

Maritime Alps

HIGHLIGHTS

- o Meeting nothing but marmots between **Terme di Valdieri** and **Entracque** (p75)
- o Playing cards and sinking grappa in the **Rifugio Garelli** (p86)
- o Watching aggressive ibex mating rituals by the **Lago di Valscura** (p73)
- o Dipping your hiking boot into a 4km portion of France during the two-day **Marguareis Circuit** (p82)

Signature food: *Risotto alla Piemontese*

Celebrated native: Michele Ferrero (chocolate magnate)

Famous for... Rum-filled chocolates

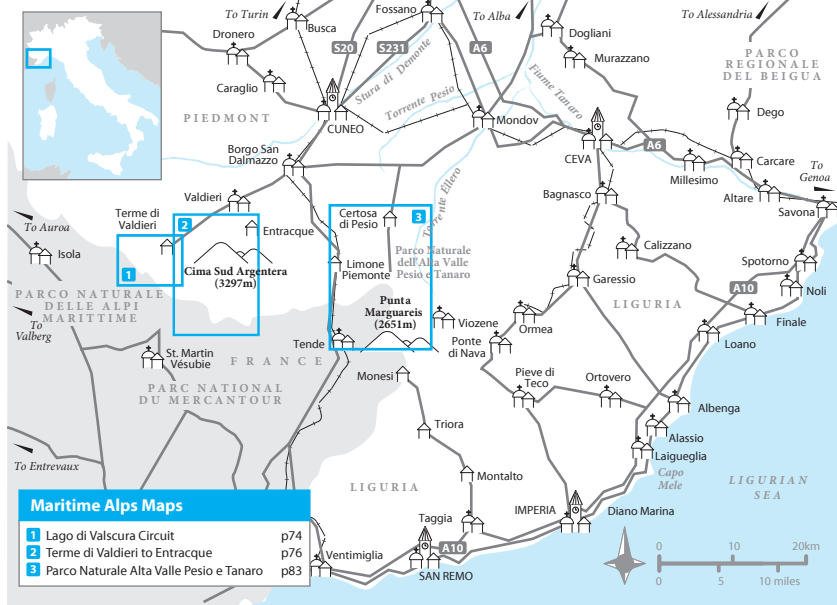
Northern Italy, crowded? Not if you bring your hiking boots. Shoehorned between the rice-growing plains of Piedmont and the sparkling coastline of Liguria lie the brooding Maritime Alps – a small pocket of dramatically sculpted mountains that rise like stony-faced border guards along the frontier of Italy and France. Smaller, yet no less majestic than their alpine cousins to the north, the Maritimes are speckled with mirror-like lakes, foraging ibex, and a hybrid cultural heritage that is as much southern French as northern Italian.

Despite their diminutive size, there's a palpable wilderness feel to be found among these glowering peaks. Get out of the populated valleys and onto the imposing central massif and you'll quickly be projected into a high-altitude Shangri-La. Whistling marmots scurry under rocky crags doused in mist above a well-marked network of mountain trails where the sight of another hiker – even in peak season – is about as rare as an empty piazza in Rome. This is Italy at its most serene and serendipitous. Not 20km to the south are the fancy resort towns of Portofino and San Remo; yet up here in the high country that straddles the invisible border between Italy and France all you need is a map, a decent pair of shoes, and enough cheese and ciabatta to keep you going until dinnertime.

The main trailheads lie to the south of the town of Cuneo in a couple of recently inaugurated regional parks, fanning out from the small ski centre of Limone Piemonte and the airy spa of Terme di Valdieri. Flush up against the frontier with France (the epic Marguareis Circuit actually crosses the border for approximately 4km), the Maritimes retain a notable Alpine flavour in both their architecture and their terrain. But, whether it's *bonjours* or *buongioranos* you're offering, the welcomes are always warm and the hiking positively sublime.



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HISTORY

Recent archaeological discoveries point to the occupation of the Vei del Bouc Valley, southeast of San Giacomo, by shepherds during the Bronze Age. A better known site from the same period is Vallée des Merveilles (Valley of the Marvels), south of the border in France's Parc National du Mercantour, where there is an extensive collection of rock engravings that date from about 1800 BC to 1500 BC. The practice of grazing livestock in the valleys and high meadows of the Maritime Alps continues today, though many of the *gias*, or herders camps, that walkers come across are now abandoned.

The profusion of walking routes across the Maritime Alps from north to south testifies to the centuries-old commerce between southern Piedmont and France. People, ideas and goods for trade have crossed the Alps freely here since before the days of the Roman Empire. Even the dominant language on both sides of the Alps was for a long time the same – *l'occitano* or *langue d'oc*. Track M11 over Colle di Finestra, for example, is sometimes referred

to as the Sentiero del Sale or 'Salt Route' in reference to its former status as the thoroughfare between Cuneo and the coast.

Colle di Finestra has more recent, tragic historical resonances. In September 1943 several hundred Jews fleeing the Nazi occupation of southern France crossed the Alps here on foot in search of a safe haven in Italy. Most were captured and first interned in a concentration camp at Borgo San Dalmazzo, then transported to camps in Germany and never seen again.

All the walks in this chapter have stages in common with the Grand Traversata delle Alpi (GTA). Some of these date from the mid-19th century, when the Argentera was a huge royal hunting reserve, and follow hunting trails built for Vittorio Emanuele II, king of Sardinia-Piedmont and the first king of a united Italy. Lodges occupied by the king's hunting parties can be seen at Terme di Valdieri, on Piano del Valasco (p73) and near San Giacomo (p80). Other sections of the GTA follow roads that were built, or enlarged, for military purposes between the world wars, especially in the 1930s – the wide, stone-paved track

