

THE LOWER VALLEY AND ITS CASTLES

Aosta Valley is very famous for its castles testifying a wealth particularly rich history.

This itinerary can start at **Bard** where there is an impressive fortress built in 1034 AD, one of the main military buildings in Aosta Valley. It played a very important role during the French invasions in 1704 and 1800 when Napoleon and his troops were trapped there for a week. Camillo Benso was also confined there as a political prisoner for eight months in 1830, when the fortress was rebuilt by the Piedmontese.

Bard is a typical transit village which developed along the Roman road. Its medieval layout is unchanged and it still preserves a number of noteworthy 15th and 16th cent. residences such as: the Challant house, the Bishop's house, the Valperga house and the Sundial house. Another beautiful building is the elegant 18th cent. palace which belonged to the last counts of Bard, the Nicole family.

Leaving Bard on the way to Aosta you can find on your left, after 5 km, the village of **Arnad** where you can admire a pleasant Romanesque church restored in 1500. Arnad is very well known not only for the tasty lard but also for its red wine "Arnad-Montjovet".

If you follow the state road along the river Dora, you will reach **Verrès**, dominated by the castle built on a hill top between 1361 and 1390 by Ibleto di Challant on the ruins of an old fortress. During Carnival the castle hosts 3 days of events, dancing evenings, historical representations and plays. The castle is open to the public all the year round. In Verrès you can also have a nice walk in the arboretum "Borna di Laou" where there are different species of trees with panels showing their botanical names.

Close to Verrès, on the left side of the Dora you will reach **Issogne**, with its medieval castle built in 1480 by Prior Giorgio di Challant. Inside ancient pieces of furniture, the pomegranate wrought-iron fountain, the beautiful chapel and the valuable cycles of frescoes representing sketches of popular life are preserved. . The castle is open to the public all the year round.

Just before Fénis where you can visit another medieval castle you can stop at **Chambave** to taste the famous white wine "Muscat", and at Nus where the "Malvoisie" one of the best white wines of Aosta Valley is produced.

Fénis on the left side of the Dora is dominated by the medieval castle , built in 1340 by Aimone di Challant. Restored at the end of the 19th cent., it is surrounded by crenellated walls and towers, you can admire the inner courtyard, the semicircular staircase , the chapel and the frescoes from the 15th century, which are authentic masterpieces of international Gothic art. The castle is open to the public all the year round.

SARRE CASTLE - COGNE - GRAN PARADISO NATIONAL PARK

5 km from Aosta (details concerning the city at page 6), direction Courmayeur on the right side at **Sarre** you can visit its castle bought in 1869 by the king Vittorio Emanuele II of Savoy and transformed as a hunting residence: the internal hall is decorated with hundreds of trophies of ibexes and chamois. The castle is open to the public all the year round.

Back on the main road, crossing the bridge over the Dora River you can see **Aymavilles** castle (now under restoration). It preserves very little of its original look since, during the 18th century, it was transformed into a grandiose residence with a central square tower and 4 round corner towers.

If you want to taste a good wine, you can visit the winery "Cave des onzes communes" that produces more than 350 bottles of the famous red wine Torrette and another 5 DOC wines.

3 km from Aymavilles on the road to Cogne it's worth visiting the aqueduct bridge at **Pondel** dating back to the 3rd year b.C. Its 52m high archspan is one of the best preserved in our region.

17 km further up the road you will come to **Cogne**, one of the nicest villages in the region. From Cogne you can take a cable car to Montzeuc (2400m) where you can enjoy a wonderful view on the Gran Paradiso massif and on Cogne Valley. From Cogne you can easily reach Valnontey and visit the "Paradisio" botanical garden set up in 1955 with a variety of environments (rocks, peat-moors, marshland, little lakes and streams) exhibiting 2000 species of European and non-European flora (the garden is open from June to September).

At Lillaz, another village very close to Cogne, the wonderful waterfalls are not to be missed, with three falls of totally 150 m. of height.

Cogne is a popular base for excursions in the Gran Paradiso National Park. Established in 1922, it originated in the hunting reserves of the Italian Royal Family. The park defends and preserves the wonderful natural environment as well as the precious flora and fauna species in it; it is the kingdom of chamois, ibexes and marmots.

There are numerous events and exhibitions; the pillow-lace permanent exhibition is very interesting and during summer the traditional soirées of "veillà" that evoke old local customs are very popular.

As far as gastronomy is concerned, do not forget the "Seupetta à la cogneintze" made with rice and fontina cheese, and the "meculin" a particular type of Italian currant cake.

GRAN PARADISO AREA

This area includes the valleys of Cogne, Valsavarenche and Rhêmes, which form the Gran Paradiso National Park and the valley of Valgrisenche.

At about 14km from Aosta at 880m on a dominant terrace of the valley you meet **Introd** with its castle of the 13th century, a big round building dominated by a square tower standing in the central inner court (closed to the public). Near the castle there is an old farmhouse called l' Ola, one of the best examples of rural buildings in Aosta Valley . In the village you can also visit the wood carving centre "Les amis du bois".

The name of the village, Introd, has his origin from its position at the crossing of the Savara and the Dora di Rhêmes rivers.

Several excursions are possible starting from the little village of Les Combes, where the Pope spends his summer holidays.

Valsavarenche in the heart of Gran Paradiso national park is the best area for excursions to Gran Paradiso, the only mountain over 4000 m situated completely in Italy, and to the Grivola mountain . During the last century this area was chosen by the Royal Family for their chamois and ibexes hunts and today it is a good starting point for excursions in the park.

In the valley are scattered several picturesque villages: Chevrère, Molère, Bois de Clin, Rovenaud. Where the valley widens is the village of Dégioz, where you can find the Visitors Centre of Gran Paradiso Park, which presents the main natural aspects of the park, as well as the predators present in the area. The last village you can reach by car after *Eaux Rousses* and *Maisonnette* is *Pont*, from where the track to Nivolet Pass starts linking Valsavarenche with Ceresole Reale and Turin.

The Rhêmes Valley is parallel to Valsavarenche. Driving upwards you first meet the quiet village of **Rhêmes-Saint-Georges** at 1218 m, starting point of several excursions during which you can see marmots, chamois, ibexes and also the lammergeyer, a recently arrival in our region.

At the end of the valley is the little village of **Rhêmes-Notre-Dame** with a visitors centre with the permanent exhibition called "Welcome back lammergeyer" concerning the extinction and the reappearance of the biggest European bird.

The other beautiful valley present in the area is **Valgrisenche**, which can be reached from Leverogne (Arvier) on a road climbing near a peak on which stands the sanctuary of Rochefort (once a medieval castle) near the village of the same name. The wild landscape is dominated by Montmayeur tower. Continuing up the road there is a medieval fortified manor house just before the village of Planaval. In the valley you can admire the Rutor glacier and the imposing artificial lake of Valgrisenche, whose wall is used for climbing. At 1664m is the little village of Valgrisenche, with its parish church of the 14th cent. and its medieval bell tower.

In Valgrisenche you can also visit the "Draps exhibition" (local hand-woven material). Drap weaving has been the typical handicraft of the inhabitants of Valgrisenche since time immemorial. A rough cloth made from sheep's wool and woven on rudimentary looms is available today in bright colours and geometrical or checked patterns.

SAINT-PIERRE - MORGEX / SAN CARLO PASS - LA THUILE

Once Aosta has been passed, driving towards the high Valley, after 8km besides the castle of Sarre (see itinerary n°2) you will meet Saint-Pierre, famous for its two castles one dating back to the 11th-13th centuries and heavily restored, today seat of the Regional Museum of Natural Sciences (open to the public from April to September); the other one Sarriod de la Tour was recently restored but can be seen only from the outside. As if straight out of a fairy tale, the castle of Saint-Pierre is completely unlike any other in the valley. Taken together with the church directly below, with its beautiful Romanesque bell-tower, it forms a very picturesque whole. Since 1975, it has been the home of a Natural History Museum. The museum is divided in nine halls, where the environment of Aosta Valley is shown to the visitor in its different aspects: mineralogy, geology, climate and glaciers, osteologic collection of Gran Paradiso National Park (ibexes), local flora and vegetation (woods, shrubs, meadows, etc...), reconstruction of four typical Aosta Valley environments: birds, large and small mammals and insects.

In the village of Saint-Pierre you can also visit the "Pain de Coucou" regional centre for handicraft and typical products and "La Grolla", a wood carving centre.

Following the main road you reach **Morgex** where there are the highest vineyards in Europe for the production of the tasty white wine "Blanc de Morgex". In the area some remains of medieval castles or towers can also be seen.

From Morgex on the left you can take the road leading to the **San Carlo Pass** (1960m). You can stop at the hotel *Genzianella* and take the track just beyond the hotel and after a 5 minutes walk you can enjoy a spectacular view of the Mont Blanc and its chain.

The road through the San Carlo Pass leads to **La Thuile**, a popular summer and winter resort, starting point of many excursions to the Ruitor glacier, the Ruitor waterfalls and some wonderful mountain lakes. The road continues across the **Little Saint Bernard Pass** to France; this pass has always been used first by Gauls then by Romans as an easy way of communication. Just on the border you can see the remains of a prehistoric cromlech, a 44 stone ellipse that dates back to the Bronze Age and indicates a sacred meeting point. The other historical point in the area is represented by the Little Saint Bernard Hospice, founded in the 11th century by Saint Bernard, repeatedly destroyed by the wars or the fire and rebuilt, it was then abandoned during the 2nd World War. It was then rebuilt in 1993. On the first floor you can visit the Museum of the history of the Pass, of the area and of the French Savoy region. (open in July and August)

Just beside the border there is the "Chanousia" botanic garden, founded in 1879 and recently re-opened (open to the public during the summer season). You can admire nearly 1600 different plant species and visit a little museum.

PRÉ-SAINT-DIDIER - COURMAYEUR

All along the road to *Courmayeur* you can see a lot of castles, they were used above all to keep an eye on the central valley, which represented a fundamental route. Strategically positioned on rocky outcrops and in view of each other, they made up an effective observation and signalling system stretching throughout the whole valley. You can still admire some of them: Chatel-Argent at Villeneuve, Montmayeur at Arvier, Chatelard at La Salle...

5km before *Courmayeur* you have to stop at *Pré-Saint-Didier*, to have a look at the huge waterfall near the hot water spring (30°C). It was an important military station along the Roman road to Gaul and now it's a nice village at 1000m ideal for tranquil holidays and starting point for excursions around the Mont Blanc.

The parish church of Saint Laurent, rebuilt in the 15th century, enlarged at the end of the 19th century, contains a high altar of the 17th century, with a big crucifix of the 15th. The bell-tower is one of the most ancient of the valley, dating back to the 11th century.

Courmayeur (1224m) small mountaineering capital at the foot of the Mont Blanc. In the old centre a nice shopping area, charming cafés, restaurants and the parish church with the Romanesque bell-tower.

Behind the church you will find the House of the Guides with the Duca degli Abruzzi Alpine Museum.

Only a few km from *Courmayeur*, at *La Palud*, you can experience the thrill of crossing Mont Blanc with the *Courmayeur-Chamonix* cable car, divided into 6 stages. It reaches the Punta Helbronner at 3462m and then the Aiguille de Midi at 3842m; it is a spectacular and unforgettable experience. At the first stop you can visit the alpine garden "Saussurrea" (open from June to September), it's the highest in Europe and hosts more than 800 plant species; at the Punta Helbronner stop the rock crystals exhibition is worth a visit.

There are numerous and easy excursions in the neighbourhood: Combal and Miage lakes in the Val Veny as well as the numerous and well-equipped huts. In this valley is the Sanctuary of Notre Dame de la Guérison, built in 1792 and destroyed in 1816 by the glacier (the statue of the Madonna was miraculously undamaged), and then rebuilt in 1867, becoming famous for the healing power of the Madonna (in the sanctuary there are a lot of crutches, ex-voto and gifts brought by healed people).

In the Val Ferret golf players can enjoy a 9-hole course at the foot of the Grandes Jorasses.

Scattered all around the Val Ferret are a lot of small restaurants offering traditional dishes, among them "Aosta Valley steak", "carbonada with polenta" and "civet" as well as the typical salami are worth mentioning and do not forget to have a coffee in the typical "friendship cup"!

AOSTA - PILA - VALPELLINE - GREAT SAINT BERNARD PASS

Aosta is the main city of the region. It was founded by the Romans in 25 BC and still boasts beautiful monuments from its origins, such as the Roman bridge, the Arch of Augustus, the theatre and the Roman walls. Not surprisingly, it is also called the "Rome of the Alps".

The history of the foundation of Aosta is presented in the Archaeological Museum, where you can also admire a rich numismatic collection. In addition there are remains of one of the four Roman gates, the Porta Principalis Sinixtra, recently discovered in its basement.

From the Medieval period: the monumental complex of Sant'Orso, with the Romanesque bell-tower, the cloister, the priorate and some frescoes are worth a visit, and the cathedral, with the museum of the treasure and the wooden carved stalls.

Interesting exhibitions are hosted every year in the towers Fromage and Lebbroso, in the Saint Benin Centre and in the San Lorenzo church.

Aosta is also famous for its weekly market which is held every Tuesday in the Market Square close to the railway station and for the Sant'Orso handicraft fair, held every year on 30th and 31st of January in the historical centre (wooden and wrought-iron objects, pillow-lace, woven-blankets and stone sculptures). Still highly attended and very popular are the battles between cows (bataille des reines), with the finals taking place the third week of October in the Croix Noire arena. From Aosta a lot of interesting excursions can be organized.

Only 18 km drive from the town, you can visit **Pila**, which you can also reach by cable car: it is a natural balcony facing the range of the Alps with a 360° view from Mont Blanc to the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa. You can find a lot of easy hikes and a wide net of tracks for mountain-bikers.

On the road leading to the Great Saint Bernard pass (SS.27), at Variney, just a few kilometres from Aosta, you can turn right into the Valpelline Valley. The first village you meet is **Valpelline**, at 954m, surrounded by pastures. It is the starting point for a wide range of excursions. On the last Sunday of July the "Seuppa à la Vapelenentse" feast takes place. You can taste this gastronomic speciality made of brown bread, fontina cheese and broth. From Valpelline, following the state road, you meet Bionaz, the last village near the Place Moulin Dam, where there is an enchanting artificial lake. From Valpelline you can reach also Ollomont, a small and very traditional village.

Coming back to Variney, you can take again the road to the Great Saint Bernard. The first village you encounter is **Gignod**. In the village square the "Fete du teteun" is held every year, a gastronomic occasion based on a local speciality: salty and spiced cow udder served in slices. Going on you meet then Etroubles, Saint Oyen and Saint Rhémy-en-Bosses (1632m), famous for its tasty ham. The road, through a wooded gorge, leads to the pass, dominated by the statue of Saint Bernard, patron of mountaineers, which stands near a small lake. Nearby, you will find a few Roman remains and, already in Swiss territory, the hospice where monks breed the famous Saint Bernard dogs.

The **Great Saint Bernard** valley is also well-known for its carnival with typical velvet costumes, mirrors and little bells evoking the passage of Napoleon in 1800.

SAINT-VINCENT - CHATILLON - BREUIL-CERVINIA

Taking the State road direction Turin at only 27 km you meet **Saint-Vincent**. A first stop should be made at the Roman bridge and then at the Parish church with its nice crypt with carved capitals from 11thcent. and its museum containing wooden sculptures and various religious objects. In Saint-Vincent is also worth strolling in the lively pedestrian area full of small shops. The "Fons Salutis" still issues its bicarbonate-sodic water considered miraculous to treat liver and cholecyst diseases (open from May to October). Nowadays Saint-Vincent is famous for its Casino, also offering some remarkable cultural events (cinema and journalism awards) and for its Congress Centre, the biggest in the region.

From Saint-Vincent you can reach **Châtillon** (3km) and turning right into the Valtournenche valley taking the road that leads to Breuil-Cervinia (27 km), one of the most important mountain resorts in Europe you meet first **Antey-Saint-André** (1074m) from where you can enjoy a magnificent view of the Matterhorn. Here you can find the remains of the aqueduct "Rus du pan perdu" with its imposing arches against the mountain. The Parish church is very beautiful and ancient and it was subject to many transformations during the centuries. The bell-tower is isolated from the church and according to tradition it was once the ancient keep of a manor house mentioned in some documents of the 15th century.

From the village you will find 2 roads leading respectively to **Torgnon** on the right-hand side and to **La Magdeleine** on the opposite side.

Torgnon is a well-known family resort in a very sunny position, surrounded by forests and green meadows. The road goes on through the San Pantaleone Pass offering a spectacular view over the central valley and leading to Nus surrounded by vineyards where the famous white wine Malvoisie is produced.

La Magdeleine, a peaceful village with pastures and flowers all around where you can enjoy relaxing walks. It is very interesting "the trail of the mills" that links eight recently restored mills built along the same stream. They were once used to grind cereals (barley, oat, wheat), whose production was very rich in this village. The meal was then used to bake the typical all-bran bread in the four ovens of the village .

Chamois at 1815m can be reached only on foot or by cable car from the hamlet of Buisson , very close to Antey-Saint-André. Nice traditional village with wooden houses and a small lake where you can fish. Plenty of opportunities for hiking, mountain biking and hang gliding.

Going up the valley you reach **Valtournenche** a well-known tourist resort consisting of several villages where some of the famous Matterhorn guides used to live. Nearby it's worth visiting the Gouffre des Busserailles, a fissure in the rock dating from the ice age shaped by the water and the glaciers of the Matterhorn which in far-off times submerged the valley. Going on, you can see a waterfall 35 m high.

8km further on is **Breuil-Cervinia**, one of the most important summer and winter resorts of the Alps. Just at the foot of the majestic Matterhorn starting point for excursions to the surrounding peaks. Not to be missed the excursion to Plateau Rosa glacier that can be reached by modern cable-cars leading to one of the higher and most spectacular summer and winter ski slopes in the Alps.

Just before the village is the wonderful Blue Lake reflecting the image of the Matterhorn.

VERRES - AYAS VALLEY - JOUX PASS

The valley of Ayas is the second you encounter entering Aosta Valley. It's a winding valley with numerous charming hollows, covered with meadows, fields and woods.

The road starts from *Verrès* (for details concerning the castle please see at p. 1) and climbs to Challand-Saint-Victor and Challand-Saint-Anselme to Arcesaz and Brusson.

At *Challand Saint Victor* (774m) , you can visit the remains of the castle of Villaz 10th cent. and the parish church of Saint Victor, with its museum containing different religious objects (for example a crucifix of the 14th century). Continuing up the road at 1040m you meet *Challand Saint Anselme*. From here a very panoramic car itinerary leads through the Tscore pass reaching Saint-Vincent. Near Challand you can visit the "Lago di Villa" nature reserve. The lake is home to two water plants, which are very rare in the Aosta Valley, the white water-lily and the amphibious bistort.

The nearby Arcesaz plateau is a drained lake dominated by the Comagne peak (2099m).

Brusson lies on a meadowy slope at 1332m.. Pleasant village for tranquil holidays you can visit at *Graines* the castle built on a isolated rock spur, a major example of Romanesque architecture with a tower, chapel and surrounding walls.

If you follow the valley you will reach *Antagnod*. The parish church of San Martino (1497) is worth a stop. Its wooden carved altar in Baroque style is the richest of the region.

The road ends up at Saint-Jacques , a picturesque little village, starting point of several tracks leading to mountain huts, after having passed *Champoluc*, famous summer and winter resort, and Frachey.

The **Ayas Valley** should be mentioned for the handicraft production of sabots, wooden clogs used by farmers and today sought-after souvenirs; the production is "semi-industrial" as well as by hand (made by artisans called "sabotiers" following tradition).

In the area you can admire several ancient devotional images painted on the walls and some sundials. Recently, a new via crucis (the highest in Europe) made of slate has been created by the artist Salvetta and placed along the path from Barnasc to the Mont Zerbion.

In the area you can visit some dairies producing typical local cheeses such as fontina. To return to Saint-Vincent you can follow an alternative road. From Brusson you find the junction to the **Joux Pass** on the right. It's a very panoramic itinerary through the pass famous for the historic fountain of Napoleon: Napoleon passed this pass in 1800 and avoided being taken prisoner by an Austrian patrol thanks to this fountain at which they stopped to drink some fresh water.

PONT-SAINT-MARTIN - DONNAS - GRESSONEY VALLEY

At Pont Saint Martin starting point of the *Gressoney* Valley, it is worth visiting the Roman bridge dating back to 1st cent BC. The town is dominated by the remains of a medieval castle. Also in *Pont Saint Martin* a historical Carnival takes place recalling the legend of "the satan bridge".

2 kilometers further on you will come to *Donnas*, where a section of the Roman road to Gaul with an arch high more than 4 meters, cut in the rock is well preserved and where different DOC wines are produced.

Back to Pont Saint Martin following the road to Gressoney, the first village you encounter is *Perloz*, at 661m famous for the annual traditional feast of the so-called brown bread which takes place on the penultimate Sunday of July and the goat battle which takes place in November and for its parish church of San Salvatore which dates back to the 12th century.

Lillianes boasts a medieval bridge and the church of Saint Rocco with its 15th cent. stone bell-tower. A few km further on, *Fontainemore* surrounded by the woods, has a remarkable wooden bridge and in the area you can visit the Mont Mars nature reserve. In the village you can also admire the 17th cent. parish church of Sant'Antonio rebuilt on the ruins of the previous 15th century church.

After the ravine of Guillemore, you reach *Issime* whose 16th cent. parish church has a façade with the "Last Judgement" fresco. It seems to be one of the first villages inhabited by the Walsers, the population of German origin who came from Valais in the 13th cent. and spread the dialect which is still spoken in the valley. At *Gaby*, on the other hand, a charming village evoked by the Italian poet Carducci a Franco-Provençal dialect is spoken.

If you follow the winding and picturesque road, you will arrive at *Gressoney Saint-Jean*, at 1385m. An elegant summer and winter resort rich in culture and traditions; you can visit the Savoy Castle (summer residence of the queen Margherita now used for events, concerts and exhibitions), the Institute of Walser Studies and Culture (for groups interested in knowing the origin and traditions of the Walser ethnic group) and the Alpenfaunamuseum (alpine wildlife). The parish church of San Giovanni rebuilt in 1725 on the foundations of a 16th cent. church and its museum deserve a visit. This resort is the starting point of many spectacular excursions: the Ranzola pass to reach Brusson, the Pinter pass to reach Champoluc and the Loozoney Pass to Piedicavallo (Piedmont).

At 1624m *Gressoney La Trinité*, is a well-known alpine resort equipped and frequented for winter sports and climbs on the Monte Rosa massif. With the nearby valleys of Ayas and Alagna, the valley of Gressoney is one of the largest skiing areas in the Alps, the "Monterosaski".

In Gressoney you can taste the local butter and the toma cheese, used to flavour the polenta.

The typical costume of Gressoney is one of the more beautiful and rich of the valley and it is still worn for special events, for example the traditional processions of the 24th June and of the 15th August.

In Gressoney valley several picturesque Walser typical houses are scattered, called "rascard" in all Aosta Valley, wooden hay lofts raised up on stone and wood pillars in the shape of mushrooms, to keep mice and damp at bay.