

# Tour de la Bessanèse

by Nigel Phipps



*Looking back at the Col de l'Autaret - Nigel Phipps*

A little-known high level three/four-night hiking tour that starts at the high end of the French Maurienne with two nights in Italy above the Val di Ala. The tour provides a really good way to experience life in the high Alps. The challenges should not be underestimated with a difficult descent down a moribund glacier and some snow challenges even in August. The settings of the huts are magnificent and there is plenty to see and enjoy. There are two big hiking days and one easier day.

A chance encounter with a neighbour in Suffolk alerted us to this area of the French/Italian Alps. Her father had been a prisoner of war in a small village north of Turin. As the Germans retreated from Italy, the Italians helped the British prisoners escape across the Alps via the Col de l'Autaret (3072m). As we investigated this area, we discovered this three-day high-level hiking tour that appeared to offer a range of challenges with some good huts on the way.



Prior to setting off, we spent three days in and around Bessans in the Maurienne exploring the valley and getting some intelligence on the route. Even in August the snow can be a problem. We were assured that the route was open and that crampons would not be needed. This information turned out to be just about OK....

So late afternoon we left the valley for the short hike up to the Refuge d'Avèrole at 2230m. The hut was not very busy and provided very comfortable accommodation and food.



*Leaving the Refuge d'Avèrole - Nigel Phipps*

The next morning, we set off early for what we expected to be an 8 hour hike. Our initial aim was the crossing into Italy via the Passage du Colerin at 3210m. We had been warned not to be tempted by some earlier cols as the Italian side was vertical. After crossing a couple of gentle snowfields, we arrived at the Colerin. Looking into Italy was majestic. The descent looked hairy. Fortunately, there was a fixed rope for the initial part of the descent down to a moribund glacier littered with boulders and dramatically perched rocks. The descent provided plenty of challenges. Boulders would move and reveal clear blue ice beneath. And as we descended, the sound of the melt water became ever more deafening.



*Passage du Colerin looking into Italy - Nigel Phipps*



At the end of the valley (2550m), we picked up some good path signs and had to cross what was in fact a raging torrent. We tracked back up the slope until we felt comfortable about the strength of the snow bridge that was still fortunately in place. And then it was a short hike to Refugio Gastaldi tucked away at 2658m. It was privately run albeit owned by the Italian Climbing Club (CAI). A delightful and friendly refuge with a bar area and some good food. All tasted wonderful - perhaps because the day had taken us 10 hours.



*The snow bridge - Nigel Phipps*

Day two was a “recovery day” – 5 hours including stops fluctuating around 2700m with two passes at around 2900m. Part of the way was alongside a dam and a lake. Route finding was not completely straightforward as flooding and work on the dam had somewhat re-arranged the paths. This was a day to take in the scenery and the colours of the Alps. After crossing the Colle Altare, the path descended quite rapidly and turned sharply into a high sided valley. There, just ahead of us, was the Refugio Cibrario (2616m). The setting was spectacular and in the early evening we explored the valley to watch the multitude of Ibex around and to check our route. There was a bit too much snow around for my liking.



*Colours of the Alps - Nigel Phipps*

Day 3 we knew would be a big day and so set off early. This was the route taken in the winter by the prisoners of war. There was a very awkward traverse of a snow gully at the head of the valley; falling was not an option and crampons would have been welcomed. But safely across, we had a steep rise to the Col de Sulè at 2900m. Shortly after, the path joined the remains of a well-constructed mule track which seemed almost Roman. We headed down past the Lac Supérieur de l'Autaret and some old military barracks (Napoleonic?) and on to a boulder strewn ascent to the Col de l'Autaret at 3072m. By this time, the mule track had clearly been swept away and it was an awkward sharp descent before being able to pick up the path for the long trek back to the Refuge Avérole. The main challenges from then were tiredness and occasionally poor waymarking.

We stopped at the Refuge d'Avérole to have another taste of their wonderful *pana cotta* and gather our energy for the short return to the valley. At this stage, we wished we had booked an extra night at the refuge even though it was very busy. The third day took 11 hours.

This was a wonderful tour in the high Alps that should not be under-estimated. Fortunately, all the bad weather gear we had carried was unused and all the huts provided good packed lunches. Italian breakfasts leave a little to be desired.