.

Once you have reached the top, the most of the difficult part of the route has been done. The track keeps running halfway up all the way to the Miserin Lake. This route offers beautiful views, surely more than the ones offered by the valley floor route, even though high voltage cables and towers spoil some of the views; the views being spoilt has been part of this valley destiny since 1953.

Once you have reached the lake, go right up to the rifugio.

From the rifugio you can climb down back to Dondena along the unpaved road.

“La Madonna del Lago Miserin” (literally, “the Miserin Lake Virgin Mary”): the Ancestor Water Worship

The snow Virgin Mary is worshiped at the Miserin Lake sanctuary. The legend this worship is based on refers to the apparition of the Virgin Mary in Rome in the night of August 4th, AD 352; on that date it snowed heavily and the Virgin Mary revealed where the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore should have been built. In Champorcher, though, as for many other mountain sanctuaries consecrated to the Virgin Mary, this legend gets narrated in a different way: according to this local version, one day some young shepherds found a statue of the Virgin Mary along the lake shore and they brought it downstream with them in order to place it in a more suitable place. The day after they found the statue along the lake shore once again, so they decided to build a chapel right there. Actually all these legends refer to the Virgin Mary as holy presence providing water, through snow or the lake itself, fundamental element to farmers. It is not by chance that local Christian rituals evoke pre-Christian rituals, such as the ceremonial cross immersion into water, propitiatory gift offering to the lake and so on. After all even the founding act of the original Miserin Lake chapel (1658) stated that a chapel would have been built exactly where “people had used to go in procession since time immemorial in order to demand for rain and favourable weather for agriculture”. These rituals were obviously linked to the farming season. The Miserin sanctuary was built, as it stands today, in 1881 on the foundation of chapels already existing in previous centuries. In 2000 the sanctuary was enlarged and its inside was improved. Its location carries mystical meaning, since it is at the crossroads of four valleys – Champorcher, Valsoana, Fénis and Cogne - , all of them already visited in pre-historical ages.

21- Bantze (or Banchi) Plateau Route: Flower Heaven (E)

Departure: Dondena, rifugio.

Usually Dondena is seen as a destination itself or, eventually, as a pass for those heading to Miserin. Its neighbourhoods are nonetheless worth a look. From the rifugio in Dondena take the unpaved road on your left and climb up towards Laris (track No 6).

When you get to 2300 mt altitude, leave the main road and take the mountain track on your right (track No 7D, going up to Miserin).

After roughly 20-30 mt, leave this track and take the other one, not marked, you will see on your left. Keep the left side downstream of the Banchi stream and you will reach the Pian di Rotse.

Climb up along the track running alongside the stream; this track is signalled in faded yellow and goes up halfway up the mountain side, basically where the glacier used to be and nowadays is only a rubble mass. This is the track leading up to the Colle dei Banchi, which is going to be detailed in the Miserin Grand Route (route No 29).

Climbing up you will reach another plateau (Pian di Bantse).

Along these valleys the blooming and flowering season takes place between the end of June and the beginning of July; it offers a spectacular view over a myriad of Alpine flower species. This variety of plant life exists thanks to the numerous different rock ground layers present in this area, and which are heaven to geologists and botanists.

At the bottom of this plateau, cross the stream and its secondary little streams.

Take the mountain track which you will find halfway up on the right downstream side of the Banchi stream; this track goes all the way up to the Alpe Chilà ruins.

Along this steep track there are still visible traces of an old mule track, of which the origins are unknown; more than likely it was used to reach the hunting posts of King Vittorio Emanuele II.

Keep to this track which heads back to the floor valley; after a while turn right towards the Alpe Pendent Dessous and past that towards the Alpe Pendent, which are between 2300 and 2400 mt high. These mountain pastures have the beautiful plateaus just below the Becco Pragelas steep sides at their disposal. Once you have reached the unpaved road connecting Dondena to Laris (signpost No 6), climb down to the bridge over the Ayasse and further down to the rifugio in Dondena. Along the way between the Alpe Chilà and the paved road you will see the majestic massif of Monte Rosa.

22- Rifugio Barbustel Route (E)

Departure: parking area in La Cort, where the track to the Natural Park of Mont-Avic starts.

This represents a classical with return route, leaving from the Alpe Cort. You cannot miss it, since the directions to the Natural Park of Mont-Avic are clear and there is plenty of people climbing up and down. The first part of this route can be a bit boring, but when you get to the top the amazing landscape and the view by the Bianco, Nero and Cornuto Lakes largely compensate. Here you will find the rifugio Barbustel. From this rifugio you will enjoy a stunning view over the Monte Rosa chain as well as over the Monte Cervino.

In summer we suggest to skip the climbing up between the Muffé and the Colle del Lago Bianco, since it lies in the sun.

Take the tracks No 10 and 5, which go up towards the rifugio passing by the the Muffé Lake and restaurant. Keep climbing up until you reach the Colle del Lago Bianco.

From up there climb down to one of the most enchanting landscapes throughout the Alps; here, on the way to the rifugio, rocks, water and trees mingle, offering a unique view.

From up there it is definitely worth it to climb up to the Cornuto Lake along the well-kept mule track. Climbing further up to the Gran Lake might imply a big effort and, once there, be a bit disappointing; it is nonetheless surely impressive to see such a large natural mountain lake at such an high altitude (2485 mt); it is the largest lake in Valle d'Aosta.

Climb back along the same road.

5-6 Hour Routes

23- Pontboset: Crest – Desot towards Retempio and Valsomma Route

Departure: Pontboset.

You can eventually reach Crest by car; please note that the road is perfectly paved but is very steep and narrow. Should you decide for this option, drive along this road from Pontboset. At the second crossroads to Pontboset, drive down to the village, cross the Ayasse and take the road to Crest.

This route is surely interesting for those passionate about nature and environment as well as history and religion. The route runs mainly along a beautiful mule track, made of large stone steps which allow you to climb the steep track up quite easily.

In case you decide to climb all the way up from Pontboset, park your car at the village, and cross the bridge over the Ayasse following the direction to Crest Desot. You can even park your car after crossing the bridge; on your right you will see a humpback bridge and from there, upstream of the road, take the mule track (signpost No 4 or even Alta Via No 2) running up through the woods until you reach the village.

Once in Crest Desot, you can take a break at the “La Louye s’la comba” restaurant, where you can have a good meal at a reasonable price; give a try to the local goat products (the goats belong to the restaurant’s owners)!

Follow the track No 4 until you come to a covered waterway. Turn left and take track No 2, which runs alongside the canal for a while and then gets to the bridge over the Brenve stream.

The route proceeds along a stone flight of steps, wisely built in the past by the construction workers in Pontboset. Be careful, keep to track No 2 and do not take the track towards Larsin which on some maps is traced loop-like in black and is between two red points; this track is impassable, since it got damaged during the flood in 2000.

After roughly 20 minute walk, you will go through a beech tree and larch wood, unique example throughout the valley. At that point you will have reached some ruins, beyond which the track becomes a mule track leading to the mountain pastures in Retempio, both the old one as well as the recently built. Over there you will also come across the Retempio sanctuary, built between 1834 and 1836 as an initiative organized by the Pontboset priest. Nice view over the Monte Rosa chain.

Climb back to Crest-Desot or Pontboset along the same way.

Should you wish, you can climb a bit further up and in one hour walk reach Valsomma.

In order to get to this mountain pasture, leave the sanctuary behind yourself on your right and take the narrow track which goes up in the midst of rhododendron shrubs; climb up until you come across some mountain lodges (Valsomma desot). Once there, in order to reach the nice plateau by the Valsomma Damon

pasture, turn left even though for the first part there will be no real track; you will get to an unmarked track, which runs up slightly steep. In ten minute walk you will have reached Valsomma.

Valsomma offers a stunning view over the below mountains and over the Monte Rosa chain.

From there you can easily see, from the mountain peak, the mountain pass which leads to the adjacent wild valley, called Fer di Moja, just above Donnas. This mountain pass can be reached following the marks along the track. By doing so, this route can be defined as a traversing route, departing from Pontboset and arriving in Donnes, the village just north of Donnas and at the Fer Valley access point (the last stop along the Alta Via No 2).

24- Crest – Brenve Route

Departure: Pontboset, after crossing the Ayasse and along the road to Frontiere, nearby the Vaseras humpback bridge.

From Pontboset you can reach Crest Desot either by car or on foot (please check the previous route for directions).

Once you have reached Crest Desot, take the track No 4 (or Alta Via No 2), which will lead you to the covered waterway of the Hone hydroelectric power station. From here onwards please go ahead along the same track (No 4) for roughly 20 minutes. You will reach the pasture in Fontana, where you will see a large and frescoed column shrine.

This track keeps running up towards the spellbinding “Mon di piodze” (literally, “the rain mountain”), so called because at the beginning of summer you happen to pass between the mountain side and a little spectacular waterfall, getting dripped by water drops as if they were rain drops.

The track gets steeper along the flight of steps, after which it gets plain again; at that point you will reach the mountain pasture in Leutta first and the Brenve village after that.

Climb back along the same route.

When you get to Brenve, the Alta Via No 2 runs up towards the Colle della Fricolla. At 2400 mt there is a crossroads; the track No 4 on your right will lead you to the Manda Valley, from where you can climb down back to Pontboset.

25- Chardonney, Bouc de Roisi, Chardonney Route (E)

Departure: Chardonney.

Up to Dondena this route mainly follows the old mule track, built by King Vittorio Emanuele II to help himself as well as his entourage (people and mules) all the way up to his hunting lodge in Dondena.

Cross the bridge near the Bar del Ponte in Chardonney and follow the directions for track No 5D. After roughly 200 mt you will come to a fork. Go left and keep following the mule track; this mule track, for some parts, corresponds to a ski run. When you get to the mountain lodges in Clos du Creux, the mule track goes back to its old original route; peculiar are the little drainage ditches, along the cobblestones, whose use was to keep the bottom of the road free from water all the time.

When you get to Alpe di Prarion, take a break. From there you will have a perfect observation point for groundhogs, roe deer as well as the local agricultural landscape with its original little irrigation ditches (“ariane”, in local dialect); these ditches used to be part of a tick water supply system, from the Laris stream all the way to the conspicuous mountain pastures.

When you reach the fork leading up to Laris (on your left), take the track on your right to the Madeleine Bridge.

When you get to the ski lift station, follow the track No 7D which will lead you up to Panoisa. Take a look on your right and you will see the Madeleine waterfalls on the opposite side, just across the bridge. Before reaching the second group of mountain lodges in Panoisa, climb up (on your left) towards the Digné mountain pasture; you will be walking through a little alder wood where you can see some rare colourful flower species (blooming is due in mid-June). You will get to track No 5C from Laris, go right and walk along this track for a while until you reach the Pian Peloi mountain pasture (which is at roughly 20 minute walk from the rifugio in Dondena). From Pian Peloi you will have access to a beautiful panoramic view.

Climb back along track No 5C down to the mountain pasture in Laris; when you get there, take track No 5B and climb back to your departure point in Chardonney.

26- Outre-Léve – Sant’Antonio Plateau Route (E)

Departure: Outre-Léve.

This is the classical route along the Alleigne Valley.

From Outre-Léve, just a bit before the frescoed chapel, take the mule track going up to Ourty (Alta Via No 2, No 4). The first part (roughly 200-300 mt) has been probably rebuilt in order to allow cars to drive by.

When you get to the abandoned village of Porte (there you will see a spectacular ash tree; you cannot miss it, since there is a sign for it), keep climbing up the old mule track; this mule track used to link Alleigne and Champorcher Valleys to the Valchiusella Valley in Piedmont through the Colle Santanel in the olden days. After passing Le Porte you will get to a mountain pasture (Raverette), where there is a fork along the track; on the left it goes up to Trome, while on the right to Ourty. Just when you reach this fork, you will walk on an interesting example of sheep-back (“roche moutonnée”, a rock formation created by the passing of a glacier), smoothed but marked with striations and cracks; these were formed by an abrasive process of the rocks present in the glacier when the glacier itself retreated after the last ice age.

Once you are there, the classical route leads up to the mountain pasture in Ourty and from there to the Sant’Antonio Plateau. We suggest an alternative route; you will go through Ourty on your way back.

From the sheep-back in Raverette climb down on your left towards the stream, following the track No 4A running up to Trome. This track goes up steep through the wood. Do not take the track on your left to Trome, but keep climbing up instead until you get to 1701 mt. There is a difference of 400 mt in altitude between the Alleigne stream and up there. From there the track keeps climbing up to just below the Mont Digny at 2079 mt.

For this route be careful and when you reach 1701 mt take a small and not so easy to see track on your right; there is an old touristic sign for it.

Now the track gets flat, and will lead you from the abandoned Alpe Borrion all the way up to Plan Sanaveus where you cross the old mule track (Alta Via No 2) from Ourty. Keep walking along the mule track and, after one last cliff you will be in "Maisons vieilles", just at the beginning of the large Sant'Antonio Plateau at 1827 mt.

On your way back climb down along the mule track via Ourty and Porte, down to Outre-Léve.

27- Outre-Léve – Alpe Vercoche Route (EE)

Departure: Outre-Léve.

This is another classical route along the Alleigne Valley.

Climb up to Alpe Ourty. Just before you reach the mountain pasture, you will see direction signs; go right and climb up to the pasture in Vercoche. From there you can further climb up, across a scree where the track is well marked, to the Vercoche Lake, one of the deepest ones across the valley.

On the opposite side (to the one you will arrive to) in the 18th century there used to be an iron mine. From here raw iron got quarried and afterwards carried up to the mountain pasture in Ourty by sled or mule back; once in Ourty, the raw iron used to get washed off soil remains and then melted in a circular forge through a process called "alla Bergamasca" and performed by expert "maitres de forge" from the Bergamo area.

On the way back along the same route you can head to the mountain pasture, clearly signaled by a large wooden signpost and where you can buy good local cheese. From there cross the recently-built wooden bridge and walk all the way to a large rock on the other side of the Vercoche stream; all around this rock you will clearly see the remains of the little circular forge used to melt the iron (nowadays almost completely hidden by plants) and some waste derived from the melting process.

From there you can climb back to Outre-Léve.

28- Raty – Muffé via Vernouille Lake (E)

Departure: Parking area at La Cort, where the paved road to Dondena comes to an end.

This is a beautiful route, going through mountain lakes in the very heart of the Natural Park. After a steep part, at high altitude the valley extends from east to west all the way from Raty to Muffé Lake.

Park your car at the parking area just past La Cort, just at the beginning of the track to Natural Park of Mont-Avic. Keep walking along the unpaved road towards Dondena, and try not to mind the cars driving by.

After roughly one kilometer, go right and take a detour to Alpe Chapy (or Sapy) (track No 9A).

Once you have left this mountain pasture and the cliff behind yourself, you will get to the "tramuto" (literally means a block of stables where animals are kept and monitored and production is performed) in Raty Dessous. Keep walking as long as you get to crossing track No 9C from Dondena; turn right (eastwards) into track No 9C and keep hiking along this valley, towards Vernouille Lake. Quite often along this ridge you might happen to see steinbocks and chamois.

When you cross track No 10 going up to Col du Lac Blanc and to the rifugio in Barbustel, go right towards the Muffé Lake and its excellent restaurant. From there you can climb down, back to the parking area.

29- The King Route to Miserin (E+)

Departure: Dondena.

This is a pleasant route along the exposed tracks where King Vittorio Emanuele II used to go hunting; across this area there is a certain number of lakes.

From the rifugio in Dondena climb up to Miserin Lake following the directions supplied for route 20, via the Colletto del Monte Dondena.

When you get to Miserin Lake, take track No 7 towards the Lago Nero (Black Lake) and the Pontonnet Lake. You will have an amazing view as far as the Fenetre de Champorcher, leading to the Cogne Valley and the Torre Ponton.

From the Pontonnet Lake take track No 8 from the Colle Fenis. Keep walking along this exposed track halfway up, then climb down to the bridge over the Ayasse stream. Once there, you will recognize the royal road going back to the rifugio in Dondena.

30- La Finestra di Champorcher Route (2826 mt) (E)

Departure: Dondena, parking area.

This is a classical route in the Champorcher Valley. La Finestra di Champorcher has used to be, throughout history, the par excellence way between the Champorcher Valley and the Cogne Valley. From there to Cogne it takes 4 hours. It was still pretty much in use up to the end of the 1950s when Champorcher inhabitants used to follow this route to go and work in the mines in Cogne.

Climb up to Miserin, following either the royal road or the track No 7 (previously detailed, see route 20, for E+). Once you have reached the rifugio in Miserin, take the Alta Via No 2 leading up to the Finestra di Champorcher; from there you will enjoy an amazing view over the Gran Paradiso chain. If you have a look downwards, you will see the rifugio Sogno Peradza, one of the stops along the Alta Via No 2. The Alta Via No 2 is a particularly long route which covers the south-western part of Valle d'Aosta, running all the way from Donnas to Courmayeur and passing through the Cogne Valley, Valsavarenche, Rhemes Valley, Valgrisenche, La Thuily Valley and Val Veny, all this with 14 stops. For further details please visit this website: <http://www.lovvda.it/it/sport/escursionismo/alte-vie/alta-via-2>

On your way back take track No 7B; at 2440 mt take the unpaved road all the way back to Dondena.

In summer 1799, during the wars after the French Revolution, the Finestra di Champorcher witnessed a sort of skirmish between the French and the Austrians. According to the report by J. Gontier (Notices sur Champorcher, 1895), the Col Fenetre was guarded and defended by a group of twenty Austrian soldiers, who were allies of the House of Savoy against the French; the French were heading an attack to Fort Bard. Nonetheless the French decided for a different military strategy: some French soldiers passed through the Colle Pontonnet which was unguarded and afterwards along the scree below the Torre Ponton, in order to approach the soldiers guarding the Col Fenetre from behind. The Austrians left their outpost and marched towards the valley floor; at that point the French troops marched over across the Col Fenetre and settled down in Chardonney, where they stayed for two months.

31- Dondena – Miserin via Vallone dei Banchi Route (EE)

This is a pleasant route along the valley where the Rosa dei Banchi glacier used to be; nowadays it has almost disappeared. The first part of this route runs across a valley abounding in flowers; while the following part runs across a rocky environment. Once you have passed the rifugio in Miserin, you will have reached the Lago Gelato (literally, “frozen lake”), keeping to the left of the Banchi stream downstream.

Do not take this route in case of snow!

From the rifugio in Dondena, take the unpaved road to Laris (track No 6).

When you get to 2300 mt, leave the unpaved road and take the track on your right (signpost No 7D).

After 20-30 mt, leave the track No 7D which leads up to Miserin and take the unmarked track on the left instead, always keeping the left side of the Banchi downstream. At one point there is no trace left of this track, so please follow the cairns (piles of stones used as small monuments), always keeping the left side of the Banchi downstream.

After having hiked along a steep track, you reach the pass at 2701 mt. from there you can climb down to the Lago Gelato and there take the track No 7, which will lead you down to Miserin across the glacial valley.

32- Funicular Railway Arrival Station to Colle di Laris Route (E)

Departure: Chardonney with the funicular railway (with return)

The Champorcher funicular railway covers a difference of 500 mt in altitude. You can use it and have your route started from its arrival station. Take the track No 5A and climb up to Colle Laris; the first part is along this track, while the last part is along an unpaved road. The Colle Laris is at 2581 mt. and offers a stunning view over the Cervino, Monte Rosa and Piedmont. You can climb back along the same route.

Another option is available should you decide for a longer route. Climb down along the track towards Vercoche Lake (Alta Via No 2, signpost No 4). When you get to the lake, leave the track No 4 (which goes back to Outre-Léve) and take No 5, which goes up to a little cliff just below Bec di Laris; climb back down to the funicular railway station. Make sure you have double-checked the time schedule and you are on time for the last run!

6-8 Hour Routes

Here we have decided just for a few routes, which we think follow the spirit of this book.

For further detailed routes, you can double check the numerous mountain guides available online and in bookstores.

33- The Route along the Lakes north of Pontboset (E)

Departure: Devine, a small village near Pontboset.

This is definitely an interesting route along a not that known valley. It goes from Devine at 1193 mt up to almost 2000 mt when you reach the lakes.

From the avalanche barrier tunnel in Chataigne along the main road take the road which runs down, on the left, towards Piolly and Devine. Park your car there and take the track No 3A.

In Devine one of the houses is marked with a large white lime cross, which is common use for the local houses. Worth to mention is also a fountain, which is a sort of shelter in a stone-arched recess, built by the well-known Pontboset “maîtres maçons”.

Once you have left the village behind yourself, walk along the paved road which comes to an end just by a raccard. From there take the track, running along a monorail, once again and climb up to the mountain pasture in Boset; at the pasture entrance there is a wooden gate, open it and simply follow the track No 3A which crosses the Manda stream and runs up across the Bec Raty woods. Take some time to observe the local spectacular larches. As soon as you have passed the damp area marked as Lago Secco (literally, “Dry Lake”) on the maps, there is a deviation: on the left to the Lago Nero (Black Lake), while on the right to the Lago Champas; the latter is worth mentioning for the water-crowfoot blooming between the end of June and the first week in July.

From the Champas Lake take the track No 3 and follow it up to the Manda mountain pasture; passed that, keep to the track No 3 and, passing through the Alpe Boset-desot and other pastures, climb down back to Devine.

34- Chardonney – Mellier High Route (E+)

Departure: Mellier.

This is a pleasant route along the woods and with beautiful views over the valley.

From Mellier climb up along the track to Rosier.

When you get to Petit-Rosier where a large cross stands, take the flight of concrete steps (roughly 20 steps), which is definitely not in very good condition, on your left; you will reach the paved road. Cross it and take a narrow lane running through the village houses, leftwards. Once you get to the end of this lane, you will enjoy an amazing view over the top part of the valley. You will see the signpost for track No 13, a bit narrow and slippery at the beginning, which will lead you up through the woods; quite flat for the first part but steep after a while, it will get you up past the rocky bastion just above Mellier.

You will reach the beautiful mountain pasture in Arcomy. From there go left and take the marked track to the Colle dello Tsuc. Climbing up this well-secured track you will reach a nice pass across the woods.

On your left a quick route will show you up to the Tsuc Promontory and from here you will have a beautiful view over the entire valley (see route No 17).

Climb down from the Colle dello Tsuc along a pleasant track; along this route you will see a water spring, near a flight of steps.

Keep climbing down, following the directions 11A to the Alpe La Cort, and from there to the houses in Petit Mont-Blanc.

When you get to Petit Mont-Blanc, you will have two options:

Should you wish to go to Chardonney, either climb down from Petit Mont-Blanc all the way to Perruchon and Chardonney or take the track detailed in route No 18 (Cratounà Route, downstream Grand-Mont-Blanc).

Should you wish to go to Château and Mellier instead, follow the main road as far as Mont-Blanc. When the road bends at the end of the village, take the old track and climb down; you will have to cross the main road in more than one point and you will surely enjoy an amazing view over the below villages. This route runs across Collin and Gontier, and gets you back to Château.

35- Funicular Railway Arrival Station to Rifugio in Dondena and Chardonney Route (E)

This is an unusual route, using the funicular on your way up and making you climb down from Dondena to Chardonney along the royal road.

From the funicular railway arrival station take the track No 5C, which halfway up will lead you to the Banchi stream and to the valley on top of which there used to be the Banchi glacier. Go right and take the unpaved road down to the rifugio in Dondena.

From Dondena climb down to Chardonney, trying to avoid the unpleasant unpaved road. When you reach the partly in-ruins mountain pasture in Dondena and cross the stream, leave the unpaved road and climb down along the royal road (Alta Via No 2) to Chardonney and not along the unpaved road where cars are allowed.

Mountain Peak Routes for Expert Hikers

Climbing up to a mountain peak is always a pleasure.

In the previous part of the book we have detailed the Tête du-Mont (1897 mt) and the Zut (1898 mt). Other peaks are much more demanding and challenging as far as difference in altitude and route length are concerned. Among the more accessible peaks, please see the routes detailed below. For more complex routes more experienced hikers can refer to *Parco Naturale del Mont Avic e dintorni*, by Finco N., L. Zavatta, L'Escursionista editore, 2009 (2a edizione ampliata).

A- The Mont Glacier (3185 mt) (EE)

Departure: Dondena, parking area.

The Mont Glacier, the highest peak in the area, does not present any particular technical difficulties but is surely hard to reach due to the steep route; we can just say that it is worth it! From the very top you will have a spectacular and unique 360-degree view over the Monte Rosa, Cervino, Gran Paradiso as well as over the Gran Lago area. Along this route it is not so rare to meet chamois and steinbock packs.

Once you have crossed the bridge over the Ayasse and just passed the building which used to be a hotel and is now in ruins, take the track on your right; running across the fields near the mountain lodges, this is a shortcut and allows you to skip the large curve along the road. Get back to the track once you have passed the rifugio.

Leave this road when you reach Pian de l'Inseta; this part of the route is flat. Follow directions to Mont Glacier-Col Fussy and cross the wooden bridge over the stream. Proceed along this plateau, which is in full bloom in summer; keep walking along the stream, so that you will have a well-marked and clear track. Climb up again until you get to a fork: on the left to the Col Ponton along tracks No 8 and 8B, while on the right to the Col Fussy along track No 8C. Go right to Col Fussy. Climb up along a zigzag track running across a steep field and leading up to the Mont Delà; stay on the right until you reach the ridge just up the Lac Gelé (we suggest to stay at the same altitude and leave the lake down in the valley on your right) and then head up to

the Col Fussy, which is now very close and where you can see steinbocks, alone or in packs. When you get to the Col Fussy, please ignore the directions for track No 5B to Mont Delà; go right instead, without passing the Col Fussy though, and hike along this track which is rather flat at the beginning and then gets steep and runs across a large scree along a diagonal line. Following this route you will get up to the ridge in close proximity to the mountain peak; follow the ridge on the left and you will reach the Mon Glacier peak. Follow the same route on your way back.

B- Mont Giavin (2438 mt) (E+)

Departure: Outre-Léve.

From Outre-Léve take the mule track leading up to Ourty and along the Valle della Legna (Alta Via No 2, track No 4). You will get to the abandoned village of Le Porte, and from there stick to the old mule track all the way up to a mountain pasture called Raverette; there you will get to a fork: on the left to Trome, while on the right to Ourty.

When you are at the roche moutonnée (or sheepback, a rock formation created by the passing of a glacier) in Raverette, go left and climb down towards the stream keeping to track No 4A which runs up to Trome, getting steep across the woods. Do not take the track on your left to Trome, keep climbing up to Colle Boset instead (2037 mt). There is a difference of 650 mt in altitude between here and the Alleigne stream. Beautiful view over the Alps.

From the Colle Boset go right and take the track No 4A, which runs flat along the ridge. when you get to a curve along this track, go right and climb up along a small valley where the track is not marked until you get to the top.

Follow the same route on your way back. Eventually another longer route back: take track No 4A to the Lago Cornuto; as soon as you have passed this lake, you will come to the Alta Via No 2 (track No 4), go right towards the Colle della Fricolla and from there climb down to the Sant'Antonio Plateau and, after that, all the way back to Outre-Léve along the mule track.

Nature Watching in Champorcher

The Alps and the Valley

The Formation of the Alps

The Champorcher Valley

The Mineral World: Rocks and Mountains

The Plant World

Shrubs

Trees

Flowers

The Animal World

Mammals

Birds

Birds of Prey (also known as Raptors)

Fish

Reptiles

Snakes

Amphibians

Insects

Human Life

The Alps and the Valley

Mountains as we know them today, in continuous changing, have formed due to three main reasons: plate tectonic interactions; ice ages throughout earth history and the effect of the glacier melting; erosion caused by rivers.

The Formation of the Alps

Plate Tectonic Interactions

The history of the present formation of the planet Earth is divided into geological ages, each of them evaluated in hundreds of millions of years, and is not finished yet. The history of the Earth is definitely complex and is studied by earth sciences (or geosciences), such as geology, mineralogy etc. Since the 20th century the knowledge of the earth formation has stepped forward, beginning with the plate tectonic theory, formulated for the first time by Alfred Wegener (1880-1930).

Practically it is believed that the Earth viscosity and the difference in temperature between the interior of the Earth and the Earth crust cause very slow movements within the Earth: the Earth crust is divided into independent and moving plates. These plates, sometimes, clash and overlap, cross each other: one plate slides underneath another until they reach the viscous part of the Earth, 600 km deep. When a continental plate is crumpled and pushed upwards, mountain ranges form, such as Himalaya and Alp chain. On the other hand, when the plates get pulled apart the oceans slide back. All these movements take place over millions of years and there have been many.

For further details about the tectonic movements over the past 600 million years you can surf the following website by Professor Ron Blakey:

(www2.nau.edu/rc7:globalpaleogeography;Mollewideglobes).

Formation of the Existing Continents... and of the Alps

Earth was formed four billion years ago; here we are going to discuss about its history starting 200 million years ago, during the age called Jurassic when dinosaurs ruled on Earth. Back then there existed only one continent and one large ocean, formed over the previous hundred million years. This one block of land mass began to break apart and plates migrated across the surface: it was at this point in time that continents began roughly to take shape as they are today, but it would take still a long time. Let's now skip forward to a more recent age, more or less 80 million years ago, when the existing continents took definite shape.

Dinosaurs became extinct and a vast glaciation covered the Earth. The first mammals appeared. Ten million years later the first primates would appear. In the area where the Mediterranean is located nowadays plates were still shifting.

Between 60 and 40 million years ago plates moved closer: one of the edges of the African Plate (or, better definition, one of its ridges, called Adria) came closer and clashed with the oceanic edge of the European Plate, together with minor plates (subduction process: making of rocks with minerals at high pressure and low temperature).

Between 40 and 30 million years ago the above-mentioned clashing was still in the process of evolving. It was between 30 and 20 million years ago that the Alps first took shape; afterwards the plates of the African continent and those of the European continent came to overlie one another and overlap.

Africa, following a counterclockwise rotational motion and due to the westward opening of the Atlantic ocean, caused in the end the pushing which would give origin to the Alps.

Roughly 20 million years ago the human evolutionary line got separated from the one of the primates.

This is the way Alps came to life. The Earth surface and the Alps surface show the remains of these important motions.

Geologists have detailed these geological varieties. Have a look at the map of the western Alps.

The suture line witnessing the clashing between the two plates (this line is called Insubrica-Canavesana, L.I. and L.C.) is clearly visible.

In the higher part you can see the red line (called "Penninic thrustfront" FP by geologists): this is the overlapping of the European continent, caused by the pushing of the African continent.

On the external side of the Penninic Line you can see the mountains dating back to the age between the Paleozoic Era (between 540 and 250 million years ago) and the Cenozoic Era (between 250 and 60 million years ago), marked in pink; they belong to the old European continent and have not undergone major transformations and changes. Please note some mountains date back to the Paleozoic Era and are the oldest mountains throughout the Alps: Argentera, Merantour, Pelvoux-Belledonne, Mont Blanc, Aar and Gottardo. Crystalline massifs are dominant.

Southwards the remains of the African continent are less present in the western Alps, while are wider extended in the eastern Alps.

Marked in green you can see the land areas of Oceanic origin, transformed over the ages and pushed to where they are located nowadays. Marked in brown you can see the edges of the European continent, strongly deformed together with the Oceanic ones (Monte Rosa, Gran San Bernardo, Vanoise, Gran Paradiso and most of the Piedmontese and Ligurian Alps, with the only exception of Argentera, come from this origin).

A geological peculiarity (marked in purple) is shown in the land areas called Sesia-Lanzo (generally are even called "Austrian-Alpine"), bordering with the lower part of Valle d'Aosta. Here rocks and stones date back to 200 million years ago; they come from the African plate. At first they were carried to the depths, where they were in a condition of high pressures at relatively low temperatures; they gave origin to blueschists (also called glaucophane schists) as well as to rocks called eclogites. Afterwards these rocks were brought back up ("obducted") while the clashing between the African plate and the European one was taking place. During this process they underwent high pressures at low temperatures and formed particularly tick rocks (called "eclogites"). Remains of these formations, similar to ocean rocks, emerge in certain points and they are important "remains": Matterhorn (Monte Cervino, in Italian), Dent Blanche, Mont Emilius. As we will see later on in this guide, traces of these formations are in Champorcher Valley, too.

From all this Alps came to life. And their history is still progressing. Due to the African pressure, they are still moving upward, in the order of 1-2 mm a year. In one million years theoretically they will be 1000-2000 mt higher than today, but erosion and gravity will surely lower down these growing numbers.

Ice Ages

The formation of the Alps is due not only to the geological transformations above described but also to the glaciations and to the interglacial periods which give shape to the mountains or leave some debris (or remains) behind (see the moraine in Ivrea). The ice reaches down to the bottom of the Canavese towards Turin. And to the main causes we need to add fractures in the rocks, often characterized by movements between the faults and sometimes of great extension (the whole valley floor in Valle d'Aosta has been formed on such a geological structure).

Champorcher Valley

The Champorcher Valley has formed as it is today over the past 100,000 years due to glaciations, but its rocks date back to a vast period of time, between 200 (Triassic geological period) and 30 (Miocene geological period) million years ago. In the same way as the Lys Valley (Gressoney Valley), even the Champorcher Valley is at the boundary line when it comes to the numerous and different geological areas which are present in the valley.

African Continent Sediments

From Salleret upwards, which means just before the last cliff to Mellier, the geological area, as read just above, is called Sesia-Lanzo or Austrian-Alpine. Across the valley there are other impressive layers of the Sesia-Lanzo area. The Mont Glacier and the Mont Rafray together, just above Dondena and at the valley border, Ponton.

Picture taken at the fork for the routes to Mont Glacier and the Torre Ponton, between Dondena and Miserin (CS = Lime-Schist; PV = Green Rocks; TP = Austro-Alpine layer of the Torre Ponton).

In a detailed description of a geological excursion to the Torre Ponton geologist Franco Rossi shows, in the above picture, the complexities of rock origins due to the African continent and the European continent edges coming to a clash.

Not that far from there, the Mont Emilius and the Matterhorn share the same origin. These layers of the Sesia-Lanzo, after the phase of shifting-up and during the terminal phases of the clashing between the African continent and the European continent, were shifted north-westwards as a single layer above the Piedmontese geological mass. Due to the erosion just isolated layers survive as a sort of relicts.

Neo-Tethys Ocean Sediments

The remaining part of the valley is composed of the original ocean debris (called Tethys), which have undergone impressive metamorphosis. Their origin dates back to a time between 100 and 60 million years ago. They mainly are lime-schist and basalt from submarine eruptions; or green schist, fragments from earth's mantle (which means the earth layer just below the earth crust) emerged due to a fracture in the oceanic crust; or serpentinites.

All these rocks show that they have undergone both the phase of deep subduction (eclogite) and the phase of thermal rebalancing due to collision which follows (green schist).

The upper part of the Valle della Legna is located just along a bordering line. If you have a closer look, for example, from Ourty towards the upper part of the valley you will clearly realize as follows: on your left (eastwards), you will notice that the mountain chain from Mont Digny, Mont Giavin, Mont Chenessy and Colle della Fricolla originates from the area called Sesia-Lanzo; while if you give a closer look on your right (westwards), you will clearly see that from the Vorea peak to the Colle di Santanel there are lime-schist

originating from the Tethys Ocean, shifted over there by the pressure of the African continent edge. These terrains can be either siliceous, as in the case of the lower part of the valley or along its southern side (gneiss Sesia-Lanzo), or calcareous, as in the case of the Champorcher Valley (lime-schist).

Glaciations: Profundities and Cliffs along the Valley

Going from Hône up to Mont Blanc, the valley is generally very recessed, showing steep differences in altitude, even up to 1000 mt.

The difference in altitude between Trambesere and Savin, two villages which are at 900 mt above sea level and located almost along the Ayasse stream and the crest which goes from Tête de Mont and Tête Colon and overlooks, in sheer drop, over the two villages, is roughly 1000 mt.

The valley climbs up and shows massive cliffs. The “orridi” route allows you to take notice of them. The two large waterfalls, just passed Château or upstream the funicular railway station in Chardonney, are a clear example of this.

These cliffs originate from the evolving of the glaciers in the main Aosta Valley and in the side valleys as well as from the strength of the glacier abrasion and from the rock physics resistance. This abrasion, which can be more or less stressed, causes the “valli sospese” (literally, “suspended valleys”) phenomena, as in the Sant’Antonio Grand Valley, the Valle della Legna or the Miserin Valley.

What explains these large cliffs in the lower part of the valley, let’s say up to Mont-Blanc, is the presence of hard rocks from the Sesia-Lanzo area; on the other hand the declivity present in part north of Mont-Blanc shows a less steep shape, due to the glacial erosion occurred to the more friable lime-schist.

The Banchi Glacier is the only one to have survived from the ice age. Fifty years ago this glacier used to be defined as permanent snow glacier and was sliding downwards at least 500 mt more than its today level, as photographs from that time clearly show.

The traces left by the glacial erosion can be seen almost anywhere across the valley: sheep-back rocks (“roche moutonnée”, a rock formation created by the passing of a glacier), glacial striations, moraines (north of Dondena and at the bottom of the Finestra di Champorcher) and eventually glacial rock bars (sills) where harder rocks are located (serpentinite and gneiss); a clear example is Sant’Antonio, where the plateau comes to an end and a cliff runs down to Ourty or even Château, and from there (precisely from the rock where the church lies) down along the Pourtset Orrido cliff.

Lakes

As throughout the whole Valle d’Aosta, also along the Champocher Valley there are numerous lakes, roughly thirty. They range from the smallest ones to the Gran Lago, located in the Mont Avic National Park at 2485 mt of altitude and the largest natural lake throughout Valle d’Aosta. Other lakes (Miserin, Vercoche) have been, through dykes, risen up in order to control the water supply to the hydroelectric plant in Hône.

All these lakes are of glacial origin, originated in a cirque glacier, such as the Lac Gelé or Miserin, or due to the formation of a natural barrier caused by a moraine or an avalanche (as in the case of the Vernouille Lake).

For further details

Vedete voi che cosa indicare

The Mineral World: Rocks and Mountains

The areas dedicated to farming and where flowers find fertile soil are composed of mineral elements (such as clay, sand, rock fragments) as well as of organic elements (such as leaves, wood, grass, decomposed matter). Here we will discuss minerals.

Minerals and Rocks

Minerals are composed of different chemical elements. For instance, magnetite is a mineral whose chemical formula is iron and oxygen. Quartz is a mineral whose chemical formula is silicon and oxygen. Silicon is one of the most abundant elements on the earth.

The rocks you find on the mountains almost always come from compact and solid mineral-conglomerates. Sometimes rocks absorb metals.

Depending on the composition and on the subdued transformations, rocks can assume different hardness, colour, shininess. Rocks can be more or less homogeneous.

Gold, Iron and Copper across the Valley

Gold veins have been proven existing in Champorcher since the 13th century. A small vein was found in 1700 in Cleyva (just above Petit Rosier, heading towards Arcomy).

In Mont Ros, just above the Vernouille Lake, or by the Lago Gelato below the Monte Ivorta (both of them in the Mont-Avic National Park) or even in Vercoche in the Valle della Legna iron used to be extracted from magnetite contained in the serpentinites in the period from the 17th century to the end of the 19th century.

Climbing down from the Lago Gelato, across the Mont-Avic National Park, you will hike along the mule track, specifically paved for the sleds used to carry minerals to La Servaz (Champdepraz); in La Servaz there was the blast furnace, built in that precise location in order to get wood supply from the woods in the neighborhoods.

Copper was extracted from the Roman age up to 1957 roughly in the mine in Hérin (Champdepraz, Mont-Avic National Park).

For further details about mines in Champorcher – F. Baudin, *Champorcher, Aosta*, ed. Arti grafiche E. Duc, 1999, pp. 137-144.

Formation of the Rocks Which Are Part of the Earth's Crust and of the Mountains

Rocks are divided into three large groups; this division is based on the formation process of the rocks themselves.

Sedimentary rocks are formed by the deposition of sediments, often deposited in layers as strata. They can be continental sediments (rivers, moraines) or, more frequently, marine sediments (more copious), more or less transformed and compacted by pressure and temperature, depending on having been shifted below the Earth's crust or to the depth of the ocean.

When these sediments come as the result of deposits in water saturated with calcium carbonate or of the accumulation of calcareous shells of marine microorganisms, then the rocks are calcareous.

Quite often in the mountains these sediments can be clearly seen in long layers, sometimes sort of folded depending on the mountain movements over million years. In case they are recent, the continental deposits are not cemented. What can follow are large avalanches along the mountains (called “clapey”, which means “scree” in local dialect), as in the case of “Clapey di Ban” which is just opposite Mellier, or “ghiaioni” (literally “loose gravel areas”), caused by the abrasion of the large glaciers which have shaped the Alps over the past million years (called “Giaviniri” in local dialect, as in the case of Monte Giaving).

Igneous rocks come as the result of the passing through of liquid magma existing below the Earth’s crust, in solid state. Magma can solidify in surface cooling down quickly, and in this case it is fine-grained, not visible to the unaided eye; an example is basalt. Or it can solidify inside the Earth’s crust, more slowly: in this case magma absorbs different minerals, its grains are thicker and composed of the different minerals which are present; this is the case of granite.

Metamorphic rocks come as the result of the transformation (from here the name “metamorphic”) of the sedimentary rocks or igneous rocks when these rocks get shifted to the depth of the Earth (between 5 and 10 km) due to tectonic plate movements and collisions. These rocks are subjected to different pressure and temperature (up to 1000°C), which change the rock structure, and get re-crystallized. The folding of the rocks you can see in the mountains or of the thin-layered minerals (mica) are the result of the deformation and of the itinerary of this type of rocks.

Common Stones and Rocks in the Valle d’Aosta Alps

Rocks present in the mountains as separable sheets (fissility)

The overlaid sheets can be more or less thick and more or less regular-shaped, and are metamorphic rocks; the different level of fissility is due to more or less high pressure which they have undergone: that is the case of slate (with less fissility), schist and gneiss. Not all the metamorphic rocks have fissility though: main exceptions are serpentinite and eclogite (see below).

Mica-schist is schist which is entirely silicious and where mica prevails; foliated minerals with silver tinge (light mica or muscovite) or with dark tinge (dark mica or biotite).

Lime-schist is mica schist with high level of limestone, its colour ranges from dark grey to silver.

They originate from the metamorphism of the ocean sediments in the ocean depths, and are associated to green stones (see below). In this case we talk about lime-schist with green stones, prevalent in the Valle d’Aosta and Piedmont Alps; in those areas they come to form gentle and mild slopes, typical of the ski resorts (quite often this is referred to as the “Zona Piemontese”). Very similar to mica-schist, it differs for its calcareous feature.

The whole Dondena Valley is formed by lime-schist, rather soft. Due to the schist disposition with north-westward declivity, it results that the right orographic side in the upper part of the valley has the same declivity as the rocky layers where slopes and pastures are (the correct definition is “dip slope layer declivity”), while on the opposite side with layers orientated in a direction which is opposite to the slope (anti-dip slope layers) the mountain side is rocky and very steep (an example is Mont-Dela-Punta Tersiva).

Flagstones or slates (which are thinner and mainly made of clay), mainly used for roofs, come from schist. In the case of roofs in Champorcher flagstones used to come from the quarries in Echelly, near the chapel, and in Tilet, along the way from Chardonney to Mont Blanc.

Gneiss (from German, “hard”) is granite which has undergone high pressures, hence causing mineral alignment; it can also derive from metamorphism of sedimentary rocks whose original chemical composition was analogous to that of granite. Across the Champorcher Valley you can find both typologies, interspersed with each other in the same formation, which is called “thin gneiss” (meaning they are thin-grained) and which can be largely found in Champorcher valley floor in the so-called “Zona-Sesia-Lanzo” (see the previous chapter). This is the dark gneiss, characterized by whitish bands (marble, quartzite, granite) and sometimes by dark bands, differently bent, which supply the rock with an unmistakable characteristic (to be found across the whole Valle d’Aosta valley floor from Quincinetto to Verres). Other gneiss are to be found in Torre Ponton and Mont Glacier.

Lenticular gneiss stone, highly deformed and with pronounced linear structure (Champorcher Valley, Ayasse stream).

Green Stones

This category usually includes different types of rocks, characterized by a colour which is almost exclusively green; this colour comes from minerals such as serpentinite, chlorite, actinolite, epidote. The formation of these minerals takes place under certain conditions of metamorphism: they, more or less, share the same origin, since they are associated to lime-schist which, as we have seen, originate from the ocean bottoms.

The green schist is a shale rock characterized by the copious presence of one specific mineral (called actinolite) with the shape of small needles (called acicular). It is the result of the metamorphosis of basaltic lava flows in the ocean bottoms.

The prasinite is a green rock, similar to the previous one, but its structure is less shale and more dense than that of the green schist; it originates from the metamorphosis of the basalts.

The serpentinite, the most dense rock of the group, originates from the metamorphism of rocks which were located at over 100 km depth where they form the so-called Earth’s mantle. These rocks are among the ones located at the deepest profundity we know of and they have come to surface due to the laceration of the oceanic crust during the tectonic movements which have caused the formation of the mountains. Their position in mountain chain usually coincides exactly with the “joint”, basically the scar caused by the collision of the plates.

Its colour ranges from green to black, sometimes it is kind of soapy to touch, solid, layer-shaped (tabular) or even with the shape of small needles (acicular), easy to recognise thanks to its whitish fibers or to its tuft (the feared asbestos), similar to glass wool.

Serpentinite, foliated and bent, part of a ophiolite group in Champorcher Valley.

A narrow fold with a nucleus of prasinite enveloped by surfacing lime-schist along the track to the Colle di Pontonnet. Photograph by Franco Rossi.

The entire Mont-Avic massif, also extending to south across the valley, on the left side, between Dondena and Champorcher, is a huge mass of rocks originating from the Earth’s mantle and entirely metamorphosed

into serpentinite (for this reason here there are magnetite deposits, since these rocks come from deep profundities).

The name serpentinite itself comes from the green colour and from the shape which is similar to those of snakes. In geological language they are often even called "ophiolite" (from "ofios", snake, and from "litos", stone). From here come the words "limeschist with ophiolites", "ophiolites with green stones".

Green schist, prasinite and serpentinite are to be found, across the Champorcher Valley, in the lime-schist and are easily to recognize due to the contrast in colour (green and black versus grey and light brown) and in resistance.

Peculiar Metamorphic Rocks

The blue schist is a shale rock containing a very peculiar mineral, called glaucophane, of an intense blue colour. Its presence defines that the metamorphic conditions are very peculiar, with high pressure and low temperatures, characteristic of subduction zones.

The eclogite is a dense rock, not shale, characterized by the presence of garnet and omphacite, and its presence defines that the metamorphic conditions are of high pressure but with highly variable temperatures.

The eglocite mica-schist is a mica-schist which is characterized by glaucophane as well as by garnet (of red-purple-coloured spherical shape) and omphacite (this is another green mineral tabular shaped and not acicular shaped as in the case of the actinolite).

White Stones

These stones are entirely white: they can be either of sedimentary origin, mainly limestone or dolomite, or result from the metamorphosis of these sediments, such as marble. These latter ones are easy to recognise in comparison with the first mentioned for their "sugary" form, due to the crystallization of the calcite.

Milky quartz (Champorcher Valley, Banchi Stream).

Garnet mica-schist with milky quartz (Champorcher Valley, Banchi Stream).

Quartzite, a rock entirely composed of quartz, can have a sedimentary origin as well as a metamorphic origin: as the previous ones, they can get identified by the mineral crystallization. Besides quartzite can be discerned from marble because it is harder (it cannot get engraved by a metal blade). The white stones which spark when beaten one against the other are the quartzite.

White are also the veins cutting through gneiss and granite; if they are white they are quartz (the correct definition is peracidite veins) or very thin granite and without mica (aplite veins). Across the valley marble and quartz veins are to be found in the mica-schist.

For further details????

The Plant World

Shrubs

Common juniper: in local dialect this is called “dzeneivro”, and it has the largest range of any woody plant up to the altitudinal limit reached by trees. It can reach 3 mt tall, and has needle-like leaves. Its fruit is black berries, used in cooking (mainly to enhance meat with a strong flavour) and to prepare what in local dialect is called “dzenevrò” and is used to cure some diseases.

Juniperus procumbens: this is a shrub with the shape of a dense mat, its leaves are slightly bent and curved. Its berries are similar to those of the common juniper.

Green alder: in local dialect this is called “drosa”. This shrub is typical of the Alpine foothills (or Prealps) between 1500 and 2000 mt of altitude and even a bit higher. It can reach 3 mt tall, with smooth grey trunk, its leaves are ovoid and dentate with evident veins in the lower part. Its pendulous flowers give origin to very small seeds; when spreading over, these seeds look like coloured powder. This is the only shrub able to grow along the passages created by avalanches. It is an invasive species, mainly in abandoned pastures; it is also for this reason that goats are taken to these pastures, so that they can eat these young and tender shrubs which are very resistant.

Common laburnum (also known as golden chain or golden rain): in local dialect this is called “arbor”. It is a shrub or a tree which can reach 7 mt tall. The leaves are generally trifoliate and oval with long petioles; the flowers are golden yellow and sweet scented, densely packed in pendulous racemes; the seeds are bean-like. It can mainly be found in groups at the beginning of the Valle della Legna, where it blooms in June and its intense smell spreads across the valley.

Sorbus aucuparia (more commonly called rowan and mountain-ash): in local dialect this is called “timì”. It is a shrub or a tree which can reach 15 mt tall. The leaves are in groups of 5 or 9, are oval shaped, pinnate, 4-6 cm long; the flowers are small and white and develop small red pomes as fruit. The plant frosts hardy and can withstand winter; its pomes are not edible. An old saying used to go like that: “ A golden chain with many pomes forecasts winter with loads of snow”.

Common bilberry (also called blue whortleberry or European blueberry; “brouacou” in local dialect): this is a shrub of limited height (max 50 cm) which grows broadening. It can be found in conifer woods. The flowers are pinkish and the fruits are dark blue. It can be eaten as fresh fruit as well as jam, marmalade and juice. It has always been used in traditional medicine for its curative effects for vascular, eye and inflammation problems.

Raspberry (also called red raspberry or occasionally as European raspberry; “ampon” in local dialect): these shrubs can reach up to 2 mt tall and easily grow both at high altitudes (up to 2000 mt) and at medium altitudes, mainly in areas more sun-exposed. The fruit is red, slightly hairy, edible both as fresh fruit and as jelly and jam, marmalade; the leaves, disposed of as herbal tea, are a good remedy against intestine and inflammation problems.

Trees

The most widespread trees across the Champorcher Valley are the conifers, which belong to the pinaceae family. They are ligneous trees with needle-like leaves; they produce resin and grow peculiar flowers which become pine cones bearing seeds. A beautiful example of conifers is the larch, which in spring shows little bright-red blooms.

Scots pine (called “doilli” in local dialect) can be found upstream of the Rosier village. Its bark is dark grey-brown and the needle-like leaves are produced in fascicles of two. Quite peculiar is the pine cone which during the ripening season becomes pendulous. The scots pine grows on poor and arid soil.

Larch (called “brenva” in local dialect) has brown bark; with the growing-old of the tree the trunk becomes very thick and with large reddish cracks. Its needle-like leaves are produced in fascicles of 20-40. This is the only conifer which loses its leaves in winter, while in spring it grows little red flowery buds which have the shape of a very tiny pine cone. Upstream of the pasture in Trome a couple of stunning larches are to be seen.

Picea abies (the Norway spruce; “pètsi” in local dialect) is the conifer which reaches the highest altitudes. The needle-like leaves grow along its branches and the pine cones are pendulous and 10-15 cm long.

In the area called Envers, on a moist soil and where the acer (commonly known as maple) grows, there are some examples of European silver fir (called “vargno” in local dialect): its trunk is smooth and light grey coloured; the needle-like squama leaves are 2 millimetres wide, and produced in 2 opposite rows, the pine cones grow upwards.

Mountain pine (also known as dwarf mountain pine, scrub mountain pine, Swiss mountain pine, mugo pine or creeping pine), native to Austria, spread across the Champorcher Valley due to a reforestation arranged in the near Champdepraz Valley, now part of the National Park of Mont-Avic. It is found in two different subspecies: the arboreal species is characterized by upright and straight trunk and pyramid-shaped foliage; on the contrary the prostrate species is characterized by crawling branches which get upright just at the top. It is thanks to their elasticity that this tree can bear the weight of the snow; it also grows along the tunnels created by avalanches. It can also grow along cliffs, where its trunk and roots grow bent and twisted. A stunning example is to be seen on the peak of a rock along the plateau in Tsenaveuts, in the Valle della Legna. Its pine cones are little (4-7 cm) and the scales are quite considerable and hook-like.

Stone pine (also known as Swiss pine, Swiss stone pine or Arolla pine or Austrian stone pine; “arolla” in local dialect, from French *arolle*) is also able to grow along cliffs, but only lime-schist such as the one in Chenessy in the Valle della Legna. Its trunk dimensions are remarkable. Its needles, longer than those of other conifers, are produced in fascicles of five. The pine cones and the seeds are of large dimensions as well. This pine has usually a very long life. Its very aromatic smelling wood is of red colour and characterized by eye-shaped knots. Its wood was used to carve sculptures, mainly statues of saints for the local chapels; one example is a very ancient Sant’Antonio statue, originally located at the Sant’Antonio pasture in the Valle della Legna and nowadays kept at the Sacred Art Museum in the parish church.

At altitudes lower than 1600 mt and in the most populated areas broad-leaves trees are common; these trees have a very thin cortex, loses their leaves in autumn and their flowers turn into “winged” fruits and seeds, larger than those of the conifers.

Chestnut (called “tsatègnì” in local dialect) rather prefers siliceous (sandy) soil and reaches remarkable dimensions both in diameter and in height. It grows mainly in the lower part of the Pontboset village. The leaves are lanceolate and roughly 15-25 cm long. The fruit, the chestnuts, has always been a basic food in the farmer nutrition system; it has been the same for the Champorcher inhabitants, who used to pick them up in the nearby village of Issogne (just passed the Col Fenetre, beyond Grand Rosier) or in Pontboset.

Sycamore (or sycamore maple; called “piéno” in local dialect) can reach up to 30 mt tall, the bark breaks up in scales with age. The leaves are opposite, palmately 5-lobed large, with toothed edges; in autumn they get

a bright yellow/red colour. It is very common and in Envers it grows together with the silver fir. The wood is used for sculptures and to build farming tools, such as rakes.

Ash (“*fraxinus*” in Latin, and “*frénou*” in local dialect) can grow to large dimensions as well; its bark slightly breaks up in scales, the leaves are lanceolate and extended along a central stalk; flowers produce “winged” seeds, which are easy to spread around by the wind, even reaching remarkable distances. An impressive example of ash, dating back at least to the 18th century, can be seen in Porte in the Valle della Legna.

Tilia or lime tree (also known as basswood and linden; called “*tilleul*” in local dialect as well as in French) is another tree of large dimensions. The leaves are oblique-cordate, roughly 15 cm wide; flowers, very perfumed, come in groups of 2-5 and get used for relax herbal teas. Climbing along the mule track which connects Mellier to Rosier there is a stunning lime tree, just downstream of the track.

Birch (called “*bioula*” in local dialect) has a white bark marked with black lenticels; leaves are with toothed edges and triangular-shaped, slightly sticky. It is a glacial “wreck”, so called because it survived when ice receded after the great glaciations in northern Europe and, after that, it spread throughout the Mediterranean countries as well.

Near inhabited areas in the olden days fruit trees used to be grown; nowadays they are mainly wild. Among these the cherry-tree (called “*serèsiri*” in local dialect), to be seen in Mellier, Salleret and Rosier; the common hazel (called “*coudre*” in local dialect), some small apple-trees (called “*poumì*” in local dialect) and some rare examples of pear-tree (called “*pèrì*” in local dialect) in Loré and Rosier.

For further details????

Flowers

The Champorcher Valley, due to its geological formation and its moist climate, shows a large variety of flowers. The rock formations across the valley are lime-schist originating a basic soil, minute gneiss originating a siliceous soil and green stones being abundant in minerals (iron) with acid soil. As far as climate is concerned, this valley experiences the Atlantic currents and most of all the weather fronts coming up from the Po Valley; these weather fronts cause rain and make Champorcher one of the most rainy places throughout the entire Valle d’Aosta.

The Valle dell’Alleigne or della Legna, safeguarded by the European Community as an important community site (SIC = Sito di Importanza Comunitaria, in Italian), is a perfect example: a recent botanical research has identified over 600 flower species just across this valley.

Across moist habitats of small dimensions and characterized by lime-schist soil there has been a wide spreading of green alders, tall-herbs (higher than 1 mt, with large basal leaves) and *Cortusa Matthioli* (also known as “Alpine bells”), a rare and tiny red primula (included in the Red List of the endangered species): this species is a tertiary “wreck”, which means this is a species of ancient origin which survived the glaciations in some shelter-areas at the extremities of the Alps. Another typical flower of the lime-schist is the *Aster Alpinus*, wide-spread across dry areas, Alpine pastures or rocks; it belongs to a flower family with over 500 species (Asteraceae or Compositae, commonly referred to as the aster, daisy, composite, or sunflower family), the most wide-spread family across the Alps which includes the ox-eye daisy. The *Aster Alpinus* is considered to be one of the most highly-developed flowers, since in just one flower there are two

different morphological varieties; the flower head consists of purple external petals (originally tiny leaves) and of yellow central flowers with tubular shape, both of which come to form a multitude of flower-headed blooms. It is surely worth it to study these flower complexities with a hand lens.

More extended habitats (lakes and wetlands) usually are home to the *water-crowfoot*, only species belonging to this family which has come to grow in lake waters; in June and July it blooms, creating a stunning floating “field” of white flowers.

Two carnivorous plants, the *pinguicula vulgaris* (the common butterwort) and the *drosera* (commonly known as the sundews) with oval leaves, grow along the lake shores and secrete liquids which attract insects, which get slowly digested. In wetlands it is also easy to notice dense fields with *eriophorum vaginatum* L. (also known as hare's-tail cottongrass, tussock cottongrass, sheathed cottongrass), a peculiar flower with the shape of white feathers.

Saxifraga aizoides (also known as yellow mountain saxifrage or yellow saxifrage) and *Saxifraga Stellaris* are two little flowers growing on rocks which are close to water. The first has yellow flowers in large tufts, while the second has a red stem with few white tiny flowers which have little red spots at the top.

On shadowy and moist cliffs you can see blue buttercups with a peculiar corolla and with spurred petals: the *Aquilegia Alpina* (also known as Granny's Bonnet or Columbine), a protected species.

In other vast habitats across the entire valley, fields and pastures, other flowers grow: globeflower (“*trollius europaeus*” in Latin; “fieur di bouirou” in local dialect, which means “butter flower”), bistort (also known as common bistort, or meadow bistort; “*persicaria bistorta*” in Latin), wild spinach, field sage and Jack-go-to-bed-at-noon (also known as meadow salsify, showy goat's-beard or meadow goat's-beard; “*tragopogon pratensis*” in Latin); all the above-mentioned flowers get usually used in cooking as ingredients for soups in local traditional cuisine. In spring it has become a tradition, now for some years, that restaurants and agriturismi throughout Champorcher Valley host dinners with dishes based on eatable wild herbs and local products.

In pastures at high altitudes other flowers grow: the colourful orange lily (also known as fire lily or tiger lily; “*lilium bulbiferum*” in Latin), the very rare mountain tulip (“*tulipa australis*” in Latin) of yellow colour, the white paradisea liliastrum, the nigritella (a tiny purple orchid, used as milk rennet), the garish asphodel (a handsome spike of white flowers), field orchids of yellow and purple-violet colour (“*dactyloriza sambucina*” in Latin), numerous varieties of gentians in different shades of light blue and dark blue, anemones (“*pulsatilla alpine*” in Latin), the yellow soapwort (“*saponaria*” in Latin; they look like small cushions with small yellow flowers), the peculiar bearded bellflower (“*campanula barbata*” in Latin) of purple colour and hairy inside.

In the conifer woods the following flowers can be found: the martagon lily (also known as Turk's cap lily; “*lilium martagon*” in Latin) with pink-purple blooms, the tiny and particularly rare pink bellflower (*linnaea borealis*), the venomous wolf's-bane (also known as northern wolfsbane; “*aconitum lycoctonum*” in Latin) with a peculiar yellow flower and bunch-shaped, the buttercup *Thalictrum aquilegifolium* with light-purple flowers brush-shaped, and the saxifrages (or rockfoils) with oval leaves and tiny white star-shaped petals.

In the screes a peculiar shrub is the *dryas octopetala* (common names include mountain avens, eightpetal mountain-avens, white dryas, and white dryad), a small prostrate evergreen subshrub. It has a widespread occurrence throughout poor soil areas thanks to its capacity of creating good-level soil and growing discrete quantities of humus through its dead leaves. Its name comes from its white flowers with eight petals. Along

the moraines it is also possible to find the little gentian *brachyphylla* (a little gentian with short leaves) with bright-blue petals, the common edelweiss (*leontopodium alpinum*) and the Génépy (please avoid picking these flowers up, since in stores you can find dried stems of the very same flowers, cultivated and not wild, with the very same characteristics, at affordable prices), two kinds of foamflower with tiny pink-purple flowers (*saxifraga oppositifolia* and *saxifraga retusa*). Another little plant which, across Valle d'Aosta, grows only in Champorcher is the *minuartia lanceolata* with very tiny white flowers and very tiny lanceolate leaves. Another native example is the *cerastium lineare* (also known as mouse-ear chickweed), a small flower which grows in rocky areas, with long stem and white flowers whose petals are divided in two. In the same rocky areas we can find the tiny *campanula excisa* (bellflower), a bright-purple bellflower: the edges of these flowers are sort of "incised" into the corolla lobe.

A species of dwarf willow which develops not erect as all the other trees but literally creeping stems along the rock surface is the *Salix Retusa*. This plant is a perfect example of dwarfism, a development condition which gets adopted by some plants in rigid climates in order to avoid desiccation caused by winds. Another example of dwarfism can be observed in the pink cushions of the *Silene acaulis* (also known as moss campion or cushion pink), especially in the mountains at high altitude in summer.

A peculiar flower which grows in rocky areas is the *Phyteuma humile* (a variety of the rampion); it is of small dimensions with basal leaves rose-shaped and pink-purple flowers in panicles, each flower with a narrow, deeply five-lobed corolla. Another example, growing in rocky and sun-exposed areas, is the *Dianthus silvestris*, typical on the sheepbacks (*roche mountonnée*) in Ourty. It is characterized by a long stem, a few lanceolate little leaves and a red flowers which in a way recalls the shape of a little clove pink.

Some of the routes previously detailed (such as the one from Outre-Léve to Chenessy in the Valle della Legna in July, or the one from Dondena to Miserin or to the Pian di Bantse in the Vallone della Rosa dei Banchi just south of Dondena) offer an excellent opportunity to see this stunning flower variety.

For further details?????

The Animal World

Mammals

Different mammals live in the mountains. They are not very numerous, but some of them are typical of the mountain environment where they have settled down very skilfully.

The screw mouse, very small (6-7 cm). It lives in fields, moist areas and thin woods up to 3000 mt high. Thanks to its tapered nose and to its excellent sense of smell it is able to hunt insects and spiders and eat them.

The European snow vole is slightly larger than the screw mouse, and it also has more developed ears and a rounded nose. It is rather vegetarian, since it eats grass, flowers and rhododendron branches, of which it keeps dried supply for the winter. Peculiar are the traces it leaves behind along its tunnels, which become visible when snow melts across the fields. It is able to move under the snow layer in contact with the ground.

A numerous family of carnivores, skilful hunters and with a tapered body, is the mustelids. Among them the stoat (also known as the short-tailed weasel; the name ermine is often, but not always, used for the animal

in its pure white winter coat); its body is 23 cm long, the belly is white while the back and the head are brown-red; which are white in winter.

It is a predator which hunts mainly rodents, in daylight. The stoat is considered to be a lone and territorial animal, it marks its territory using olfactory signs, mainly urine. It is a good swimmer, therefore it is also able to hunt fish.

Stoat in summer and winter fur

Another animal belonging to the mustelid family and of larger dimensions is the European pine marten (known most commonly as the pine marten in Anglophone Europe, and less commonly also known as pineten, baum marten, or sweet marten); its paw has five claws which are semi-retractable, which helps this animal in moving from one tree to another, since its habitats are usually well-wooded areas. Another one is the beech marten (also known as the stone marten or white breasted marten), smaller than the pine marten; it mainly lives in inhabited areas, finding shelter in attics, granaries and in any place which can be accessed through small holes. This animal is well-known poultry raider; it drinks chicken blood, leaving the dead animal on the ground without having eaten it. It eats a large variety of things, among which man leftovers as well, mainly adapting to what is available.

The European red squirrel occupies coniferous woods in Europe, and eats seeds of conifer cones, nuts and wild berries. The fur colour is red/brown; it is a diurnal animal and lives mainly on trees, climbing down only when it feels safe and only to get the seeds it has previously hidden. Quite often it forgets where it has hidden the seeds, and in this way it contributes to the seed spreading. Its presence in a specific area is recognisable thanks to the cones found on the ground near trees and eaten commencing from the stalk (the part which is attached to the branch); the cones are sort of “fringed”, with a small tuft left on the top.

In case the cones have been eaten by a bird called red crossbill (the name comes from its beak, which is cross-shaped), it will be easy to notice it, since they would have been eaten in reverse order, from the top to the stalk. One of the most stunning shows you can have the chance of witnessing is the one involving acrobatic raids by male red squirrels, fighting for territory control ; these raids always comes with loud crying (sounding like whistling). These little animals climb up trees very quickly and climb down with their head first; they jump from one larch branch to another one almost as if they were literally flying, with their tail kind of balancing them.

Recently the European red squirrel has been risking extinction due to the introduction (and competition) of the eastern grey squirrel from North America, introduced by man mainly everywhere; the grey squirrel is more adaptable and more aggressive, and it has started to cause habitat loss for the red squirrel.

The mountain hare (also known as blue hare, tundra hare, variable hare, white hare, snow hare, alpine hare and Irish hare), as the stoat and the rock ptarmigan, has glacial origins, meaning that this animal has already been widespread across the Alps since the glaciation periods and it has kept living in our mountains even when the glaciers retreated. These animals mentioned above are all characterized by the presence of a winter coat – according to the season they change their coat, brown in summer and white in winter. The mountain hare is becoming a very rare species. It is one of the most timid animals, of boreal origin, therefore adapted to extreme winter weather conditions at high altitude, also thanks to its tick fur which allows its paws not to sink in the snow.

An animal which hunts the mountain hare is the fox; it belongs to the family canidae. In winter the fur gets ticker and longer and becomes of reddish colour. It is a stunning show when it hunts the water voles under

the snow layer. Thanks to the large ears which give it a very sharp hearing, the fox can easily locate the rodent and dig a hole in the snow with its elongated rostrum and catch the prey. It is an impressive explorer, since even in particularly snowy winters (even 2 mt of snow!) its footprints can be found on daily basis across arduous areas, such as Alpe di Peroisa in the Valle della Legna.

The marmot is the largest rodents at high altitudes in the mountains. It can easily be recognised for its pretty and clumsy way of moving and for the long and loud whistles to communicate with one another. It creates a burrow which is literally a well-organized living area and offers shelter to the marmot throughout the winter time from October to March; this is the hibernation period when temperature goes to -12°C. In winter each marmot will live in a group, creating a complex social system which consists of a male, a female and kids of 2-3 generations; in this way, alternating one with the other, they offer the right warming to the kids, curling near them.

March is the mating season for marmots. The female gives birth after a gestation period of 35 days. The offspring get weaned when they are one month and a half old, and this timing gives them the highest possible chance of storing enough fat to survive the coming winter, just a few months away. In order to protect the offspring from birds of prey, they plan a special protection system and build escape tunnels throughout the area. When the on-guard marmot sees a golden eagle, it makes one loud and clear alarm call. In case it sees a fox, each marmot in the area makes an alarm call in order to confuse the predator with regards to their position.

Quite often in summer up in the mountain pastures it is common to find clods of grass which have been overturned and ploughed by wild boars (also known as wild swine or Eurasian wild pig). These animals, very prolific, do not belong to the original wild family, but they have been rather crossbred with wild pigs, often illegally reintroduced by those fond of hunting. They mainly live in woods where they give birth to copious litter.

The roe deer (also known as the western roe deer or chevreuil): due to a reintroduction program over these past years it has been reintroduced to the mountain pastures at medium altitudes. It is the smallest in the ungulate group. One of its features is what is called "false tail", a very short and barely visible tail which is white in winter and reddish in summer. The male of this species (often called roebuck) has branched antlers which he loses in autumn. Its habitat is the wood with open fields. It is a very attentive animal, always on the alert; it has a very developed sense of smell. When alarmed, it will bark a sound very much like a dog.

The Alpine ibex (also known as the steinbock or bouquetin) belongs to the ungulate group, is massive and strong-built; there is a pronounced physical difference between the male and the female in this species (a sexually dimorphic species). Males are larger than females and carry larger, curved horns; the male horns are with numerous ridges along their length and can reach 1 mt in length. The females are smaller and their horns are shorter. The ridges along the length of the horns indicate the age of the animal. Despite the long horns and thanks to the two-toenail hooves characterized by little footpads similar to rubber, these animals are the unquestioned masters of cliffs and rocks. Their crossings along the rocky sides at Monte Delà (near Col Fussy) are spectacular. Sometimes they stand in a stretch-apart position in order to lick some rocks, probably containing salts. They do not like forests nor woods. In winter they dig in the snow by the side borders to find some grass stalks, and they even lick some rocks containing salts. The Alpine ibex is a social species, and this a difference between it and the chamois, which is a much more careful animal. When you approach it, it makes a sort of gruff and rasping cry.

The chamois lives in areas up to 2500 mt in summer, while in winter finds shelter also in woods and forests. It has small black horns: the horns of the male are hooked backwards, are parallel and at the end show a tip like a hook; the horns of the female are hooked backwards as well but are shorter and stretched apart (not parallel), and the hook is less marked. Peculiar is its fur: the colour changes completely according to the season; in summer the fur has a rich brown colour, while in winter it turns to a dark brown and around the neck it gets white. The chamois is a real climber: it is common to see it running down across snowfields, jumping in the air from one place to another and giving a show of fearless and daring pirouettes; sometimes it is also possible to see it while it plays and pushes a piece of larch root down to an avalanche tunnel. These pirouettes can also take place when they are in group, with their offspring taking part to the show, along a very steep avalanche tunnel. If you try not to be seen by them, you can spot chamois across snowfields in the Dondena Valley as well as in the Valle della Legna (Chenussy snowfield) and in the National Park of Mont-Avic. The mating season takes place at the end of autumn and the female gives birth in May.

When King Vittorio Emanuele used to go hunting across the Champorcher area, usually the favourite spots were just below the Becco della Cula, at the foot of the Rosa dei Banchi, between the Torre del Ponton and the Punta Coutatzi, between the Colle Moussaillons and Raffreis (a stunning location for Alpine ibex) or across the Mont-Delà and Delogne plateaus, perfect for chamois (...)

“The King, once he has reached the (Banchi) glacier, gets off his horse and walks as far as a small stone-wall, behind which there is hidden... The animals get pushed off by the cries of dozens of hunters, who are climbing down towards the King, while the King observes and awaits. A rifle shot gets fired and causes fear and disorder among the Alpine ibex group, now on the run. Fear supplies them with wings to flee the area; watching them gives the impression of watching errant “will-o-the-wisps” across the glacier. From time to time a victim falls to the ground, hit by royal bullet. Other animals manage to flee, being them so quick in their run”.

(Extract from Antoine Chanoux, *Contes de ma vallée*, Ivrea, ed. Viassone, 1924, p. 255)

Drawings in the “Campeggio del Re” and in the “Re Appostato” are by Casimir Teja, also present in the work by Amé Gorret, *Victor-Emmanuel sur les Alpes*, Turin, 1879.

Birds

As basically everywhere, birds live in the sky as well as across woods, forests and mountain villages. They can be categorised according to size, colour, flying style, calls and cries they use. They do not share the same preferences regarding habitat: it can either be among trees, across open fields, on rocks. In order to give you more opportunities to see them, we will here divide them into groups according to size and habitat.

Smaller Birds (max 15 cm)

In the woods and in proximity of human habitat you can find the lively Eurasian blue tit and the great tit (12 cm). This a species with many varieties, based on colour: the great tit whose breast is white, black and yellow; and the Eurasian blue tit, mainly similar to the previous one but whose head is a bit light blue. Some species have a long tail, while others have a sort of small tuft.

In the woods the Eurasian treecreeper (or simply “common treecreeper”; “*Certhia familiaris*” in Latin), 12 cm long, with a curved bill, patterned brown upperparts and whitish underparts, hunts for insects climbing trees up and down.

The wallcreeper ("Sitta europea" in Latin) is an excellent climber; it can easily climb up along rocky sides and walls thanks to its feet: both the nails and the thumb are extremely long, with the thumb being almost of double length (compared to the other toes). In winter it hunts for insects along the walls of old stone-made houses. When it flies butterfly-like style, the wallcreeper clearly shows its grey body, crimson large wings and two white spots on its primary pinions. In summer the wallcreeper prefers vertical mountain sides, slightly moist, hunting for insects in holes thanks to its curved, thin and long bill. This bird spends a lot of energies in climbing up and flying, that is why it sleeps a lot: it wakes up late in the morning and goes to sleep early at night.

The European greenfinch (15 cm) is a beautiful little bird of yellow-greenish colour.

The lesser redpoll (12 cm) has a red spot on its head and it cannot be mistaken for any other bird.

The Alpine citril finch (12 cm) is of green-yellow colour.

The smallest bird living in the woods is the wren (10 cm), with a tapered body and brownish striated back.

The smallest one at high altitudes is the common chiffchaff, with light olive green back, is max 12 cm long; it prefers open woodlands up to 1800 mt.

Larger Birds (15-25 cm)

In woods and mountain villages up to 1800 mt

The red crossbill belongs to the the finch family Fringillidae. Its body is large and stocky; the bill is very peculiar with distinctive mandibles, crossed at the tips. The male tends to be red or orange in colour, while the female, smaller in size, is of green-yellow colour. It feeds on the seeds extracted from the conifer cones, mainly firs. Thanks to its bill this bird is able to efficiently separate the scales of conifer cones, even of the more resistant ones. Another peculiarity: the red crossbill can be categorized in left birds or right birds, depending on the way the upper mandible crosses the lower one.

The red crossbills with the mandible on the left separates the scales of the conifer cones bending their head on the left, those with the mandible on the right proceed in the opposite way. It is an excellent acrobat: it can climb from one tree to another, using its bill to separate the scales of the cones and staying with its head down to do it.

The house sparrow (20 cm), well known.

To the sparrow family also belongs the pretty white-winged snowfinch: the wings are striped in white, the head is grey and the breast is reddish. The colours change according to the season.

The common blackbird is well known: the male is black, while the female is brown. Very common is also the black redstart, of ash grey colour; its red tail is peculiar for its strange shaking.

The ring ouzel is rarer. Its name comes from the white crescent, a sort of ring, the male has on its breast. It can be seen just in spring time.

Worth mentioning is the white-throated dipper, a real "water bird". It can be spotted by more than one stream across the Champorcher Valley. When it enters the stream water, sometimes rough, it goes upstream (literally counter-current) and it keeps its tail up in order not to get undertaken by the water pressure. It walks on the stream bottom and it grips the underwater stream rocks with its strong feet, it looks for larva and leaps upwards. Its immersion can last up to one minute.

The swallows live in areas up to 2000 mt of altitude. What is most common about these birds is their flying, their nests which are skillfully made with mud, and their forming of large flocks at the end of the summer when they migrate southwards. Nowadays due to the type of habitat and to the soil pollution swallows have become rarer.

The Eurasian crag martin (15 cm) is a rock species. It builds a nest adherent to the rocks under a cliff overhang and prefers areas sun-exposed, poor in vegetation and not exposed to winds. Unlike the common swallow which is fork-tailed, the crag martin belongs to a squarer-tailed species.

The Alpine swift is fork-tailed. It is a bit longer than the swallow and larger as far as wingspan is concerned. They fly in flocks and with a loud call that is a drawn-out twittering. Some of its characteristics are quite peculiar and might sound even funny: even sleep can be performed while on air, mainly when it migrates to Africa or Asia where it spends the winter season. It flies upwards and gets carried forward by the winds. It is not completely asleep when it flies; when one cerebral hemisphere sleeps, the other one is awake to check the flight route. Its flight speed is quite considerable; when it flies in straight direction, it can even reach over 100 km per hour, and over 200 km per hour when diving. It is faster than the birds of prey, which it can escape quite easily. At Mont Digny by Trome it is quite common to see and literally feel the Alpine swifts when they fly around, as if it were a sort of breath.

When swallows and swifts are on the air, their main goal is to hunt for insects. Their hunting is quite impressive: in just one day the Alpine swift can get up to 20,000 insects.

Over 1800 mt of attitude

The grey wagtail and the white wagtail (18 cm ca) are slender birds with the characteristic long, constantly wagging tail. They live at both high and lower altitudes, often near water and easily seen by roads.

The water pipit (16 cm) lives only in Alpine clearings. It is of brown colour and white streaked, thin and with a quite long tail. This singing bird, similar to the skylark, sings when on air.

Largest Birds

Crows

They are the large black birds, not particularly loved, they make a shrill sound. Often they fly in flocks.

The common raven (*Corvus corax*) is the largest one of all corvids; the wingspan is 130 cm. Its flight style is planar and slow. Common ravens are known for spectacular aerobatic displays, such as flying in loops or interlocking talons with each other in flight or tailspinning on their own.

The crow (33 cm) is of dark grey colour, black, wings and head are black, with a shrill vocalization. They gather in large flocks, often near areas inhabited by man.

The red-billed chough (38 cm) has red bill and red legs. It breeds on mountains at high altitude, up to 4000 mt.

The Alpine chough (also known as yellow-billed chough; 38 cm) has red legs and yellow bill; it breeds in high mountains.

The carrion crow (46 cm) is quite similar to the crow but it is larger in size.

The Eurasian jay belongs to the corvids family and is quite large in size (35 cm). It inhabits mixed woodland and parks; in recent years, the bird has begun to migrate into urban areas, where it is easier to find food. It feeds on other birds' eggs, small rodents as well as on fruits such as apples, chestnuts and walnuts. It is always in constant movement. It is of light brown-reddish colour, its head and wings are streaked in light blue and trimmed in black. The jay is well known for its mimicry, often sounding so like a different species, including birds of prey, that it is virtually impossible to distinguish its true identity unless the jay is seen.

Wood Birds

The woodpeckers. You can hear them while walking across woods because they drill and drum on trees with their long bill, looking for insects deep within a hole of a tree. Their bill is long and solid.

The European green woodpecker (31 cm) is of greenish colour; they have green upperparts, paler yellowish underparts, a red crown and moustachial stripe which has a red centre in males but is all black in females. Often they are to be found in open fields, looking for ants. The black woodpecker (45 cm): the male has the head of red colour. The spotted nutcracker (32 cm) is of brown colour with distinct white spots and streaks all over its body; slender and rather long, sharply pointed bill. It inhabits the ground for most of the time. The most important food resources for this species are hazelnuts, acorns, conifer seeds as well as berries, worms and eggs.

The rock ptarmigan: it is 35cm long and it is an elegant bird; it changes colour according to the season: in summer the back is light brown and the breast is white; it is completely white in winter. The nest is usually built on the ground among short shrubs. It lives at altitudes between 2000 and 3400 mt.; even in winter time it does not migrate to lower altitudes. It is a cautious bird and it has learnt to distrust man. It is a frugal animal and it feeds on buds, leaves and insects in summer, while it eats fir needles in winter. It is always a stunning experience to see this bird while hiking.

The black grouse (or blackgame or blackcock) belongs to the grouse family. There is a remarkable difference between the male and the female: the male (53 cm) is black, with brown wings and red crest and a peculiar lyre-shaped tail (from here the Latin name, *Lirurus Tetrix*); the female is smaller (**avete messo la stessa lunghezza!**) with brown plumage. This bird inhabits woodlands with clearings, over the altitude of 1800 mt. During their mating season at the end of winter the males exhibit in a distinctive and well-recorded courtship ritual or game: they strut around in a traditional area and display a sort of dance, as a way of imposing on the females; this process is called "lek". The woods between Dondena and Laris are the perfect habitat for these birds.

The bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), also known as the lammergeier or ossifrage. It eats mainly animal carrion. This bird of prey is longer than 1 mt and its wingspan is more than 2.5 mt; it lives at high altitudes and usually nests in rocky areas. It is of streaked brown colour, its head is always white. In Valle d'Ast the last specimen was killed in 1913. In the 1980s some couples of bearded vultures were reintroduced and nowadays it happens to see them flying around in the Champorcher area.

Birds of Prey

The common buzzard (50-60 cm) is large and stocky. The male is of brown colour, while the female (brown as well) has streaks. The wingspan is beautiful; their wings are brown and white.

The golden eagle (75-90 cm long; wingspan of 2 mt), the undiscussed queen of the mountain peaks. This species has become rare due to habitat changing. It usually nests in rocky areas at around 2000 mt of

altitude. One or two couples inhabit the Valle della Legna and the National Park of Mont-Avic. Sometimes they are seen flying in the Champocher area.

Fish

With the exception of the Salmonidae family listed in the Lake & Stream-Fishing Consortium (brown trout, rainbow trout and Arctic char), in the Ayasse stream there is a local trout, called marble trout. The Ayasse is the perfect habitat for this trout, since this stream is natural and genuine and due to the presence of small slopes, medium and large-sized holes, pebbles and gravel along the stream-bed, and the stream-banks are rich with vegetation. Unique throughout the Valle d'Aosta, this species is listed on the EU Directive "Habitat for Natural Environment Safe-guard". It has a large mouth, marble pattern on the back, the stomach is grey and it can weigh up to 10-15 kg. It feeds on insects and small crustaceans.

Reptiles

Lizards

To the lizard family ("lacertidi", the Latin name) belong reptiles with agile and nimble body, easily-movable head and their feet are supplied with long nails; the external ears are easy to be seen and the mandible has small teeth, suitable for chewing.

The largest lizard is the European green lizard (*Lacerta viridis*, in Latin). It can reach up to 40 cm in length thanks to its long tail which can be up to twice the length of the body. The male has a uniform green coloring punctuated with small yellow spots; the cheeks and the neck become bright blue in the mating season. The green lizard habitat is rocky areas which are sunny-exposed (such as Rosier), dense bushy vegetation areas, walls and wild fields (such as Mellier higher part). This is a timid and fast animal; when it escapes across an area covered with dry leaves, it might scare people.

The common wall lizard is smaller than the European green lizard. Its body is tapered and flattened, and is 10 cm long. It is very agile when it runs across walls. It feeds on insects: it keeps still and motionless and attacks its prey with sudden and quick movements.

Snakes

Snakes, unlike lizards, have a mandible with elastic ligaments which allows them to swallow larger preys and to avoid chewing.

The colubridae are a family of innocuous snakes, such as the grass snake (also known as ringed snake or water snake); the grass snake is of olive-green colour, with a characteristic yellow collar behind the head, which explains the alternative name "ringed snake". It is a skilful swimmer; when in danger, it is able to swim across a lake the size of Muffè Lake, despite its cold water. It mainly feeds on tadpoles, little toads and frogs, little fish.

Aesculapian snake is a snake which can reach up to 1.20 mt in length. It is active by day and forages on foliage. It inhabits small ash-tree groves with maple trees and cherry trees.

Viperidae family: these snakes have retractile teeth and therefore are able to inject venom into their preys.

In this group there is the common vipera aspis, with a body which is stockier and shorter than the colubridae's; it can inhabit areas up to 2000 mt of altitude. It is a territorial animal. During the mating season the fighting between males is a stunning show: they raise high and coil one around the other as in a real fight, trying to push each other to the ground but without biting each other with their venom. During this period the vipera aspis, despite being a timid animal, gets very nervous: when it feels man presence, it turns its head towards people and hiss with its mandibles, in the same way when it feels trapped and with no getaway. It is like it is inviting us to keep our distances; if its suggestion gets followed, the viper will not bite us.

The vipera berus (also known as common European adder or common European viper), unlike the vipera aspis, prefers areas which are moister and is to be found even at higher altitudes. The colour pattern varies, with one being similar to the aspis' and the other being almost black. Sometimes, as in the case of the black berus, it can be found coiled around an alder's branch, still and camouflaged with the tree bark. Across the Valle della Legna, even in areas one close to the other, both the berus and the aspis can be found.

Be careful with vipers and snakes

First of all prevention: please avoid putting your hands into the grass without checking carefully first, and avoid lifting rocks and stones. Never sit down without having checked the ground and hit it with a walking stick first. In case you leave some of your clothes or your boots on the ground, please check them carefully before wearing them back. Vipers and snakes are able to see infrared rays and are attracted by warm spots.

Please always wear boots, thick socks and trousers (not shorts).

What should you do in case you get bitten? The viper bite is easy to recognize: there are two tiny holes, 1 cm one from the other. Once you are sure this is a viper's bite, try to calm and reassure the victim (to be lethal the venom dose has to be three times that of a normal bite!) and to keep him/her still in order to slow the venom spreading across the body. Do not make any incisions on the victim, and do not use any tourniquets on the bitten arm/leg. The most important issue is NOT to inject the snake-bite serum, since it might cause further problems and anaphylactic shock. Please call 118 for immediate help. To be well-informed, please read the following websites in advance and take some notes:

Qualche sito di riferimento in inglese???

Amphibians

The fire salamander is roughly 15 cm long, with bright yellow shades on the shiny black body. It inhabits moist areas in forests. When it perceives human presence, it starts to move very slowly, in a way that almost resembles the sloth.

The common frog (*Rana temporaria*), also known as the European common frog, European common brown frog, or European grass frog, can inhabit areas up to 2300 mt of altitude. It is of yellow-beige colour, the back is red. It lays its eggs along lake banks as well as in ponds and in quiet little streams. It hibernates in the coldest months and re-emerge when snow starts to melt. Pond is the perfect habitat for reproduction; this gives origin to migration to predetermined areas, where the courtship ritual lasts 10 days and involves noisy vocalisations, known as "croaking", by large numbers of males.

N.B. Catching frogs and tadpoles is forbidden and well as damaging and destructing their habitat.

Insects

Many insects have been able to adapt to mountain environment, even at high altitudes. They now manage to endure cold weather, very strong winds and intense exposure to UV rays.

The species are numerous. Common practice, when you come across them, is to avoid them or to crush them; better idea is to observe them.

The grasshoppers are well-known for their ability to jump and hop. They inhabit fields up to 2500 mt of altitude.

In the coleopteran family there is the oreina (*Crysocloa gloriosa gloriosa*, in Latin), of bright metallic green colour.

The dung beetle is a black beetle which inhabits, nests and feeds on cow dung.

Butterflies. Across the plateau in Sant'Antonio, particularly rich in flora, near puddles of water there are gatherings of Plebejus Argus males, a butterfly of light-dark blue colours with purple-violet shadows, a sort of shiny rainbow with its wings constantly moving.

From the caterpillar to the butterfly

One of the most amazing phenomena present in nature is the metamorphosis of butterflies. The caterpillar changes its morphology and its internal organs completely. It is a land voracious insects and it transforms into an insect with a complex mouth system, antenna and wings of stunning colours. The butterfly lays its eggs on stem or leaf of flowers or plants. Later the caterpillar comes out of the egg; it is a voracious insect with strong jaws and a chewer system. When its growing is finished, it looks for a quiet and sheltered place where it can mutata its molt, its "skin" and become chrysalis.

During this phase the caterpillar undergoes the metamorphosis: changes take place and chest and abdomen form the future butterfly. On the head antenna, eyes and mouth system take shape. The wings, for now wrapped around its body, get coloured. After that the insect breaks free from the chrysalis shell and starts to fly, starts a new life.

Up to 1800 mt of altitude between June and September the Parnassius Apollo butterfly can be seen: it has large white wings with black spots and two red spots on each wing. The Pieridae are smaller and simpler, of white colour and it is quite common to see them, even when you are just picnicking somewhere.

The butterflies belonging to the Ninfalidae family have brown-red wings, sometimes white with darker shadows.

Night butterflies are numerous. Quite often their colours are less showy and flashy, such as light brown, grey, yellowish. In order to be able to fly at night and perceive the presence of predators, these butterflies, which might look rather insignificant, have developed external auditory organs able to sense and intercept ultrasounds.

One of the most interesting areas for those who love insects and butterflies is surely the National Park of Mont-Avic which hosts not only 90 species of birds but also 1100 species of butterflies and 120 species of forest beetles.

Ants

When you go picnicking and by mistake take a seat on an ant nest or on one of their routes, you are more than likely to jump up immediately and to shoo away these animals.

The most disturbing are surely the red wood ants, to be found in the woods and the typical of the Alpine region. When they perceive they are under attack, they bite and spray formic acid which causes pain.

The role of red wood ants in woods as far as natural balance is concerned is very important: they eat grubs, which are destructive insects; an example of destructive grubs is the pine processionary, which feeds on conifer needles causing the defoliation and death of the tree.

So please avoid hitting and destroying ants' nests. It takes years for the ants to build their own nests. The ants' society is hierarchical and matriarchal. Queens reign over this society and, as in the case of red wood ants, co-exist in the same nest. Their main task is to lay eggs, which will be taken care of by worker ants. The ants' nest is a sort of real busy city: there is a no-stop moving of food, eggs and larva; the nests are large, conspicuous, dome-shaped mounds of grass, twigs, or conifer needles, often built against a rotting stump. Right in the middle of the nest, where it is particularly warm, they lay their eggs; the nest itself is a maze of tunnels, cells and little cavities.

The nest, very moist, does not rot because parts of the nest itself get brought outside and back inside in order to air them out. Furthermore the worker ants secrete an acid which works as antibiotic as well as fungicide.

The ants' nest is always clean, free of leaves and small branches. That is the reason why it is so easy to spot it in the woods. The ants can be defined as perfect housewives and they cannot stand external objects. In case leaves or small branches deposit in the nest, they cut them in small pieces and destroy them. There is autonomy in the nest; all the ants aim to the collective goal of reproduction. The ants' nest can be defined as a "super-organism". Just out of curiosity: Eurasian jay usually fly with stretched wings by the ants' nest, where the ants will spray their formic acid, a natural disinfectant which helps in keeping the jay's feathers clean and healthy.

Human Life

Champorcher Long History

Champorcher Valley, as the other mountain valleys across the Alps, was first inhabited in pre-historic age, even though there is no certain proof. An indigenous local tribe, known as Salassi (a Celticized Italic tribe), was reported to have inhabited these valleys at the same time when the Roman civilization settled down across the valley floor of these very same valleys (from Ivrea to Aosta) between the 1st century BC and the 5^h-6th AD. The first certain records date back to late Middle Ages when the Champorcher Valley used to be a feud of the Lords of Bard, later replaced by the House of Savoy. They left this feud to the aristocratic family of Riccarand; later it passed down to Pompeo Bruiset, part of their royal court. Lastly it was passed over to

Jean-Francois Freydoz, a local lord. In 1861 both Champorcher and Pontboset paid a ransom for the two villages and got rid of their feudal duties to the last heir of the Freydoz family.

The Château Tower, built in 12th-13th century, was later destroyed during small battles against the villages in Valsoana, and afterwards it was entirely rebuilt in 1320 as per the Savoy's order. This is the very last exemplar of aristocratic presence in the valley.

In 1630 the great plague (told by Alessandro Manzoni in his master piece, *I Promessi Sposi*) hit northern Italy and Champorcher, too. It was over these years that some chapels were built across the valley: their aim was to protect local people from infectious diseases. Examples are the chapel in Mellier, consecrated to San Rocco, and the chapel in Grand Rosier, consecrated to Santi Fabiano and Sebastiano.

Across the 18th and 19th centuries the whole valley witnessed a new activity flourish: iron mining and its melting, thanks to skilled workers from France and Bergamo. This new activity brought new means of subsistence, but at the same time it caused the greatest deforestation ever. These two centuries saw a growing in population across the Alps, and even the most remote villages were inhabited throughout the whole year. Each village saw the opening of schools.

Over these years, due to a difficulties related to local agriculture and to oppressions perpetuated to local people on different issues, in the lower part of the valley three uprisings took place: the first two in 1799 and 1801, opposing the anti-clerical issues brought forward by the French Revolution; the third uprising, the most well-known both for the large participation and for the legal consequences, broke out on Boxing Day in 1853 in Champorcher. The previous day, exactly on Christmas Day, local people had been given a bad news on their way out from church: a new law had been passed by Siccardi's government, according to which a new tax on private income and housing would have been imposed. A few years later the first king of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele II, who loved hunting, had the "Casa Reale di Caccia" (literally, "Royal Lodge for Hunting") built in the "Plan des Beuzes", later converted in the present rifugio. In order to access Dondena with horses and carriages, the king partly financed the building of the mule track from Hône to Dondena; this mule track was extended all the way to Miserin and Colle Finestra in order to have Champorcher well-linked to the other valleys, where the king went hunting the following years. Other smaller tracks were built in order to make the king's hunting easier in the higher part of the valley. Nowadays hikers enjoy all these tracks and many other mule tracks, which have existed basically for ages.

In 1955 a new road open to vehicles was built; this helped the tourism spreading across the valley. Tourism had first begun in the 1920s when a few hotels were already open in Champorcher. The first ski facilities developed in the Laris area in the 1960-70s, giving birth to a new tourism: downhill (also known as Alpine) skiing tourism.

The Natural Regional Park of Mont-Avic, established in 1989 in the Champdepraz municipality and extended to the Dondena Valley in 2003, allows the valley to acquire new resources for tourism; the recent building of a tourist bureau for the park in Château gives obviously even more visibility to Mont Avic and the valley itself.

At the same time the grown self-awareness about the local natural heritage has given origin to the creation of a protected area by the EU (officially, a site with community importance) in the Valle dell'Alleigne o Valle della Legna for its remarkable biodiversity: variety of environments, flowers (sometimes rare) and rocks upon which flowers grow. Also worth mentioning is the possibility of reaching, from the Mont Avic, the

Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso and the Parco Nazionale della Vanoise in France; this is a trekking route of stunning interest for those who love nature.

Interesting Historical Buildings

Two houses, badly preserved (one of the two is half-collapsed) and dating back to the Middle Ages, are in Mellier and in Verana. The Torre del Castello (the Tower in Château), rebuilt at different times as explained above, is nicely located just next to the beautiful parish church. The present structure of the parish church dates back to 1730 and comes as the result of different remaking and later enlargements. It was originally built on the foundation of a 16th-century church, which in turn had been built on the foundation of a smaller and older chapel. The part which today is occupied by the high altar covers, more than likely, the area of the old Medieval chapel. The church, as it stands today, was built by a master builder from Valsesia, whose name was Jean Ferro, with the concrete help of local people, who supplied him with the necessary raw materials; wood, lime and sand were wrought and shaped and delivered up to Château. The majestic high altar in Baroque style was built in 1741 by another artist from Valsesia, Giovan Battista Gilardi. The triumphal arch with the crucified Christ and the statues of St John and the Virgin Mary date back to the 18th century, too. Around 1866 the two side aisles were added, skilfully frescoed at the end of the 19th century by Piedmontese painters, Artari. Worth mentioning are the outstanding pulpit (1870), built in walnut wood, and the pipe organ, built by the Franzetti brothers in 1868.

There is a small church museum, where the most important sculptures from the valley churches and oratories are preserved; this has avoided these sculptures from getting stolen. Among the works of art it is worth mentioning a precious box for holy oils, some crosses, a copper-made reliquary and some statues of saints, among which a beautiful wooden statue of Sant'Antonio from the wayside shrine in the Sant'Antonio plateau, Valle dell'Alleigne. Unfortunately an antique statue of the Virgin Mary with baby Jesus, in Medieval style, in the chapel in Vigneroisa (one of the oldest ones) was stolen back in 1964.

Some raccards (traditional wooden granaries, where cereals used to be handled and stored) can still be seen in Outre-Léve, Gontier, Château, Chardonney and Salleret; unfortunately many of them are not literally falling apart. The oldest chapels, dating back to the 17th century, are in Salleret, Mellier and Vigneroisa. The chapels in Grand Rosier (1709) and Outre-Léve (1727) date back to the 18th century and display beautiful frescoes on their façade. Quite often in the chapels there are frescoes of the Virgin Mary with the saint venerated in that specific chapel: San Rocco (patron saint against plague and diseases), San Nicola di Bari (patron saint in the parish church), San Grato (patron saint in the Aosta diocese) and Sant'Antonio (patron saint of animals).

Among the old chapels one which is surely worth mentioning is the chapel in Chardonney, unique example throughout the entire Valle d'Aosta for its peculiar painted bell tower. It has been rebuilt and restored more than once over the centuries; the last restoration dates back to 2014, when the work was done skilfully and in details and the chapel came back to life in all its splendour. Its bells came also back in use and now they strike the hour in the village.

The shrine by Miserin Lake, built on an old chapel dating back to the 17th century, was built in 1881 and surely was founded on what had been a holy pre-Christian site.

Rue di Mellier

This canal ("ru", from the Latin word "rivus") was already mentioned in writing in the 14th century. Its building, as for the other "rues" in Valle d'Aosta, interested the whole downstream community of landowners. It catches water from the Ayasse stream in Chardonney and runs down to the upper part of Coudreyt; it is 5 km long. In the olden days it was used to carry water and irrigate downstream fields.

As far as rye cultivation is concerned, these fields used to be located upstream, since they do not require irrigation. At a glance from a distance it was definitely clear that "ru" worked as a sort of boundary: upstream the yellow rye fields, while downstream the green watered fields.

In order to make the "ru" maintenance easier, a few years ago a large pipe was inserted inside the canal, so that water gets now correctly channelled.

Economy

Up to the 1930s local economy was based on agriculture and animal farming at family level. The population growth in the 19th century caused the local resources not to be enough for local population, and for this reason many locals were forced to leave Champorcher and move to Switzerland, France, Germany or Piedmont for seasonal employments. Last century it was quite a certain amount of locals who, after years of seasonal employment, decided to settle down abroad for good with their families.

The farming lands were literally teared off from the mountain side which was well sun-exposed and terracing were built along little walls, which are still visible today even though they are falling apart. Local people used to grow rye, whose harvesting was due in August, and, from mid-19th century onwards, potatoes. The production was hardly enough for local people.

Families used to help their basic necessities with the growing of a small vegetable garden by their homes.

Across the pastures near the villages hay used to be harvested twice a year: in June and at the end of August. Hay was used to feed animals in winter. Each family owned a few goats and cows, which would help them out as far as milk, butter, cheese and sometimes meat were concerned. Herds were led to summer pastures around mid-June (this small migration was called "inarpa" and usually took place on San Bernardo day, June 14th). They used to stop at lower pastures (at 1500-1700 mt) and spend there a few weeks, and later move to the higher pastures at 2000 mt once snow had melted away. They used to move back along the same way in September and be back to the village on September 29th, San Michele day: this was called "desarpa", and it was celebrated across the whole village.

The pastoral activity is still important nowadays, and barns have been modernized according to EU rules. Shepherds are usually workers who have migrated to Champorcher. Cheese making takes place in local pasture lodges. Nonetheless the main activity is still tourism, mainly linked to the skiing season. For a few years summer tourism has been getting relevant to local economy, thanks to the growing self-awareness of both local community and tourists about the important nature amenities, historical and artistic unique pieces as well as prestigious handcrafted activities (such as high-level hemp weaving, woodworking and cabinet-making) Champorcher offers. Apart from the classic hotels, a new network is successfully growing across the valley: agriturismo (literally, farm holiday resorts), Bed & Breakfasts, chambres d'hôtes are facilities of smaller dimensions and excellent-level accommodations for the new niche guest, who endlessly looks for a short break away in a quiet and natural environment.

Roads and Access Networks

In the olden times and up to the end of the 19th century the networks among mountain villages were more frequent at high altitude rather than at valley-floors, at least in summer. In Champorcher the most popular passes were those leading to Valsoana and Valchiusella (Colle Laris and Colle della Balma), to Issogne (Col Fenêtre) and to Cogne (Finestra di Champorcher).

On the contrary the road from the valley-floor up to Champorcher was, at least up to mid-19th century, very rough and, in more than one spot, it risked avalanches and landslides continuously.

In some places, particularly dangerous, along the road (the clearer example is where the rock is cut by Degrés, old name for Echelly) you needed to climb up and down some steps carved in the rocks. It was possible only for those on foot. Quite often cows moving from the valley-floor to the high pastures in Champorcher twisted their ankles; the mules had to be carried unloaded and in any case with great difficulties. Women had the duty to carry goods from the valley-floor to Champorcher, since it was almost impossible to use mules along the “extrêmement précipiteux” road from Hône to Champorcher.

Ovens

In almost every village there used to be a village oven. Many of them have been restored in these past few years. Once a year in winter, usually at the beginning of December, rye bread used to be baked. The baked bread loaves were then stored in granaries where they would dry. They were kept on wooden shelves, called “rateli”, so that they would not be too close one to the other in order to avoid mould formation; the idea of keeping them above-ground was to avoid them from being eaten by rodents. These bread loaves were sometimes stuffed with chestnuts and cumin seeds; to soften this bread, it was often dipped in milk, soup or sugared wine. This last option was frequently chosen as a snack by those dealing with hay-mowing in hot summer days.

Mills

Along the Ayasse banks there used to be many water mills, put in operation by water power. In the Middle Ages they belong to the local lord and were licenced to private people, who got paid for cereal grinding.

Unfortunately many of them have been abandoned. The mill traction power can be used for different purposes: cereal grinding, woollen cloth fulling to soften the clothes, hemp fulling with perpendicular grinders, forge trip hammer moving and, more recently, tree log sawing to obtain boards (as for the mill in Moulin, near Verana). The mill can also produce electricity for self-using, as in the case of the mill at the farm holiday resort in Savin, Pontboset, called “Les Moulin des Aravis”.

Rout Summarised Chart

Departure Point

Route Name

Type

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