

**TREKKING THE GIANTS' TRAIL:  
ALTA VIA 1 THROUGH THE  
ITALIAN PENNINE ALPS**



#### **About the Author**

Andy, born and bred in Northern England, developed his early mountain skills with his local scout group in the hills of the Lake District and Snowdonia. Since discovering the joys of the Alps with a Cicerone guidebook in 1999, Andy and his wife Sue have explored much of the Western Alps, walking, running, cycling, ski touring or snowshoeing.

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#### **Other Cicerone guides by the author**

*Mountain Adventures in the Maurienne*

## **TREKKING THE GIANTS' TRAIL: ALTA VIA 1 THROUGH THE ITALIAN PENNINE ALPS**

**BENEATH MONT BLANC, THE MATTERHORN AND  
MONTE ROSA**

**by Andy Hodges**

**CICERONE**

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*To Sue, my partner on every journey, including the longest, our marriage of  
26 years. Thank you.*

### Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website ([www.cicerone.co.uk/992/updates](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/992/updates)), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to [updates@cicerone.co.uk](mailto:updates@cicerone.co.uk) or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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## CONTENTS

Map key . . . . .	9
Overview map . . . . .	10–11
Route summary table . . . . .	12–13

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> . . . . .	15
The route . . . . .	16
Geography . . . . .	20
Geology . . . . .	21
History . . . . .	23
Art and culture . . . . .	24
Wildlife . . . . .	26
Plants and flowers . . . . .	27
Weather . . . . .	30
When to go . . . . .	31
Access and travel . . . . .	32
In-route transport options . . . . .	33
Accommodation . . . . .	34
Mountain huts . . . . .	35
Clothing . . . . .	38
Food and drink . . . . .	38
Language . . . . .	39
Maps and navigation . . . . .	39
Waymarking . . . . .	41
Safety and emergencies . . . . .	42
Insurance . . . . .	43
Using this guide . . . . .	44

<b>THE ALTA VIA 1: AN ITALIAN HAUTE ROUTE</b> . . . . .	47
<b>Eastern section</b> . . . . .	48
Stage 1 Donnas to Sassa (Etoile du Berger) . . . . .	48
Stage 2 Sassa (Etoile du Berger) to Rifugio Coda . . . . .	55
Stage 2A The Col Portola Route: Sassa (Etoile du Berger) to Rifugio Coda . . . . .	61
Stage 3 Rifugio Coda to Rifugio Barma . . . . .	65
Stage 4 Rifugio Barma to Niel (La Gruba) . . . . .	69
Stage 5 Niel (La Gruba) to Gressoney-Saint-Jean . . . . .	75
Stage 3A Rifugio Coda to Rifugio della Vecchia . . . . .	82

Front cover: Approaching Berrio Dessus and the descent to Ollomont (Stage 12)

Stage 4A	Rifugio della Vecchia to Rifugio Rivetti . . . . .	90
Stage 5A	Rifugio Rivetti to Gressoney-Saint-Jean . . . . .	95
Stage 6	Gressoney-Saint-Jean to Rifugio Vieux Crest . . . . .	102
Stage 7	Rifugio Vieux Crest to Rifugio Grand Tournalin . . . . .	108
Stage 8	Rifugio Grand Tournalin to Cretaz, Valtournenche . . . . .	112
<b>Western section . . . . .</b>		<b>118</b>
Stage 9	Cretaz, Valtournenche to Rifugio Barmasse . . . . .	118
Stage 10	Rifugio Barmasse to Rifugio Cunéy . . . . .	122
Stage 11	Rifugio Cunéy to Closé/Oyace/Lexert . . . . .	127
Stage 12	Closé/Oyace/Lexert to Ollomont/Rey . . . . .	133
Stage 12A	Closé/Oyace/Lexert to Ollomont/Rey: the low route . . . . .	139
Stage 13	Ollomont/Rey to Rifugio Champillon . . . . .	144
Stage 14	Rifugio Champillon to Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses . . . . .	148
Stage 15	Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses to Rifugio Bonatti . . . . .	153
Stage 15A	Via Francigena from Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses to Great St Bernard Monastery . . . . .	161
Stage 15B	Great St Bernard Monastery to Rifugio Bonatti . . . . .	167
Stage 16	Rifugio Bonatti to Courmayeur . . . . .	174
<b>Appendix A</b>	<b>Two-week schedule . . . . .</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>Appendix B</b>	<b>Useful contacts . . . . .</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>Appendix C</b>	<b>Useful phrases . . . . .</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>Appendix D</b>	<b>Kit list . . . . .</b>	<b>187</b>

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Thank you most of all to Sue, my wife, for travelling this and every other journey in life at my side. Without you life would be a lonely journey indeed.



*Mt Emilius and the Valpelline valley (Stage 12)*

## Mountain safety

Every mountain walk has its dangers, and those described in this guidebook are no exception. All who walk or climb in the mountains should recognise this and take responsibility for themselves and their companions along the way. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this guide was correct when it went to press, but, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, they cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person using this book.

### International distress signal (emergency only)

Six blasts on a whistle (and flashes with a torch after dark) spaced evenly for one minute, followed by a minute's pause. Repeat until an answer is received. The response is three signals per minute followed by a minute's pause.

### Helicopter rescue

The following signals are used to communicate with a helicopter:

Help needed:  
raise both arms  
above head to  
form a 'Y'



Help not needed:  
raise one arm  
above head, extend  
other arm downward



### Emergency telephone numbers

Italy: Emergency Services: tel 118

### Weather reports

Italy: tel 0165 44 113

Mountain rescue can be very expensive – be adequately insured.

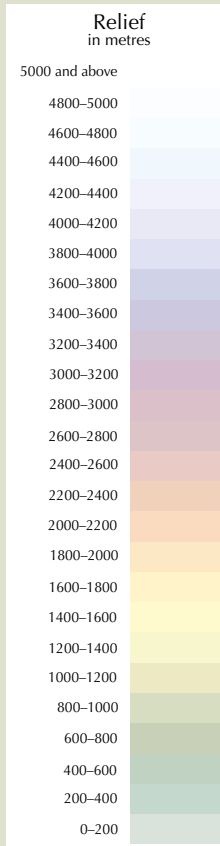
## Symbols used on route maps

- route
- alternative route
- start point
- finish point
- start/finish point
- alternative start
- alternative finish
- route direction
- glacier
- woodland
- urban areas
- regional border
- international border
- station/railway
- peak
- manned refuge or hotel/  
unmanned refuge
- campsite
- building
- church/monastery/cross
- castle
- pass
- water feature
- viewpoint

SCALE: 1:50,000

0 kilometres 0.5 1  
0 miles 0.5

Contour lines are  
drawn at 25m intervals  
and highlighted at  
100m intervals.



GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at [www.cicerone.co.uk/992/GPX](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/992/GPX).





## ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

	Stage	Time	Distance	Ascent	Descent	Page
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## The classic route

1	Donnas to Sassa (Etoile du Berger)	5hr 20min	9.8km	1550m	500m	48
2	Sassa (Etoile du Berger) to Rifugio Coda	3hr 50min	7.1km	1050m	250m	55
3	Rifugio Coda to Rifugio Barma	4hr 30min	8.1km	530m	700m	65
4	Rifugio Barma to Niel (La Gruba)	7hr 10min	13.7km	900m	1400m	69
5	Niel (La Gruba) to Gressoney-St-Jean	6hr 45min	16.25km	900m	1140m	75
6	Gressoney-St-Jean to Rifugio Vieux Crest	5hr 50min	11.1km	1400m	900m	102
7	Rifugio Vieux Crest to Rifugio Grand Tournalin	4hr	9.5km	1020m	450m	108
8	Rifugio Grand Tournalin to Cretaz, Valtourmenche	3hr 30min	7.6km	300m	1300m	112
9	Cretaz, Valtourmenche to Rifugio Barmasse	2hr 10min	4.2km	700m	0m	118
10	Rifugio Barmasse to Rifugio Cunéy	7hr 05min	14.2km	1200m	650m	122
11	Rifugio Cunéy to Closé/Oyace/ Lexert	6hr 15min	12.25km	450m	1650m	127
12	Closé/Oyace/ Lexert to Ollomont/Rey	5hr 25min	11km	1080m	1150m	133
13	Ollomont/ Rey to Rifugio Champillon	2hr 40min	4.3km	1040m	0m	144

	Stage	Time	Distance	Ascent	Descent	Page
14	Rifugio Champillon to Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses	4hr 35min	13.4km	420m	1300m	148
15	Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses to Rifugio Bonatti	6hr 45min	16.5km	1320m	900m	153
16	Rifugio Bonatti to Courmayeur	3hr 55min	11.2km	150m	950m	174
<b>Totals</b>		<b>79hr 45min</b>	<b>179.2km</b>	<b>14,100m</b>	<b>13,240m</b>	

## Alternative stages

2A	The Col Portola Route: Etoile du Berger to Rifugio Coda	2hr 30min	4.3km	720m	50m	61
3A	Rifugio Coda to Rifugio della Vecchia	8hr 45min	15.2km	1350m	1730m	82
4A	Rifugio della Vecchia to Rifugio Rivetti	5hr 40min	10.1km	1200m	850m	90
5A	Rifugio Rivetti to Gressoney-Saint-Jean	5hr 05min	13.75km	370m	1100m	95
12A	Closé/Oyace/ Lexert to Ollomont/Rey: the low route	2hr 45min	9.6km	465m	485m	139
15A	Via Francigena from Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses to Great St Bernard Monastery	2hr 40min	6.1km	780m	0m	161
15B	Great St Bernard Monastery to Rifugio Bonatti	6hr 50min	15.75km	1150m	1510m	167



*Crossing the Torrent de Malatrà near Rifugio Bonatti (Stage 16)*

## INTRODUCTION



*The Monte Rosa mountain chain comes into view (Stage 2)*

There can be few people who have not heard of at least one of the Alpine giants of Monte Bianco (Mont Blanc), Monte Cervino (the Matterhorn) or Monte Rosa. These giants, along with the slightly less well-known Gran Combin, form the frontier between Italy and Switzerland and have, between them, created many myths, legends and tales of derring-do.

The most famous mountain journeys across the Alps have taken place in the shadows of these giants, and another lies undiscovered, to be enjoyed in a two-week trek between beautiful mountain huts and

picturesque mountain villages. The Alta Via 1 (AV1) follows the northern flank of the upper valley for 180km, climbing over 14,000m in the process, and takes the better part of two weeks to walk. These magnificent white giants grace the valley heads and offer stunning backdrops to each day's journey. By the time you reach Courmayeur, they will be old friends and firm favourites.

History echoes with each step; from the views of the Matterhorn, which were instrumental in informing Whymper's first ascent plans, to the Roman temple and road remains



## EASTERN SECTION

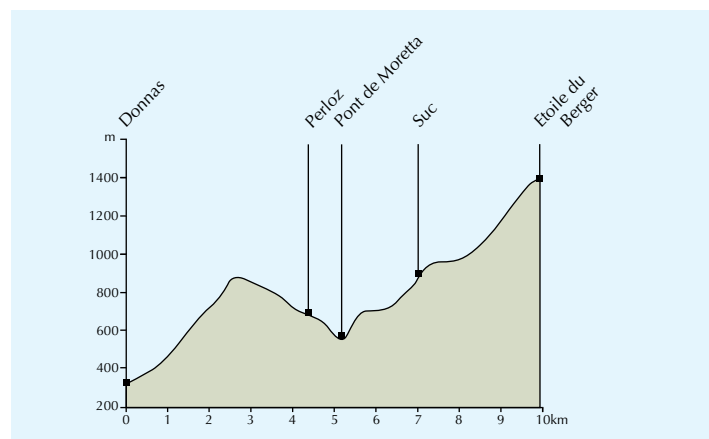
## STAGE 1

*Donnas to Sassa (Etoile du Berger)*

<b>Start</b>	Donnas, railway station
<b>Distance</b>	9.8km
<b>Total ascent</b>	1550m
<b>Total descent</b>	500m
<b>Grade</b>	2
<b>Time</b>	5hr 20min
<b>Maps</b>	1:50,000 Istituto Geografico Centrale 9: Ivrea, Biella, Bassa Valle d'Aosta; 1:25,000 Carta dei Sentieri by L'Escursionista editore 12: Basse Valli d'Ayas e del Lys

The AV1 begins in Donnas at a low height of 330m and encompasses a significant climb of approximately 1500m ascent towards the end of the walk, which finishes at the delightful Etoile du Berger. This will be a tough first day of over five hours' walking that is uphill for pretty much the whole day. There is an alternative, though: the AV1 route crosses the main Lys valley road at the hamlet of Tour d'Hereraz. From here the walk to the Etoile du Berger is approximately three hours and makes for a gentler starting day and also allows those arriving mid morning to begin the trek. It is also possible to link this shorter first day with the shorter option for Day 2, to arrive at Rifugio Coda in about six hours from Remondin, thereby saving a day should time be a pressing issue.

From the railway station in Donnas begin by crossing the road, turning right and walking for about 50 metres. The yellow signpost is visible just after St Pietro in Vincoli, a yellow-painted church. Follow the Via Rue Janin directly uphill, passing a school on the right. The route climbs quite directly through the narrow streets



with clear yellow signage aiding route-finding. Narrowed cobbled streets soon give way to a tarmac road and an older track that climbs directly up the hillside. ▶ You will again encounter the tarmac road as this more-direct path cuts the corners by climbing straight upwards. A couple of minutes later climb some stone steps and pass through the unusual gateway at Côte d'Artada, one of a number of shrines en route. Join the tarmac road for about 50 metres to the beautiful church of Sposalizio de Vergine on a hairpin bend. The view above the Aosta Valley already indicates how much height has been gained.

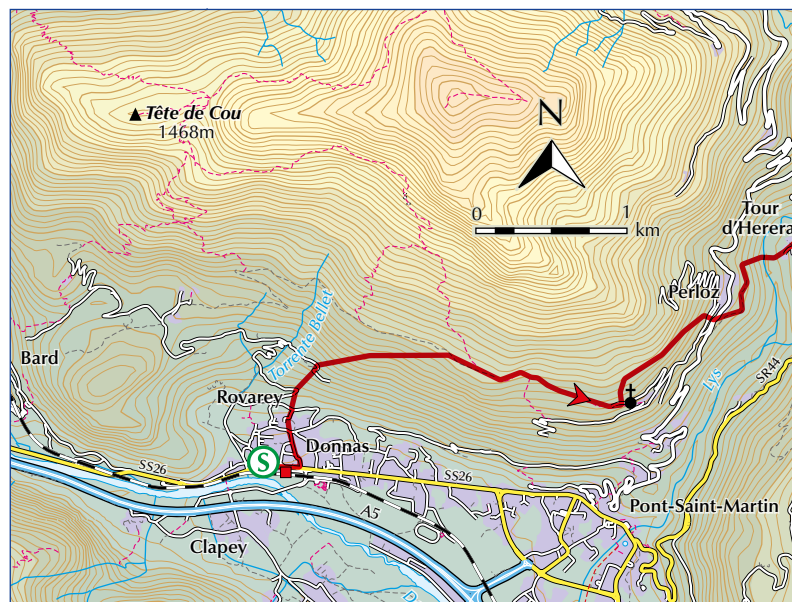
After the church take a track on the right and almost immediately leave this to take a steeper path on the left. This path climbs the wooded slopes for about 1km. ▶ Pass another shrine and shortly after, join a forest road at approximately 800m altitude. **1hr 20min**

Follow this track for a few minutes until just after a sign for 'Place 815m' ('Place de la' on the map). Descend into the woods on a path indicating 'Perloz: 55min'.

As the path descends past a number of small caves, it is not hard to imagine what good hideouts these would have been for Italian partisans from 1943 to

It is easy to imagine the track dating back to Roman times as it wends its way through vineyards.

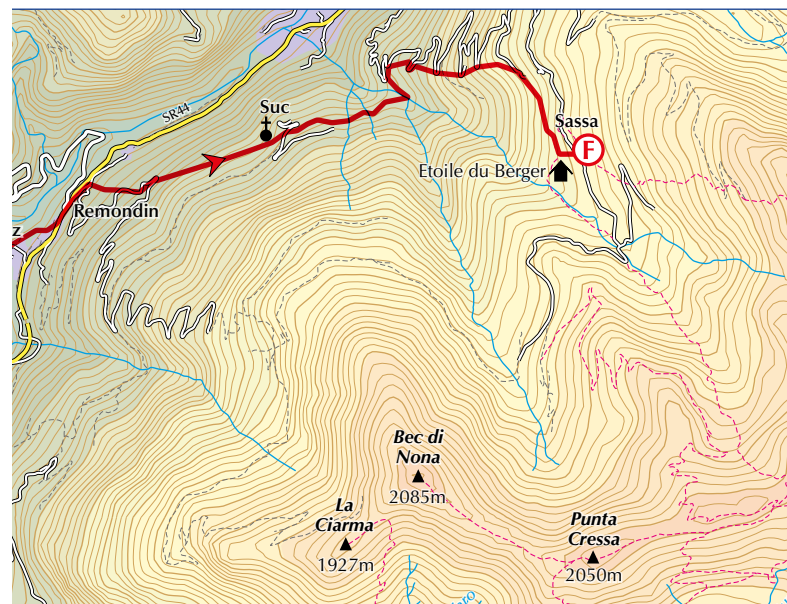
The forest provides welcome shade in the summer months. Later in the season you may see early chestnuts on the ground in their distinctive spiky cases.



1945; this area was a heartland of the **resistance**, and the small museum at Perloz sheds light on the heroic actions of the local resistance movement during the Nazi occupation in the latter part of the Second World War.

After 20min leave the shade of the woods at the end of the dirt road. You can follow this road instead of taking the signed AV1 path below it. To do so will mean missing out on a visit to the church of Santuario di Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, which is a beautiful collection of buildings set in a stunning location. **1hr 45min**

Descend to a signpost and just before the church re-ascend to join the dirt track mentioned above, which has, by this time, become a metalled road. The AV1, which is signed left almost immediately, begins a climb of a little over 100m.



#### Alternative route to Perloz via the church

Alternatively, you can reach Perloz by continuing to the church and passing it to the right. Take the paved track leading downhill and pass the old village laundry sinks to gain a little-used metalled road, which will take you into Perloz in approximately 15min. You can pick up the AV1 shortly after the Mairie.

After 30min you will reach the high point of 820m. Pass a ruined building and cross a narrow section, which is protected with handrail cables. A short ladder helps with a steep descent and before long the route passes a 'pond'. ► Enter **Perloz** via a man-made water channel and pass the TV/mobile phone mast.

Descend through the village on lovely cobbled streets, too old and narrow for vehicles, to come out opposite the Mairie and the small Musée de la Résistance.

The pond appears to be the water supply for Perloz so should be treated with care and respect.

The short, exposed section above Perloz



Carry on through Perloz towards the Pont de Moretta. **2hr 45min**

The **Pont de Moretta** is a truly impressive piece of construction and, as befits deep gorges and bridges in the Alps, there is a legend to accompany the crossing. This one includes a dragon that burned the previous wooden structure, which is why this one is constructed from stone. An information panel demonstrates the construction techniques used to build the bridge in 1721.

Continue uphill, following the obvious track to the hamlet of **Tour d'Hereraz** and the main road to Gressoney-Saint-Jean. As you arrive in the hamlet, the path joins a tarmacked track climbing leftwards.

The **tower** from which the hamlet takes its name is the church clock tower. Dating back approximately 1000 years, and once part of a fortified structure belonging to the wealthy and powerful Herens family from Valais (modern day Switzerland), it was converted into a church clock tower in 1878 and is one of the oldest structures in the valley.

The road curves to the right. Take a left turn onto a minor road before shortly turning rightwards and climbing a set of steps between two houses. Turn left to join the main road for a couple of hundred metres.

**2hr 55min ▶**

Cross the main road and take the minor road to Remondin and Barmette. After you have passed through Barmette and entered the 'centre' of Remondin (a very small hamlet), AV1 signs indicate a right turn onto an ancient mule track; take this track. Before long the route eases its gradient and climbs diagonally across the ancient fields, still following the mule track. The route briefly meets the road and follows it around a hairpin bend before resuming a more direct ascent line on a briefly surfaced track. ▶ Take the steps by a large boulder, which lead to a chapel at **Suc. 3hr 40min**

Pass the tiny chapel and some houses to join the road. Cross the road and take the gently rising grass track in an easterly direction (do not take the concrete steps; these are Path 3). AV1 signage is visible after the track begins but is not clear from the road. This delightful track meanders along the hillside in the shade of the trees to cross a bridge over a stream. Continue along a well-engineered old road to cross the main river by an impressive stone bridge. **3hr 55min**

After crossing the bridge descend slightly to join the road, which climbs to Sassa. The route from here to Sassa and the Etoile du Berger is a steep climb, gaining approximately 500m in altitude in around 2km. You will occasionally encounter the road as the path takes a more direct line, passing through a couple of farms and hamlets en route to the Chapelle de Santa Margherita. **4hr 45min ▶**

If you have used the bus or Trek-Bus option, the route begins here.

The surrounding trees are usually laden with early season nuts, which may be found on the ground but are unlikely to be ripe.

Sadly, the chapel is locked, but its interior can be glimpsed through the windows.



*The chapel at Suc*

From here on the gradient eases. Traverse the hillside to pass through the next hamlet, Granges. Wooden railings support the route as you enter the open woods, now mixed with some pines, and the final fields to reach the path junction beneath the Etoile du Berger. **5hr 10min**

Take the well-made path that climbs the side of a drainage channel to reach the terrace of the **Etoile du Berger** and a warm welcome. **5hr 20min**

**Etoile du Berger** (hotel, twin and double rooms, tel +39 340 5206774, [www.letoleduberger.it](http://www.letoleduberger.it)). The lovely hotel Etoile du Berger takes its name from the local name for Venus, the first star seen in the evening sky and an indication to shepherds that it was time to make their way home, hence the shepherds' star.

## STAGE 2

*Sassa (Etoile du Berger) to Rifugio Coda*

<b>Start</b>	Etoile du Berger, Sassa
<b>Distance</b>	7.1km
<b>Total ascent</b>	1050m
<b>Total descent</b>	250m
<b>Grade</b>	2/3
<b>Time</b>	3hr 50min
<b>Maps</b>	1:50,000 Istituto Geografico Centrale 9: Ivrea, Biella, Bassa Valle d'Aosta; 1:25,000 Carta dei Sentieri by L'Escursionista editore 12: Basse Valli d'Ayas e del Lys
<b>Note</b>	The 1:50,000 map indicates a different route that skirts along the hillside in a traversing line following the GTA (Grande Traversata delle Alpi). This is not a particularly pleasant route as the path contours along quite steep hillsides, following a well-worn groove of a path.

Today the route leaves the comforts of the Etoile du Berger 'mountain hotel' and the balmy lower Lys valley to climb into the higher mountains amid the green alpages, rocky ridges and misty mountains of the Piedmont border.

There are two routes to reach the CAI refuge: the 'Two Monts' route detailed below in Stage 2 or the shorter route via Col Portola (alternative route Stage 2A). The ridge linking Mont Roux and Mont Bechit makes for a thrilling first full mountain day and incorporates some steeper terrain (all of which is amply protected by fixed ropes, hence the designation on the maps of 'via ferrata'). Easier than Striding Edge, the 'Two Monts' route offers views and adventure that will, undoubtedly, win out on a clear day.

From the Etoile du Berger (1376m) descend to the path, following the water course below the hotel to the AV1 path from the previous day, and follow the AV1 signs to cross a bridge. Turn left and ascend to the gold mine bridge. **20min** ▶

**Gold** has been mined in the Alps since Roman times. Although the deposits are not extensive, they

Alternatively, follow the metalled road above the Etoile du Berger to end up at a sign and path to the interesting abandoned gold mines.