

CICERONE

WALKING IN THE AOSTA VALLEY

Walks, scrambles and via ferrata in the shadows
of Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa



Andy Hodges

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MONT BLANC, THE MATTERHORN AND
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MONTE ROSA

by Andy Hodges

CICERONE

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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. This guidebook was in part researched and written before the COVID-19 pandemic. While we are not aware of any significant changes to routes or facilities at the time of printing, it is likely that the current situation will give rise to more changes than would usually be expected. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1015/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.

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 or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

Register your book: to sign up to receive free updates, special offers and GPX files where available, register your book at www.cicerone.co.uk. 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. However, we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

Front cover: Mont Blanc from Mont de la Saxe

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ROUTE 1

Forte di Bard and the Roman road, Donnas

Start/Finish	Donnas library car park (underground, free)
Distance	4.5km
Ascent	30m
Descent	30m
Grade	1
Time	1hr 20min (round trip)

This short walk allows the visitor to experience a whole world of history in a day as well as offering an alternative way of approaching the popular Forte di Bard complex.

The arch on the Roman road is clearly visible when approaching Pont-Saint-Martin from the upper valley. The road is remarkably well preserved and the worn surface clearly shows evidence of cart and carriage wheels rolling along here for thousands of years. Being part of the Via Francigena, this walk is also part of the ancient pilgrim route to Rome from Canterbury. The dominating Forte di Bard is the destination, making it an historical exploration suitable for the whole family. As the setting for a recent Avengers film and a host of museums and exhibitions, the fort will easily take a full day of exploration. A host of artisan shops, cafés and restaurants in the old town are the icing on the cake.

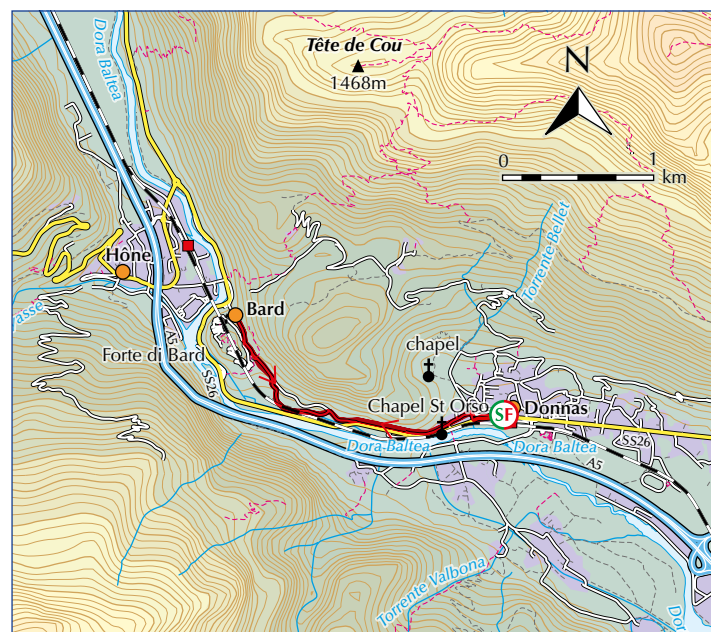
It is worth considering that by the time the road from Canterbury to Rome was being trodden, the Roman road upon which this section is based would have been around a thousand years old.

From the centre of Donnas follow the road out of town in the direction of Bard (up the valley). At the junction approximately 50 metres after the library follow the road uphill signed 'strada romana; arco romano' for approximately 30 metres to the right.

Turn left (Path 103, which is the Via Francigena) into the medieval street and buildings of old Donnas (5min). ◀

This narrow road has been paved in a traditional stone style at some considerable expense and begins by passing through an arch indicating the old town wall.

ROUTE 1 – FORTE DI BARD AND THE ROMAN ROAD, DONNAS



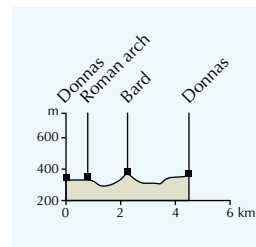
Continue down the road taking time to look at the buildings and some of the old signs painted above the doorways. ►

At the end of the old street is the **Chapel of St Orso** which has existed for over 900 years and was built to provide protection from the frequent river floods (15min).

The Roman road is ahead; just how many wheels rolling along it would it have taken to create the ruts?

The road was called '**delle Gallia**' (of Gaul, modern day France) and was the

About 100 metres along the road, look out for the palace of the Enrielle family with its round tower. This building also housed travellers before it became a prison.



The 36 (XXXVI) milestone (a large column) indicates 36 Roman miles to Aosta.

first road in the Aosta valley. To cut a roadway into solid rock is testament to the ingenuity and technological standards of the Roman engineers as well as the hard labour of the slaves who created such an impressive construction.

Walk along this section of road; although only 221 metres in length it will probably take a while as there are many distractions to catch your eye. Pass through the remarkable **archway**. ◀

Continue along the obvious road, which is now a modern path, away from the busy road. Pass some vineyards until the surface changes to river pebbles set in concrete **(20min)**.



The ancient archway on the Roman road, Donnas

Follow this to reach a track junction. At the time of writing the old road is closed here due to the risk of rock-fall from the cliffs above **(25min)**.

Take the road left which descends quite steeply before contouring under the rock face and past some allotments. Climb steeply to regain the old road **(35min)**.

Forte di Bard is visible ahead, follow the road into the beautifully preserved village of **Bard (40min)**.

The small **open-air museum/ecology site** on the left makes for an interesting diversion. Glacial erratics, striations and other geological features can be discovered along with some ancient stone carvings which encircle the erratic boulder.

Bard has a number of small artisan shops and cafés/restaurants along its main street.

FORTE DI BARD

The complex of Forte di Bard is imposing; it is easy to see how it would have controlled travel in the valley, and the strategic importance of its situation is obvious.

There has been a fort of some description on the rocky promontory for over a thousand years, dating back to wooden palisades in the 5th century. The present buildings were constructed between 1830 and 1838 because Charles Albert of Savoy was worried about a French invasion.

The fort's troops were outnumbered 100:1 by Napoleon's Grande Armée, but thanks to its situation they successfully held off the army for two weeks as it attempted to invade Italy, having crossed the Great St Bernard Pass. His successful plan to bypass the fort by a difficult path resulted in vicious street fighting in the village of Bard. The bullet-pock-marked walls today provide ample evidence of the intensity of the street fighting that took place.

Advances in military technology meant the fort fell into disuse, and it was handed over to the local administration in the 1980s. Since then it has been developed to become the attraction it is today.

Permanent exhibitions include an Alpine museum and exhibitions on the fort's history. And with temporary exhibitions and displays of local artists' work, there is always something to see. The 2015 film *Avengers: Age of*

Ultron used the fort and the village as sets, and artefacts can be encountered around the site. Children can also partake in a virtual climb of Mont Blanc!

The Hotel Cavour (named after Camillo Benso, the Conte di Cavour, who was responsible for its development and who became Italy's first prime minister following unification in 1861) in the upper part of the fort is a unique place to stay. This part of the fort was originally the officers' and women's quarters; eleven rooms are available and are all equipped to a high standard. There is a small restaurant and a café within the complex offering lunchtime meals and refreshments.

The return is by the same route but allows different views throughout, and features that may have been missed on the outward journey will be spotted on the return leg **(1hr 20min)**.



*Forte di Bard from
the Roman road*

ROUTE 2

Napoleon's diversion route

Start/Finish	Bard – parking available in the village of Hône (or at the fort complex)
Distance	9km
Ascent	640m
Descent	640m
Grade	2, a very small section of fixed rope aids a steep descent of no more than 5 metres
Time	3hr 45min

As Napoleon's power increased, his expansion across Europe seemed to show no bounds. He had famously crossed the Alps via the Great St Bernard Pass and was on the march into the Italian states. Nothing could stop him.

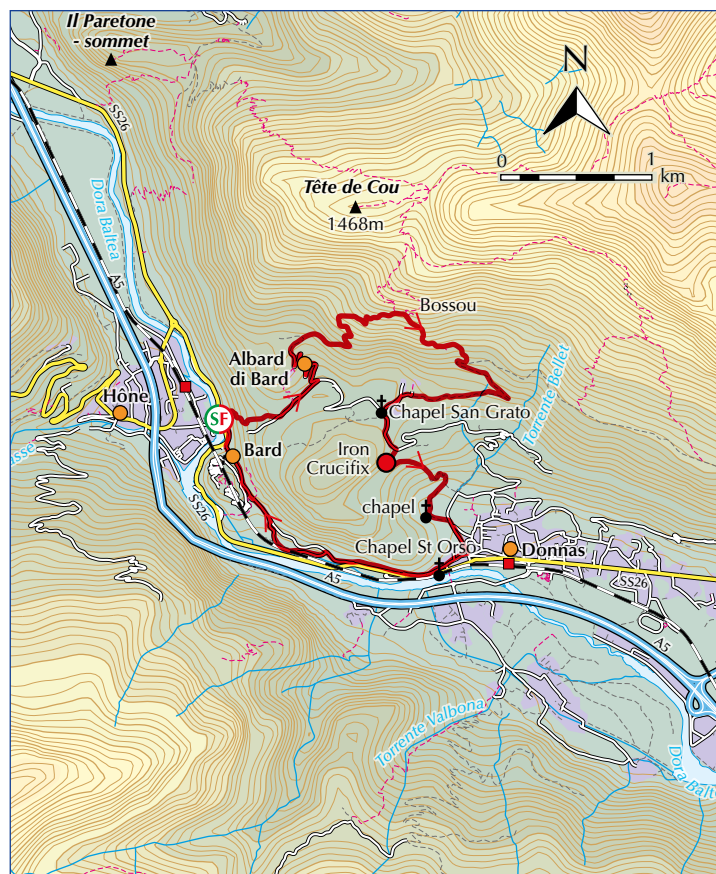
Then he encountered the Forte di Bard. The fort guarded a very narrow passage of the river, and the only road passed through the small village of Bard at the foot of the fort. After two weeks of a fruitless siege no further progress had been made. Then, after scouting the area, Napoleon and his army hatched an audacious plan: to bypass the fort via a steep climb and attack from the other side. This route follows their route.

The route begins opposite the footbridge from Hône, about 20 metres to the left after crossing the bridge. If parking at the fort, leave the car park and walk right from the entrance along the pavement to the bridge.

Take Path 2 'Albard di Bard' (confusingly marked as Path 1 on the Carta dei Sentieri 1:25,000 map). ▶ Pass to the right of a farmhouse to join a track **(20min)**.

Follow this track to join a quiet road **(25min)**. This road continues to climb gently to a road junction **(35min)**.

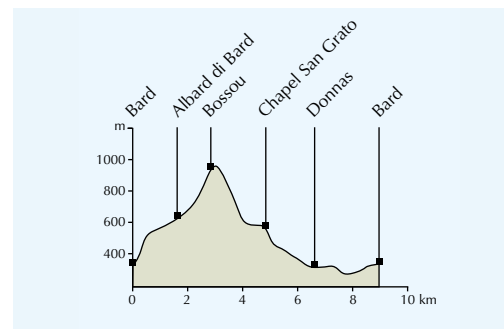
The path is an old, well-worn staircase that climbs quite steeply between houses before entering shaded woodland.



Be wary of signs indicating short cuts; some of these paths end abruptly with little to indicate which way to go.

Take the left fork and follow the road as it zigzags to the village of **Albard di Bard**, 643m (55min). ◀

The **village architecture** is very old, mostly drystone built. It is believed Napoleon stayed here during the siege and several properties have embrasures to allow musket fire.



A sign indicates Path 1 to the right. Follow this path, a delightful walled track that winds its way through fields to join a road at a car park, 627m (1hr).



Napoleonic musket ball scars, Bard

These are worth a short exploration, particularly those built into the rock but, as always with abandoned buildings, care is needed.

Follow Path 1 to a junction which is reached in a couple of minutes. Take the right fork, still Path 1, and continue climbing to reach a wonderful viewpoint looking down to the fort and across to the mountains beyond (1hr 15min).

Follow the path as it winds its way up the hillside to reach a restored chalet at Chesal, 844m (1h 30min).

Keep climbing to reach the day's highpoint of the abandoned chalets of **Bossou**, 943m (1hr 40min). ◀

Pass through what appears to be the old 'street' of the settlement and within a few minutes you will reach a split in the path. A large stone indicates an inverse triangle symbol with a '3' inside it. This path is the descent (marked as Path 6 on the map). Follow this path to a well-built stone staircase and abandoned chalets at Fobe, 817m (2hr).

A minute or so later a small shrine offers a fabulous view of the valley and what is, in effect, the end of the Alps as the Italian plain stretches into the distance.

Continue along the path to join a track (2hr 10min).

Turn right on this track, downhill. Follow the track as it descends through the forest to become a road. Pass through the hamlet of Planet and keep following the road downhill to the small chapel of **San Grato** (2hr 20min).

Follow signs for Path 3 to the left along the road. After only three or four minutes a path leaves the road to the right; be sure to follow this as Path 3 signs will no longer be encountered. After only a minute or two the path bends rightwards and splits. Take the lower path (old red arrows on rocks) ◀ Follow the path as it descends to the right. It is steep at first but well used by local farmers. Pass a farm and then a very short section of rope helps you descend a steep section (2hr 35min).

Keep following the path, passing an information board, to arrive at a road and another small chapel (2hr 50min).

Follow the road downhill and at a junction take the right turn onto a rough farm track through the vineyards. Take another left at the end of the vine road to join a road (3hr).

An iron crucifix is a good waymarker here.



Old shop sign,
Donnas

Follow this road down into **Donnas** (3hr 05min).

From here, the return to **Bard** and Hône is along the Roman road (Route 1), which takes about 40 minutes (3hr 45min).



- 32 routes in the majestic Aosta Valley • rambles, day walks, scrambles and via ferrata • breathtaking vistas of Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa



Italy's Aosta Valley boasts stunning mountain scenery, with trails and outdoor activities to suit most preferences and abilities. This guide presents a selection of 32 routes, from short leisurely walks to longer, more strenuous hikes, from scrambles to via ferrata and protected routes bordering on mountaineering. A handful of local

trail runs and other via ferrata are also summarised in brief.

There are walks to the ancient fortress of Forte di Bard and the world-famous Grand St Bernard Monastery, ascents of some of the region's alluring peaks, an ascent of 'Italy's hardest' via ferrata and overnights in welcoming mountain refuges. Other highlights include insights into the valley's fascinating history and opportunities to enjoy delicious local cuisine.

- potential bases include Gressoney St Jean, Valpelline and Courmayeur
- lower walks are feasible from Easter to late October; mountain routes from late June to late September
- includes advice on travel, accommodation, equipment and safety

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