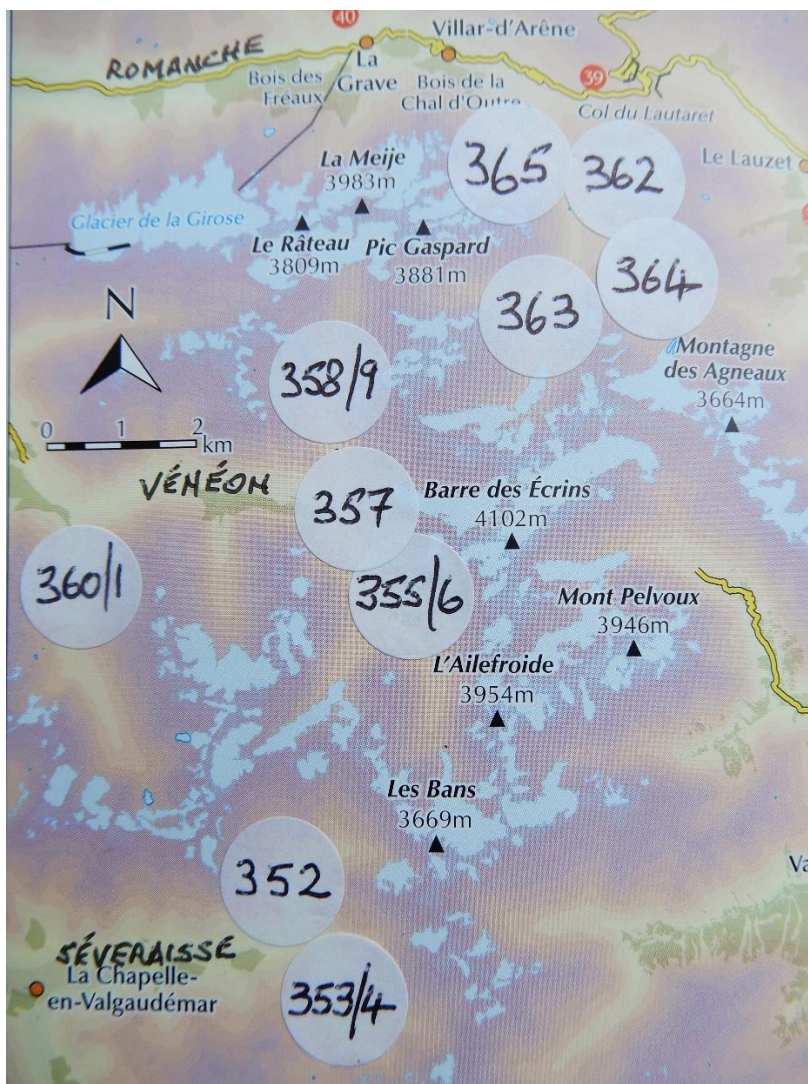


TRIP 38: THE FRENCH ALPS (LES ECRINS)

Having visited the Italian Alps in at least seven different areas (see previous trips), I thought it was time to try the French Alps. I chose the Ecrins National Park area because I wanted to avoid the overcrowded and expensive Mont Blanc area and because the handy Cicerone guide-book had tempting pictures of three adjacent valleys that reach into the heart of big mountains. The valleys in question are Valgaudemar, Veneon and Romanche. Although they start from widely separated points, they all end up next to each other amidst the Massif des Ecrins.

Valgaudemar is the most southerly of the three and goes east from the village of St Firmin along the Severaisse River, with La Chapelle as the main resort. Vallee du Veneon is in the middle of the three and runs south-east from the town of Le Bourg d'Oisans along the Veneon River to the summer resort of La Berarde. Vallee de la Romanche is the most northerly, also starting from Le Bourg d'Oisans but runs east along the Romanche River, turning south at the village of Villar d'Arene.



8315: location of the trails; map from Walking in the Brianconnais, Cicerone, 2018

'Ecrins' can mean, amongst other things, 'green oases', which is appropriate for these very green valleys, which only lose their green cloaks of trees in their upper valleys where scree and moraine predominate below the remains of glaciers. Thanks to my friend Bill Orwin for the research that turned up that meaning of 'Ecrins'.

A somewhat complicated series of buses can take you from one valley to another, involving overnight stays in Le Bourg d'Oisans. Getting there and back is possible by plane to Lyon but the train journey should be just as quick and only slightly more expensive, if you don't make the mistake I made (see next section). My visit was in late August and early September 2022, after the main French summer rush. The guide-book I used is Kev Reynolds, Ecrins National Park, Cicerone, 2008, still relevant 14 years later, although the glaciers he photographed have retreated even further (hereafter referred to as 'Reynolds'). Apologies to anyone bothered by the lack of accents on French words but my computer keyboard doesn't do accents.

Getting There

My first day was a concatenation of mishaps. Sparing you the gruesome details, of which there are many, I missed each connection of my well-planned outward journey. For a change, I was not travelling by plane but by train and bus, involving four connections. I assumed that Eurostar was like any other train and turned up 20 minutes before departure, only to find that the gate had closed 10 minutes ago to allow for passport control and security. The next train was an hour later which meant that I missed the train at Gare de Lyon by 5 minutes, therefore arrived at Grenoble 2 hours late, thus missing the last bus to St Firmin where I was to catch the 'navette' (local bus) to La Chapelle-en-Valgaudemar where I had a reservation. Instead, I had to catch a bus to the nearest town to St Firmin, Corps, from where I thought I'd hire a taxi. No taxis in Corps so I hitched a lift to le Roux, still 7k short of La Chapelle.

By then, it was 8pm. I confidently expected to score another lift but, just in case, started walking with a full pack and a hand-bag full of food and drink. No one stopped (only about a dozen cars passed) so I walked 5k into the night, failing to get a signal to ring the place where I was staying. My legs gave out on me at 10pm when I finally got a signal to phone my hostess who picked me up for the final 2k.

What should have been a straightforward journey had turned into a disaster. So much so that my first trail to Lac du Lauzon was out of the question the next day. Instead, I lazed around at Refuge du Gioberney, hoping that the constant rain forecast for the next day would not materialize and scupper my last chance to do the trail on what was to have been my rest day. As it turned out (see below), other events meant that the self-inflicted drama continued for another two days. Moral: read the small-print on your Eurostar ticket.

Valgaudemar

Beyond La Chapelle, Valgaudemar continues for another 7k then forks into two valleys, the Severaisse going south and the Gioberney going north. Both valleys are surrounded by huge mountains with three high refuges. Refuge du Gioberney is just above the fork at a lower altitude and is more like a hotel than a refuge, although it does have dormitory beds.



7836: upper reaches of Valgaudemar; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

352: Lac du Lauzon

After a day's recovery from my 'getting there' debacle described above, I was ready for my first trail, a rather famous one to a lake on a shelf high above Refuge Hotel du Gioborney. It features in most of the guide-books of the best trails in the southern part of the French Alps and is Route 43 in Reynolds.



7835: Lac du Lauzon + surroundings; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

On looking at the terrain, I didn't like the look of the steep descent from Lac du Lauzon from the north (7758) so I decided to go up and come down by the southern route across the hillside (7760, 7761).



7758: the northern route comes down the left side of the valley ahead
7760: the easier southern route traverses this hillside....



7761:and continues far above the waterfall



7775: crossing the scree

From Refuge du Gioberney, you go north for a bit, then you turn south across scree on zig-zags (7775), followed by a verdant patch with luxuriant ferns (7776) and a small wood (7778). Just after the wood, you cross a stream above the Voile de la Mariee waterfall (7780).



7776: luxuriant fern



7778: small wood

The traverse of the hillside continues for another 500m with more zig-zags and occasional views down to Refuge du Gioberney and the two valleys above it (7782). Ahead looms Le Sirac, a mountain with a dusting of snow after rain the night before – also the glaciers, what is left of them, had turned white from their previous grey when I arrived (7783).

7780: the stream above the Voile de la Mariee waterfall





7782: Refuge du Gioberney with the valleys and mountains above it

After a corner, you traverse north-west with yet more zig-zags until you cross a rise and see this view ahead (7784). Maybe it's just me but from here it felt like I was treading on sacred ground, it was all so beautiful, with a little rock scrambling thrown in for entertainment (7788).



7783: close-up of Le Sirac and its glaciers



7784: Lac du Lauzon is on the shelf in the upper centre



7788: a bit of scrambling here

700m after the corner, you come to a flatter section, called “a meadow-land” by Reynolds, but not my idea of meadows, more like scrubby grassland, yet still beautiful (7789). After another 500m and yet another waterfall (7790), you finally reach the lake (7791).



7789: scrubby grassland before the lake appears – footbridge bottom right



7790: waterfall and pool



7791: first view of Lac du Lauzon

Of course, you have to go round the lake and are rewarded by lots of lovely views (7793) and many lovely spots. Mine was

“On a Rock about One-third of the Way round Lac du Lauzon”

Reynolds describes the view from Lac du Lauzon as a “waterfall-streaked amphitheatre” (p.161). Well, the recent drought put paid to that – no waterfalls any more but plenty of mountains and vestigial glaciers (7795, 7797 & 7800). This was everything it is cracked up to be: verdant banks with healthy green bushes, reeds in the lake and views all around the cirque of Haute Valgaudemar.



7793: watery sun with Les Bans, Pic Jocelme and their glaciers

7795: Pic Jocelme, Pointe de Chabourneou and Le Sirac with their glaciers



7797: Pics du Says, Mont Gioberney and the north end of the lake

7800: Le Sirac and the west side of the lake

Continuing round the lake, you find more enticing views (7801 – 7808):



7801: c/u of the glacier on Les Bans



7804: marshy area at the north end



7805: little flowers in the marsh



7806: reeds at the northern end

I enjoyed the scrubby grassland even more on the way down, since I wasn't impatient to reach the lake as I had been on the way up (7810, 7811 & 7814).



7808: outlet of the lake, Vallon du Gioberney and Les Bans



7810: the start of the way down - that's an expanse of stones on the right, not the lake



7811: a stream and what looks like a marsh

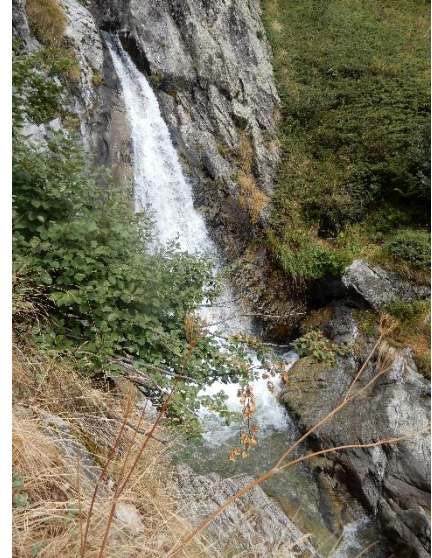


7814: the end of the scrubby grassland

Mist in the valley below surprised me (7815). After a few scrambly descents (harder than on the way up), I stopped at one of the waterfalls:

“Right by a Waterfall about Two-thirds the Way to the Corner”

This spot is about 30m off the path on a grassy perch overlooking the waterfall: by a waterfall is always good – this one has a pool deep enough for a brave dip (7816, 7819 & 7820).



7815: mist – by the way, the next trail goes up the valley beneath the glacier on the left
7816: the waterfall and the pool from my spot



7819: the way down to the pool, obviously taken by some intrepid hikers
7820: the path down to the waterfall

More mild scrambling – for me, not for sure-footed hikers – was to follow (7823). I stopped for one of my many rests at the corner and a mist appeared from nowhere in the ten minutes that I was there (7825). This is apparently common in these mountains but I have no idea of the explanation for it. My favourite tree, the rowan, showed up well against the mist (7828). Then the mist mostly dissipated (7829, 7831) before the final approach over flattish ground to Refuge du Gioberney where I was impressed by a tall flower (7833).



7823: scrambly bit



7825: sudden mist



7828: rowan against the mist



7829: mist lingering over the two northern valleys



7831: Refuge du Gioberney from just before the final turn



7833: all the other specimens of this flower on the trail were not flowering

As you can probably tell, I absolutely loved this trail from start to finish, even though I had to descend really slowly to preserve my legs for the following day. It was all good – but heavenly from photo 7784 onwards: “un petit peu de paradis”. So, without question, it goes into my ‘pantheon of heavenly hikes’ (see under ‘Odds & Sods’). It seems appropriate to conclude with this idealized image from the wall of my next stop, Refuge de Chabourneou – sorry about the unavoidable window reflections (7849).



7849: promo poster

353: Refuge du Gioberney to Refuge de Chabourneou

This trail was a complete contrast to the previous one for two reasons: because of my ‘getting there’ debacle, I had to do it without my planned rest day, which I had spent recovering from the debacle; and secondly, by comparison, it was rather boring. It was the same length as Lac du Lauzon (about 6k) but was a trial from start to finish as my legs hadn’t recovered and I was weak from a stomach upset. It was actually an easier trail but took me much longer (55 minutes per k, as against 44 minutes for Lauzon, excluding rests). The route follows the valley south from Gioberney and then goes up a steep slope to Chabourneou. You can also get to Chabourneou by going along a shelf high above the valley from Gioberney or by traversing a spur of Le Sirac from Refuge de Vallonpierre but both of these looked too difficult for me.



7733: trail 353 + surroundings; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

You go down the access road for Refuge du Gioberney to the second corner with a good view of the Voile de la Mariee (The Wedding Veil) waterfall (7837, 7763). You can turn off the road after the second bend or lower down at the parking place onto the Sentier du Ministre, which follows the river for 500m before crossing it just below the parking place.



7837: The Wedding Veil living up to its name after a night's rain



7763: the day before

From here, it's a 4k traverse of the hillside above the Severaisse River, relieved only by crossing the rapids coming down from Cabane du Pis and Pic Jocelme (7838, 7839).



7838: near the start of the traverse 7839: near the end of the traverse, Le Sirac on the right

Then you cross another set of rapids at the bottom of the Chabourneou Valley and are faced with the final climb up to the refuge (7840).



7840: just before crossing the rapids – the refuge is just visible in the upper left corner in the dip in the ridge – the path to it goes through numerous zig-zags and gets steeper all the time

That's it for this trail, except to say that I could hardly move by the time I had climbed the final slope to the refuge, even on fairly friendly zig-zags. I managed a very light meal and gallons of water and slept for 9½ hours with only one wake-up – usually it's 7 hours with several wake-ups. The compensation is that the refuge is in a spectacular setting with views all around (see later photos). I can't really judge the merits of this trail as I was in such a dire state but it's by far the easiest of the three possible approaches to the refuge.

Refuge de Chabourneou

Spent the next day first warming up in the sun with four layers on, then avoiding the mid-day sun; otherwise watching nauseatingly nimble children romping up the slope that had been so difficult for me; oh, and drinking as much water as I could to re-hydrate (I had drunk 1½ litres on the way up but it still wasn't enough – I later found out that another hiker regularly carried and drank 5 litres on a full day's hike in the mountains so perhaps my mere three 500ml bottles contributed to my general tiredness on this trip). I hoped this rest day would put me back on track with my planned walking days and rest days. Here are the photos:



7855: Pic Jocelme and Pic de Bonvoisin from behind the refuge

7856: down into the valley with Aiguille de Morges (left) and the French flag



7858: the path leading round the hillside and continuing across the valley and across the slope below Le Sirac to Refuge de Vallonpierre, a path that I eschewed even before leaving England, both for its difficult stretch in the centre of the photo (see red dots on the map) and for the difficulty and length of the approach to Vallonpierre – to put me in my place, the woman next to me at dinner was doing both paths in 7 hours the next day, back to Gioberney



7860: the continuation of the path to Vallonpierre, which is on a shelf round the corner
7862: the refuge from behind

Was the effort to get there and down again worth it ? I'm not so sure as all but the view in 7855 were visible from below; so you could go up and down the valley in one day and cut out the last, steeper climb to the refuge. You could also go along the valley floor on the GR54 trail towards Vallonpierre and turn around when it gets steep with similar effect – and that path looks more pleasant to me. Anyway, that's not what I did and the day spent at the refuge was just what the doctor ordered.

354: Refuge de Chabourneou to Rif du Sap

Knowing it took me 7 hours from Refuge du Gioberney to Chabourneou, I allowed 8 hours for this return journey to the lower by 250m Rif du Sap because coming down usually takes me longer than going up. The deadline was having to catch the local 'navette' bus at 15.30.



8317: trail 354; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

I had largely recovered from my upset stomach, dehydration, headache and weak-all-over, thanks to my rest day. By the way, I put it down to a combination of altitude sickness (even at 2,000m), eating some dodgy pesto pasta brought from England 3 days previously, gobbling too many magnesium pills to ward off muscle cramps and the knock-on effect of my 'getting there' debacle.

I got down to the valley in just over an hour whereas it had taken me 1hr 50 mins coming up, so I realised I had plenty of time (7863). Soon after the first bridge, I found a small path I was looking for off to the left (brown dashes on the map) which would take me away from the stony traverse of the hillside I had trodden on the way up (7865). It also promised to connect with the GR54 on the far side of the river, which I had liked the look of on the way up.



7863: early morning shot of Refuge de Chabourneou and the last part of the climb up

Initially the path was earthen or grassy and therefore much easier on my knees. Then, as it approached the river-bed, it became stony but not unpleasantly so. At the river-bed, there were a few wet bits to cross (7866) before it was possible to get onto the bank (7867).



7865: the turn-off for my 'alternative' path (by the bush)



7866: wet bits on the river-bed

As you turn into the main valley where the streams from Vallonpierre join (7868), it's easy to lose the path but also easy to find it again. This path was so much better than the way I came up: more varied, easier going and less predictable – in fact, a genuine 'trail-less-trodden' !



7867: path goes onto the bank for a while



7868: joining the main valley where I lost the path

You join the river again and a ‘proper’ path emerges on the bank (7870), taking you through a rock ‘tunnel’ (7871) directly to the 2nd bridge (7872, 7873). Turn right over the bridge for a short-cut to the GR54 but it’s easy to miss it at a warden’s hut (go round it to the right).



7870: the ‘proper’ path



7871: the rock ‘tunnel’



7872: the 2nd bridge



7873: looking back from the bridge towards Le Sirac

Once on the GR54, it's plain sailing all the way to Refuge du Clot. The path is not as well-trodden as the rocky terrace above (surprisingly for a Sentier de Grande Randonnee, a national hiking trail) but again far more interesting (7875).



7875: on the GR54, approaching the 3rd bridge – the mountain is Les Rouies, above Lac du Lauzon

“On the 3rd Bridge over the Severaisse Stream”

This is a typical mountain stream spot with a view upstream to Le Sirac (7876), up a side valley to Pic des Apiliou and Les Bans and downstream to Pointe de la Muande and Les Rouies (7878). One can never get enough of mountain streams.



7876: upstream to Le Sirac



7878: downstream to Les Rouies

After the 3rd bridge, it just gets more idyllic as the GR54 winds its way down the valley near to the river (7881). Lizards were swishing and slithering in fits and starts, butterflies were hovering and fluttering and grasshoppers were hopping (what else?). A 4th bridge over the stream from the side valley brings you more steeply downhill to the corner turning west towards Refuge du Clot, passing a somewhat idyllic cottage (7882) by yet another bridge, this time over the Gioberney River.



7881: idyllic stretch of the GR54



7882: idyllic cottage – inhabited

From here to Refuge du Clot is a very pleasant verdant stroll on an easy path with some different flowers from what I saw higher up (7883, 7885, 7886 & 7888). I arrived at Refuge du Clot (7892) with 3 hours to spare, so plenty of time for a drink, cooling off and writing these notes – oh, and feeding the chickens with my stale, but buttered bread (they were in clucking heaven).



7883: unnamed flower



7885: briefly by the river



7886: sylvan or what ?



7888: scabious

Talking of heaven, how different things were on the way down: I was fresh, with less bodily problems (my headache went as soon as I got lower down), walking earlier in the day and on a 'trail-less-trodden'. What I take from this is that the body is the primary source of all pleasure, which is enhanced (or not) by one's surroundings. It's not the other way round, as we are supposed to believe: that pleasure comes from the outside and we are the recipients of it. For me, walking enlivens the pleasure in my body and the beauty of the mountains, lakes and streams reflects that pleasure back to me – but if my body is wrong, as on the way up, the mountains etc are just rubbish.

7892: Refuge du Clot from my table



I was told that the walk to Rif du Sap to catch the bus is an easy downhill stroll in the shade. Not true: it's not that easy (quite a few rocky bits), it's hardly downhill at all but undulating and at least half of it is in the sun. Apart from that, it's a better half-hour than walking down the road.

Vallee du Veneon

Moving from Valgaudemar to Vallee du Veneon via 4 buses with an overnight stay in Le Bourg d'Oisans only confirmed that altitude sickness was part of the drama I experienced at Refuge du Gioberney. We'll see what happens in Vallee du Veneon where two of the refuges I'm staying in are even higher (by 200m and 400m) than Chabourneou. Like Valgaudemar, Vallee du Veneon splits at its far, eastern end with the Veneon River going south and the Etancons north. According to the map, it's surrounded by a lot more glaciers than Valgaudemar, presumably because its mountains are on average 500m higher. Maybe at least the north-facing ones will be in better shape than those in Valgaudemar (map on next page).

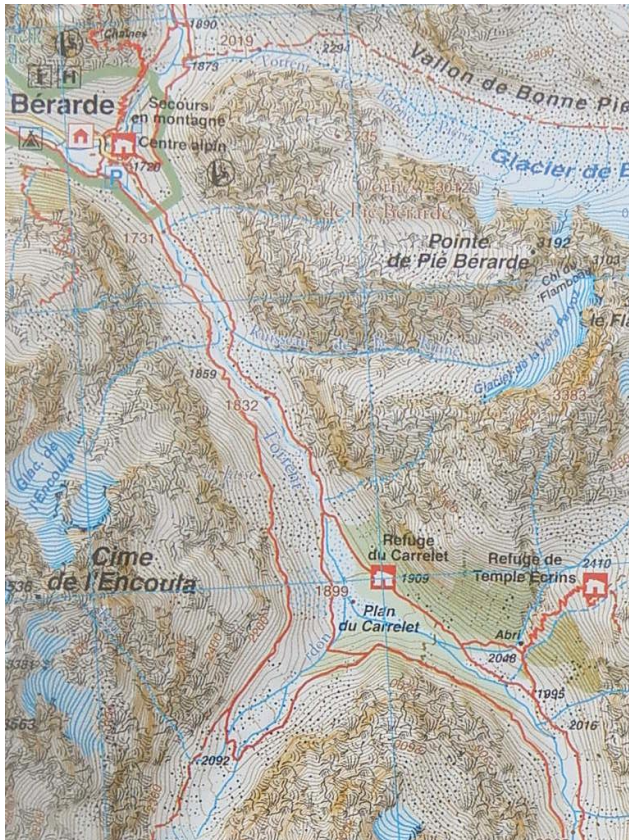
355: La Berarde to Refuge du Carrelet

Reynolds describes this trail as "a gentle valley stroll" (p.225, Route 67). This is guide-book writer showing-off. It may be short but it's not easy, as he claims. For a start, it's uphill all the way and secondly, it crosses some unpleasant stony terrain (see later). It's supposed to take an hour for 3.7k according to the sign-posts but these timings are created by mountain-goat park rangers and thoughtlessly reproduced by Reynolds lest he appear to be a wimp in hiking circles. I know what 4k an hour looks like (I even used to do it myself) and nobody, but nobody, on this trail was doing more than 3k an hour (I was doing 2k an hour). So bear this in mind if you use Reynolds, who is otherwise quite good on directions, facilities and the rest and has good photos – with one glaring exception (see trail 363).



7933: upper Vallee du Veneon; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

Starting from La Berarde, the village at the end of the valley where the river splits, you first pass some cows in a fenced pasture (7894). A gentle rise after the pasture gives you an idea of the terrain ahead (7895). The next rise gives you a decent view back down to La Berarde (7944, p.27). I found a flower about here which grows abundantly beside the path (7901).



7739: trail 355; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

7894: cows chewing trees

7895: view of the trail ahead

Now comes the stony bit, awkward to walk on and quite extensive, as you can see (7903), followed by a sylvan passage (7904) with goats in attendance on my day (7907, 7909).



7901: abundant flower

7903: stony stretch – why do guide-book writers often neglect to mention this stuff ?



Thereafter, it's more of the same, with alternating stony and verdant stretches until you come to a bridge taking a path into the Vallon du Chardon (7911). The last 500m from there to the refuge is delightful, through a sparse wood on an easy path, again not mentioned by Reynolds.



7904: a nice place for a rest under this rowan 7907: another rowan, being nibbled by not-so-wild goats – the biggest one was tethered to the tree but they all seemed to prefer the rowan



7909: goats in typical poses 7911: the Vallon du Chardon from just before the refuge

Also not mentioned is the refuge's delightful setting on an open meadow with great views all around (7912, 7914). Enough said.

7912: Refuge du Carrelet with L'Ailefroide behind



7914: the refuge in the other direction

Refuge du Carrelet

I spent the afternoon and night here and cannot speak highly enough of the staff, as well as the surroundings: I was made to feel welcome straight away – not the usual “take your boots off and leave your rucksack in the vestibule” to an obviously exhausted hiker. Most importantly of all, they found me a small dormitory of my own at no extra cost and provided me with an early breakfast with no demurrer. Would that all refuges were like this. Unfortunately, some of the wardens at other refuges can be quite officious for no obvious reason.



7915: two donkeys seemingly in permanent residence

356: Refuge du Carrelet to Refuge de Temple-Ecrins

Quel surprise ! I thought this would be the toughest trail of my trip – up 500m in 2.5k – and so stayed overnight at Carrelet, expecting the climb to take me about 5 hours. However, Reynolds describes it as “never overly demanding” and this time he is right. It only took me 3 hours – only ½ an hour longer than the ‘easier’, longer trail from La Berarde to Carrelet the day before (for maps see 7933, 7739 from previous trail).

The first 700m from Carrelet is a genuine stroll through piney woods, ending at a junction where the left fork gets steeper up the left side of a stream. About here, I got my first sight of where I thought Refuge de Temple-Ecrins would be (7916). 20 minutes later, I got my first sight of the Glacier de la Pilatte at the end of the adjacent valley (7917).



7916: the refuge is actually tucked behind the first ridge on the left, below the jagged peaks
7917: close-up of the Glacier de la Pilatte in the early morning sun

Another 15 minutes brought a more complete view of the glacier from just before the stream crossing by the Abri (shelter) (7920, 7923).



7920: glacier now in almost full sun

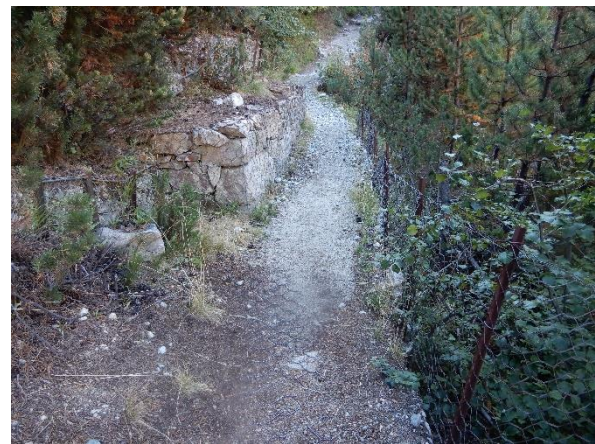


7923: stream crossing via 2 plank bridges

The vegetation by the path was still piney but the trees were becoming shrubs (7924). The path is very well-constructed and is reinforced with metal at corners and elsewhere (7925): at no point was there a high step which could not be circumvented, much to my knees' delight (7926). I was never breathing heavily – if I am, I reckon I'm going too fast and remind myself to slow down: it's not a race.



7924: I liked this tableau – a stunted pine mixed with a shrub with fluffy flowers



7925: fence to the right, metal restraints to the left, even metal net on the path

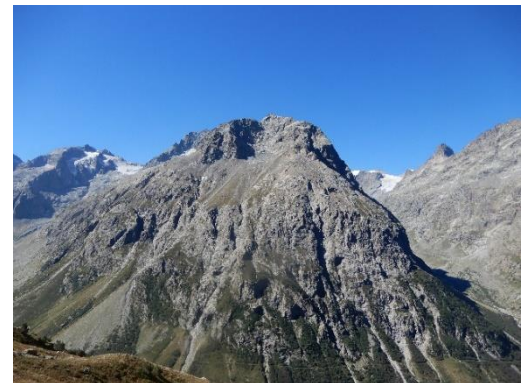
After 2½ hours of enjoyable climbing, I emerged from the shrubs and the gradient relented. From here you get a good view of the whole valley leading up to the Glacier de la Pilatte (7928). A bunch more zig-zags over open ground and you are at the refuge. Just before it, I took these other glacier photos (7929, 7930).

7926: a typical bit of path (no high steps!)





7928: Vallon de la Pilatte



7929: remains of the Glacier du Vallon de la Pilatte (often glaciers are named by where they are facing, not where they are) – Barre des Ecrins Massif behind, Pic Coolidge to the right

7930: Mont Gioberney, Glacier du Says, Tete de Cheret and Glacier des Rouies, the last on the north side of Les Rouies, the mountain above Lac du Lauzon – see trail 352

Refuge de Temple-Ecrins

The refuge is plonked on a shelf (7931) facing the Vallon du Chardon, with Les Bans and the Glacier de la Pilatte to the left, Pic Coolidge and Barre des Ecrins behind and the lower Vallee du Veneon unseen to the right. It's definitely worth the effort of getting there and you can roam the surrounding area – however, things get steep pretty quickly with no recognised paths to follow. The refuge has a large platform in front of it with tables and deck chairs where most hikers lunch before going down.

7931:



Only soft nuts like me stay overnight - or hard nuts who are climbing one of the mountains. The refuge has recently been renovated and no longer has a “sombre barrack-like appearance” (Reynolds, p.229). Both inside and out, it's spick and span and run very efficiently. I especially liked the partitioned cubicles in the dormitories which give an illusion of privacy.

357: Refuge de Temple-Ecrins to La Berarde

Did the whole trail in one go on the way down with a pasta stop-over at Refuge du Carrelet. Each section took exactly the same time as on the way up (usually coming down takes longer thanks to my dodgy knees). Only a few more photos as I took the obvious ones going up:



7938: early morning shot of the refuge, Barre des Ecrins and Pic Coolidge

7941: arriving at Carrelet, looking down the valley towards La Berarde



7943: down valley from after the Chardon bridge

7944: coming into La Berarde

Only one further comment: the stones on the path. I moaned about these on the way up to Carrelet – now I’m moaning again. For me, small stones about the size of golf balls, or a bit larger with irregular shapes, are horrible to walk on: they move beneath my feet, especially coming down, and tip me off balance. I don’t know why path-builders put them there – give me earth or large flat rocks any day.

358: La Berarde to Refuge du Chatelleret

Reynolds says of this trail: “a walker can.....enjoy almost every step of the way the rugged grandeur of the scenery” (p.223). That’s OK but he puts the distance at 5k, whereas the signpost at La Berarde says 6k – I trust the local sign and my own estimate.



7741: trails 358/9 + surroundings; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

You start near the church at the top of the village on a steep, winding path, passing the Tete de la Maye on the left (7946). This mountain, incredibly to me, is climbed by ordinary mortals with the help of fixed chains and metal rungs – there’s even an orientation table at the top to clarify what is said to be a spectacular 360 degree view. This first k was a bit of a grunt for me: steep, rocky zig-zags through a wood and it took me the best part of an hour.

7946: the Tete de la Maye



However, the path then levels off once you leave the wood and becomes a delight (7947, 7948). After 500m or so, you cross the Torrent de Bonne Pierre coming out of a valley to the right (7949) on a substantial bridge (7950), not the usual planks.



7947: close-up of a juicy rowan



7948: National Park sign and admonitions



7949: Torrent de Bonne Pierre



7950: substantial bridge

The next k is a gently uphill meander through green scrub with the occasional tree:



7958: looking ahead up the Etancons valley
7956: an elegant silver birch



I took a rest at 7959 and was passed by a French woman I'd sat next to at dinner the evening before. She commented that the scenery makes us feel good; so I got on my hobby horse and replied that the scenery is a reflection of what is inside us, pointing to my chest. A Gallic shrug indicated that this response was not appreciated (in either sense of the word) – the French think they own philosophy !

7959: the fan of a scree slope



The only drawback to this pleasant meander was the presence of too many flies seeking to feast on my sweat but at least I don't have to waft my tail all day (and all night, it seems) like our four-legged domestications.

Another k brings you into stony territory (7961), with a couple of waterfalls on the left at Plaret Geny. Rounding a corner, you get the first full effect of the wall of jagged peaks that is La Meije, still 5k away, with the distinctive Pointe des Aigles on the right (7963).



7961: stony territory



7963: the end of the valley with La Meije ahead

The next k from the corner to the Passerelle de Pierre Brune footbridge is a drag, being both rocky and undulating, with only brief respite through a small wood. Refuge du Chatelleret can be seen ahead, tantalisingly close but still out of reach. Straight after the footbridge, you have to climb an unwelcome 'rock staircase', lasting about 150m, just when you think you've made it.

7967: looking back down the 'staircase'



Reynolds describes this passage from the footbridge as “a straightforward slant upvalley” (p.224) – I beg to differ (7967, 7968). Even from 7968, it still took me an hour to reach the refuge, admittedly using the excuse of photo opportunities to give myself frequent rests:-



7968: ahead from the same spot as 7967, the refuge is on the green patch, right centre
7970: I like these single brave flowers growing in inhospitable places



7971: crossing a side-stream; refuge now just visible in the centre





7979: seemed a strange place for a succulent



7981: final crossing of the Etancons stream



7982: looking down valley from the bridge in 7981



7984: the final rock to be surmounted – I liked the green blotches and the pink stripes

The whole thing took me 5 hours actual walking, arriving in time for an outdoors omelette before a predicted heavy rain shower erupted to keep the grass passably green. Rugged grandeur? Judge for yourselves from my photos. As I grew increasingly tired from my slow exertions, I was progressively less able to appreciate the grandeur ! Perhaps it will re-appear tomorrow on my rest day...

359: Refuge du Chatelleret to La Berarde

An early start saw me at the bridge in 7981 as the sun was touching the peaks and I realised what a great spot this is (I had been too tired on the way up to notice, just took the obligatory photo):

“Bridge over the Etancons just below Refuge du Chatelleret”

You get a good view of all the surrounding mountains plus, of course, up and down the river or ‘torrent’ as the French prefer to call it.



7995: La Meije and the refuge, early morning



7997: Tete du Rouget to the south-west



7999: La Grande Ruine to the east



8001: Pointe des Aigles to the north-east

On the way down to the next bridge ('passerelle'), I noticed this rock and named it 'The Hippo' (8002). Then I took a couple more photos of the 'rock staircase' (8007, 8008). The whole thing took me 18 minutes of careful prodding with my pole and gingerly stepping from rock to rock (actually, there's a fairly easy, level section in the middle).



8002: open-mouthed hippo 8007: near the bottom of the 'staircase': path to Plaret Geny, right; way down to the passerelle, left; and passerelle visible, centre left

This flower cheered me up once I'd had a rest by the passerelle (8010). Then it was a case of trying to get a good shot of La Meije being lit up by the sun (8012). Remarkably, there's a refuge about 50m up the ridge on the left between shade and sunlight (8026).

8008: looking up from the bottom of the 'staircase', which I'd found so daunting on the way up



8010: unknown flower

8012: part of La Meije in sunlight



Next comes the section I described as a drag on the way up – this is why (8015). One last look at La Meije and Pointe des Aigles and you round the corner onto easier terrain (8019).

8026: close-up of Refuge du Promontoire



8015: rocky traverse of about 500m
8019: easier terrain after the corner



The terrain eases further as you pass Vallon de Bonne Pierre on the left and your eye is drawn to the two peaks at the end of it (8022, 8024).



8022: Barre des Ecrins and a breast-like peak which I think must be Le Flambeau (the torch)
8024: Vallon de Bonne Pierre and Barre des Ecrins, also seen from Temple-Ecrins earlier, where it didn't look so spectacular (photos 7929, 7938, pp.27, 28)

After crossing the Torrent de Bonne Pierre on the handsome bridge (8025), you again have to put up with the numerous zig-zags that bring you down to the walkers' haven of La Berarde where civilisation hits you with a shop, a refuge, restaurants and a summer bus stop.

8025: the bridge over the Torrent de Bonne Pierre – La Berarde is in the valley below



I preferred this trail to the Temple-Ecrins trail but preferred the views from Temple-Ecrins. La Meije is spectacular, I think, mainly for two reasons: its glaciers, which are almost non-existent on this south side but still copious on its north side (see later); and the thought that human beings actually climb the thing (that's what Refuge du Promontoire is primarily for) – and even do the traverse along its spiky ridge (I later got a lift from a woman who had done it). I think they are foolish and even selfish but would not dream of stopping them. By the way, La Meije was closed to climbers when I was there because of unstable snow and ice.

La Berarde

This is a one-street village (8030) at the meeting of the Veneon and Etancons streams before they plunge down the Vallee du Veneon. It's got everything a hiker needs in the short-term: an epicerie which also sells post-cards, alcohol and some outdoor gear (8032), a refuge that's more like a hotel, a tourist office and several restaurants (offering mostly crepes and pizzas).



8030: main street, La Berarde



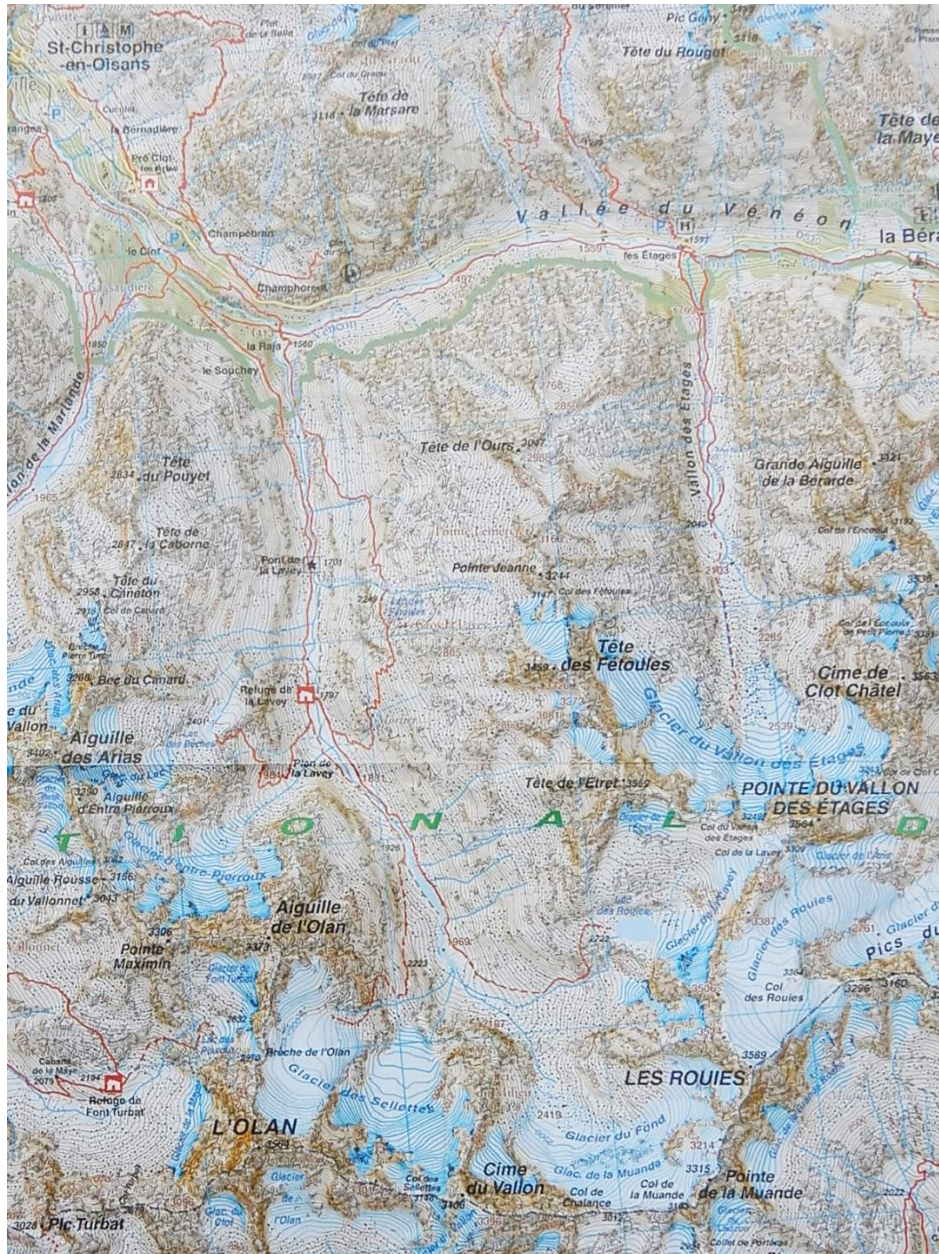
8032: epicerie, café, off-licence etc.

360: Champhorent to Refuge de la Lavey

This is a 5k - not 4k as in Reynolds – down and up trail that involves 627m of height loss and gain, so more than all the others on this trip. Reynolds' verdict: "The Vallon de la Lavey is one of the loveliest in the Ecrins National Park.... The refuge....stands idyllically among pastures" (p.207); so, of course, I had to do it. It's Reynolds' Route 58. It's supposed to take 2 hours – let's see what happens....

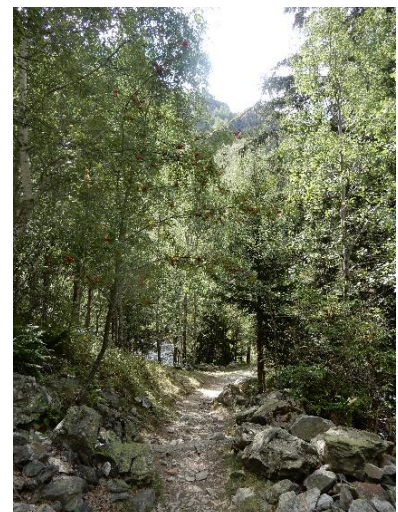


7751: trails 360/1; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005



7750: trails 360/1 + surroundings; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

At Champorent, about 8k down valley from La Berarde, look for a parking area just below the road, go through it and descend about 140m in height on a wooded path (8040) to the bottom of the valley. There are occasional views of the entrance to the Vallon de la Lavey and of the Veneon River (8036).



8040: wooded path down to the river

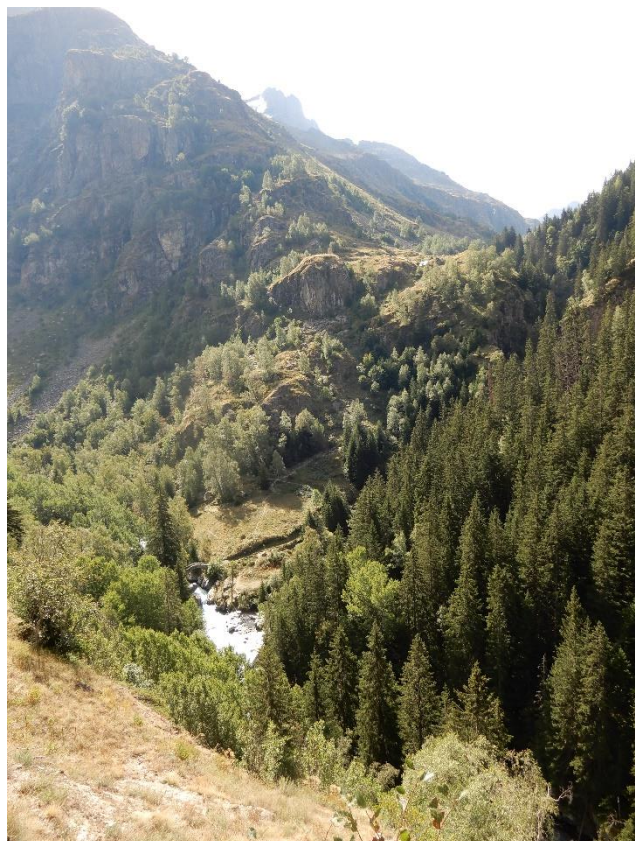


8034: words for those of you who can read French; from a board at the start of the trail



8035: flower that looks like a crocus but isn't

8036: down and up at the start of the trail: river and bridge at the bottom, la Raja at the top of the slope, Vallon de la Lavey beyond



The strain on your knees is worth it for the sights that greet you as you cross the river on an old stone-arched bridge:

“On the Apex of the Bridge over the Torrent du Veneon”

Obviously, you can see up and down the river but also the adjacent meadow which is the way ahead. It’s all too beautiful, as the Small Faces once sang.



8045: up river



8047: down river

From the bridge I spied another spot (in photo 8047) which might be even better:



“By the Bank of the River just below the Bridge”

Indeed it was, taking in the bridge, and the confluence of the Veneon and the Muande, coming down from Lavey; the spot itself had a special charm, right by the river.

8042: adjacent meadow from the bridge



8051: the bridge from downstream



8054: the confluence



8056: the second spot

I took a shot of the bridge in full sunlight (8049) before setting off on the steep 140m climb to la Raja. I heard the Muande waterfall but did not see it as it's just off the path. The climb is not as bad as it looks as the zig-zags are quite well-graded. On the way up you can see the road at Champhorent and the path you came down (8058).



8049: stone-arched bridge



8058: road and the way down

La Raja is just a home (8059), an outbuilding and a shrine. I was told by well-meaning hikers at La Berarde that after la Raja the way is flat. Don't be fooled by such foolish talk – it is never flat for more than one minute (I counted) until you reach Pont de la Lavey 2k and 140m in height up the valley. The proof follows:-

8049: la Raja





8064: the Muande Gorge



8066: stony and rocky uphill



8067: further into the valley



8068: this flat doesn't last



8069: flat? I don't think so



8071: briefly by the river

At last, after 4 hours, I reached Pont de la Lavey (8075), from where there's a good view of the terrain covered so far (8074). From above the bridge, you can see that the path does indeed flatten out as it enters the upper valley (8076). However, don't be deceived by a 'false Refuge de la Lavey' in the distance (8077).



8075: Pont de la Lavey and waterfall



8074: looking back from Pont de la Lavey



8076: flatter path above Pont de la Lavey

The sign at the bridge says $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour to the refuge – you guessed it: it took me $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours. Here is my guide to signpost timings: they are for super-human beings who walk continuously at maximum speed; 2 times timings are for ordinary human beings who take their time, stop for rests and take the odd photo; 3 times timings are for subhuman beings such as myself who go slowly for whatever reason, stop, rest, stare and take lots of photos.

8077: the ‘false Refuge de la Lavey’



Be that as it may, this last section is especially scenic (8076/7 above and 8079). Inevitably, the flat doesn't last as there's a final, steepish rise before the refuge (8080).



8079: approaching the bridge over a stream 8080: looking back from the top of the final rise

At the top, there's a terrific spot:

“By the Cross on Top of the Final Rise before Refuge de la Lavey”

This takes in most of the valley and the surrounding peaks and sums up the beauty of the Vallon de la Lavey, if you include photo 8080:-



8081: ahead to the end of the valley; roof of the refuge on the right

8086: remains of Glacier d'entre Pierroux below Aiguille de l'Olan

Then you trudge down the last few metres to the refuge (8087). An hour after I arrived (6 hours after setting out), the sky burst open and thunder roared for several hours into the night.

8087: Refuge de la Lavey



I was the only person staying overnight in the refuge so I had a dormitory to myself and the opportunity for a long, undisturbed sleep before going down the next day. Reynolds is right: the refuge stands idyllically in pastures, even at 1797m, and the guardians grow their own veg and have constructed a green haven around a little stream (8091).

8091: taken the next morning



Obviously the trail was a trial for me, partly misled by Reynolds' 4k, instead of the 5k on the sign at Champhorent, his "the way is uncomplicated" (after la Raja) and his "bear left" (after Pont de la Lavey) "and, rising over a grassy knoll, you come to Refuge de la Lavey" (p.211), which took me the 1½ hours. Still, as always, it was worth it for the beauty of the valley and the refuge.

361: Refuge de la Lavey to Champhorent

The night had been a riot of thunder and heavy rain with heavy mist all over the valley in the morning. However, it had all cleared by the time I set off at 10am to catch a bus to le Bourg d'Oisans at 5.30pm. The rain meant that the earthen parts of the path were softer and more pleasant to walk on and, fortunately, the rocky parts had dried out. Here are a couple more shots around the refuge taken in the morning:-



8092: the end of the valley from the end of the refuge grounds

8093: the refuge from the same place as 8092, greenhouse on the right

Here is the final rise over Reynolds' 'grassy knoll' (8094) and this is where the tricky, non-flat downhill starts 5 minutes before Pont de la Lavey (8098). Just to show that I can on occasion be an ordinary human being (see my guide to signpost timings on the previous trail), I did this '½ hour' stretch in 1 hour 5 minutes.



8094: the final rise before the refuge



8098: start of the downhill

Now we come to the long downhill stretch with just a few photos:-



8099: I liked the shape and the lines of this rock



8100: there *are* trees but hardly any by the path for a shady rest

Downhill is particularly hard for me because of a dodgy left knee (torn meniscus); so I compensate for this by asking my right knee to do more than its fair share of the work.... which eventually leads to pain in my right knee. The only way to lessen this is to do the old person things, which all slow me down, as I'm constantly saying:-

8104: blue butterfly that I was lucky to catch – they usually fly away just as I'm ready to take the photo



- 1) I take small steps, especially on steep slopes: if you put a foot wrong, you can probably recover.
- 2) I use my pole and hand-high rocks to full advantage to take the weight off my knees.
- 3) I always have my pole securely in place before taking a step (except on smooth, flat paths).

- 4) I watch where I'm placing each step and if a rock looks dodgy, I prod it first with my pole.
- 5) I take lots of short rests and try to drink enough water (but don't always succeed).
- 6) I never hurry – if I'm breathing heavily, I'm going too fast.
- 7) I don't try to mount – or dismount – large steps on the path; there's almost always a way round to the side; if necessary, I come down backwards, it's easier.
- 8) Remember, there's more skill to walking on uneven ground when you're old than when you're young (I should know, I've done both); so don't feel ashamed about going carefully and slowly when others speed past you.

Actually, I don't feel ashamed anyway: old age is not some self-inflicted disease. In fact, I feel proud, I'm starting OALF – Old Age Liberation Front – 'out (on the trail) and proud'. These musings on the trail get wilder and wilder – what next, the OAAB – Old Age Angry Brigade – kidnap the age fascists and demand a ransom from Daytime TV ? And before you dismiss all this, hopefully with a chuckle, remember what Nietzsche said: "Only the thoughts that one has while walking are worth something".

Back to reality. At the junction with the Lac des Fetoules path, the gradient gets steeper (8105). Between here and la Raja, you are largely above the Muande Gorge (8106). Then you start the even steeper la Raja descent on sometimes rocky hairpins (8108) but the actual path is not too steep.



8105: path gets steeper



8106: the Muande Gorge

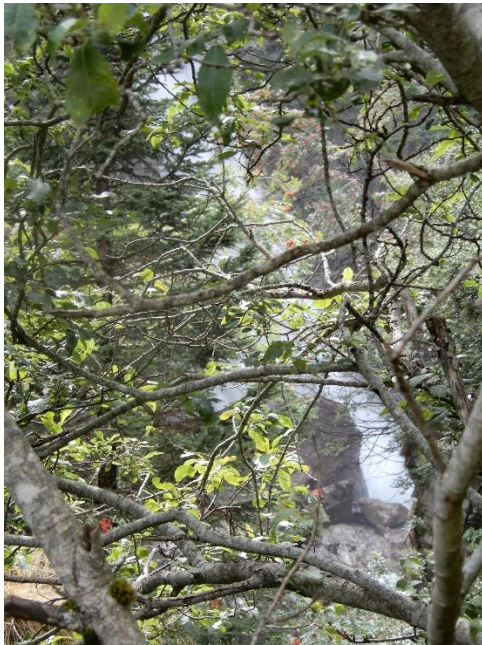


8108: rocky hairpins



8107: I love mossy rocks

I tried to view the Muande waterfall at the bottom but found that it's only visible through trees (8109), not from the wooden bridge over the Muande, as you might expect. All that now remains is the long trudge up the slope to Champhorent, 50 minutes in my case (8110).



8109: waterfall through trees



8110: is that a snake on the path? (any excuse for a stop)

There were lots of ants on the path, making it hard to be a good Buddhist and not tread on them: don't get me wrong, I'm not a Buddhist or any other kind of '-ist'. I think all such labels and allegiances are for people who have not made up their minds about how to live their lives (again, I should know: I've been a psychologist, a sociologist, a Marxist, a feminist and a Rajneesh-ist in my time).

Wow! That was a philosophical trail – it must be the mountain air getting to me at last. What is not philosophical is that the Vallon de la Lavey fully lives up to its reputation as one of the loveliest in the Ecrins National Park, certainly the loveliest I have trodden so far, as I hope my photos show. So, despite my weary progress, it goes into my 'pantheon of heavenly hikes'.

Unexpectedly, I reached Champhorent with 2 hours to spare before the afternoon bus to Le Bourg d'Oisans, so, of course, I hitched. Three lifts brought me to the excellent campsite at Le Colporteur, where you can hire your own cabin for the night (with a deposit of 250 euros to prevent you trashing the place).

Le Bourg d'Oisans to Col du Lauteret

After a bit of shopping, I caught the bus to Col du Lauteret along the Vallee de la Romanche. It's quite a journey. Passing above the deep Gorges de l'Infernet, along the Lac du Chambon (8115) and beneath the north-facing glaciers of La Meije, seen best from La Grave (8124, 8120). Another 5 minutes takes you past the village of Villar d'Arene, perched on a hillside above the river.



8115: Lac du Chambon



8124: even these north-facing glaciers are fast disappearing

Just past Villar d'Arene, you get views of the upper Vallee de la Romanche, where we are heading (8126, 8128). Ten minutes later you are at the Col du Lauteret, a beautiful place, only slightly marred by the usual hotels, gift-shops and restaurants (8130, 8131).



8120: close-up of the most prominent glaciers on La Meije



8126: the next trail crosses the scar on the hillside

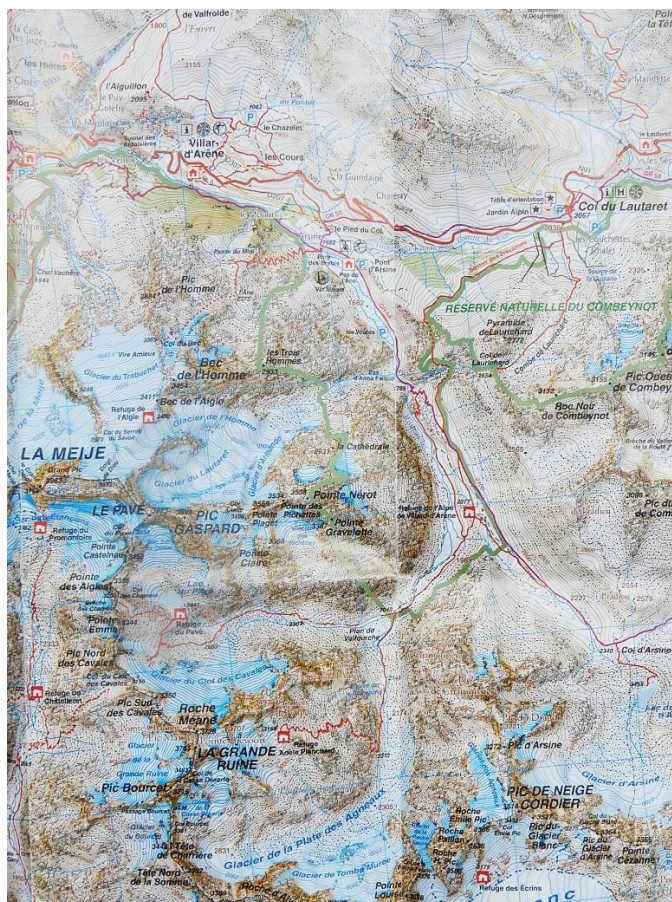
8128: the upper Vallee de la Romanche – it divides at the refuge, which is roughly left centre



8130: north towards the Col du Galibier of Tour de France fame
8131: south-west to La Meije and its north-east facing glaciers

362: Col du Lauteret to Refuge de l'Alpe de Villar d'Arene

You find the path to the refuge at the first bend below the col – better to take that path than to walk down the busy road to the official starting-point on the map (8132, 8134).



8175: upper Vallee de la Romanche and 8176: trail 362; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005



8132: my starting-point + La Meije 8134: back to my starting-point and the Col du Lauteret

Half an hour along, at my pace, you come to a conifer wood (8135); the view back to the col now includes the Jardin Alpin (8136).



8135: approaching the conifer wood

8136: Jardin Alpin is the green splodge on the left

All the time you are gradually moving upwards, which makes nonsense of Reynolds' claim that there is only 22m of 'height gain' on this trail (Route 16, p.80). No doubt he means between Col du Lauteret (2057m) and the refuge (2079m) but this disguises the fact that the trail goes upwards for its first half and then downwards, undulating the whole time. I estimate that there is at least 200m of overall height gain/loss, plus constant undulations in the middle section. This is what Reynolds should be reporting if his account is to be of any use to the average hiker, planning his or her trip. I assumed this was going to be an easy hike along the flat from reading Reynolds – far from it, as you will see.

Now Col du Lauteret goes out of sight as you round a corner (8139). La Meije comes into fuller view but only its glaciers (8140) and you get the best view of the lower Vallee de la Romanche from a viewing platform at one of the following corners (8145). You also see La Meije from here but the best view of it is further along.

8139: patriotic or what?





8140: glaciers on La Meije and a flattish section of the path



8145: the lower Vallee de la Romanche from the viewing platform – the three villages in descending order are le Pied du Col, les Cours and Villar d'Arene

It's here that you first see the upper Vallee de la Romanche, past the first part of the 'Sentier des Crevasses' (8149). This name is given to the whole trail but is only really applicable to the middle section (dotted lines for 'difficult' on the maps). Reynolds describes it thus: "this is a standard mountain path that goes nowhere near a crevassed glacier"....(with)...."an

exposed and in places rather narrow path with a fixed cable for safety” (p.80). In fact, there are two ‘difficult’ sections, only one of which (the first) has a brief bit of cable (maybe 20m) (8151, 8152).



8149: upper Vallee de la Romanche and the first part of the Sentier des Crevasses



8151: cable is at the first corner

8152: the cable section

After this, in my opinion, you get the best view of La Meije with the full sweep of its glacier stream, called for some unfathomable reason ‘Torrent de l’Homme’ (8153). This is probably the nearest you can get to La Meije without either climbing it or going up in a telecabin from the La Grave side.

Then you come to the second part of the Sentier des Crevasses, which is worse than the first part with no fixed cable (8156/7/8): you have to cross an awkward cascade (8160) and then go down half a dozen high, wet steps before traversing the far cliff for about 200m.



8153: best view of La Meije? 8156: approaching the second part of the Sentier des Crevasses
8158: the path to and past the cascade



8157: the path from the cascade along the far cliff

The point about all this, including the first part, is that a slip or a stumble over the edge would mean certain death (the slope is too steep and bare to grab hold of anything). Fortunately, the path is mostly about 1m wide. Reynolds mentions none of this, which to me is unforgivable and irresponsible in a guide-book writer. I wonder if he has actually trodden this trail or has cobbled his sparse description together from looking at a map or from walking the trail from Villar d'Arene (Route 15 in his book) about which he gives much more detail.



One last retrospective of the second part (8162) and you are on safer ground. At least the French give a decent warning (8164). On your right, you see the valley floor and the path coming up from Villar d'Arene (8165) and ahead the verdant meadows of the upper valley.

8160: crossing the cascade (not as easy as it looks)



8162: retrospective of the second part of the Sentier des Crevasses



8164: the sign says: "Prudence! Passage délicat"
8165: path from Villar d'Arene (see trail 365 later)

From here the views are consistently marvellous as you slope gradually downhill towards the refuge – high Alpine meadows, what’s not to like? :-



8167: cattle and other animals with Pic d’Arsine and Pic de Neige Cordier, right centre



8168: first view of the refuge (below the left spur of the mountain)



8169: fat marmot, in shape for winter’s hibernation, unusually sitting right by the path – they usually run away



8170: refuge and the end of Vallee de la Romanche, trail 363



8174: final pull to the refuge



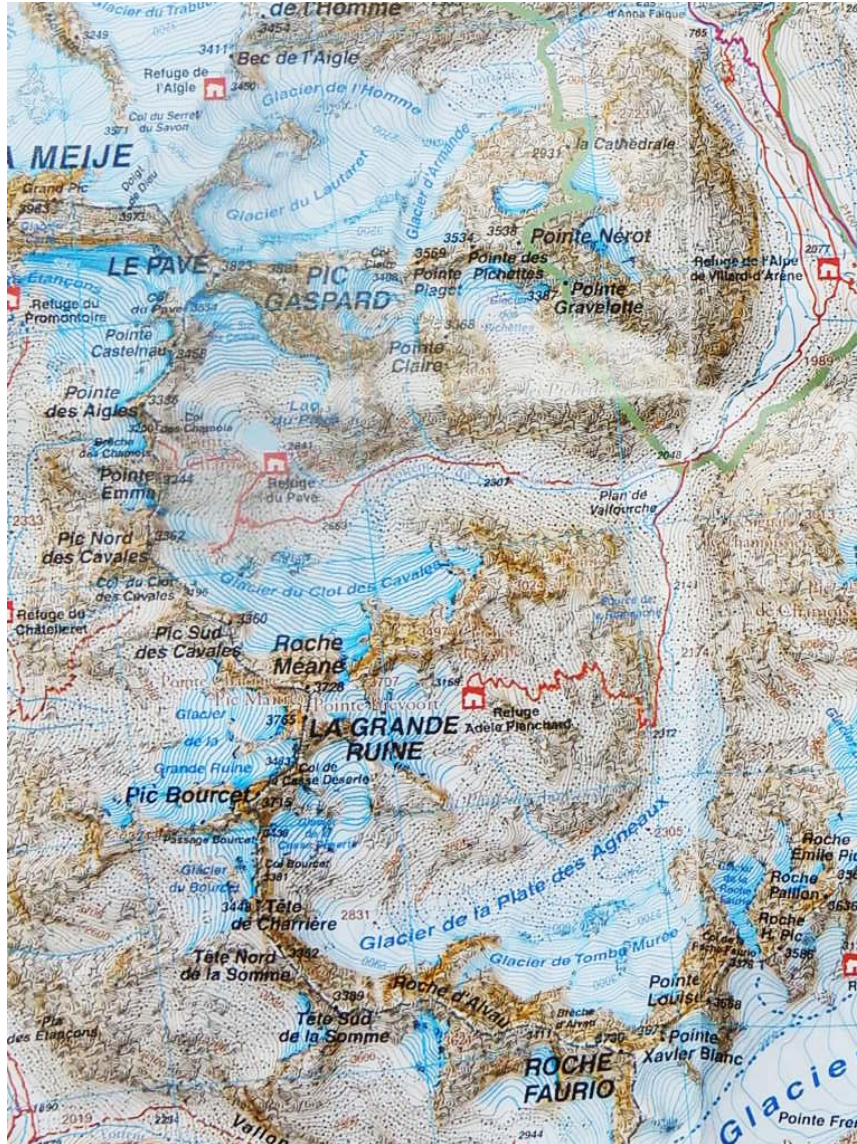
8171: refuge and the path to Col d'Arsine, trail 364

Despite my criticisms of Reynolds and the difficulty of the second part of the Sentier des Crevasses, both made worse by my tiredness on this the third consecutive day that I had trodden a trail (expecting this one to be easy, according to Reynolds), this is undoubtedly a terrific trail in both senses of the word – a bit frightening and certainly awe-inspiring. First you have the scenery of Lauteret and the valley below, then the majesty of la Meije, then the frisson of danger on the Sentier des Crevasses, rounded off by the glorious approach to the refuge. Full marks to the path-builders, if not to Reynolds. It has to go into my ‘pantheon of heavenly hikes’. Incidentally, I did this trail in 4 hours (including breaks) against the official timing of 2 hours - Reynolds says 1 hour 45 minutes – so once more I have briefly become an ordinary human being, according to my guide to signpost timings on trail 360.

As for Reynolds, my impression is that he treats these shorter, ‘easier’ trails with some contempt and therefore minimizes or ignores their difficulty for ordinary hikers. I think he sees himself as a mountain climber who is only including these easier trails on sufferance because he is writing a guide-book. This leads him to be lazy in his estimates of distance (he seems to measure them as the crow flies), of height gain (as in this instance – it should always be height gain/loss over all parts of the trail) and in his description of the trail itself. All this is borne out by his other books which are mainly about higher mountain trails (see first page of the Ecrins guide).

On a lighter note, at dinner I notched up my first joke in French. In answering the usual question, “What are you doing tomorrow?”, I replied, “Pour moi, c’est un jour de reste: peut-être, je fais un Tour du Refuge de l’Alpe de Villar d’Arene”, accompanied by a Gallic gesture indicating the 50m around the building. This raised a laugh from my three French dinner companions, one of whom added, “Face Nord”, in reference to the harder stretches of most mountain expeditions (e.g. the North Face of the Eiger) which have more ice and snow.

I chose to do this on an overcast day as my other trail from the refuge goes higher and might be more spoiled by cloud cover. This trail is along the right fork of the valley shown in photo 8170 above and is part of Route 17 in Reynolds.



8233: trail 363 + surroundings; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

You start off by going down a steepish slope from the refuge to the valley floor (8177), giving you a view down the valley (8179). Then you pass through pasture with a few cattle grazing (8180) before the path turns rocky (8181) and the river becomes more like torrent (8184).

8177: from the top of the slope with La Grande Ruine ahead





8179: down valley towards Villar d'Arene



8234: detail of trail 363; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005



8180: River Romanche and pasture



8181: the path becomes rocky

After 2k, you come to a bridge which carries the path to the high Refuge du Pave. The valley forks again here at a triangular plain, the Plan de Valfourche, and there are views all around:

“Bridge over the Romanche at Plan de Valfourche”

While I hung around here, the sky started to clear and the quality of my photos improved a lot (8185 – 8197).

8184: the river becomes a torrent





8185: the bridge



8190: looking back – refuge just visible, centre



8196: looking up the Clot des Cavales Valley



8197: looking up the Romanche Valley

From here the sign says $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour to the source of the Romanche, following the fork going south. Nothing much seemed to grow on the well-watered plain, except long grass (8198). There's a big rocky bluff ahead (8214) which you have to go round on another rocky path. In fact, most of the rest of the trail is stony and/or rocky (8199).



8198: this is the effort of a rowan to grow



8214: big rocky bluff ahead



8199: the last part of the trail – the ‘source’ is over the next rocky rise

After about 1k from the bridge there’s a final, smaller rocky bluff to surmount before you are at a sign proclaiming ‘Sources de la Romanche’. However, it all looked a bit dubious to me. A faint path leads over flat grass to various trickles emerging from the mountainside (8201, 8204).



8204: two minor trickles plus a stream in the middle background which doesn’t count as the Romanche, it seems; Glacier de Tombe Muree and Roche Faurio in the background

After 25 minutes poking around, I started to descend, passing a mysterious locked ‘hut’ (8207). At the bottom of the final rocky bluff, my suspicion was confirmed that there’s a second stream coming down on the right side of the bluff, which has a stronger current (8208, 8209).



8201: the strongest trickle at the ‘sources’



8207: the ‘hut’ and the way down to Plan de Valfourche



8208: the stronger current – not from the official sources

8209: from the confluence of the two streams, showing that the one on the right is stronger (it continues up the valley past the official sources as shown in photo 8204 above)

Why is this second stream not treated as the Romanche ? I have no idea, except perhaps that it dries up sometimes whereas the official ‘sources’ don’t. This seems unlikely to me as the stronger current is glacier-fed and even features on the map (8234 above).

Anyway, I'll leave that one hanging and come to another gripe with Reynolds. He shows a photo on p.82, captioned as "Source de la Romanche and the stony Clot des Cavales". It's a lovely photo, which I reproduce later, but it's nowhere near the source, in fact about 1k from it. The Clot des Cavales is the stream that comes down the right fork at the bridge featured in my spot above. What is he playing at ? On this evidence, not only is he a lazy guide-book writer but he's also a cheat and a liar ! The charitable interpretation is that the caption is a mistake, although I find that hard to believe.

A second gripe is that Reynolds says, "Allow 1hr 15mins there, plus about 45mins back to the hut" (p.83). It's 3½ k from the 'hut' (refuge) to the 'sources'. 1hr 15mins is just about possible but 45mins back means going at over 4k per hour over stony, uneven ground much of the way, with a final slope to climb. I know I am slow but I call this impossible, unless you are running ! Again I wonder if he has actually done the whole trail, what with the inaccurate photos and the unrealistic timing.

OK, gripes over. Here's something to cheer you up - or not, as the case may be (8210). From the big rocky bluff you get a good view of the rest of the trail back to the refuge (8213).



8210: lovely plant with what looks like a human turd in the middle (to the left of the stone)
8213: the rest of the trail – refuge again just visible, centre

Then I carefully spied out where Reynolds had taken his photo of the 'source' from – it's just before the bridge to Refuge du Pave on the way down (8217).



8217: Reynolds' false photo of the source

The rest of the photos speak for themselves – or rather the captions do :-



2019: whirls in the torrent



2018: rocky ground



2021: end of the 250m rocky ground with a tarn



2024: pasture, river and last part of the trail



2025: just before the final climb to the refuge (high on the right)



2026: the final climb



2030: the final marmot (there had been lots on the trail)

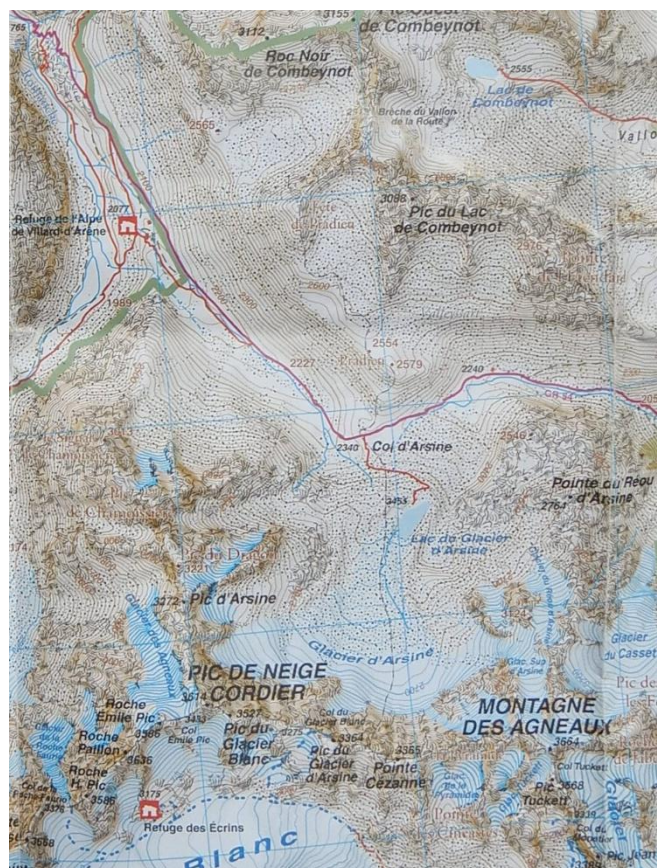
Apart from my internal grumbles with Reynolds, this was a lovely trail, spoilt only by my strong suspicion that the true Source de la Romanche is higher up the valley on the way to the Refuge Adele Planchard. I was lucky that occasional spots of rain didn't develop into anything serious and that the sky brightened on the upper part of the trail. I almost welcomed the overcast day – all of previous trails had been in bright sun – as this meant that I didn't get at all dehydrated and ended up less tired, ready for another trail the next day. By the way, it's not flat, as I had been told: you lose 50m at the start and then gain 130m on the rest of the trail, with the usual undulations in between (the French seem to class as 'flat' anything that doesn't involve zig-zags and at least 300m height difference).

364: Refuge de l'Alpe de Villar d'Arene to Col d'Arsine

I got the fine day I was hoping for for this trail up towards a cirque of mountains, supposedly with a large glacier and a glacial lake beneath them, height difference about 280m so the French would probably call it flat.

The sign at the refuge no longer gives '45mins to the col', as Reynolds reports, but 1 hour. At least Reynolds has the grace to say "but a more realistic time would be 1¼ - 1½ hrs" (p.86).

7756: trail 364 + surroundings; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005



Anyway, you kick off at the back of the refuge on an uphill, twisty path that leads to an enclosed gully from which little can be seen. However, this only lasts about 500m before you start to see the good stuff ahead (8237). Already you are clearly in marmot territory (8236).



8237: emerging from the gully



8236: a marmot neighbourhood

The view ahead steadily improves as the path approaches the main stream from above and crosses it after just over 1k from the refuge to join the GR54 trail coming up from Villar d'Arene (8239).



8239: easy going

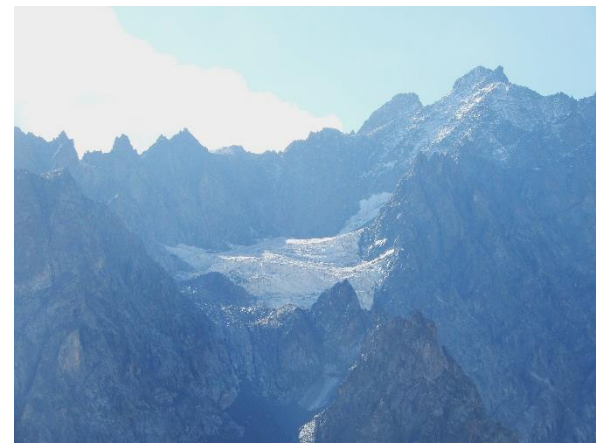
on the GR54 with Montagne des Agneaux and the only decent glacier left (close-up)

The path is actually a doddle, even for me, until you get to the much steeper final climb of about 300m in length (8240). Once up that, you turn left on flatter ground to reach the 'official' Col d'Arsine. I say 'official' because it's quite clear that the post proclaiming the col is not at the highest point of the col, which is some 300m further on (8247). Instead, it is at the turn-off for the path to the glacial lake, Lac de Glacier d'Arsine.



8240: the steeper final climb in the middle distance 8247: way to the highest point of the col

I had already decided not to attempt the path to the lake, as it is an extra 230m of up and down with no guarantee of a lake at the end of it, as the Glacier d'Arsine has all but disappeared (I later learnt that there is still a lake there, of diminished size). The path to it goes across the huge moraine that looms beneath the mountains (8260). Most of the views, however, are slightly better from the actual col which I headed for (8250, 8253).



8260: start of the path to the lake

8253: Glacier Superior d'Arsine, below the highest peak, Montagne des Agneaux (close-up)

It's more grassy at the actual col but I still wasn't happy enough with the views to make it one of my spots. Instead, I went a bit further along to see down the valley on the far side (8258) – it's also the spot Reynolds describes as “a truly delightful region where streams coming from the Glacier d'Arsine unite to form milky-blue oxbows” (p.87) - hooray, that's the second nice thing I've quoted from Reynolds on this trail.

8250: from the actual to the 'official' col





8258: Reynolds 'milky-blue oxbows' on the far side of the col

Then I back-tracked to the 'official' col. Still not happy (I'm hard to please), I went up the slope to the north-west and found my spot:

"Rock on the Brow of the Ridge above and to the North-west of the Official Col d'Arsine"

For me, this gives the best all-round view of the area – and a seat while you admire it. I don't think you could do better than that without a helicopter (8261, 8265 & 8266).



8261: the 'official' col is at the end of the path on the far left; the path to the glacier lake goes diagonally across the moraine



8265: Pic Gaspard and its glacier – the peak is in cloud

8266: Pic d'Arsine and Pic de Neige Cordier at the western end of the cirque

After spending an hour and a half on and around the col, I was ready to go down. As usual, I won't repeat the description but just toss in a couple of worthwhile photos:-



8269: from halfway down the final slope

8271: I love solitary flowers in the middle of nowhere – a bit of self-projection there ?

Instead of retracing my steps down the gully that I came up, I chose to stay on the GR54 and hope for a short-cut from it down to the refuge. After a bit, I saw a path on the far side of the stream and headed for it. On the way, I got quite near to a differently-coloured marmot (8274) – there had been marmots all the way down but you can only take so many photos of them. I crossed the stream here (8275) but stumbled to a halt on the path up the far bank – it had clearly been used by cattle, judging by the huge hoof-holes and turds (8277).



8274: I guess the marmots around Arsine and the refuge have got used to humans



8275: stream-crossing – path on the left



8277: the top route is much better

This brought me out onto a ridge above the refuge, as expected. The bonus was that I found an unexpected spot:

“On Top of the Ridge above Refuge de l’Alpe de Villar d’Arene”

The beauty of this spot is that you can take in the three valleys that I’ve been describing since I left Col du Lauteret and their surrounding mountains:



8278: back up the Arsine Valley



8283: the Romanche valley (again)

The only trouble was that I was left with a steepish descent to the refuge which I found tough at the end of a 6-hour trail (8285).

8285: steepish descent to the refuge and the way down to Villar d’Arene (trail 365 next)



Including my foray beyond the actual col, this was an 8k trail but gentle enough on the whole to leave my knees intact enough for the next day's trail down to Villar d'Arene. The trail itself was a pleasure to tread but I was rather underwhelmed by the glacier-less scene that greeted me at the top, even though the cirque is north-facing. I actually preferred the scenery on the Sources de la Romanche trail but both trails are well-worth doing and not too strenuous, for a change.

365: Refuge de l'Alpe de Villar d'Arene to Villar d'Arene

My last trail was down into the 'lower' Romanche Valley to start my journey back to London. For me, it was a nightmare. By now, I was more tired than I realised after 13 trails in 19 days and this was my third trail on consecutive days, both much more than I usually do because I had been misled by Reynolds into thinking that my trails were easier than they in fact were for me. On this trail, I paid the price. It's Reynolds' Route 15 in reverse: as usual, he measures the trail by the map, not by the actual distance covered with its many twists and turns so it's at least 8k, not 7 as he suggests.



7754: trail 365; from Ecrins, 1:50,000, copyright Rando Editions, 2005

The early morning sun lit up the valley below as I set out (8288). The first 1½ k is straightforward and rather jolly as you slowly descend through cattle country. Then the way steepens a lot as you come to the zig-zags you can see on the map ('lacets' in French) (8289, 8290). There's a sign asking you not to cut the corners (8291) but, of course, many people do, resulting in a devastated hillside.



8288: easy start with sun in the lower valley



8289: at the top of the zig-zags



8290: about halfway down the zig-zags

8291: sign too often ignored



The 'lacets' continue for about 1k (when you 'unwind' them) and took me an hour and a half of ginger-stepping, while others were almost running down them ! Towards the bottom, you see the second part of the Sentier des Crevasses from below (8292).

8292: second part of the Sentier des Crevasses – the path is near the top of the photo

Then, mercifully, the path straightens out and becomes less steep (8293). You soon get a view right up the valley on the left towards La Meije (8294) and then you come to the first part of the Sentier des Crevasses (8296).



8293: welcome respite



8294: up towards La Meije



8296: the first part of the Sentier des Crevasses – again the path is near the top of the photo

The next landmark is the car-park at Les Voules where the GR54 to Villar d'Arene starts a long traverse of an almost bare hillside. However, there is clearly another path along the valley floor, which looks both easier and more shaded. I took the GR54 as far as a small lake and then crossed over (8300, 8302).



8300: from the GR54, showing the valley path 8302: back over the lake to the zig-zag slope

Both paths come out at Refuge de Pas de l'Ane, where you take a road for 500m to the Pont des Brebis. Here you have a choice if you are heading for Villar d'Arene: the road goes there directly but across fields with no shade; the GR54 goes beside the river, mostly in shade. I chose the latter, hoping it would be more or less flat (8303). Well, it was for the very pleasant first 1k (8304) but then it did the usual rubbish and turned into an up and down roller-coaster with rocky bits thrown in.



8303: the start of the GR54 by the river 8304: pleasant stretch – Les Cours village, right

The first k took me ½ an hour, the second 1 hour and I was truly on my last legs by the time I reached the bridge below Villar d'Arene (8305, 8306). I should have paid more attention to Reynolds who says the path is 'undulating' but by the time I reached Pont des Brebis, I just wanted to get out of the sun as I was already feeling pretty ropey. I staggered into my auberge and found that I had lost my voice, as well as my legs – down to partial dehydration and a stinking cold (I had sneezed about 50 times on the way down). Not a happy end to my trip.

Not just because of my personal trials, I'd say this is a functional trail that gets you from the high Romanche Valley to the lower one where the villages and roads are. If you want a scenic route to and from the refuge, and you don't suffer from vertigo, take the Sentier des Crevasses from Col du Lauteret, which is served by two buses a day.



8305: I didn't photo the most difficult bits but this is the final descent to the bridge

8306: the bridge and the path up to Villar d'Arene – looks easy, doesn't it ?

The Summing-Up

After all those ups and downs, literal and psychological, what do I make of the Ecrins ? Firstly, don't let my sometimes weary progress put you off these dramatic and scenic valleys and mountains. Plenty of fitter hikers were romping around the trails that I did – and more difficult ones – with no trouble at all. I even talked to several people who had climbed Pic Coolidge from Temple-Ecrins and one woman who had traversed the spiky La Meije Ridge. Secondly, the Ecrins may well be the most attractive area of mountains in the French Alps, if you include the Vallouise Valley to the east, which I did not visit but is included in Reynolds. There are also other worthwhile valleys and refuges, many too difficult for me, branching off the three valleys that I've described.

As for me, I'm thinking it's time to scale down the scope of my hiking ambitions. Too many of these trails were hard work for me, particularly towards the end of the trail and on the third consecutive day of treading a trail. I'm not a masochist (although some of my friends may disagree) so in future I shall choose locations where I can complete my trails without feeling exhausted. That will mean that I'll have to revamp my next two projected foreign trips (the Picos d'Europa in Northern Spain and the Austrian Alps) where the trails I had planned are actually longer and probably as difficult as those I have just trodden in the French Alps. I've also decided to do more short trips in England, Wales and Scotland, to the parts of the coast that I have not visited, most of which are not too hilly. What I shan't do is give up walking in beautiful places and writing about them, with photos, on this website. What else am I going to do with my retirement – start playing bowls ?

