

WALKING IN THE BRIANÇONNAIS



About the Author

Andrew McCluggage was born in Northern Ireland, where he lives with his wife and two children. A hill-walking and mountain biking fanatic, he spends a large part of his time in the Briançonnais. After two decades as a corporate lawyer, he decided to do something more interesting and wrote this book.

WALKING IN THE BRIANÇONNAIS

**40 WALKING ROUTES IN THE FRENCH ALPS EXPLORING
HIGH MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPES NEAR BRIANÇON**

by Andrew McCluggage

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Front cover: A magical vista near les Arêtes de la Bruyère (Walk 37)

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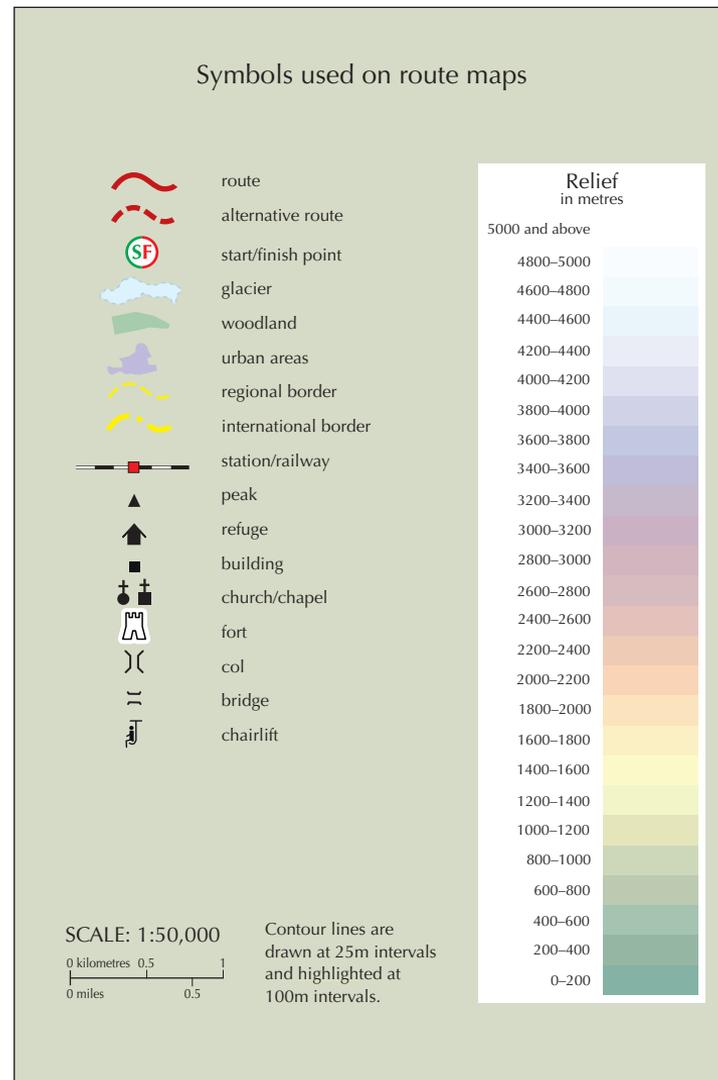
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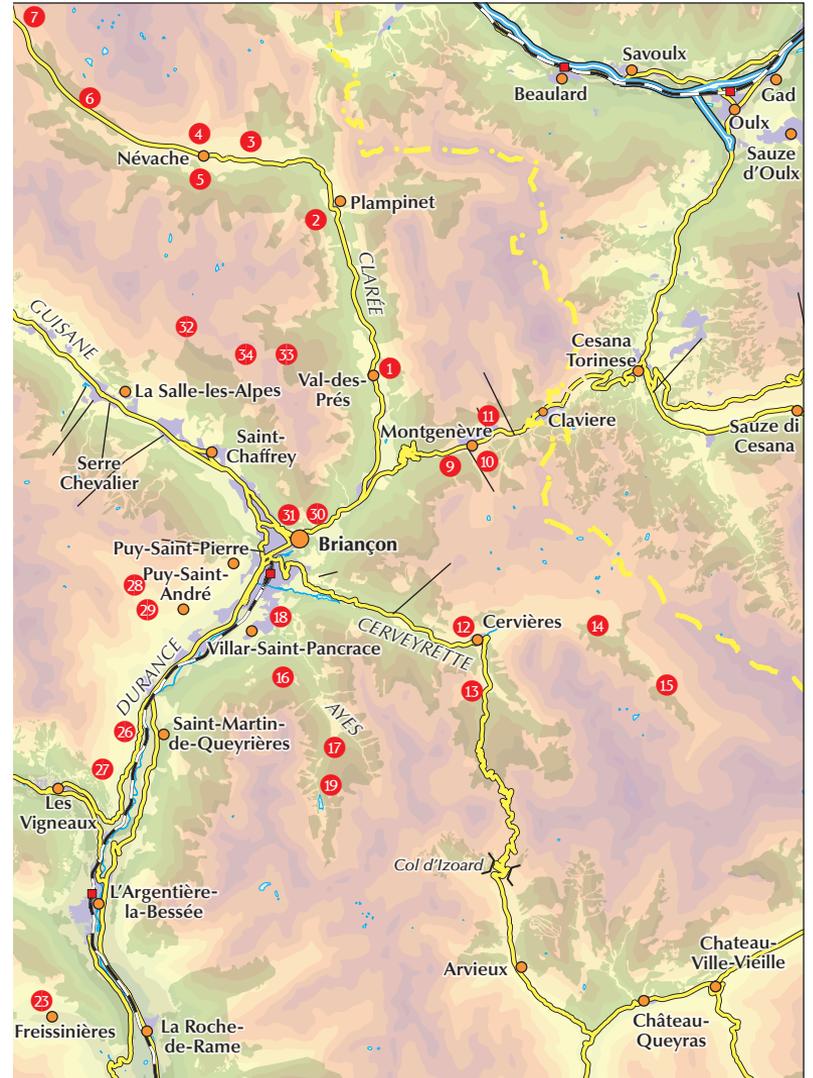
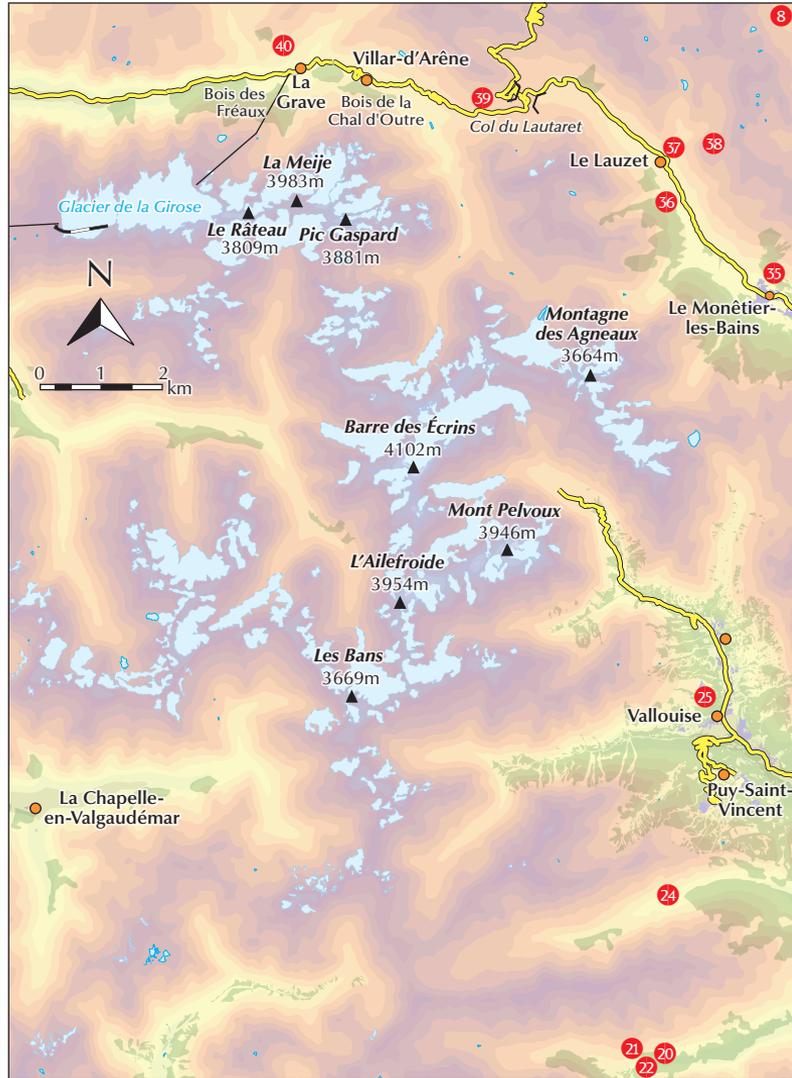
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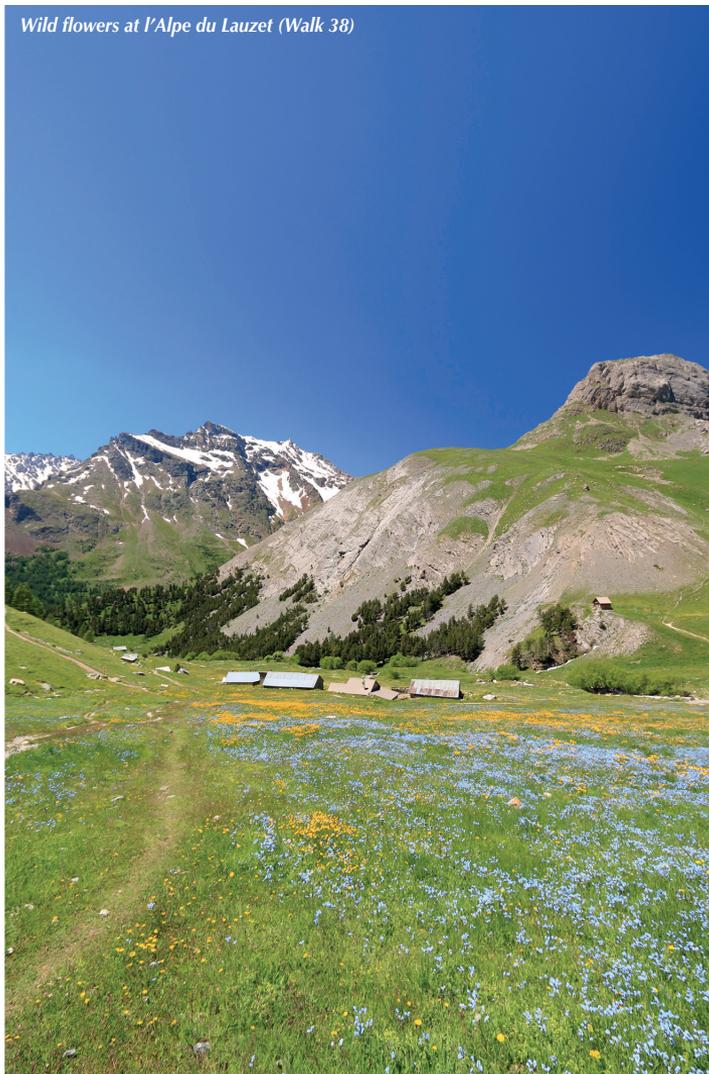
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Wild flowers at l'Alpe du Lauzet (Walk 38)



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

France: PGHM (Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne):
Tel 04 50 53 16 89; Emergency services: Tel 112 (mobile phones)

Weather reports

France: Chamonix: Tel 08 92 68 02 74, www.meteo.fr or Tel 3250

Note Mountain rescue can be very expensive – be adequately insured.

View from the descent from Col des Marsailles (Walk 15)



INTRODUCTION

The glaciers of la Meije reflected in Lac Noir (Walk 40)



Dominated on all sides by jagged peaks, and perched on a rocky spur at the nucleus of five beautiful valleys, the city of Briançon lies almost at the southernmost tip of the main Alpine range. It is the highest city in France (at 1326m above sea level) and it is the beating heart of the Briançonnais, the region to which it gives its name.

The Briançonnais is a stunning mountain wilderness packed with everything one would expect from a high alpine environment: snow-capped peaks, green valleys and pastures filled with the sound of cow bells, sparkling alpine lakes full of trout, an abundance of wild flowers and a labyrinth of paths.

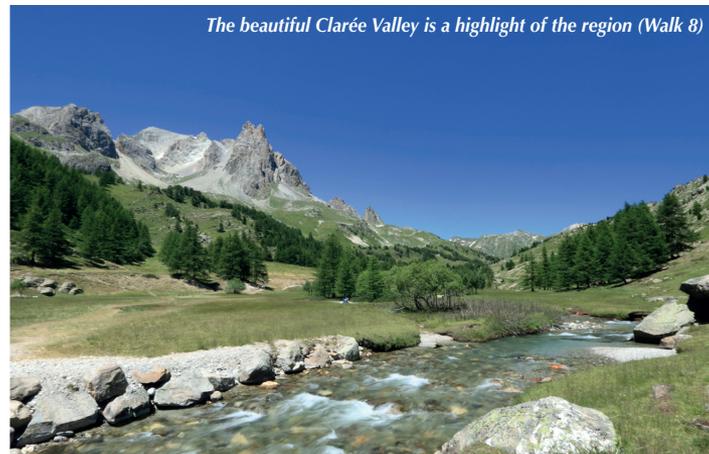
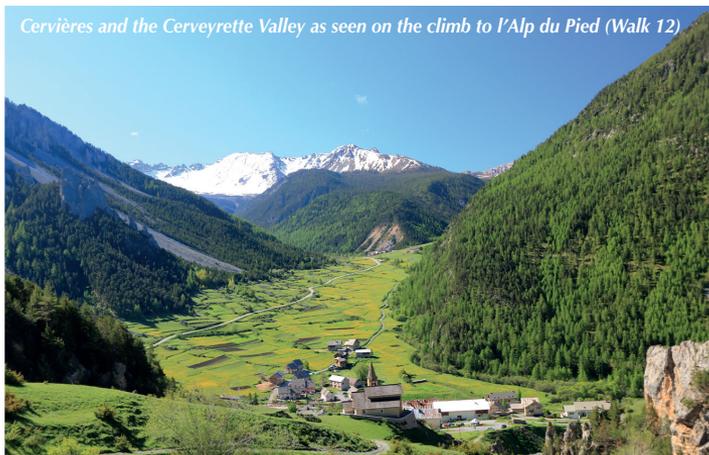
However, despite these attractions, the Briançonnais does not receive the volume of visitors that the wealthier, glitzier Northern Alps enjoy. It is geographically more isolated, being further from motorways and transport hubs such as Geneva. And often the area is overlooked in favour of mountains within national parks, which are more marketable. Yet anyone who has visited this amazing region will tell you that this is ludicrous. Although only part of the Briançonnais falls within a national park – the Écrins National Park (Parc National des Écrins) – it is as scenic and unspoilt as any mountain region in Europe.

In particular, the Briançonnais has largely been overlooked by English speaking walkers who have tended to favour the more easily accessible mountains around Geneva. This is a significant advantage for the walker who will find (save during the six peak summer weeks) largely empty tracks and paths among indescribable beauty. Outside of peak times it is not unusual to spend a whole day hiking in these wonderful mountains without encountering another soul. Even during peak times, the mountains here are tranquil compared to many other better known regions. In the age of mass tourism this is truly a rarity in the Alps. In short, those who favour solitude will feel like they have died and gone to heaven.

Such statements may sound like tourist office hyperbole, but they are

supported by statistics. For example, the Écrins National Park (the north-east section of which contains part of the Briançonnais) is approximately half the size of the Lake District National Park in the UK, which attracts approximately 16 million visitors each year. Yet the Écrins National Park apparently only gets around 800,000 visitors. This suggests that the Briançonnais receives a mere 10 per cent of the visitors per km² that the Lake District attracts.

Perhaps as a consequence of the lack of visitors and its relative remoteness, the Briançonnais has not been exposed to as much development as the Northern Alps, retaining a rural feel which has largely died out elsewhere. The Hautes Alpes in which Briançon resides is one of the least affluent regions of France. It remains



a French region for French people, and exhibits a charm often extinct in more touristy areas. Here, one finds few large ski resorts scarring the landscape. Absent, too, are the millionaires' chalets found elsewhere. This absence of development and pretension is one reason that aficionados of the region are fiercely loyal to it.

Another major draw is the climate. Briançon reputedly enjoys 300 days of sunshine each year, or so the locals are fond of saying. This may or may not be true in any particular year, but the climate is milder than the Northern Alps. For walkers this results in more sunny days, higher daytime and evening temperatures and less rain than in alpine regions further north. Anyone who has travelled hundreds of miles for a week's holiday in the mountains, only to be

forced indoors by inclement weather for most of that week, will readily confirm that favourable odds on sunshine are not to be discounted lightly.

To get a brief flavour of the region you could watch a stage of the Tour de France, the world's greatest cycling race, which takes place over three weeks each July. If the highlight of the race each year is its foray into the Alps, the highlight of each Alpine foray is often the race's journey into the Briançonnais. Make no mistake, this is one of cycling's true heartlands, soaked in almost a century of cycling history. Every few years the race passes through Briançon (sometimes twice!), or makes its tortuous way over one or more of the region's famous cycling cols, such as the Col du Galibier, the Col de Lautaret or the Col d'Izoard. Cycling fans will

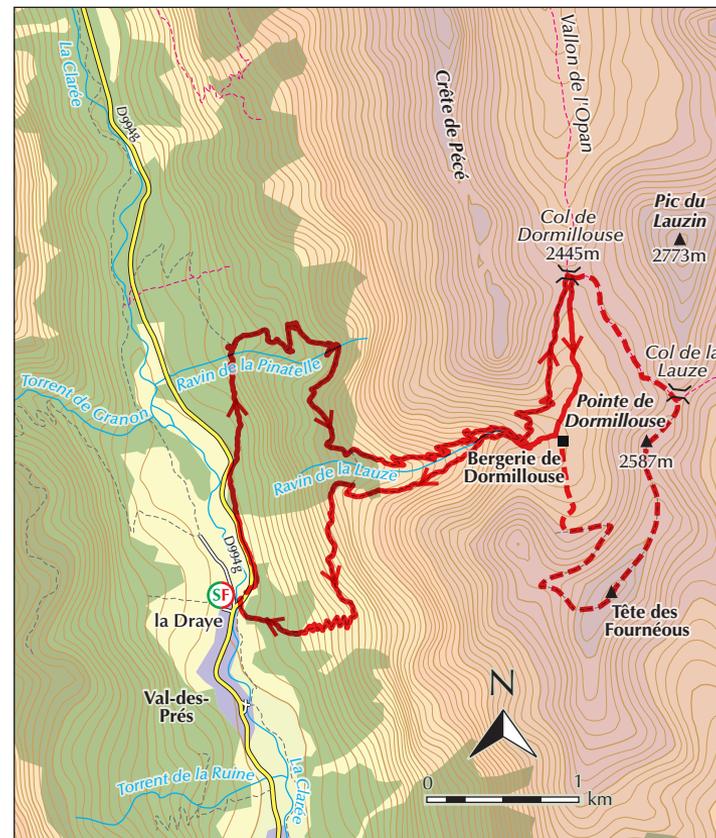
WALK 1

Col de Dormillouse

Start/finish	La Draye near Val-des-Prés (1400m, UTM 32T 316871 4980684)
Distance	14km
Ascent/descent	1100m
Grade	Hard
Time	5hr 30min
Maximum altitude	2445m
Map	IGN 3536OT Briançon (1:25,000)
Refreshments	None
Access	From Briançon take the N94 towards Montgenèvre. After a few kms take the D994 left (N) up the Clarée Valley towards Névache. N of Val-des-Prés, after the bridge at the hamlet of la Draye, there is a large car park on the left.

A beautiful foray into the high alpine pastures of the Clarée Valley, where sheep have grazed for centuries. The walk climbs through pristine forest to a classic hanging valley before reaching the lovely Col de Dormillouse, where the views are spectacular. Route finding can be tricky for the first hour as there are a number of interconnecting paths. At the time of writing, recent landslides in the Ravin de la Lauze have buried some small sections of path and a little scrambling over rocks was required to locate the path again. Helpfully, a few cairns had been placed to assist with navigation in these areas. Care should be taken approaching the Ravin des Fournéous as the path is a little unstable in places.

The descent passes historical alpine farmers' huts and cabins. These huts provide a fascinating insight into the conditions endured by the shepherds of times gone by, whose pastures were made famous by Emilie Carles' autobiography, *A Wild Herb Soup* (1977), describing the plight of local farming communities in the 19th and early 20th centuries (see box below).



From the NE side of the car park, follow the signposts to 'Grotte de Cinquante Anes' and 'Dormillouse'. Cross the road and follow a track on the other side, heading E towards a yellow signpost. At the signpost turn left ('Grotte de Cinquante Anes') and follow a small path to the N which runs parallel to the road. After 10min, the path meets a faint track – turn right. There are some yellow waymarks to guide you.

Eventually, the path starts to head away from the road – continue N to arrive at the **Ravin de la Pinatelle** (35min). Cross the ravine in a NE direction and continue on a path on the other side. Shortly after the ravine, at a track, turn right, uphill (E). Where the track bears back around to the N, ignore a faint track on the right. Shortly afterwards, ignore a path on the left and continue to climb up the track.

When the track meets the ravine again (at what appears to be a dead end), turn left to follow a small path heading up to the left (N) – the start of the path is concealed behind some bushes and is a little tricky to locate. The path zigzags up the slope and just below a large needle shaped rock formation arrives at a junction of paths: turn right to continue uphill (SE). The path soon arrives back at the ravine and here the path splits – keep right to climb parallel to the ravine for a few moments. The path then crosses the ravine to pick up a path on the other side, heading S.

Shortly after crossing the ravine, the path bears around to the left – ignore a faint path here to the right heading S. ◀ After 5min, arrive at another junction of paths – keep straight ahead (S) still following yellow waymarks.

Eventually, the path arrives at a fork and two signs (2hr): turn left, following a sign for ‘Dormillouse’ up the N side of the **Ravin de la Lauze**. As you climb, the views into the Clarée Valley become better and better. Watch your footing as the rocky path is narrow and unstable in places.

Where the path meets the base of the ravine and disappears, head straight up the N edge of the ravine (following cairns) and after a minute find the path again on your left (heading W). After another 5min, ignore a path on the left by a cairn and keep straight ahead (E), following yellow waymarks.

Where the path meets a little ravine, cross over and scramble up the other side towards a cairn. ◀ From here on, the rocky path becomes hard to follow in places so concentration is essential.

Where the path arrives at a junction of faint paths (3hr), turn left, signposted ‘Col de Dormillouse’. Red waymarks guide you here. Soon the path leaves the grass to climb initially W up a rocky slope. The path zigzags up the face of the slope until finally, it passes below a rocky outcrop and then proceeds N to **Col de Dormillouse** (2445m, 3hr 30min). The magnificent views extend to the N down the Vallon de l’Opon and to the E and S you can gaze up to the jagged lines of the Crête de la Lauze. The col is flanked to the W by the Crête de Pécé and to the E by the Pic du Lauzin.

You are on the **GR5** here and, should you be feeling particularly energetic, you could follow it to the SE up to the Col de la Lauze. From there you could follow the ridge to the S to the Tête des Fournéous and then descend down to the Bergerie de Dormillouse to rejoin the walk. This variant is stunning but would add approximately 3hr to the walk.

From the col, take a path heading SE. After a few metres head S down a grassy spur towards the base of the

The view N from the Col de Dormillouse

Yellow waymarks will confirm that you are on the correct route.

At the time of writing, there had been a small landslide here making the path tricky to follow.



An old shepherd's cabin below the Col de Dormillouse



grassy valley below. Keep heading S along the base of the valley. When you catch a glimpse of a shepherd's cabin below to the S, make your way towards it. The path is intermittent but the grassy terrain is straightforward.

Arrive at the stone building of **la Bergerie de Dormillouse** (4hr). The views from the bergerie into the Clarée Valley are beautiful. ◀

Pass to the right of the bergerie and descend the grassy slope to the SW – watch where you place your feet as there are a lot of marmot burrows here.

Upon reaching the **Ravin de la Lauze** again, cross over and pick up a small path heading down the S side of the ravine. The path is faint at times but there are plenty of red and black waymarks. Eventually the path moves away from the middle of the ravine and heads into the forest.

When the path emerges from the trees onto a grassy plateau (4hr 30min), with fabulous views of the Clarée Valley, keep descending, passing to the left of an old stone ruin. Shortly after the ruin, the path bears around to the N and enters the trees again. After a few minutes, arrive at a junction of paths – turn left and descend on a small path.

Eventually, the path emerges from the trees and works its way along the base of some cliffs – the path here is narrow in places and there are steep drops, so be careful. Then the path zigzags S down the slope and enters the trees again. Finally, the path arrives at a track – turn right and immediately afterwards, turn left (W) to descend on a path. Where the path meets another faint track, turn right and continue downhill back to the car park (5hr 30min).

EMILIE CARLES

Emilie Carles, the most famous resident of the Clarée Valley, was born in 1900 into a peasant farming family. Her mother died when she was four and she managed to juggle strenuous farm work, helping to look after her family and trying to attend school to gain an education. The Clarée Valley in those days was remote and bitterly poor and opportunities for advancement for its children were few and far between. Against all odds, Emilie managed to qualify as a teacher and taught in a number of impoverished peasant farming communities throughout the Haute Alpes before returning to Val-des-Prés. She loved the Clarée Valley with all her heart and spent the rest of her life here.

In 1977 she published her memoirs, in the French language, to popular acclaim. *Une Soupe aux Herbes Sauvages* was published in English in 1991 as *A Wild Herb Soup – The life of a French Countrywoman*.

Describing in detail the terrible conditions and difficulties endured by the region's farming communities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the book is shocking in its frankness and highlighted in particular the challenges for the women in these communities, upon whom much of the work appeared to fall (despite having to bear child after child in an era without effective birth control). The conditions they endured were shocking relative to living standards in modern day France.

The book did not always paint the residents of Val-des Prés in a good light. In particular, local officials were often painted as petty, chauvinistic and resistant to progress. This caused some resentment and, although Emilie Carles became famous and feted throughout France, it is said that some bitterness still remains among a few in the Clarée Valley.

In the 1970s there was talk of construction of a motorway to Turin in Italy which would traverse the Clarée Valley. Emilie, fearing that a motorway would destroy the valley's pristine environment, lobbied relentlessly against the project. She was instrumental in creating a protection association for the valley. There followed posters, pamphlets, petitions and hearings. Protests and marches were held in Briançon and elsewhere to highlight the Valley's plight. In October 1975 she held a press conference in Paris in which she explained how the motorway would affect small farmers and argued that France had an absolute duty to protect nature in the valley. Gradually the protest expanded and in 1976 the project was abandoned. Emilie died in 1979, and in 1992 the Clarée Valley was finally given protected status.

Little has changed here in generations. The valley remains a stunning rural environment of snowy peaks, green pastures and icy streams, and it depends for its survival on both tourism and agriculture. Without the single-mindedness of Emilie Carles, the beauty and tranquillity of this pristine environment may have been lost forever.



The descent offers magnificent views of the Clarée Valley

WALK 2

Fort de l'Olive and Fort de Lenlon

Start/finish	Plampinet (1482m, UTM 32T 315611 4985942)
Distance	17km
Ascent/descent	1050m
Grade	Hard
Time	6hr
Maximum altitude	2508m
Map	IGN 3535OT Névache (1:25,000) and IGN 3536OT Briançon (1:25,000)
Refreshments	Plampinet
Access	From the top of Briançon take the N94 towards Montgenèvre. After about 3km, exit at la Vachette and take the D994 all the way to Plampinet. Drive over the bridge in the village and immediately afterwards there is a parking area on the right.

For those interested in military history this walk is second to none, visiting two very different forts and with traces of history in evidence throughout. The views into the Clarée Valley are absolutely superb. The walk is long and the rocky tracks hard on your feet but on a fine day it's more than worth it. There is nothing too technical about the route save that the section just before the metal door below the Fort de l'Olive is very steep and has some loose rock.

From the car park, cross over the road and proceed N along a path running parallel to the road. Shortly afterwards, arrive at a small chapel and take a track to the NW, in the direction of a signpost to 'Névache'. After 15–20min, at a fork, take a track on the left following a sign to 'Fort de l'Olive'.

After another 10 minutes, arrive at a junction of tracks – pass between two cairns on the left onto a path, following the sign for 'Fort de l'Olive'. The rocky path