



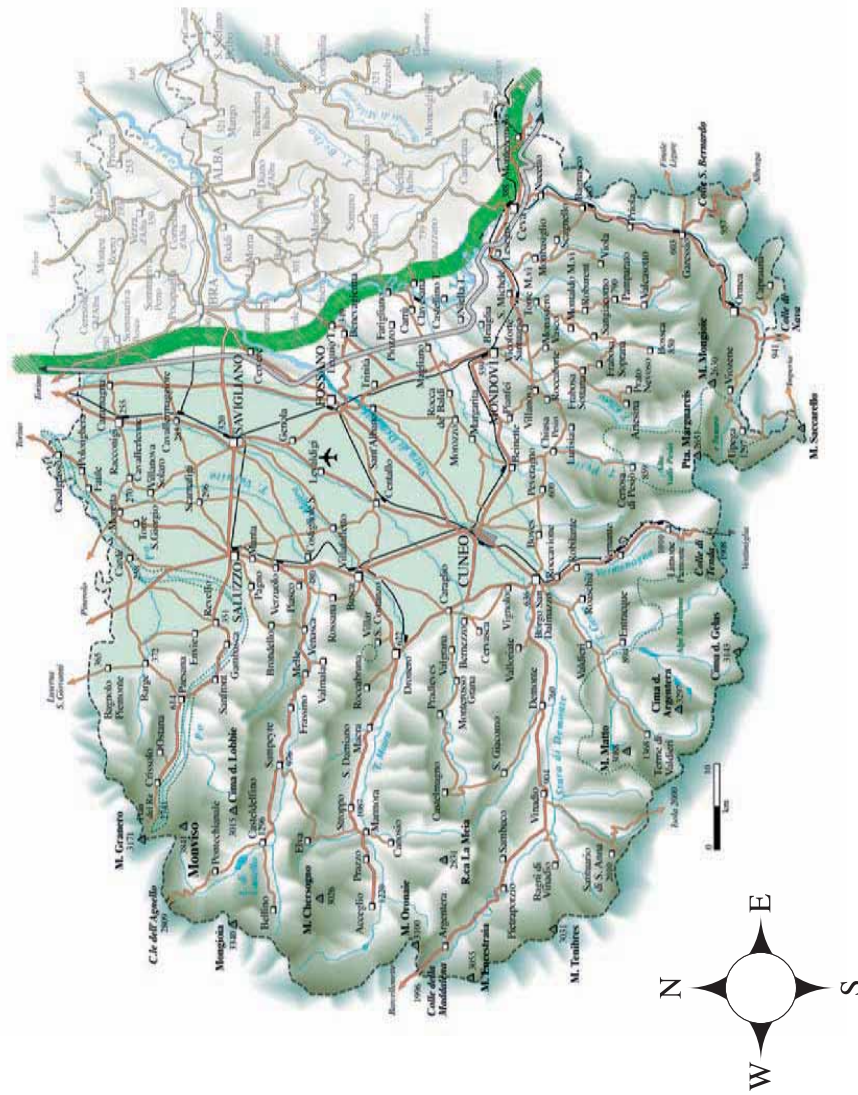
guide to the  
**Occitan valleys**  
in the province of Cuneo

 **PIEMONTE**  
NUOVO. DA SEMPRE.

 **ATL**  
Azienda Turistica  
Locale del Cuneese

 **REGIONE  
PIEMONTE**

The green line borders the part of the area under the control of the A.T.L. del Cuneese.



## INDEX

<b>Occitania</b>	page	3
<b>Welcome to the Occitan Valleys of the province of Cuneo</b>	»	4
<b>Hiking in Occitania</b>	»	5
<b>THE PO, BRONDA, INFERNOTTO VALLEYS</b>	»	6
Famous names linked to Monviso	»	7
From Mombracco to Buco di Viso	»	8
Exploring the upper valley	»	9
Painters on the road	»	10
Religion and legends	»	11
<b>VAL VARAITA</b>	»	12
'Sun cult' crafts	»	13
Under Colle dell'Agnello	»	14
Casteldelfino and the Alevé forest	»	15
Poetry and colored ribbons	»	16
Lilies and dolphins	»	17
Mistà and dance	»	18
The sounds of the valley	»	19
<b>VAL MAIRA</b>	»	20
An Englishwoman at Dronero	»	21
Great masters	»	22
The saint and his <i>ciciu</i>	»	24
Museums of the valley	»	26
In Matteo Olivero's home town	»	27
Eating d'oc	»	28
A place where everything is Occitan	»	29
<b>VALLE GRANA</b>	»	32
Castelmagno Cheese	»	33
Sanctuary of Castelmagno	»	34
<i>Novè</i>	»	36
Feast days in Coumboscuro	»	37
In the footsteps of Pietro da Saluzzo	»	38
Caraglio: silk, music and art	»	39
<b>VALLE STURA</b>	»	42
Mountain museums	»	43
Vinadio on the move	»	44
No passports needed	»	45
Memories of the Alps in wartime	»	46
The wonders of Pedona	»	47
Literary trails and legends	»	48

<b>VALLE GESSO</b>	page	52
The bear and the rye	»	53
Royal memories in Valdieri and Entracque	»	54
On the traces of wolves and lammergeyers	»	57
<i>Le Parlate</i> , theater in languedoc	»	58
The valley cuisine	»	59
Stories of migrant shepherds	»	60
<b>VAL VERMENAGNA</b>	»	62
The Fortresses of Tenda	»	63
<i>Ubi stabant cathari</i>	»	64
Pinocchio in Vernante	»	65
The genius of <i>Nòto</i> and <i>Jòrs</i>	»	66
Straw, poems and words	»	67
<b>VALLEYS AT THE FEET OF THE BISALTA</b>	»	68
Botanical stations	»	69
The Charterhouse in the forest	»	70
Photograph collection at the Park	»	71
Famous men of Peveragno	»	72
New music with the <i>Gai Saber</i>	»	73
<b>KYÉ VALLEYS</b>	»	74
Partisan Itinerary	»	75
“Holed” mountains and other trades of long ago	»	76
The art of Giovanni Mazzucco	»	77
Civilization and tastes of the Alps	»	78
<b>THE BRIGA AREA</b>	»	80
A sanctuary of the Neolithic age	»	81
Forests and archaic villages	»	82
Paradise for spelunkers and botanists	»	83
<b>Addresses</b>	»	84

#### CREDITS

**Text editing:** introduction and Po, Bronda, Infernotto Valleys, Valle Varaita, Valle Maira, Valle Gesso by Leda Zocchi (Ass. Arealpina); Valle Stura, Valle Grana, Valle Vermenagna, Valleys of the Bisalta, Valleys of the Kyè, Valleys of the Briga area by Fredo Valla (Ass. Arealpina)

**Photographic material:** A.T.L. del Cuneese, C.M. Valli Po, Bronda, Infernotto, C.M. Valle Varaita, C.M. Valle Maira, C.M. Valle Stura, C.M. Valli Monregalesi, C.M. Alta Val Tanaro, Ass. Culturale Il Marcovaldo, Chambrà d’Oc, Coumboscuro Centre Prouvençal, Espaci Occitan, Parco Naturale Alpi Marittime, Parco Naturale Alta Valle Pesio e Tanaro, Terme di Vinadio, Tiziana Aimar, Elisa Bono, Massimiliano Fantino, Roberto Gaborin, Laura Martinelli, Daniela Salvestrin, Marco Toniolo

**Graphic project:** Madisonadv - Cuneo - [www.madisonadv.it](http://www.madisonadv.it)

**Printing:** TEC Arti Grafiche - Fossano - [www.tec-artigrafiche.it](http://www.tec-artigrafiche.it)

**English translation:** Studio Laura Castoldi - [castoire@tin.it](mailto:castoire@tin.it)



## Occitania

Occitania is one of the largest European linguistic zones.

It extends over three countries, France, Spain, Italy, with an area of about 200,000 sq.km and a population in excess of 10 million inhabitants.

In Italy, aside from the Occitan valleys of Piedmont in the provinces of Cuneo and Turin, there are Occitan communities in Liguria, at Triora and Olivetta San Michele. An Occitan linguistic island of very ancient emigration is located in Calabria, in Guardia Piemontese.

The name Occitania goes back to at least the 14th century, where it is mentioned in several documents. In the Middle Ages, the poetry of the troubadours brought prestige to the langue d'oc, that was highly respected even outside its own land: in Galicia, Catalunya, Italy, Germany, Hungary. Dante Alighieri, for example, held it in great esteem: in the Convivium (I, 13) he disserts on the "precious speech of Provence" and in the Divine Comedy (Purgatory, Canto XXVI) he uses Occitan for the words of the troubadour Arnaut Daniel, whom he describes as "the greatest artisan of the mother tongue".

In modern times, Frederi Mistral (1830-1914), Provençal poet, won the Nobel Prize for literature for his work in Occitan (1904).





## Welcome to the Occitan Valleys of the province of Cuneo!

We find ourselves on the extreme eastern tip of Occitania, the linguistic region that covers most of the south of France and extends as far as the little valley of Aran in Catalunya (Spain). Here in Italy, Occitania extends over thirteen valleys in the Piedmont Region, with a harsh, mountainous landscape that differs from the rest of Occitania. Arriving from the Po plain, the valleys open fanlike towards the west: the crown of peaks closes the horizon, glowing pale pink in the morning sunlight and silhouetted darkly against the evening sky.

Accessible only with great difficulty for much of human history, the valleys developed their own peculiarities, in both language and traditions. But to think of these places as isolated worlds would be a mistake: their pathways and roads were incessantly traveled, from Medieval times, from one end to the other, across what is now Italian territory and into the French territory. Proof of this is in the langue d'oc common to these people, the artistic heritage left by the painters who worked there, the itinerant traders that brought people from the Mediterranean sea up into the mountains, from one valley to another, and down from the mountains to the Po plain and beyond.

In the mountains, slow, steady steps are necessary to reach the top. In the same way, time and patience are essential if we want to discover the splendors of this territory in the villages, hamlets, and tiny offshoot valleys. Progress is slow and the eye must be watchful, the steps silent to catch glimpses of the nature of the place and the marks of man who has tried to live there.

The thirteen valleys preserve a natural treasure: the geological marvels of the karsts, the flora and fauna, as well as the architectural culture, the music,

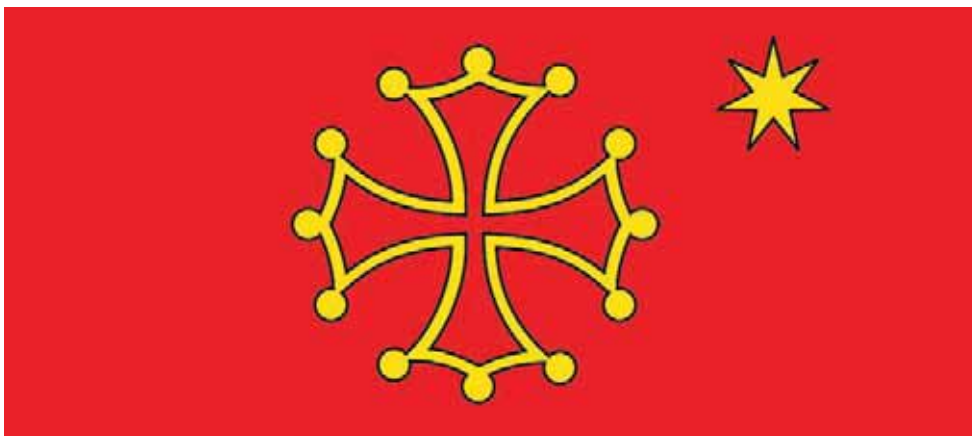
literature and culinary traditions. Sadly, the area has lost many of its inhabitants since the end of World War II, and far too few people are left to bear the responsibility for maintaining this legacy. Often the meadows are eaten up by the woods, and the deer and boars take back plots that once were vegetable gardens.

A new awareness of the respect and safeguard of the environment and its traditions has led to the creation of nature parks and museums in the area, to preserve the memory of how it used to be, and confirm that the mountain is a treasure that we must not let slip away (Info: [www.chambradoc.it/cmgy/progettocmgy.page](http://www.chambradoc.it/cmgy/progettocmgy.page)).

## Hiking in Occitania

In September 2008 a trail system was inaugurated, called **Occitania a pè** and consisting of 60 itineraries. The starting point is at Vinadio in Valle Stura and the arrival is at Vielha in Val d'Aran. The trails cross the Alps and the Pyrenees, winding over the hills and through the valleys, past historic sites, conveying the emotion of the poetry of the troubadours and a language that is a human heritage (Info: [www.chambradoc.it/LeAdesioni.page](http://www.chambradoc.it/LeAdesioni.page)).

The Occitan Flag





## The Po, Bronda, Infernotto Valleys

The Po Valley is one of the shortest of the Occitan valleys. It is located at the center of the fan ideally formed by these valleys, and in a few dozen kilometers reaches an altitude of 3841 meters above sea level with the peak of Monviso, that dominates the western horizon.

This is where the highest park of the Po in Cuneo province is located, established to safeguard the source of that great river, and the flora and fauna characteristic of the mountain environment, but also of the wetland environment, with the peat bogs that distinguish some of these high plateaus. The valley was settled already in prehistoric times, as shown by the cave etchings of men and women in prayer toward the sun, the moon and the stars. Some of the most significant of these etchings are found on **Mombracco**, the mountain with its unmistakable rounded shape that closes the valley at the lower end. Other signs of prehistoric man (cup-and-ring marks) can be seen on the side that faces on the valley at Bric Lombatera.

Many sites reveal evidence of farming and grazing activities, religious strife that did not spare even the Po valley, religious devotion that left pillars, chapels and holy places in the loveliest sites of the valley, like the sanctuary of **San Chiaffredo**.

Medieval monasticism in the Po Valley had two important sites at **Staffarda** and **Rifreddo**.

History has marked these places even in more recent times, during the period of the Italian Resistance which started, in Infernotto valley and the upper Po valley, right after September 8, 1943. Some of today's hiking trails were used then by the partisans, and earlier by salt caravans, emigrants, pilgrims and stonecutters.



## Famous names linked to Monviso

**Monviso** has always aroused a sort of fearful reverence in the people who admired it at close quarters or from far away, and in ancient times it was believed to be the highest mountain in the world.

Virgil mentions it in the Aeneid, calling it *Vesulus*. Even Dante, Petrarch and Leonardo da Vinci describe their feelings of wonder at the sight of Monviso. Chaucer mentions it in his "Canterbury Tales" and Stendhal in "The Charterhouse of Parma".

The British mountain-climber Matthews was the first to reach the summit in 1861 and it was scaled again in 1863 by Quintino Sella who decided to found the Italian Alpine Club (C.A.I.) here. Today, new horizons for tourism in the human dimension arise from the tours along ancient trails through woods and villages, linking pastures and mountain retreats: "Monviso Horizon" is an itinerary that rings the upper Po Valley, with detours to explore hidden historic and artistic sites (Info: Ufficio Turistico Valle Po / Comunità Montana - [www.vallipo.cn.it](http://www.vallipo.cn.it) - [www.chambradoc.it/paesana/paesana.page](http://www.chambradoc.it/paesana/paesana.page)).

### Mount Monviso



## From Mombracco to Buco di Viso

**Mombracco** can be reached from the municipalities of Sanfront, Rifreddo, Paesana, Barge, Envie, Revello.

This particular cupola-shaped geological formation is also known as Leonardo's Mountain because the Italian genius spoke admiringly of its stone quarries. The mountain is still quarried for its famous pink quartzite, and visitors can watch it being extracted on the summit.

A ring of trails called "Leonardo's Path," explores several rock caves on the mountainside overlooking the valley, where prehistoric etchings and cup marks have been found. We know that Mombracco was inhabited as early as the Neolithic age, also because of the many grottos and rock overhangs that offered refuge to shepherds and their families. The last of these caves, inhabited until the Sixties of the past century, is Balma Boves, in the municipality of **Sanfront**, where the houses were recently turned into a museum of the area, preserving the tools and instruments used by the farmers and shepherds of long ago who lived mainly on chestnuts, and tiny plots of vegetables they planted on the steep slopes (Info: [www.marcovaldo.it](http://www.marcovaldo.it)).

We ascend the valley along the Po, still a rushing stream where it meets its first affluent, the Lenta, that flows down from Oncino. This is where we encounter the last town in the valley: **Crissolo**. A steep and winding road with hairpin turns (partially closed in the summer to keep traffic from the upper Po Park to a minimum but providing a convenient shuttle bus) goes all the way up to Pian del Re. This is the site of the great peat bog where the Po first sees the light as it emerges from underneath one of the great boulders that detached itself eons ago from Monviso, and home of the black salamander, the symbol of the territory.

From Pian del Re many trails branch out toward the surrounding mountain peaks of Monviso, Punta Roma, Punta Udine and Granero, and toward the lakes that lie at their feet. Departing from Pian del Re, a trail leads to Buco di Viso, the first tunnel in the Alps, built in 1478 when the Marquis of Saluzzo, to encourage the salt trade from the Rhone delta, decided to facilitate the passage of the caravans and create a safer and shorter route under Colle delle Traversette. It only took a few years to complete.

Unfortunately, the fall of the Marquisate and the colder winters of the following centuries led to disuse of the Buco di Viso, which was only recently reopened for travel, though it is still difficult to reach on the French side due to a landslide that has not been entirely removed yet.

## Exploring the upper valley

The sanctuary of San Chiaffredo, in Occitan Chafre, Jaufre in the Middle Ages, is located at **Crissolo**.

The saint's feast day is celebrated in September. According to tradition, Chiaffredo was a Roman soldier from the Theban Legion, like his companions Maurizio, Magno, Ponzio, Dalmazzo, Costanzo, Mauro, Pancrazio, typical saints of the Occitan mountains.

Some fled toward the valleys of Monviso, where Chiaffredo, hunted by the pagans, was martyred. The many votive offerings displayed in the sanctuary tell of the wars, tragedies and hopes of this mountain people.

The cycle of life, work in the fields, the stables, the school, the traditions, are illustrated in the Municipal Ethnographic Museum of **Ostana** (Info: Comune di Ostana - tel. +39.0175.94915 – [www.reneis.org](http://www.reneis.org)), with implements, objects, reconstructions of environments and photographs captioned in Occitan and Italian. In June, the Museum will present its fascinating theme notebooks, edited by the Association "I Rënéis".

Ostana organizes a host of community initiatives: picnics, singing groups, literary contests, meetings for the members of the Alpine troops, photographic exhibitions and environmental improvement projects. With careful work it has turned the town into a workshop of alpine architecture and, for these reasons, has been awarded recognition as one of "the Most Beautiful Villages in Italy" ("I Borghi più belli d'Italia").

On the right-hand side of the valley, **Oncino** for centuries was the most important town of the upper valley, famous for its fine pastures and large herds of cattle. In the Middle Ages, the monks at Staffarda led there the herds to pasture. The first alpine refuge of the Italian Alpine Club was built near Alpetto lake, and is now flanked by a new building. On the crests is the Buco delle Fantine, inhabited, they say, by hard-working, hairy little fairies, who loved doing laundry. Every morning the mountain residents, looking out their windows, used to see their clothes spread out to dry in the sun. From Oncino many paths set out across the crest toward Val Varaita.

## Painters on the road

The villages and hamlets of the Po Valley hide many small treasures of popular art. An original artist who painted there between the 18th and 19th century signed his works *Giors Boneto painter from Paizana*, the name of his birthplace. He was an itinerant artist, one of the countless country artists who frescoed religious subjects on the pillars and façades of the houses in exchange for a few coins, sometimes nothing more than hospitality.

Giors Boneto painted his way from his Po Valley home to the feet of the Bisalta. He had a profound knowledge of the fresco technique and a vast range of subjects: saints, the Madonna, Christ on the cross, depositions, cherubs, seraphim...his naïf but highly individual style is recognizable centuries later.

In the Upper Valley, works by Boneto can be seen at Crissolo, Oncino, Ostanta and **Paesana**: 44 frescoes signed or attributed to the artist, starting from 1780. And even more numerous are the works found in the lower Po Valley and the nearby Varaita and Maira valleys. The scholar, Gianni Aimar, did a great deal toward listing and cataloguing the work of this artist.

Another painter, Giovanni Borgna "Netu" (1854-1902), reveals good academic technique. His birthplace was **Martiniana Po** where a plaque on the family home celebrates him and where the family tomb, which he himself frescoed, is located.

With his training at the Academy of Fine Arts of Turin, Borgna was able to handle complex, challenging series of frescoes in the chapels and churches of the valleys and nearby plain, as far as the western Ligurian coast.

In the Po Valley, we can admire his works at Pratoguglielmo, Paesana, Sanfront, Envie, Calcinere, Rocchetta. The list of sites and works he painted in his brief career is truly amazing, for his paintings and frescoes are found in more than forty sites throughout the provinces of Cuneo, Imperia, Savona, Turin and Asti.

## Religion and legends

Staffarda, Rifreddo, Revello and Barge were the sites of abbeys, that are now the most important medieval monuments in the area. A visit to them takes us back to the golden epoch of the Marquisate of Saluzzo.

Even more ancient is the monastery of **Pagno**, founded by the Lombards and refuge of Beatrice, the daughter of King Desiderio. In her honor, the monks dictated an epigraph inspired by the Virgil's verses. Pagno lost importance in 825 when the abbey was assigned to the Abbot of the Novalesa, from Val Susa.

After the year 1000, when the Saracens ceased their raids, the marquis' family contributed to the foundation of new monastic centers. In the 12th century, Manfredo I of Saluzzo called the Cistercians to **Staffarda**, between Saluzzo and Revello. The abbey grew and its possessions increased: an inventory made in the second half of the 12th century reveals the consistency of its *scriptorium*, which contained important illuminated codices. Later, the marquises supported the creation in **Rifreddo** of the women's monastery, Santa Maria della Stella. Its façade is still visible, with some of the walls and a few precious objects in terracotta. It was at **Revello**, in 1291, that Tommaso I of Saluzzo and his wife Aloisia of Ceva, established the Dominican nuns' monastery of Santa Maria Nova. Another (Trappist) monastery was built in the 13th century by the Carthusians on Mombracco.

Today the legacy of the abbeys of the Marquisate is collected in the new Cistercian monastery of Pra d' Mill, deep in the chestnut forests on the mountains of **Bagnolo Piemonte** (Info: [www.dominustecum.it](http://www.dominustecum.it)).

The conversion to Christianity of the area, so obvious in the many churches, chapels and monastic centers, conceals more archaic traditions. The mythology of the ancient agrarian-herding society has survived in oral form with supernatural figures, some benign, others terrifying. In addition to the *fantine* of the upper valley, who taught the women to weave and sew, and the hairy, spiteful *masche* who lived in the grottoes of Mombracco, legends tell of a fantastic zoo that includes the *pitois* cat, with its fiery eyes, the crested snake of Envie, the *pitapenas* bird of the Infernotto villages, and the terrible *ravas*, the man-eater that lived in a grotto in the woods of Barge, in a place where a chapel was built in the Middle Ages, dedicated to Our Lady of the Rock.



## Val Varaita

Val Varaita is crossed by the ancient road to France that goes to Colle dell'Agnello. It runs from Piasco to Chianale.

At the center of the valley lies **Sampeyre**, that is, St. Peter, from *Peire* in Occitan.

The *Baia* of Sampeyre is an event of great interest: it is celebrated every five years during the *Mardigras* to commemorate the rout of the Saracens from Val Varaita, which occurred, according to local traditions, around the year 1000. Hundreds of costumed participants, organized like an army with commanders, guards, cavalry, infantry and *sapeurs* reenact the assault that smashed the barriers of tree trunks left by the fleeing Saracens, waving colorful banners (displayed in the ethnographic museum - Info: [www.comune.sampeyre.cn.it](http://www.comune.sampeyre.cn.it)). Even the women's roles are played by men. It is all a great flourish of embroidered ribbons and flowers, silk rosettes and cockades, accompanied by Occitan music and dances.

At **Bellino** (*Blins*), higher in Val Varaita, the *baia* is celebrated every three years. The ceremony echoes the spring myths and sun cults, typical of archaic agricultural communities, with their fertility symbols, while the military aspect typical of the *baia* at Sampeyre is almost entirely lacking.

A smaller *baia* is also celebrated at San Maurizio di Frassino.

At Sampeyre, **Casteldelfino** and **Pontechianale**, the tourist development of the Sixties has partially altered the original architecture, but the historic buildings of the villages and hamlets still make use of a wide range of architectural solutions handed down through the ages. At *Tè-nòu*, above Torrette di Casteldelfino, near a larch wood, there is the only hamlet of houses with their roofs partially shingled with thin boards of larch.

The sanctuary of **Valmala**, in the valley, is a site of regular pilgrimage. It is dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy and it is said that on August 6, 1834, Our



Lady spoke to a group of innocent shepherdesses in Occitan. She appeared to them as a “weeping lady”.

The tourist welcome center is at Porta di Valle (Info: Via Provinciale - 12020 Brossasco - tel. +39.0175.689629 - [www.segnavia.piemonte.it](http://www.segnavia.piemonte.it)), where there is a cafeteria, a bookshop specialized in local publications, books about the mountains, maps of the area and local products. The tourist agency Segnavia has its office there and handles incoming flows, offering tourist packages in Val Varaita, in the other Occitan valleys and in the Saluzzo area.

### “Sun cult” crafts

A characteristic of the valley is the production of rustic furniture in a style based on the design of the old-time furniture known as “Val Varaita”, although the decorations, representative of the primitive sun and water cults, are common to the entire alpine area and are also found elsewhere among the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean. Bread cabinets, chests, and sculptured objects from Queyras and the Varaita valley are displayed in the museums of Grenoble, Gap and Cuneo, and in many antique collections throughout Europe and America.

### Typical architecture of Chianale



## Under Colle dell'Agnello

**Chianale**, a few kilometers from the French border, is the highest village in the valley, dominated by the Colle dell'Agnello (2748 m). It has been dubbed one of "the Most Beautiful Villages in Italy" ("I Borghi più belli d'Italia"). Its alpine architecture is valorized by the stone houses, with the roofs tiled in loze (stone tiles), the Romanesque bridge that joins the two halves of the town, with the Varaita river that runs through it, and the churches that go back to the years of the Dauphinate.

Catholics and Huguenots lived together relatively peacefully in Chianale: alongside the Romanesque church of Sant'Antonio stands a medieval house indicated as a Protestant temple.

The town proudly preserves its Occitan characteristics, the place names and local dialect. In the Middle Ages it gravitated in the orbit of Briançon, and was part, with the other towns of the upper valley, the upper Val Chisone, and the Oulx valley and Queyras, of the Republic of Escartons, an example of independence that survived until 1713, when the territories on this side of the Alps were joined to the Savoy possessions, and now recreated by the intensive cooperation between the Mountain Communities, the Municipalities and the Park of Queyras with projects for cultural, tourist and economic development.



A typical recipe of Chianale and the Val Varaita are *raviòlas*, made from potatoes and toma, a fresh cheese made from cow's milk. Here is how: cook 1.5 kg of potatoes, puree and mix with 500 g of toma. Add one egg and blend. Then add 500 g of flour to obtain a stiff dough. Cut the dough in 3 cm slices. Flour the *tornoira* (a wooden board with raised sides) and form small rolls being 2 cm in diameter. Cut into small pieces and roll with the palm of the hand to create the typical spindle shape of the *raviòlas*. Spread on the board and sprinkle with flour. Cook in boiling salted water and when they come afloat, scoop them out with the broth skimmer. Serve the *raviòlas* with cream and melted butter.

## Casteldelfino and the Alevé forest

**Alevé** is the name of the forest of Swiss stone pines, *elvo* in Occitan, on the mountains of Casteldelfino and Sampeyre, up to an altitude of 2700 m: it is one of the largest Swiss stone pine forests in the Alps, crossed by trails that go to lake *Bagnour*, where there is a small lodge for hikers. As early as 1387, the laws of Casteldelfino forbade exploitation of the woods. A walk through the Alevé can bring close encounters with foxes, deer, ground hogs and hares. A typical creature of these woods, though seldom about during the day, is the boreal owl, while during warm afternoons it is possible to observe the lazy flight of buzzards.

The pine nuts (*garilhs*) of the Swiss stone pine are edible and were also pressed to provide oil for lanterns. The buds were used for respiratory insufflations and the resin served to prepare balms and cough drops. The pinewood was ideal for carving the wooden sole (*seps*) of the clogs worn by children and old people, who enjoyed their lightness and warmth. Above all, it was used for furniture: bread cabinets, boxes, tables, chairs, chests. It is soft wood that lends itself to carving the traditional designs of the primitive sun cults: rosettes, serpentine, spirals.

The Furniture Museum, at **Castello di Pontechianale** (Info: tel. +39.348.7125650 – +39.349.1466050), housed in a traditional cottage, groups examples of furniture and decorations that the farmers of the Varaita valley developed over the centuries with their fancy carving similar to embroidery. Still today, the Val Varaita is distinguished for the many small workshops specialized in the production of rustic furniture with attention to traditional styles but also to modern design.

At **Casteldelfino**, the visitors' center for the Alevé (Info: Parco del Po - tel. +39.0175.46505) offers a sample forest with the typical animals: the great grey owl, roebuck, ground hog, hare and boar, and prepares visitors for excursions into the Swiss stone pine forest. Winter is the best time to enjoy its silence, broken by the calls of the nutcracker, a bird that forgets where it hides its pine nuts, thus ensuring the natural propagation of the forest. At the *Escartons* space, next to the visitors' center, it is possible to obtain information about the history of the area.

In the church of Sant'Eusebio, at the feet of the ruins of the dauphin's castle, is the Museum of Popular Religiousness, dedicated to the saints of the Occitan valleys.

## Poetry and colored ribbons

Contemporary Occitan literature boasts two poets from Val Varaita: Tavio Cosio from Melle and Antonio Bodrero (*Barba Tòni Baudrier*) from Frassino (Info: [www.chambradoc.it/melle/melle.page](http://www.chambradoc.it/melle/melle.page)).

The town of Melle stages an annual event in honor of Tavio Cosio with literary walks around the sites that inspired his poetry and stories. His works are on sale in local bookstores.

Antonio Bodrero was a poet, and a supporter of the Occitan and Piedmontese cause. He was surprisingly non-conformist. People who knew him remember him as being very wise (*barba*), with a hypnotic conversational style on topics like language, religion, politics, the origin and history of words.

Beyond the apparent simplicity of his verses, a great depth of thought is perceptible. They are verses that describe the mysteries of the mountain, the ancestral and natural divinities. He was a poet of landscapes who placed the homes of the *sarvanòts* (fauns) under the *barme*; in the cherry trees in bloom he saw fireplaces lit to the glory of God, in the stars the lights of the lodges for the recently deceased...:

*“Que de quiar, benèit i ouèi, quouro n’er’un per meiro  
e la nouèch e i vitoun treivèn a fa’ stéle;  
dihèn encàa i estéle quouro grinoùr i bòouco:  
Bafarà, mé pa tro; qui crè pa vène a vèire: nous sèn i quiàr di meire, nove, di  
vosti rèire”*

(There were so many lights, the eyes were blessed when there was one for every lodge / and at night the mountaineers played at making stars; / the stars still say, when lovers gaze at them: / “Laugh loudly, but not too loudly; let those who do not believe come to see: / we are the lights of the new lodges of your ancestors”)

The complete works of Bodrero are now being collected for publication.

On special feast days, the women of Casteldelfino, Pontechianale, Bellino and Sampeyre wear the traditional costume with the caps worked in tatting, shawls and silk aprons over heavy black dresses designed like nuns’ habits. The costume is adorned with *bindels* (ribbons). In Sampeyre and Frassino the cap is often replaced by a scarf (*mochet de la testa*). The costume of the upper valley has the characteristic of the so-called *gonela* with three pleats

on the back. The jewelry that completes the costume consists of a long necklace of gold grains with a heart or cross in the middle made of gold. There are few occasions when the men also wear the ancient costume: a black suit with jacket and tails, white knee-length stockings and feluca.

## Lilies and dolphins

These are the symbols that appear, carved in stone, on the fountains, the columns, over the architraves in the towns of the Castle zone (Castellata): Casteldelfino, Pontechianale, Bellino.

The dolphin commemorates the period when the upper Val Varaita was part of the dauphinate, while the lily alludes to the succeeding period of the French reign.

**Casteldelfino** - *Chateau Dauphin* at the dauphin epoch – was the capital of the *Escarton* of Val Varaita. From the dauphin period, the town preserves the ruins of the castle, the frescoes of the parish church and, along the main road, a few noble mansions and a medieval fountain. The village that is still called Confine marks the ancient frontier with the Marquisate of Saluzzo.

Rural Occitan architecture has its sanctuary in the village of **Bellino**, *Blins* in Occitan, one of the most impressive settlements. Round pillars, megalithic architraves, mullioned windows, covered passages, frescoed meridians, roofs in loze tiles and *têtes coupées* are reminders of that knowledge. But *Blins* is also the home of writers. The bookstores in the valley sell the works of *Janò di Vielm*, pen-name of Giovanni Bernard, author of “*Steve*” (the first Occitan novel of the valleys) and “*Lou Saber*”, an encyclopedic dictionary with 12,000 terms in Occitan as spoken at *Blins*. Another important book is “*Nosto Modo*” by Jean-Luc Bernard, which was the first work to describe systematically the material and oral culture of this Occitan town.

The old primary school of Celle di Bellino houses the Museum of Time and Meridians (Info: tel. +39.0175.95110 - [comune.bellino@tiscalinet.it](mailto:comune.bellino@tiscalinet.it)). The visitors are introduced to the itinerary among the meridians frescoed on houses and religious buildings throughout the town, where in the past there were several shops of sundial makers. Photographic panels suggest a reflection on time, while a film marks the passage of the seasons with twelve proverbs in Occitan.

## Mistà and dance

In the 15th century the good government by the Marquisate of Saluzzo and relations with the Dauphinate created a favorable climate for a flourishing of the arts. Churches, paintings and sculptures are linked to an artistic itinerary known here as *Mistà*, which in Occitan means a sacred image.

The greatest sculptors were those who came from the school of the Zabrerri in Val Maira. They carved baptismal fonts and doorways with beautifully decorated little columns and sculptured capitols. Significant examples are found in the churches of **Sampeyre**, **Villar**, **Casteldelfino** and **Bellino**. The artistic schools of the Brianzone area influenced the art



of the **Castellata** where, in Bellino, Casteldelfino and Chianale, we can encounter many stone heads that go back to the Celtic-Ligurian custom of hanging the heads of enemies killed in battle around the houses. There is also an extraordinary 15th century doorway in *flamboyant* style at the parish church of Sant'Andrea in **Brossasco**. The 16th century chapel of San Rocco in **Brossasco** commemorates the town's survival of a plague epidemic.

In painting, two brothers, Tommaso and Matteo Biasacci of Busca left many frescoes in Valle Varaita. The work of this family of itinerant artists, who were active between southern Piedmont and western

Liguria, can be seen at the parish church of **Sampeyre** (Our Lady of the Milk, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Flight into Egypt, the Adoration of the Magi, the Passion and Resurrection of Christ), in the church of **Casteldelfino** and at **Valmala**. The style is archaic, a transition between Romanesque and Gothic, like the paintings at the parish church of San Massimo in **Isasca**, and those on the façade of the parish church of **Rossana**, with its handsome Gothic floral doorway in terracotta. The paintings at Rossana are particularly curious because they show angelic figures playing traditional medieval instruments, some of which were rediscovered with the rebirth of Occitan music toward the end of the Sixties in the last century. Actually, music in Val Varaita has never been completely forgotten. The repertoire of dances common at fiestas or even



just for pure enjoyment includes dozens of names. The most well known are: *corenta*, *giga*, *contradança*, *borea*, *mescla*, *sposin*... They are figured dances that may require dozens of dancers at the same time. There are many courses that teach Occitan dances including many from the French side of the Alps.

## The sounds of the valley

In **Venasca**, historically the most important town of the valley bottom, with a charming Baroque church and a market famous for its chestnuts, is the Sound Factory, the first Italian theme park to focus on sound and music. The goal of the Factory is to interest children and young people in the musical world with a playground-workshop approach, arousing curiosity and wonder. The workshops, scattered along the tour route, teach the visitors to distinguish between sound and noise, to translate the meaning of the different characteristics of sound with concrete visual or interactive experiences, to experiment with the vibrations of sounds and the propagation of sound waves in space. A special section presents musical instruments from all five continents.

To understand the main musical instruments of the Occitan tradition, the Factory proposes workshops of *ghironda*, diatonic accordion, *galobet*, *tamburin* and *fifre*, with information about their construction, live music and performances of Occitan songs and dances (Info: tel. +39.0175.567840 - [www.lafabbricadeisuoni.it](http://www.lafabbricadeisuoni.it)).

In the shadow of the rugged old castle of the lords of Sampeyre, at **Piasco**, a few km from Venasca, is the Harp Museum (Info: tel. +39.0175.270511 - [www.museodellarpavictorsalvi.it](http://www.museodellarpavictorsalvi.it)) which displays historical harps collected by Victor Salvi, a famous harpist who played under the direction of Arturo Toscanini and founded a company here for the renowned tradition of craftsmanship of the Val Varaita and Saluzzo area in woodworking. The harp factory he founded now covers 90% of the professional market. His collection includes eighty-six pieces built starting from 1700 to the first half of the 20th century, from Europe, Africa and Asia. It is possible to see the technical and expressive development of this largely unknown instrument.



## Val Maira

In Val Maira the Occitan language still vibrates with the resonance of the troubadours, but its landscape and art draw the lion's share of attention. For years this land has been the chosen setting for movies and television programs, and the prizewinning film, "The Wind Blows Round" (*L'aura fai son vir* in Occitan) directed by Giorgio Diritti, was entirely made there.

The valley follows the course of the Maira, a stream which branches off into lovely little valleys and coombs like Albaretto and Celle, Marmora, Preit, Unerzio and Elva that climb along trails and military roads toward the crests, passes and peaks, with their surprising variety of rocks and plants. In some of the sunnier spots, Mediterranean herbs like lavender bloom.

The border point between Italy and France was through the mountain pass, used regularly by emigrants and smugglers. During World War II the Italian partisans and French maquis stipulated a political and military agreement in the anti-Fascist struggle, between May and July 1944, at Col Sautron and Saretto on the Val Maira side, and at Barcelonnette in France. A plaque in Saretto still remains to commemorate that agreement.

The capital of the valley is **Dronero** (*Draonier* in Occitan), that has been classed as a city for 250 years. To discover its Occitan roots, it is best to visit it on market day and eavesdrop among the stands and in the cafés, to hear the people who come from San Damiano, Elva, Acceglio, and the nearby *La Ròcha* (Roccabruna) casually speaking Occitan.

Its history tells of Huguenots and Waldensians, but also of aristocratic families, men of letters, artists, journalists and politicians among whom the most outstanding figure is that of Giovanni Giolitti, prime minister of the Kingdom of Italy, to whom a research center is dedicated (Info: [www.giovanngiolitti.it](http://www.giovanngiolitti.it)). Dronero is rich in monuments, buildings and

churches reminiscent of its medieval greatness. It is characterized by the dizzying height of its crenellated Devil's Bridge over the Maira and for its octagonal grain silo built in the first half of the 15th century.

### An Englishwoman at Dronero

The British explorer and writer Freya Stark (1893-1993), linked to some of the most important personalities of her time, like Churchill and the legendary Lawrence of Arabia, spent part of her adolescence in Dronero and returned in 1919. In her autobiography she describes Dronero as *"a city between two streams, at the center of a lovely, broad valley... it has a medieval cathedral handsomely decorated in terracotta in the Gothic-Lombard style... The crenellated bridge is immensely high and embraces the entire valley, that lies far below it, covered with the white pebbles of the stream, on which tremulous poplars and walnut trees cast soft, blue shadows"*.

### Traversado - Passage to Gardetta Pass



## Great masters

To discover **Elva** is like opening a secret doorway, finding the signs of a world of long ago, unearthing a lost book that tells the story of when the ideas traveled slowly, on foot, and living at high altitude was not an isolation from the world.

Up there, on the watershed with Val Varaita, Elva appears to be suspended on the hollow between the neatly mowed meadows, surrounded by the peaks of the Pelvo, the Chersogno and the Marchisa, mountains that exceed 3000 meters.

The church, consecrated to the Assumption, stands on a rocky spur. Archaic figures decorate the doorway: *têtes coupées* in the Celtic-Ligurian tradition, Beluin masks, Atlas and the woman-chain-snake sequence. The arch of the presbytery is adorned with the symbols of the zodiac, a Romanesque twin-tailed mermaid, St. George and the dragon, the cauldron of the damned who boil for their sins.

The interior houses the frescoes of Hans Clemer, a Flemish painter who worked all over the Saluzzo Marquisate between the end of the 15th century and 1508, when he left for Provence to work at Tarascon, Pertuis and Vinon... other Occitan towns.

Clemer married in Saluzzo and had his workshop there, where he taught many local students.

### Elva - Church of Santa Maria Assunta



His frescoes in the parish church of Elva are the masterpieces of the Occitan valleys. Throughout the territory of the Marquisate, which until then had remained loyal to late Gothic artistic trends, the style of Hans Clemer was an authentic artistic revolution for its contemporary aspect and the introduction of elements current in Italian painting at the time. The Crucifixion, the Stories of Christ and the Virgin Mary in the church of Elva reveal a strong sense of drama and attention to the psychological portrait, especially in the faces of the pious women and the distressed apostles around Mary's deathbed. Other works by Clemer are at Saluzzo, Revello, Bernezzo, Pagno, and here in Val Maira the visitor to the parish church of **Celle Macra**, consecrated to St. John the Baptist, will find another of his works: the altarpiece with the Virgin Mary enthroned, surrounded by saints, on a gold background, dated 1496, a splendid merge between the figurative Provençal-Lombard culture and the German pictorial technique.

Among the woods, not far from the town of Celle Macra, in the chapel of St. Sebastian, we find the work of another important artist of the 15th century Occitan school, the painter Giovanni Baleison (*Johannes de Baleisonis*), originally from Demonte in the nearby Stura valley, who worked in an area that ranged throughout the Alps between Piedmont, Liguria and Nice. The cycle of frescoes includes one of God in Glory, the Martyrdom of the Saint, Limbo, the Celestial City, the Virtues, Purgatory and Hell. The Madonna on the outside of a building in Bassura di **Stroppo** is also by him, as well as the frescoes in the chapel of Sts. Sebastian and Fabian in **Marmora**, depicting Christ in Glory, the Virgin Mary Enthroned between St. Sebastian and St Costanzo, the Evangelists, the Stories of Christ's childhood and the childhood of St. Sebastian.

The pictorial itinerary in the upper Maira valley is completed with the frescoes by Tommaso Biazaci in the parish church of Sts. George and Massimo at Marmora, that depict St. Christopher, St. Jerome and St. Francis receiving the stigmata. Another fascinating visit is the chapel at San Peire in **Macra**, where we discover a Dance Macabre with texts in Occitan mixed with ancient French - an iconography that is extremely rare for this area. A visit to the church of St. Peire in **Stroppo**, which stands isolated on a cliff, is exciting for the position and proportions of the structure, in Romanesque style, with frescoes in the apse and an impressive Adoration of the Shepherds by an anonymous artist in the side chapel. The itinerary

terminates with one of the oldest churches in the valley, San Salvatore in Stroppo, with a bell-gable and late medieval frescoes depicting episodes from Genesis and the Dance of Salomè, and 15th century frescoes of Christ giving his blessing, the Evangelists, the Apostles and Sts. Catherine and Anthony.

The 15th century sculpture of Val Maira had an important workshop, that of the Zabrerri brothers (*Chabrier* in Occitan), who came from Pagliero, and did fine work in many towns throughout the Marquisate of Saluzzo.

The Zabrerri were given the commission to produce the doorways of the parish churches at Dronero and San Damiano Macra. Figured capitols from their workshop are in the parish church of St. Anthony at **Pagliero**. They carved the baptismal fonts at Canosio and Pagliero in Val Maira and in many other churches of the Occitan valleys. The style is recognizable, in the shape of a chalice with a knot at the center of the stem. The bowl is polygonal, decorated around the border with inscriptions. On the sections, acanthus leaves are accompanied by the client's coat of arms.

But art in this valley was not limited only to religious buildings. We find it in civilian buildings too, in the lazaret of Caudano, one of the hamlets of **Stroppo**, for example, recently restored, with a gabled façade and interesting mullioned windows with sculptured heads and the characteristic knot of Solomon, taken as the symbol for the local mountain community. Decorative designs by local artists are found at **San Damiano Macra** and **Villar d'Acceglio**, which was the site of an archaic carnival, one of the most interesting of the Occitan valleys. Noble mansions from the medieval period with high gabled façades and windows with one or two openings in carved stone are found at Castellaro, Combe, Verneti, Unerzio, Preit. They were owned by the wealthy farm and mountain middle-class families mentioned in notarized deeds from the 15th and 16th century.

## The Saint and his *ciciu*

In the prealpine territory of **Villar San Costanzo** we encounter rare art treasures and environments. In the natural reserve of the *ciciu* (doll figures), among the chestnuts, poplars and birch, stand about 400 mushroom-shaped geological formations with a diameter between 2 and 7 meters and height that in some cases reaches 8 meters. Their formation



is said to have begun 12,000 years ago, at the end of the last glaciation. The *ciciu* formed as a result of the erosion of the waters that, over thousands of years, washed the soil leaving, in place of great masses of gneiss, columns of compact earth topped by huge stones.

In the summer the *ciciu* appear reddish at the base, with a funny dark cap; in the winter they become pinnacles emerging from the snow. The tour of the Reserve takes well-equipped trails, while the Visitors Center at the entrance provides information. The area outside the reserve is an excellent bouldering zone, but climbing on the *ciciu* is strictly prohibited, as they would risk being damaged for all time (Info: Ente di Gestione dei Parchi e delle Riserve Naturali Cuneesi - tel. +39.0171.734021).

A popular legend attributes the *ciciu* to a miracle of the martyr Costanzo: the pagan enemies who chased him down to kill him were petrified by God's divine will.

Costanzo, a saint of the Theban Legion, is surrounded by legends. A plaque walled into the parish church was said to cover the relics of the martyr. In Latin it reads: "Here lies Costanzo, martyr of the Lord, who belonged to the Theban Legion". A monastery grew up around the martyr's cult, in the Middle Ages. The



church of San Costanzo al Monte, in the woods over the town, was built toward the beginning of the 8th century by the Lombard king, Aripertus II, rebuilt after the Saracen invasions by Lombard masons who brought their models into the apses, marked by narrow pillar strips and embellished at the top by galleries. The crypt is a regular lower church. After draining the marshy plain, the Benedictines built the abbey of Sts. Peter and Costanzo on the site of the current parish church. In addition to the crypt frescoes by Pietro da Saluzzo (stories of St. George, the Virgin Mary, saints and evangelists), the church preserves the bell tower with Romanesque-Gothic friezes and walls in carved stone.

## Museums of the Valley

At **Elva** we find evidence that the mountain once offered more than mere survival with the crops of its fields, the meat, milk and cheese of the herds. In the winter months when agricultural work in the mountains was impossible, the inhabitants tried their hand at other trades, sometimes ranging far afield. The men of Elva set out in the autumn to collect hair that they processed in their homes and sold in France, Germany, England and even the United States, for making wigs. In memory of this trade, the community installed a Museum of the *Pelassiers* at the “sundial house”, itself an original and rare example of native architecture, with tools, pictures and a video to illustrate this activity that took the people of Elva around the world.

Another trade of seasonal emigration typical of the valley was that of the anchovy picklers, who left the Val Maira to go down to the sea and buy anchovies that they sold at the markets, traveling from place to place with a little wheelcart. The Seles Museum in **Celle di Macra** is devoted to these traders. Other museums illustrating the life of long ago are *La misoun d'en bot* in Borgata Chialvetta at Acceglio (Info: tel. +39.0171.99017), the Hemp Museum of Prazzo Inferiore (via Nazionale, 22) and *L'escolo de mountainho* in Borgata Paschero at Stroppo (Info: tel. +39.0171.999220 - 999112).

Farther down the valley, in his house at **Dronero**, Luigi Mallé, who came from the town and was director of the city museums of Turin, left the town a legacy of furniture, objects, books, records and photographs. Inaugurated in June 1995, the museum ([www.marcovaldo.it](http://www.marcovaldo.it)) houses a collection of ancient and contemporary art, with works of great masters that reflect Mallé's heterogeneous taste: they range from paintings and drawings by Piedmont artists of the 18th century to archaic religious works and Flemish landscapes and portraits – works acquired by Mallé on the antiques market – as well as works by contemporary abstract artists: Lucio Fontana, Umberto Mastroianni, Adriano Parisot.

## In Matteo Olivero's home town

In one of his famous self-portraits, Matteo Olivero appears wearing a red scarf at his neck, with watchful eyes, a black hat and a long, pointed beard. Born in **Acceglio**, in 1879, in the cluster of buildings known as Pra Rotondo, he was the most celebrated painter in modern times in the Occitan valleys. Olivero is remembered not only as a "painter of the snows" or "tragic interpreter of his mountains", as the art critics defined him at shows in Grenoble, Rome, at the Venice Biennale and at *expositions* in Paris, but also for having perceived the original ideas and revolutionary changes in painting at the turn of the century.

His works are found in many collections and museums. Several of his paintings are on view in the Saluzzo city hall and will soon be displayed in a museum dedicated just to him. Here in Val Maira we can admire the sites that inspired him. But his paintings show other views of the Occitan mountains of the Po, Grana and Varaita valleys: they were an important source of inspiration for him with their rivers and streams, the sun and the snow, the early morning light on the peaks.

In 1902, Olivero met Segantini in Switzerland, bonding immediately through their shared love for the alpine world and above all their interest in exploring the technique of painting through the division of color into its elements. Exalted by the passion for divisionism, Matteo Olivero carried on an intense correspondence, starting in 1903, with Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, author of the famous "Fourth Estate".

Having lost his father while he was still an infant, Olivero's mother, Lucia Rosano remained his sole reference, following him in his travels from Turin (1896) to Saluzzo (1906), to Calcinere (1923-26). One of the most famous subjects of Olivero was his majestic painting entitled "Waiting," that depicts the slow, tired steps of his mother. When she died, the painter decided to end his days with her.

## Eating d'oc

The richness of the landscape and historical-artistic legacies of the valley make it a favorite with tourists interested in hiking and culture (Info: [www.percorsioccitani.it](http://www.percorsioccitani.it)) from outside Italy, in the German-speaking countries like Switzerland, Germany and Austria, and in the other nearby regions of Italy. This has brought many young people back to the valley: sons and daughters or grandchildren of mountain people who emigrated in the Sixties, as well as young people from the cities who come to live in Val Maira, choosing a less stressful lifestyle for themselves and their families. This change in the trend has encouraged many of the young people who grew up in the valley and were thinking of emigrating to seek their fortune in the city, to stay, possibly learning new agricultural techniques, new trades or finding work in the tourism sector. Some of the newcomers have adopted the Occitan language and made its culture their own, organizing exhibitions, museums, itineraries, concerts. There are a number of excellent restaurants, and several bed&breakfasts and guest farms have been opened as a result of this wave of neo-ruralism that has led to the growth of new enterprises specialized in zootechnology and dairy productions, especially high quality cheeses made from cow's and goat's milk (at Elva, Podio di San Damiano Macra, La Morra di Villar San Costanzo), baked goods (at Roccabruna, Villar San Costanzo, Dronero, San Damiano Macra), traditional foods (at San Damiano Macra), alpine herbal infusions such as *genepy* and *achillea erbarota* (at San Damiano Macra), organic wines like the extraordinary Nebbiolo of Dronero and many others, now grown in vineyards out of the valley on the hills of the Saluzzo area, where the ancient varieties of the middle Val Maira have recently been saved from extinction. Among the many culinary specialties worth trying are *lo comaut* (cream of squash), *macarons e trifolas* (macaroni and potatoes with mushrooms), *los fesqueiròls* (pasta served with a sauce of onions and bacon, peas and cheese), *los panets* (apple tarts), *la torta dels Techs* of Dronero. Several restaurants offer a complete Occitan menu certain days of the week.

Addresses and phone numbers of restaurants, farms, bed&breakfasts, and information about the products can be obtained from the Comunità Montana - [www.vallemaira.cn.it](http://www.vallemaira.cn.it) or from the Tourist Information Office of Dronero: [iatvallemaira@virgilio.it](mailto:iatvallemaira@virgilio.it) - tel. +39.0171.917080 - fax +39.0171.909784.

## A place where everything is Occitan

*Espaci Occitan* is located at **Dronero** (via Val Maira, 19) in barracks that have been turned into a modern cultural center (tel. and fax +39.0171.904075). Created through an initiative of the Mountain Community of Val Maira, its scope is to link the Italian Occitan territories with the great linguistic and cultural Languedoc region from the Alps to the Pyrenees, from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, and it can be considered the first cultural center in Italy devoted to the Occitan world. It became possible after recognition of the Occitan linguistic minority by the Italian government, with law no. 482 of 1999, a historical turning point. With *Espaci Occitan*, for the first time, the organizations in the area took responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the Occitan language and culture, which until then had been a matter of interest only for private groups.

Now *Espaci Occitan* is an association of public organizations in the alpine Occitan territory (Info: [www.espaci-occitan.org](http://www.espaci-occitan.org)). It has a Study Institute, a Language Sound Museum (*Sòn de lenga*), a Linguistic Office and a shop selling Occitan products.

The "Sound of the Occitan Language" museum is designed in multimedia format with dynamic exhibits for all ages, taking the visitor through the geography, history and civilization of Occitania.

Literature, music, history, lifestyles, folklore and social organization of the area are illustrated by audio-video stations that accompany the visitor on an interactive, virtual visit to the Occitan world. The explanations are in Italian, Occitan, English and French.

The media library of *Espaci Occitan* contains works of Occitan literature and multimedia material on and in the Occitan language. Films and documentaries, CD-ROMs, audiocassettes and music CDs are available for consultation in special audiovisual booths, and are divided by theme areas. The Institute of Occitan Studies is steadily growing, with new offers and services, and activities for a heterogeneous public, as well as information via internet. The institute, open to exchange and comparison with the other Italian and European minorities, is organized for conferences, public projections, exhibitions, book presentations and cultural initiatives.

It has a Language Office on line and offers literacy courses at various levels,

with lessons on line, so that interested students can learn to express themselves in Languedoc. Products of the valleys, local publications, crafts and tourist information are available from the shop.

*Espaci Occitan* is located in an area that valorizes its linguistic and cultural characteristics. Now a ring of trails across the Val Maira is suggested on the website [www.percorsioccitani.it](http://www.percorsioccitani.it).

In the town of **Roccabruna**, the municipal government has named the streets and plazas after famous Occitans, with bilingual Italian/Oc signs. They commemorate the regions of Occitania, Provence, the Dauphinate, Guascogne, the artists of the glorious 15th century like the painter Hans Clemer and the sculptors, the Zabrerri brothers, eclectic personalities like Giacomo Inaudi of Roccabruna, the world famous mental calculator mentioned in the French Larousse encyclopedia, the Nobel prizewinner Federico Mistral, chansonnier of Provence, the humanist ideologue François Fontan and the more celebrated medieval troubadours like Arnaud Daniel, Peire Vidal, Marcabrun and the Countess de Dia.

Poetry and prose have always flourished among the people of the Val Maira, who love stories and rhymes. Some of the greatest writers of the Occitan revival in Italy in the Sixties come from this valley. Their works, published by local editors, are found in the bookshops and libraries, and are available at *Espaci Occitan*. A recurring theme is nostalgia for a populous, industrious past in contrast with the current situation of empty houses and abandoned villages. Among the names to remember: Pietro Ponzo di Preit, Pietro Antonio Bruna Rosso (*Tòni d' l'Aura*) author of brief poems and also of the "Little Dictionary of the Occitan Dialect of Elva", Piero Raina (*Pietro d' Seze*). In the heart of this poet is the mountain, both symbol and archetype: below lies the fast-paced, polluted, dark world of men alone in the crowd; up here is the sane, pure, sunlit world of serene solitude in contact with its memories and the transcendent. For Raina the mountain dies when man abandons it. His poem "The houses of the villages will collapse" is celebrated:



*Toumbaren i casei di vilage  
Sla mountagno abandounà  
Un al bot senzo tapage  
I casei dle noste ruà  
Bouch d'erbo biancho, rousier sarvage  
Enfoungaren le bianque rei  
Ai pe da c'les muraie  
Esquiapa da l'auro e dal soulei*

...

*Troup d'sarvan la sero  
Saiaren dai bosq tenebrous  
Per viroundar sle quintaine silenziouse  
A escoutar le vous misterieuse  
Que dousse ancara dapé i lindal  
Desert di meisoun  
Countaren le storie di minà.*

...

The houses of the villages will collapse  
On the abandoned mountain  
One by one, without a sound.  
The houses of our villages  
Thickets of absinthe, wild roses  
Will sink their white roots  
Beneath the feet of those walls  
Ravaged by wind and sun

...

In the evening flocks of Silvans  
Will creep out of the shadowy woods  
To roam the silent streets  
And listen to the mysterious voices  
That, murmuring softly still, on the  
Deserted thresholds of the houses  
Tell children's bedtime stories.

...



## Valle Grana

Valle Grana is the closest of all the valleys to Cuneo. At the entrance to this little valley, still characterized by an active agricultural life, is **Vignolo**, at its head **Castelmagno**, with its thirteen hamlets and a sanctuary that is one of the most famous in the western Alps.

The scenery is spectacular, with leafy chestnuts and beeches, and conifers, that at the higher altitudes give way to pastures with the rare examples of protected flora that have made Castelmagno cheese so famous.

An important economic town in the lower valley is **Caraglio**, an ancient Roman settlement that is now the site of cultural initiatives and the cradle of the new Occitan music of *Lou Dalfin* "exported" to Italy and the rest of Europe.

Significant initiatives are organized for the promotion of Occitan culture, and held annually in the towns of **Monterosso Grana** and Castelmagno.

In the villages of the valley, it is possible to admire examples of alpine architecture that have survived the ravages of time, or visit the ethnographic museum of *Sancto Lucio de Coumboscuro* and at Castelmagno in fraz. Chiappi the *Muzeou dal travai d'isi* (Museum of local labor) or, in fraz. Colletto, the *Pichot Muzeou*, set up in a barn.

In addition to historical and artistic evidence of Romanesque and Gothic origin, it is also possible to observe in the frescoes of the chapels and parish churches, the generous patronage of the Marquises of Saluzzo, who ruled the land for centuries.

## Castelmagno cheese

This particular “herbal” cheese is singular for its aroma and delicacy, that come to it naturally through the diet of the animals, fed on the rich flora and particular aromatic herbs and fragrant hay of the mountain pastures. The cheese is of very ancient origin: indeed, it is mentioned as early as 1277, as a tribute to the Marquis of Saluzzo in exchange for use of his pastureland. Today, Castelmagno is the symbol of a mountain economy that uses the particular features of the place to its best advantage. With the goal of maintaining the bonds between man and territory, and an indispensable memory for the new generations, an ecomuseum project called “Terra del Castelmagno” has developed here. The project means to safeguard the Castelmagno cheese production process and illustrate its fallout on the local economy and customs. The ecomuseum project also plans to restore the trails that lead to the high-altitude hamlets, and organize visits to a dairy where the cheese is produced. Four fundamental aspects combine synergetically in the program: Castelmagno cheese, the alpine architecture, the work and the scenery.

## Sanctuary of Castelmagno



## Sanctuary of Castelmagno

**Castelmagno** takes its name from a block-shaped castle with four towers at the corners, of which only a few traces remain in the village of Colletto. The place was formerly occupied by the Romans because of its strategic position, and there are still ruins of an “*arula*” consecrated to Mars. The town has a sanctuary named after San Magno, at 1760 meters altitude, one of the stops on a religious itinerary that, leaving from Sant’Anna di Vinadio, winds its way through the Maira and Varaita valleys (sanctuaries of Valmala and Becetto) and reaches the upper Po valley, where the sanctuary of San Chiaffredo is located.

St. Magno is considered one of the martyrs of the Theban Legion. Early in the evangelization of this land, in the first half of the third century, 6666 soldiers were called up by the emperor Maximianus Herculeus from Egypt to halt the advance of Christianity in the provinces of Gaul. The entire legion, however, mostly of Theban origin, had themselves been converted to the Christian faith in the meantime. They refused to persecute their brothers in faith and as a reprisal, were exterminated. There are traces of them in the shadow of bell towers and pillars throughout the Alps, and in the names of the people of the valleys: Costanzo, Chiaffredo, Vittore, Magno, Dalmazzo, Maurizio, Felice, Alessandro, Clemente, Vitale, Ottavio, Damiano, Defendente, Isidoro, Mauro, Pancrazio.

Since time immemorial, the popular devotion of the people of the valley for San Magno has never waned. He is considered the patron saint of the herds and alpine pastures. On his feast day, August 19, a statue of the saint – dressed as a warrior – has been carried in procession high in the mountains, since 1700, borne by a dozen members of the *baia*, in tailcoats and felucas, adorned with colored silk ribbons and cockades (*es livrees*) tied to the halberds. Unlike the other *baias* or *abadie* of the valleys, that maintain a popular and sometimes even pagan character, with seasonal references such as the spring awakening, this procession maintains a christianized character (Info: castelmagno.oc@libero.it).

The sanctuary of San Magno, as we see it today, was built between 1704

and 1716, but contains earlier artistic traces of great interest. In addition to the chapel frescoed by Pietro da Saluzzo, it is possible to visit the "Old Chapel" of the sanctuary, where we can see frescoes by Giovanni Botoneri di Cherasco going back to 1514. The frescoes occupy 17 compartments and tell the story of the triumphant entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, its conviction and passion.

At Castelmagno there is an Occitan Culture Center called "D. Dalmastro", an association that has been working to safeguard and valorize the Occitan language for over thirty years. The Center also publishes a periodical, *La vous de Chastelmanh*.

In the last ten years, a number of small workshops have been opened, specialized in woodcarving and the production of baked goods.

The mountains around Castelmagno are still largely deserted since the heavy wave of emigration that followed the war. Enthusiasts of alpine architecture often visit some of the villages and settlements, where the aspects of village life in the past century have been maintained intact. Among these, the most remarkable are the ancient village of Narbona and the districts of Valliera, Battuira and Campofei, clusters of mountain farmhouses that have preserved the imposing circular columns and characteristic chimneys with stoke holes decorated with stone "rays".

Those who enjoy high-altitude trekking can hike the trails along mounts Tibert and Tempesta where, on a clear day, it is possible to view the vast landscape from the ring of the Alps all the way to the Piedmont plain.

Not far away is "*Lou Pertus d'la Patarasa*", named after the kind fairy who is said to live in the caverns, a grotto with formations of calcite and permafrost crystals. This reminds us that in the past everything came from nature.

## Novè

The Occitan culture shows a particular devotion to Christmas carols. The ceremonies and popular pageants connected with this festivity have a dual connotation: that of a religious feast, but also a commemoration of the pagan feast of the winter solstice, announcing the rebirth of nature. The Occitan culture, with its strong focus on the world of nature, has preserved in its traditions a rich repertoire of *Novè* that were sung on these occasions, where the people participated directly, and not as spectators. The *Novè*, inspired by the texts of the Holy Scriptures, also refer to apocryphal stories and, over the centuries, these were embellished with new details, and new episodes: elements of daily life, comical situations, contemporary characters... They are still sung in the churches of the valleys during the Christmas holidays.

The most famous are the *Novè de Nòsta Dama dei Dòms* from Avignon and the *Novè de Sabòli*, written by *Micolau Sabòli* (1614-1675) in the 17th century.

Original experiences of valley life are those sung by the groups *L'Escabòt* (Info: 0171.986142), formed in 1999 with a choir of nine elements from the Stura and Grana valleys, and *La Cevitou* (Info: [www.lacevitou.it](http://www.lacevitou.it) - tel. +39.0171.988103), the oldest polyphonic choir of the Occitan valleys, which sing the old songs of the rich Occitan popular tradition, direct descendents of the troubadours.

### **Sancto Lucio de Coumboscuro - Roumiage**



## Feast days in Coumboscuro

A visit to *Sancto Lucio di Coumboscuro* is like a pilgrimage. In the early Sixties, in this little section of **Monterosso Grana**, the return of interest in what is defined here as "Provençal", got its start through the passion of Sergio Arneodo, a teacher, poet, playwright and charismatic personality. Like the poet *Tòni Baudrier* and the thinker François Fontan in Val Varaita, Arneodo aroused the valleys, revealing that the dialect they spoke was based on the language of the troubadours and the lyric poetry of the great *Frederi Mistral*. The periodical "*Coumboscuro*" goes back to that time, with the opening of a woodcarving workshop.

*Coumboscuro* stimulated a generation of poets who grew up admiring Provençal poetry. One of the most important successes of the movement of thought created by *Coumboscuro* was the school where, still today, the teaching is done in Languedoc. And some of the students become little poets:

### **Nuèch**

*Soufio l'auro enrabià:  
i-arbou soun tuchi coujà,  
i fuéie vòlen desperà.  
En chan japo aval,  
elouégn envers lou bial.  
Tout es quiét,  
la luno espouncho sal sarét.  
S'èstegnen i quiar ent'i ruà  
e mi istou souléto a pensar...*

### **Nighttime**

The wind blows angry:  
the trees are all bent,  
the leaves fly terrified.  
A dog barks somewhere,  
far off, down by the stream.  
Everything is silent,  
the moon rises over the peak.  
The lights go out in the villages  
and I lie alone and thoughtful...

At *Coumboscuro* many cultural events are held, including the *Festenal*, a meeting of European music and traditions, exhibitions and conferences on the linguistic minorities. The second Sunday in July, an original religious procession is held in honor of the Virgin Mary. A visit to the Ethnographic Museum (Info: [www.coumboscuro.org](http://www.coumboscuro.org) - tel. +39.0171.98707), with sections devoted to agricultural work, hemp processing, cheese-making, the bread cycle, crafts (weaving, carpentry, barrel-making, knife-sharpening, carving, tatting), means of transport, traditional furniture, clothing and hobbies is a



truly educational experience that explores the entire material culture of the Occitan valleys.

In the most ancient part of San Pietro di Monterosso Grana, a delightful open-air museum, always accessible, displays domestic scenes and ancient trades. The figures, called *babaciu* in dialect, are in natural size.

## In the footsteps of Pietro da Saluzzo

The valley has preserved many of the works of Pietro da Saluzzo who, according to documentary evidence, was born into the Pocapaglia family. He painted the frescoes in the chapel of San Magno, in the sanctuary of **Castelmagno**, between 1475 and 1480, those in the chapel of Sts. Bernard and Mauro at **Valgrana** (Virgin Enthroned, St. Bernard of Menton, John the Baptist, the Evangelists, the Doctors of the Church and an Annunciation) and in the chapel of St. Sebastian at **Monterosso**.

As a painter, Pietro da Saluzzo was sensitive to the courtly gesture and never expressed drama directly, preferring to use the elegance of the draped cloth, the controlled movements of his characters, to give a hushed, respectful atmosphere to his scenes.

He was, in his day, greatly in demand in the marquisate and surrounding towns. He had a workshop and many pupils. He worked for churches and confraternities. In painting, he was influenced by the Lombard school, but rejected the influence of Jaquerio who had produced works of great value in the Marquisate, including the frescoes at the Baronial Hall of Castello della Manta.

For those who wish to follow an itinerary among his works, in addition to those described in Valle Grana, there are the above-mentioned frescoes in the chapel of St. George at Villar San Costanzo in Val Maira, the chapel of San Ponzio at Castellar in Val Bronda, the Annunciation to St. Bernard of Ostana in the Po Valley, the Transit of the Virgin in Santa Maria in Nives at Centallo, the Annunciation in Saint John the Baptist at Savigliano, the cycle in the chapel of the Holy Trinity at Scarnafigi, the frescoes in the ancient parish church of Sts. Philip and James at Verzuolo, the paintings in the chapel of St. Anne and in Saint John at Piasco in Val Varaita, his St. Cecilia in the chapel of Santa Maria della Spina at Revello, the detached fresco of St. Nicholas of Tolentino on view at the municipal museum of Casa Cavassa in Saluzzo.

## Caraglio: silk, music and art

The natural outlet of the valley toward the agricultural plain is **Caraglio** that, with Borgo San Dalmazzo, is the only town of the Occitan valleys in Cuneo province to show traces of Roman foundation.

The foundations of a spa, bricks, epigraphs and coins have been found in the San Lorenzo district.

The urban layout and architecture of the town bear traces of different historical epochs, from medieval Romanesque and Gothic (the ruins of the castle built in 1128, perched on the hilltop, the former City Hall, the mansions of via Brofferio, the bell tower of the church of Sts. Peter and Paul, the church of St. John the Baptist) and Baroque (the church of Santa Maria Assunta (Our Lady of the Assumption), the church of the Capuchins), to the 19th century aristocratic palaces, fountains and monuments.

In 1198, the revolt of the townsfolk against the marquis of Saluzzo contributed to the foundation of Cuneo on the peak between the Gesso and Stura streams. The richness of the past derived to a large extent from the fact that Caraglio was a crossroads at the center of a fertile agricultural region, and an early industrial zone with five spinning plants for the production of silk.

In recent years, Caraglio has become a center of cultural activity in the vanguard in southwestern Piedmont, organized and managed by the Marcovaldo cultural association. The agenda of this association is packed with international contemporary art shows, photographic exhibitions, historical and literary events and theme conferences at the impressive Capuchin Convent or at the Red Mill, a 17th century spinning plant recently restored. The mill is one of the most original structures of the Occitan valleys, with cylindrical towers on the corners, two inner courtyards, and decorations in plaster and terracotta ([www.marcovaldo.it](http://www.marcovaldo.it) - tel. +39.0171.610258).

The spinning plant was originally built by the silk manufacturer Giò Gerolamo Galleani, and was both his mill and his refined home, evidence of a time in which silk gave work to more than six hundred people in the countryside around Caraglio.

The current vivacity of local culture seems to reflect the great stir of ideas that flourished in the 16th century, when the Protestant Reformation spread widely in the lower Val Grana and the population of Caraglio joined it en

masse, with the favor of the lords of the place, the Solaros of Villanova, whose most influential members became converts to the Waldensian faith. Caraglio is the home town of the most famous musician of Italian Occitania: Sergio Berardo, who plays the hurdy-gurdy, hand-organ, *fifre*, bagpipes, and various electrical instruments and is the leader of the group *Lou Dalfin*, in English "The Dolphin".

Berardo, is a charismatic artist who has succeeded in reinventing the local tradition and opening it to a mixture of music genres and styles, creating a new genre, an irresistible musical language in which contemporary and archaic sounds are equally at home, a blend of disco rhythms and age-old tunes, with echoes of famous songs. The instruments are, to a great extent, those of the alpine Occitan tradition: hurdy-gurdy, hand-organ, bagpipes, violin, Jew's harp, pipe, clarinet. Others, like the *fifre*, the *galobet*, the Provençe drums, were brought in from the French side of the Alps, and combined with the modern electrical instruments of contemporary rock music.

Berardo is said to hold the hurdy-gurdy the way Jimmy Hendrix held the electric guitar. His fame goes far beyond the Occitan valleys and the fans who follow his concerts (thousand of young people) and listen to the CDs of *Lou Dalfin* (Info: [www.loudalfin.it](http://www.loudalfin.it)) discover an ancient musical culture interpreted with the sounds and language of the present.

Berardo has broadened the horizons of Occitan music, that risked being confined to the area of folk revival and traditional music, making it modern and popular. In addition to holding concerts, he teaches, and many musicians have studied at his school. In his wake have come groups like *Lou Seriol* from Val Stura, *Lhi Jari* from Val Vermenagna and the *Gai Saber* from Peveragno, *Les Fuines* from the Val Maira, the *Chare Moulà* and *Aire d'Oustano* from the Po valley. A number of other musical groups are also active on the scene, like *Trobairitz d'òc*, *A fil de ciel*, *Senhal*, *Troubaires de Coumboscuro*, as well as many accordionists, violinists, clarinetists and folk singers.

The meeting and exchange of experiences with the musicians of Occitania has become an annual festival, organized by *Lou Dalfin* at Castelmagno. On this and other occasions, a choral performance of the hymn *Se Chanta* is sure to be heard: it is the only love song – instead of a war song - that has ever become the anthem of a people, sung throughout Occitania from the Val Grana all the way to Guascogne.

**Se chanta**

*Denant de ma fenestra i a un aucelon  
Tota la nuech chanta, chanta sa chançon*

*Se chanta, que chante  
Chanta pas per iu  
Chanta per m'amiga  
Qu'es luenh de iu*

*Aquela montanhas que tant autas son  
M'empachon de veire mieis amors ont son*

*Autas, ben son autas, mas s'abaissarèn  
E mas amoretas vers iu tornarèm*

*Baissatz-vos montanhas, planas levatz-vos  
Perqué pòsque veire mieis amors ont son*

Translation

Outside my window there is a little bird / All night long, it sings its sweet song / If it sings, let it sing / not for me / It sings for my girl-friend / who is far, far away / Those mountains so tall, won't let me see / Where my loved ones have gone / They're tall, so tall, but they will come down for me / And my darlings will come back here to me / Come down, mountains, come up, plains / So I can see where my loved ones have gone

**Caraglio - The Red Mill**





## Valle Stura

It is one of the longest and most impressive Occitan valleys, the ancient Roman road toward Provence and Nice across Colle della Maddalena (1996 meters altitude) and Colle della Lombarda (2351 meters altitude).

When the Romans conquered these lands they took account of the ethnic affinity between the people on both sides, thus the Val Stura, with the nearby Gesso and Vermenagna valleys, was aggregated with Provence that, for the degree of civilization achieved, was the Roman province par excellence. Place names like Piano Quarto and Piano Quinto at **Gaiola**, milestones, inscriptions to Mars, Diana and the divinities attributed to protection of wagons and roads mark the traces of the Roman road toward Provence.

The Occitan language is still very widespread throughout the area all the way to the gates of **Borgo San Dalmazzo**. In the towns at high altitude the Languedoc spoken is among the most archaic and best preserved languages of the entire alpine Occitania.

The scenery is harsh and rocky, with magnificent deep lateral valleys (Arma, Bagni, Lombarda, Neraissa, Ferriere), imposing military structures like the Savoy Fort built in the 19th century at Vinadio, and severe Romanesque bell towers at **Aisone, Vinadio, Sambuco** and **Pietraporzio**.

With its strategic position as an important road of transit, it was often the subject of strife and many armies marched over it. The valley still contains some of the original log constructions called *blockbau* at **San Bernolfo** (Bagni di Vinadio), with thatched roofs in the Neraissa valley and with stone shingles at **Ferriere**.

## Mountain museums

The fame of Val Stura is now linked to its Sambucana sheep, with its characteristic flattened profile. There has been a revival of interest in this autochthonous breed in recent years, which is highly prized for its meat, as well as for its cheese and wool.

Summer grazing at high altitude was one of the most frequent activities here in the past. The history of this and other aspects of mountain life is told in the museum setting *Na draio per vioure* (A road for life) organized by the Sheep-farming Ecomuseum of **Pontebernardo** at Pietraporzio, that valorizes the cultural, naturalistic and environmental legacy of the area (Info: tel. +39.0171.955555 - [www.vallestura.cn.it](http://www.vallestura.cn.it)).

**Sambuco** has opened a Valley Documentation Center at the former primary school. The structure, which has been open since 1988, serves to document the historical and cultural heritage of the valley and valorize local initiatives. The center houses a permanent exhibition of costumes and traditional objects from "The Abbeys of Val Stura", with particular reference to those of Festiona and Sambuco, significant examples of "Christianized" bays. It also functions as a visitors' center and has a section devoted to the sale of books, publications and various materials.

### Ecomuseum of sheep-farming at Pontebernardo di Pietraporzio



## Vinadio on the move

Now that it has been restored by the Piedmont Region, tourists can visit the Fortress built by Carlo Alberto at **Vinadio**, a masterpiece of engineering and technology, and one of the most significant examples of military architecture in the western Alps. The construction, begun in 1834, employed as many as 4000 people and was completed fourteen years later. Inside, three levels of walkways house the interactive exhibition entitled "Mountain on the Move", organized in a keenly spectacular way. It is defined as a series of "multimedia paths across the southern Alps. An invitation to rediscover the past and reflect on the present while exploring the future of the alpine valleys". The mountain



seen, in other words, not as a frontier and periphery, but as a hinge, a node of exchange. Through forty video settings, more than sixty video programs and fourteen interactive reading stands, we receive an image of the mountain as dynamic and flexible, where man has succeeded in combining adaptation to the environment with creativity (Info:

Forte di Vinadio - tel. +39.0171.959151 - [www.fortedivinadio.it](http://www.fortedivinadio.it)).

The last Sunday in October is the traditional Fair of All Saints at Vinadio. Until the Eighties of the past century, the fair revolved around the sale of potatoes (*bòdis* in Occitan), cattle and sheep. Then the Sambucana Sheep Show became the focus, attracting concerts, exhibitions and entertainment to valorize the traditions of the pastoral world, with tastings of Sambucana yearlings cooked according to various traditional recipes (Info: Comunità Montana Valle Stura - tel. +39.0171.955555).

At the Bagni district, it is also possible to take the thermal cure with waters rich in sulfur, from the hot springs that supply water at 55° for baths, steam treatments and inhalation. Massages, mud baths and physiotherapy are also available (Info: tel. +39.0171.959395 - [www.termedinadio.com](http://www.termedinadio.com)).



## No passports needed

*... I wasn't yet sixteen when I left for France, on foot across Colle di Ciriegia; with others we walked all the way to San Lorenzo del Var beyond Nice, and from there we went to Saint Raphaël, in hopes of finding work...*

*... at the age of 12 I went to Barcelonnette for the first time. A wagonload of children left from my village... it took us as far as Pianche. Then from Pianche to Barcelonnette we traveled on foot. In Barcelonnette, every year in April, on Thursdays, there was a market of children... Later I started going to Grasse and thereabouts...*

These are two stories of Val Stura in the old days, from the book "The World of the Losers" ("Il Mondo dei Vinti") by the writer Nuto Revelli. Seasonal emigration took the villagers to Marseille, Toulon, the Crau, the Camargue, Nice, Arles, Aix, Nîmes and Avignon, only occasionally in the opposite direction toward the Po plain. It was normal, in those days, to travel over the mountains. Children were taken to the fairs to be "rented" as shepherds.

One of the most peculiar aspects of the Val Stura were migrants who traveled up and down the coast of Provence with dancing ground-hogs, gathering pennies for this little circus act. The frontiers were non-existent for those who knew the passages through the mountains, and going to France meant earning a living in a country that was familiar to most of the people, where they spoke the same language.

Knowledge of the mountain routes also facilitated smuggling. The traders exchanged rice and tobacco for salt, that was cheap, and sold it in the valleys at fifteen to twenty times what it cost them. The Val Stura Mountain Community has devoted a museum to smuggling in **Ferriere**, at 1900 meters altitude. Located in a renovated house, it is called *La mishoun de la couòntabando* (The House of Contraband – Info: tel. +39.0171.96715). It uses this rather typical aspect of frontier life to illustrate life in the villages, complete with a documentary of interviews with those who performed this activity, that was unquestionably illegal but certainly useful for survival in the high mountains.

## Memories of the Alps in wartime

The traces on the Alps of World War II – the war against France, the Resistance Movement and racial persecutions – are a cross-border network of ecomuseums ([www.memoriadellealpi.net](http://www.memoriadellealpi.net)).

In the province of Cuneo alone there are over forty “Pathways to Freedom”, that link sites and itineraries evocative of the historical memory. Information centers are located in Cuneo, Borgo San Dalmazzo, Boves, Dronero, Ormea, Roccabruna and Sambuco, with spaces, initiatives and materials that revive, in the heart and mind, the thoughts, plans, choices, feelings and emotions of the people of those years. For example, in 1940 the entire Stura valley area was occupied by several divisions of Alpine troops and infantry, cannons and Blackshirt divisions that Mussolini counted on to break through the French lines. The French, already defeated by the Germans, considered the Italian attack “a knife in the back”.

A Memorial at the railroad station of **Borgo San Dalmazzo** commemorates the Jews from all over Europe who came there on foot from Val Vésubie. Many were saved by the townspeople but a few hundred people were captured and shipped off to the German concentration camps.

Following September 8, 1943, the first groups of partisans began to get organized in the Occitan mountains. A group of anti-Fascists, led by Duccio Galimberti, Dino Giacosa, Dante Livio Bianco and others met at Madonna del Colletto, between the Stura and Gesso valleys, forming the “Free Italy Band”. Since the position of Madonna del Colletto was difficult to defend, the group moved its base to **Borgata Paralup**, at the far end of the Rittana valley between the Stura and Grana valleys, where the Foundation named after the partisan writer Nuto Revelli is now working on a project of architectural conservation.

## The wonders of Pedona

The Roman origins of **Borgo San Dalmazzo** are a fascinating enigma. It is still uncertain exactly where Pedona "with its white towers" was located. It was the *municipium* already in the first century a.d. and site of a *statio doganale* that retained considerable importance for a long time as the position for control of the roads toward Liguria and toward France, but eventually it succumbed to decadence and the Saracen raids of the 10th and 11th century, as we read in "*Planctus super Pedonam*" (Lament for Pedona).

Among the archeological findings are an epigraph, mentioning the station of the Quadragesima Galliarum, a necropolis from the 2nd-3rd century near what is now an abbey, and scatterings of Roman tombs in other parts of the town. A funereal relief of two spouses was found in particularly good condition. It dates back to the middle of the 1st century a.d., and is kept at the Civic Museum of Cuneo. The *Victorina* tombstone in fine white marble is dedicated to a woman, but curiously decorated with shield and arrows. There is evidence of links with the sea in an *ara* dedicated to Neptune by the *piscatores*, kept at Mondovì at the diocesan seminary.

The first mention of the abbey of San Dalmazzo is contained in a diploma dated 902 in which Ludwig III of Provence placed it under the control of Bishop Eilulfo of Asti.

Even the origins of San Dalmazzo or Dalmazio, the patron saint of the city, are uncertain. Some say he was an evangelist of ancient Pedona. According to another, older version, the saint was a soldier in the Theban Legion, martyred by the priests of Apollo.

The abbey church of San Dalmazzo contains a vast crypt with refined decorations in plaster and marble, and capitols from the high Middle Ages. In what is known as the Angevin Chapel there are frescoes by the Biasacci brothers of Busca and Giovanni Baleison of Demonte (Info: [www.sandalmazzo.com](http://www.sandalmazzo.com) and in particular the Abbey Museum - [www.sandalmazzo.com/museo/index.htm](http://www.sandalmazzo.com/museo/index.htm)).

Early in December the town holds the traditional Cold Weather Fair (Fiera Fredda), established by Emanuele Filiberto back in 1569. It was given this name because it is the last opportunity for a feast before the winter. The fair has become famous in particular because it is an opportunity to taste, and

buy, white snails, *Helix Pomatia Alpina*, a delicacy greatly valued by the connoisseurs for its white meat, that has its natural habitat in the nearby alpine valleys. These snails are now cultivated and cooked in a variety of ways, including many traditional recipes and other more recent ones.

### Literary trails and legends

One of the most important Italian writers of the 20th century, Lalla Romano, was born in **Demonte** in 1906, into a family sensitive to the arts and sciences. While attending the university in Turin she met and became friendly with writers and intellectuals of the caliber of Vincenzo Monti, Cesare Pavese, Mario Soldati, Franco Antonicelli, Arnaldo Momigliano. Among her novels, "The Penumbra We Have Crossed" ("La penombra che abbiamo attraversato") (1964) was based on memories of her childhood in the Stura valley. The years she lived in Demonte appear also in a particular book, "Reading a picture" ("Lettura di un'immagine"), that the writer

#### **Ferriere, headquarters of the House of Contraband**



dedicated to her father Roberto and consisting of photographs engraved on plates in black and white, taken by him between 1904 and 1914.

But Lalla Romano (who died in Milan in 2001) was also an excellent painter who attended the Turin school of Felice Casorati and exhibited her works in collective and personal shows. In her memory, Demonte has dedicated a section to her works in the 17th century Palazzo Borelli, one of the most prestigious residences, built by the Viscounts Bolleris, lords of the valley from the days of Jeanne of Anjou (1376).

The "Lalla Romano Space" includes a permanent show documenting the landscapes, atmospheres, shapes and colors of the places that had a decisive influence on the development of Lalla Romano's artistic sensitivity, starting from her youthful paintings and drawings, places that also appear in her books. Alongside the exhibit, a library and teaching workshop to promote the knowledge and consciousness of her literary works are available for schools and teachers, going from the local ones and extending throughout the cross-border zone; there is also a landscape study center that serves as a permanent multidisciplinary workshop to investigate the relationships between the different types of artistic expression, literature, poetry, painting, photography and the landscape (Info: tel. +39.0171.618260 - [raffaella.degioanni@marcovaldo.it](mailto:raffaella.degioanni@marcovaldo.it)).

The story of another poet in Languedoc of the Stura valley is quite different. Giuseppe Rosso, *Bep Rous dal Jouve*, one of the finest Occitan poets of the 20th century, was born at Borgo San Dalmazzo into a family of herdsmen originally from the central valley, who had the opportunity during his childhood and youth to follow the family herds along the itineraries of the herd migration from the Stura valley to the Po valley. This gave him a vast experience in mountain civilization that he succeeded in sublimating in the verses of his poetry.

An eclectic educator and scholar, *Bep Rous dal Jouve* also published studies of toponymy, architecture, history, religious art, painting, local traditions and folklore. He was a persuasive speaker and a respected art critic, musicologist and choirmaster, an enthusiast of photography and also a wood carver and poet in the Piedmont dialect.

His poetry includes verses in a particularly rich Occitan, both as regards the vocabulary and as regards the expression of his feelings. Unfortunately his works were never systematically collected and published, although

they deserve to be rediscovered in order to gain a better understanding of the *genius loci* of the valley. These few lines are a homage to one of the finest voices of the Occitan mountain, in the hope that the people of the valleys and others from outside take an interest in his work.

Abou la chamiso bioncho

*N'ai mec pus uno, de chamizo bioncho,  
e ren la sortou per calar en villo.  
Mi me la vestou per anar amount  
entourn se làrguen i cavial di suco  
trepjà de sàouvo chardo énte l'erbasso,  
adéou despoutentà di questaniha  
que mouéren quiet dins lou darriè bouòsc.*

In my white shirt

I've got just one left of my white shirts,  
and I'll not wear it to go down into town.  
I'll wear it to go up there,  
where the herds of cut-down trees range over the land  
soaking the grass with their red sap,  
the desperate farewell of the chestnuts  
that die in silence in the last forest.

The literature and poetry in Languedoc are rich in myths and legends. One of the most moving traditional poetic texts of the Val Stura tells of the passage of Queen Jeanne of Anjou, on her way to Naples: "*Nòstra Rèina Jana, tuchi corriou al siu passatge, tuchi venion a lhi far omatge. Viva la rèina de nòstra montanha e tot lo monde qu'aici l'acompanha!* (Our Queen Jeanne, all people ran to cheer her passage, all people wanted to pay homage to her. Long live the queen of our mountain and all her retinue)" There are countless stories about the Queen of Naples and lady of Provence, who was said to be very beautiful, but dissolute and cruel. Jeanne had four husbands and many lovers and, after being charged with murder, was garroted in 1382. Here in the valley, however, she is remembered as a benevolent noble, and

a little meadow overlooking the Barricate narrows, a rock barrier between Bersezio and Pontebernardo, is still known as “Queen Jeanne’s garden”. It is only in the lower valley that *Rèina Jana* returns to be that diabolical creature handed down by the medieval chronicles. Here they tell the story that, the beautiful queen, on her way from Naples to Provence, decided to spend some time on a mountain that had a particularly healthy climate and was near a cool spring. But shortly thereafter a terrible plague struck the town and the inhabitants interpreted it as a sign of divine retribution for the sinner’s presence. The people begged Jeanne to leave and she agreed, but in exchange demanded that she be given a pair of shoes suitable for her feet. That was how it was discovered that she had “hen feet”, that is, that *Rèina Jana* was a witch.

#### Relax at Vinadio Spa in the Bagni district







## Valle Gesso

The Natural Park of the Maritime Alps, about 29,000 hectares around the Argentera massif, is the largest park in the Piedmont Region. It borders on the French National Park of Mercantour, with which it has been twinned since 1987. This means that a total of 100,000 hectares of precious alpine territory are protected and, in 1993, received the European recognition for the environment.

The Park has, as its distinctive feature, its vicinity to the sea, although many of its peaks and glaciers are over three thousand meters. About 1,900 superior plant species have been classified in the Park, and many of these are preciously endemic, 26 even exclusive. Rich in fauna, with the ibex in the foreground, it also has, chamois, mouflons from the Mercantour, wolves, eagles, lammergeyers and peregrine falcons. The Visitors Centers of Valle Gesso are located at Entracque and Terme di Valdieri.

Among the important karst formations of the zone are the **Roaschia grottoes**, characterized by the resurgence of Dragonera, which has been explored as far as -35 meters, and the **Bandit's grottoes**, also mined for gold until the end of the 19th century, but famous above all as the site where the bones of cave bears (*Ursus spelaeus*) were found, a species three meters tall and weighing about a ton, which became extinct about 15,000 years ago. Farther down the valley carved by the Rio Bedale, we can also observe a deep cut that forms a canyon, with high, rocky walls.

## The bear and the rye

The bear is the main character also in the ancient alpine mardigras of **Valdieri**. A "bear" in a costume of rye straw is paraded on a chain through the streets of the old city centre by a tamer. The bear tries to attack the girls and when it gets free it chooses one for a dance. At last it escapes and flees the people and a figure stuffed with rye is burned in its place. The circus parade also consists of noisy "*peroulier*" and "*i frà*" who recite humorous "*epistule*"; and the funny "*magnin*".

The theme of rye is central for the Ecomuseum of Rye, located in the ancient village of Sant'Anna di Valdieri: the museum explores the habits, curiosities of daily life and the typical labors of long ago. The museum project has recovered several houses and rye-thatched roofs in the villages of Tetti Bartola and Tetti Bariau. The documentation center offers ethnographic excursions like the "*Lou Viol du Tàit*" cultural tour, workshops of local culture and rye workshops (Info: Comune Valdieri - tel. +39.0171.97109).

### Pian del Valasco



## Royal memories in Valdieri and Entracque

The area of the Maritime Alps Park is a place of wild beauty. In 1855 the Savoy visited the Gesso valley and Vittorio Emanuele II was so entranced with it that the towns of **Valdieri** and **Entracque**, aware of the advantages that the royal presence would bring, gave the future king of Italy part of their land as a private hunting and fishing reservation.

Vittorio Emanuele II chose Valle Gesso as his summer home and between the “Gentleman King” and the people a special relationship was established. The king employed many of the local residents as guards, bearers and beaters, whose job, during the hunt, was to direct the herds of chamois toward the royal rifles, and a troop of servants, cooks and waiters who worked in the hunting lodges where the king received monarchs from all over Europe, with their retinues, friends and mistresses.

At the Terme di Valdieri in memory of the romantic escapades of the “Gentleman King”, the original chalet of “*Bela Rosin*” decorated with lacy carvings and flourishes in the Swiss style still stands. Vittorio Emanuele II had it built for his young, lower-class mistress, Maria Rosa Vercellana, later elevated to the nobility with the title of Countess of Mirafiori.

To encourage the use of the nearby hot springs where the waters flowed

**Bela Rosin's chalet at Terme di Valdieri**



at temperatures of 25-29 degrees, a number of hotels were built and Vittorio Emanuele II himself inaugurated the majestic Hotel Royal in 1857. A royal hunting lodge was built at Sant'Anna di Valdieri, another at San Giacomo di Entracque. Various trails set out from both, leading to Pian del Rasur, where it is easy to encounter chamois and marmots and enjoy the view of the Monte Gelàs glaciers.

Among the loveliest local sights is Piano del Valasco, a broad plateau surrounded by peaks, at an altitude of 1760 meters, with a stream that runs through it and forms two spectacular waterfalls, where Vittorio Emanuele II built one of his most important and characteristic hunting lodges: a solitary square-shaped castle with four watchtowers. A plaque places there in 1882, by the Italian Alpine Club reminds the visitor that Vittorio Emanuele II who, leaving behind "the cares of his realm, came here to the summits of the Maritime Alps every year, to enjoy the hunting and rest". His successors Umberto I and Vittorio Emanuele III received confirmation of their rights to the reservation, so that for over eighty years, the royal hunting reservation had the merit, if only for the king's sport, of preserving the wild fauna, protecting it from poaching and introducing, in 1920-22, the ibex imported from the Gran Paradiso park. After the monarchy was abolished, the former reservation was turned, several years later, into what is now the Maritime Alps Park (Info: [www.chambradoc.it/cmgy/progettocmgv2004.page](http://www.chambradoc.it/cmgy/progettocmgv2004.page)).

For more information about the opportunities offered by the protected area and the Valle Gesso in general, it is possible to visit one of the visitors' centers that the Maritime Alps Park has opened at the access points of Entracque and Terme di Valdieri (Info: Centro Visita Entracque - tel. +39.0171.978616; Terme di Valdieri - tel. +39.0171.97208 - [www.parcoalpimaritime.it](http://www.parcoalpimaritime.it)).

The Valderia Botanical Gardens have been opened at the Hot Springs, named after the valderia violet that is endemic in this area. The Gardens contain over 450 examples of the natural environments of the zone: quartz and limestone, meadow and bog, streambed, grazing land and bushland. The necropolis of Valdieri, open to visitors, and the cave etchings of the lake of Vei del Bouc testify to the presence of prehistoric settlements. The valley was known to the Romans for its hot springs, and in the Middle Ages it was on the road traveled by the salt caravans from Provence.

The frescoes of the Madonna del Gerbetto at **Andonno** and in the chapel of Saint John at Valdieri are medieval. The grey vulpinite marble quarried near San Lorenzo was used during the Baroque period in the parish churches of Valdieri and Entracque. In this latter town, the Museum of Sacred Art displays liturgical objects and paintings in the style of Caravaggio.

The towns and villages have maintained, to some extent, the aspect of long ago and we can observe traces of the old thatched roofs in straw; another characteristics are the summer pastures with their stone walls, called "*parc*", the stone "*casot*" where the shepherd sleeps and the "*truna*" with a sod roof where the cheese is kept. The whole complex is called a "*gias*" from the Latin "*iacere*" (to lie down) and reflects a rustic lifestyle.

The Valle Gesso is not, however, only royal memories, nature, history and material culture. The hydroelectric plant at Entracque is spectacular, it went into function in 1982, and is the largest in Italy. It is articulated in two separate falls: Chiotas-Piastra and Rovina-Piastra.

Its construction, begun in October 1969, required thirteen million hours of work and a complex worksite with thirty-five construction and electromechanical companies, some working at high altitude for construction of dams at Chiotas (130 meters high) and Colle Laura, some for construction of the external buildings, some in tunnels for the branch canals and penstocks.

Over the years, the gigantic wall of the Piastra dam has become a popular, rather unusual rock gym for climbing enthusiasts. To satisfy the curiosity of the visitor, a visitors' center has been opened on the road for **San Giacomo di Entracque**. Called the "Luigi Einaudi" Information Center, it displays a model of the high-altitude installations and offers a train tour of the power plant that goes right into the cavern with the immense pipes and turbines (Info: Centro Informazioni "Luigi Einaudi" - tel. +39.0171.978811 - fax +39.0171.078811).

## On the traces of wolves and lammergeyers

The Park of the Maritime Alps, that obtained the European Environmental Diploma in 1993, is rich in chamois and ibexes. It is also home to two rare animals, the wolf and the lammergeyer, or bearded vulture, that until a few decades ago had disappeared from the area.

The wolves returned gradually, along the Apennine range and it was just in Valle Gesso, toward the border with the French Park of Mercantour, that the signs of its presence were found to be particularly numerous. Their return has created some problems for the shepherds, who must now protect their sheep from attacks by the predator.

At the Center of the Maritime Alps Park in Entracque, experts are studying the behavior of the new arrivals. After counting the animals from the Val Vermeignagna to the Val Varaita, they follow their tracks in the snow in the winter. In the summer they "howl" from the coombs and crests, imitating the call of the wolves or playing tapes of recorded howls. The wolves respond and in this way it is possible to understand where and how many there are (Info: [www.regione.piemonte.it/parchi/lupo/progetto/monitor.htm](http://www.regione.piemonte.it/parchi/lupo/progetto/monitor.htm)).

Catching sight of a bearded vulture on the wing is exciting. This raptor has a broad wingspan and can cover very long distances, flying from the Maritime Alps to the Cozies, and over the sea as far as Corsica.

The Park, where sheep graze in the summer, provides abundant food for these high altitude scavengers, capable of swallowing whole bones (even the femur of a chamois) and digesting them with their powerful gastric juices.

The lammergeyers waste nothing, their food consists of the bones and tendons of dead animals, so they have no competitors in the food chain. They are intelligent: in the late spring they fly over the sites of landslides and avalanches, searching for dead animals. When the bones are too large, they fly up into the air with them and drop them on the rocks below from a height of fifty meters or so, to break them.

The lammergeyers were first released in the Maritime Alps in 1993: since then they have been sighted regularly and every sighting is reported in a data bank. The predatory birds released in the Park are "marked" and can be recognized by the lighter flight feathers and rectrices. A lammergeyer from the Maritime Alps Park was sighted in the skies over Holland and about three months later observed in the upper Savoy region.

## Le Parlade, theater in languedoc

At **Entracque** every five years the town stages its Passion Play, "*le Parlade*" (the last was held in 2005). The reenactment of the Passion and Death of Christ is played out by actors and local characters on a stage at the Confraternita di Santa Croce. The entire play, from the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane to the Burial, is recited in the Occitan dialect of the town. The custom goes back to the Middle Ages and is held during the Holy Week before Easter, with the central event on Good Friday, when the local characters appear: *al Timbajer* (the herald) who, early in the morning, goes on his way through the streets of the surrounding villages announcing the program, *al Capitani* (the captain), officially assigned the part on Palm Sunday by the parish priest. *Al Capitani* marches out with *al Tenenti* (the Lieutenant), presents the characters to the mayor and requests permission



to hold "*le Parlade*". On receiving the authorization, in front of the Confraternita di Santa Croce (confraternity of the Holy Cross), the Passion Play is performed, and the celebration continues with a procession, accompanied by choirs singing the *Miserere* and *Stabat Mater* through the streets of the town, by torch and candlelight. The

Sacred Urn with the body of Christ is carried by the *Trèzè Cavajer* (the thirteen Knights) in frock coat and feluca with a banner decorated with a silver cross on a black field, in representation of the thirteen districts, headed by "*al trezè*", their commander. The procession ends with the deposition of Christ in the Parish Church, where the whole town is gathered.

*Le Parlade*, prompted by a strong religious motivation, is an act of faith, history and tradition, that requires enormous work to organize, involving the entire community of the little town located at the feet of impressive calcareous cliffs and rugged mountains

(Info: [www.chambradoc.it/cmvgv/progettocmgv2004.page](http://www.chambradoc.it/cmvgv/progettocmgv2004.page)).



## The valley cuisine

The recipes of the valley revolve around the typical local products and crops: spinach gnocchi, rice cooked in milk with potatoes, leeks and squash, trout with fresh cep mushrooms, onions stuffed with chard and sausage, *ricotta* cake. The potato has a part in almost all these recipes, as it is the primary food resource in the Occitan Alps. Actually the potato came to the Occitan mountains rather late, toward the end of the 18th century. Its name in Occitan has many variations: some call it *trufa*, others *tartifla*, other still *trifola* and the most different name of all, *bòdi*, is used in the Gesso and Stura valleys.

Soil, altitude, water and climate make the mountain potato a highly prized commodity. In the traditional cuisine of the valley it is used in a variety of ways: fried, browned, boiled in the skin to maintain its flavor, and mashed, also as the essential ingredient for various types of gnocchi, *raviolas*, *calhetas*, *donderets*, *tondirets*, with rice and *aioli*, and even in some types of quiche.

Some traditional tools are still widely used for the cultivation of the potato: the two-pointed



hoe called the *magau*, imported from the Provençal region into the Occitan mountains, and the original *picha* or *bichard* that has only one point. However, the rapid mechanization of production is spreading throughout the area.

Among the traditional recipes, *los talharins de Roascha* are particularly tasty. These Roaschia-style *taglierini* consist of home-made noodles and a bacon sauce made as follows: brown 600 grams of thinly sliced onions in 80 grams of butter and four tablespoons of olive oil with 200 grams of diced bacon. When it is all nice and golden brown, add two glasses of red wine and cook for 8 minutes more. Toss with the boiled noodles and serve.

## Stories of migrant shepherds

The stories of emigration are the “great adventure” of the Occitan valleys. “... I was not yet sixteen when I left for France on foot, across Ciriegia Hill. With other children we walked as far as San Lorenzo del Var, beyond Nice, and from there some of us went to Saint Raphaël, to try our luck...”: this is a story reported by Nuto Revelli in his book “The World of the Losers” (“Il Mondo dei Vinti”).

Seasonal emigration took the people far from home, to the sea in Marseilles, to Toulon, into the Crau, the Camargue, on the Riviera at Nice, to Arles, Aix, Nîmes, Avignon and even to Paris.

The shepherds of Roaschia went in the opposite direction, down toward the Po plain, along the course of the Po river. Men, women and children left the Valle Gesso with hundreds of sheep, followed by a wagon with the essentials for a very simple life ... walking by day, sleeping under the stars

### **Natural Park of the Maritime Alps - Lower Valscura Lake**



at night. They “stole” the grass from the verges along the river and the water from its stagnant ponds, and for this reason they were given the name of “*gratta*”, that in dialect meant a petty thief. They returned in the late spring, bringing back to their native valley the objects, customs, songs and fine wines of the Asti hills.

In a filmed interview made in 1996, kept at the archive of the Ousitanio Vivo Film (Info: via Marconi - 12020 Venasca – tel. +39.0175.567606 - ousitanio.vivo@infosys.it), Lorenzo Giraudo known as *Lencho d’ Charù* from Roaschia, tells his story:

“We came down with the flock of about 180 sheep and walked all the way to Fiorenzuola d’Arda in the province of Parma: my father, my mother and the whole family. We left in the fall, at the end of September, with the wagon. Passing through Cuneo, Bra, Alba, Asti, Alessandria, Tortona, Voghera, then to Casteggio and Stradella, where they make accordions, on to Castel San Giovanni, Piacenza and San Giorgio Piacentino”.

The “*gratta*” were nomads in a world of sedentary folk. The Roaschia shepherds had to be careful and developed their own jargon that no one could understand: *la bartolina* and *lo bartolòt* were the sheep and the lamb, *la bëjja* was the toma cheese, woman was *la tubera*, girl was *la marmalha*.

The women participated in this harsh life: “Day after day in all kinds of weather, rain and snow. The wagon was our home, the women slept inside and the men underneath the wagon, on sheepskins”.

**Natural Park of the Maritime Alps - former military road to Colletto di Valasco**



**Natural Park of the Maritime Alps - Mount Matto**





## Val Vermenagna

In the Middle Ages, the valley was an important route of transit for the salt caravans and communications from Piedmont to western Liguria and the Nice area.

Val Vermenagna is without a doubt the valley of song and dance. In the summer the towns and villages celebrate one patron saint after another and organize country fairs with the enthusiastic participation of the entire population. In particular, at **Robilante** and **Vernante**, the young people display a strong attachment to the traditional Occitan dances. Both the figured dances, to the music of the accordion and clarinet, and the songs, have developed typical local forms, with a singing style that tends toward the high notes, and a very rapid dance step that is almost impossible to imitate.

Today, the valley is the only one in the province of Cuneo to have an international highway and railway line, connecting Turin and Cuneo to Nice. **Limone P.te**, at the far end of the valley, is considered the most important ski resort in the southwestern Alps. The first skiers braved its slopes in 1907, but it was not until 1936 that the first ski lifts and hotels were built. After the war its snows became a renowned resort for skiers and tourists from Cuneo, Liguria and the Nice area (Info: [www.limonepiemonte.it](http://www.limonepiemonte.it)).

In spite of its intensive development and construction as a ski resort, the town has preserved a strong community identity and a languedoc dialect with a number of curious phonetic peculiarities. A traditional Occitan event is the *Baija*, celebrated in the summer with a religious procession followed by music and dancing.

The road tunnel at **Tenda**, excavated in 1883 for the passage of the postal stage coach, measures 3.3 km and was one of the first in the Alps. It

facilitated the opening toward the Nice area and Provence. The well-developed road system also partially explains the presence in the lower valley of quarrying and mining industries that provided jobs for the local population, limiting emigration from the valley.

## The Fortresses of Tenda

At the end of the 19th century, Italy built a system of mountain Fortresses on the Colle di Tenda (Tenda Pass) (1850 m altitude), between the Vermenagna and Roya valleys, connected by military roads that are now hiking trails of great environmental value. The Colle Alto fortress, built from 1888 to 1891, was the main element of this array against France.

No shots were ever fired from the Fortresses of Tenda: at the outbreak of World War I their artillery was dismantled and used on the Austrian front. In 1947, when the upper Roya valley was annexed to France, the fortresses of Tenda also changed owners.

### Mountainbike tours to the Tenda fortresses



## *Ubi stabant cathari*

*Ad Rocavione, et est locus apud Cuneum, ubi stabant cathari qui venerant de Francia ad habitandum...* wrote the inquisitor Anselmo da Alessandria in the 13th century. The arrival from the Languedoc region of the first Cathar heretics at **Roccavione** went back to 1165. They, like many fugitives, had crossed the Colle di Tenda (Tenda Pass).

Roccavione was located at the intersection of many roads and had a castle, built in the 11th century of which only a few ruins remain. Starting from here, the Cathars preached in Piedmont, Lombardy, Tuscany and the Veneto region. Many personalities also passed through here: troubadours, nobles and knights, among them some defenders of Montsegur fortress, where the Cathars were massacred, a milestone event in Occitan history.

In June, Roccavione reenacts by torchlight the foundation of the Cathar religion, the rites, the persecution and final sacrifice, with music and scenes of daily life in the lower middle ages. About 100 people in costume evoke the events described in the *Tractatus de heretici* by the inquisitor Anselmo.

Val Vermenagna is one of the most ancient routes of transit through the Alps, and this is confirmed by the finding at Roccavione (Bec Berciassa at 962 m altitude) of a settlement from the Iron Age. Tenda pass was also used by merchants. The trades linked to traffic and transportation have St. Eligio as their patron saint and **Limone P.te** still celebrates the traditional *Baija d' sant Aloi*, in honor of the protector of wagoners, blacksmiths, horseshoers and saddlers. It is celebrated the last Sunday of August: the old *Abbà* leads the *Baija* carrying the patron saint's banner, and the brothers of the confraternity parade in the rich costumes of the Napoleonic era, on horses adorned with ribbons, pennants and rattles, led by elegant muleteers bearing poles topped with ribbons and flowers. When they reach the parish church built in 1363, the oldest in the Val Vermenagna, with a stone façade and doorway with pointed arch, the new *Abbà* receives his investiture.

The parade is repeated twice the same day, accompanied by *corenta* and *balet*, traditional dances known throughout the Occitan area, and the sharp reports of the firecrackers.



## Pinocchio in Vernante

Just 6 km from Limone Piemonte is **Vernante**, that preserves about 100 murals dedicated to Pinocchio. As the story goes, in the 1920s, a girl from Vernante, Margherita Martini went to work in Turin at the home of Attilio Mussino, famous illustrator of Pinocchio. After the death of his wife and son, the artist retired to Vernante where he spent the rest of his days. In 1989, Bruno Carlet and Meo Cavallera had the idea of frescoing the walls of the houses with the story of Pinocchio.

They created an impressive series of paintings telling the famous story from one end of the town to the other. At the north entrance is a monument to Pinocchio, made by local craftsmen (Info: [www.comune.vernante.cn.it](http://www.comune.vernante.cn.it)).

The pride of Vernante craftsmen, however, are the now rare "*vernantins*"; knives made of tempered steel with the handle in bovine horn and the particular nail closure. They can be either straight or curved and are used for various farm tasks. Part of the territory is inside the Natural Forest and Lake Reserve of Palanfrè, part of the Park of the Maritime Alps. The protected area is located in the upper part of the Val Grande, above the village of **Palanfrè**, where the meadows are bordered by white calcareous rocks.



Though it is not particularly large (about 1070 hectares), the reserve has a variety of microclimates and this explains the enormous wealth of fauna, both birds and mammals, including chamois, marmots, martens and badgers.

The little settlement of Palanfrè with its ash grove above the houses, protected since the 18th century, has preserved the aspect of a traditional village. The houses have been renovated in respect of the alpine architecture of these places. The Park of the Maritime Alps, that extends this far and has opened a small visitors' center also in Vernante, offers a nature tour called Sentiero Natura, consisting of a walk through the ash grove, rich in examples of contorted old trees.

## The genius of *Nòto* and *Jòrs*

The *genius loci* of the valley is well represented in the “Museum of the Accordion, Popular Music and Art” in **Robilante**, with the *semitons* accordions and workbench used by Giuseppe Vallauri (born in Robilante in 1896, died in 1984), known as *Nòto Sonador*.

An excellent accordion-player, famous for his renditions of the *corenta* and *balèt*, Vallauri also repaired the instruments. The history of Occitan folklore mentions him among the great examples of the musical heritage of popular dances.

The Accordion Festival organized every year in May is dedicated to *Nòto Sonador*. The museum also displays period costumes and many photographs, reproductions of the works of the farmer-sculptor Giorgio Bertaina, *Jòrs de Snive* (born in 1902, died in 1976), who lived in the mountains of Robilante at le Piagge.

*Jòrs* carved in wood with his knife, in a style reminiscent of Romanesque. His sculptures are inspired by his world: domestic and wild animals, cows at pasture, musicians with the accordion and clarinet, the tavern, the bride and groom dancing.

*Jòrs de Snive* also carved dozens of walking sticks, decorated with scenes from life, true stories carved all around the entire length of the stick. Some of his sculptures representing the strict arm of the law are particularly interesting: *carabinieri* on horseback dragging men in chains, perhaps mountaineers caught with their freight of contraband.

Contraband was a real business in the towns on the French border: they carried rice and tobacco and exchanged it for salt, that was cheaper there. They also smuggled accordions, returning with wool, cows and sheep. When there were no *carabinieri* and financial police lying in wait, the frontiers were non-existent for those who knew the secret passages through the mountains!

A visit to the museum is pleasantly accompanied by the music of traditional accordion tunes played against a background of natural sounds, as if to immerse the visitor in the paths and villages of this valley that, thanks to the way the people of these communities behave, is considered as the most “Marseillaise” of the Occitan valleys (Info: Museo - tel. +39.0171.78101 - fax +39.0171.789103 – [www.chambradoc.it/cmguv/progettocmgv2004.page](http://www.chambradoc.it/cmguv/progettocmgv2004.page)).



## Straw, poems and words

The *genius loci* of the Valley can also be seen in the construction of the houses: some villages around **Robilante** (Tetti Rescasso, Snive and Merciadun) and **Vernante** (Tetto Serre and Val Grande di Palanfré) have preserved the use of thatched roofs in rye straw, widespread also in the nearby Gesso and Stura valleys. In Robilante, the houses with the characteristic curved trusses in chestnut, resemble certain constructions found only in England and Germany.

*Genius loci* is the languedoc.

**Limone P.te**, its past as an agricultural town, its present as a tourist resort which has influenced its town development scheme, and its Occitan heritage have inspired the poems in Languedoc written by Giacomo Bellone, *Dzacolin Bortela*:

...	...
<i>Lè turna dzurn:</i>	Daylight comes again:
<i>gi ommi is disvaggiu,</i>	the men awake,
<i>i s' spar u acol,</i>	and shoot at each other
<i>i fan piurar li framme...</i>	making the women cry ...
<i>lè turna dzurn:</i>	Daylight comes again:
<i>li framme i gi an la smans</i>	the women bear the seed
<i>cügiüya 'nt la nöts,</i>	gathered in the night,
<i>pur bröjar d'autri ommi...</i>	to germinate other men ...

Since the Seventies, the idea of collecting the Occitan language in a dictionary has been the great legacy of a few spontaneous scholars. Occitan between Robilante and Roccavione is the subject of a dictionary of thirteen thousand entries (Info: [www.chambradoc.it/CatalogoGenerale.page](http://www.chambradoc.it/CatalogoGenerale.page)), collected with the passion of the local scholars Lorenzo Artusio, Piermarco Audisio, Gianni Giraud, Eliano Macario. A labor of about twenty years. The result enables the writers to say that the dialects of both towns have "maintained an excellent Occitan pronunciation with interesting similarities to those of Boves, Peveragno and Roccasparvera. The influence of Piedmontese is already strong, but the Occitan roots are clearly perceptible, and give the language an appreciable linguistic identity for those who use it ordinarily".



## Valleys at the feet of the Bisalta

The Bisalta, or Besimauda, watches over the city of Cuneo. It has two peaks, one at 2231 m above sea level, the other slightly lower. At its feet lie the towns of **Boves, Peveragno, Chiusa Pesio**, and streams like the Colla and Josina run down its sides.

The local dialect shows a strong Piedmontese influence, accentuated in the last few decades following the abandonment of the mountain villages. The lexical foundations of the rural vocabulary remain Occitan, however, like the universe of legends, populated with mythical characters - *u magu* (the magician), *u dràà* (the dragon), *le mäsque* (the witches), *u servägn* (the wild man), *le fäie* (the fairies) – that we find throughout the languedoc alpine territory.

The maps of the trails “Around the Bisalta” describe excursions on foot, on horseback and by mountain bike, all over the area (Comunità Montana - tel. +39.0171.339957 - [cmbisalta@ruparpiemonte.it](mailto:cmbisalta@ruparpiemonte.it); Parco Naturale Alta Valle Pesio e Tanaro – tel. +39.0171.734021 - [www.parks.it/parchi.cuneesi](http://www.parks.it/parchi.cuneesi)).

In the 19th century, Chiusa Pesio, Peveragno and Boves were industrial towns with spinning plants, ceramics factories, woolen mills, forges, tanners and industries for tannin extraction. The Museum of the Royal Factory of Crystals and Ceramics, in the ancient City Hall of Chiusa Pesio, has the goal of spreading the history of the role of these early industries in the country's development. Now the three towns are culturally active, with associations dedicated to the rediscovery of the local traditions, social activities and history (Info: Scuola di Pace di Boves - [www.scuoladipace.it](http://www.scuoladipace.it)), as well as film initiatives (Info: Associazione Ipotesi Cinema Piemonte - tel. +39.0171.735341).

## Botanical stations

The highest part of the municipality of **Chiusa Pesio**, towards the great calcareous mass of the Marguareis, is included in the Natural Park of the Upper Pesio and Tanaro Valley, an interesting area for the numerous plant species and for the presence of the wolf.

The paved road ends at Pian delle Gorre (1032 m), where there is a visitors' center. From there a trail climbs up to the Garelli Refuge, 900 m higher. A nearby plateau houses the botanical station dedicated to the scholars Clarence Bicknell and Emile Burnat.

The station consists of a wet zone, with examples of *Drosera* and *Pinguicula*, the fascinating carnivorous plants of the Alps, that "eat" insects to acquire their nitrogenous substances. Another half hour hike reaches a second botanical station, located near a small lake beneath the imposing cliff wall of the Marguareis (2651 m above sea level). Here we encounter a lovely orchid, the Venus Slipper (*Cypripedium calceolus*), taken as the symbol of the Park.

## The Charterhouse of Pesio



## The charterhouse in the forest

The Charterhouse located in the municipality of **Chiusa Pesio** was founded in 1173, when the nobles of Morozzo donated their lands in the upper valley to the Carthusian order. The friars preserved many works of art, to the extent that already in the 16th century they had to enlarge the structure. In the 17th century the grand loggia was built, still striking for its majestic proportions and the monumental staircase. The friars decided to build a number of granges for the cultivation of the surrounding lands. In 1802 the Napoleon's government closed the charterhouse and its treasures were scattered. The building served in the 19th century as a hydrotherapy establishment, until it was closed in 1915. It was only in 1934 that works were undertaken to renovate this admirable building, restoring it to its earlier splendor as a place of meditation and pilgrimage, concealed among the chestnuts (Info: [www.certosadipesio.org](http://www.certosadipesio.org)).

A museum is dedicated to the chestnut, that has had such an important role in feeding the population of these zones. The Chestnut Museum in **Boves** was inaugurated in 2000, and occupies part of the Martinengo Marquet mansion. It was created as part of an international project for the valorization of this fruit. It contains a collection of tools for the cultivation of the chestnut and traditional agriculture. The museum also offers instructive tours on the subject of the working methods of long ago (Info: Cascina Marquet - Via Roncaia, 24 – Boves - tel. +39.335.6777905).

The different species of mushrooms that can be found in the woods at the feet of the Bisalta have also played an important role in the local culinary traditions. The Museum of the Mushroom and Natural Sciences of Boves, organized by Prof. Mario Strani explores this subject in eight rooms, with an exhibition of over 1000 plaster casts or resin models of mushrooms representing the 250 species that can be found in the zone, as well as fossils, minerals, stuffed animals, shells, and a precious collection of over 130 species of butterflies from the Cuneo area, as well as several inventions from the 19th and 20th century. The museum also provides studies of the quarries and kilns located in the province of Cuneo and has a model of the area (Info: Comune di Boves - tel. +39.0171.391834 - fax +39.0171.391856 - [www.musei.provincia.cuneo.it](http://www.musei.provincia.cuneo.it)).

## Photograph collection at the Park

At the headquarters of the Natural Park of the Upper Pesio and Tanaro Valley at **Chiusa Pesio**, there is a permanent exhibition dedicated to a great master of contemporary photography: Michele Pellegrino, native of this town.

The exhibition is divided into eight sections, with three hundred black and white photographs: Places of Water, Ordinary Enchantments, *Visages de la Contemplation* (the monastic life), Alta Langa, Wedding Scenes, Ligurian, Maritime and Cozie Alps, Monte Bianco and Traces in Time. The meaning of the collection is primarily artistic and documentary.

Pellegrino devoted himself to photography first as a self-taught photographer, succeeding in grasping the expressions of the people and the sometimes tragic beauty of the valleys, before the great depopulation of the Sixties emptied the towns and villages. In 1972, Michele Pellegrino published his first

book of photographs, "Gente di Provincia" (Provincial People), followed by "Profondo Nord" (Deep North) on the subject of the exodus from the mountains. Among the most recent works, starting from the Nineties: "Le Montagne della Memoria" (The Mountains of Memory), "Il Tempo della Montagna" (Mountain Time), "Il Silenzio Magico della Monta-



gna" (The Magic Silence of the Mountain), "Una Traccia nel Tempo" (A Trace in Time) and in 2002 "Elva, un paese occitano" (Elva, an Occitan Village).

His attention is also captured by a flower, a rock, the water of the creeks, because he says "what is important is to see things – not in a cold, mechanical way, but with the soul". His portraits are almost a psychological study of the inhabitants of the valleys, with whom he has shared the life and sorrows. They speak to us of the joys, melancholy, dignity and poverty of a prostrate people, "a world of losers" as Nuto Revelli wrote, a marginal territory that, little by little, toward the end of the Sixties, rediscovered its own identity (Info: Parco Naturale Alta Valle Pesio e Tanaro - tel. +39.0171.734990; [www.vallepasio.it](http://www.vallepasio.it); [www.chambradoc.it/cmvgv/progettocmgv2004.page](http://www.chambradoc.it/cmvgv/progettocmgv2004.page)).

## Famous men of Peveragno

The streets, plazas and monuments of **Peveragno** commemorate its illustrious citizens. Among them were Pietro Toselli, hero of the colonial wars, and the writer, Vittorio Bersezio.

Born in 1856, Toselli died in Ethiopia in the celebrated battle of Amba Alagi in 1895. Eighteen officers and about two thousand soldiers fell with him.

To his officers who urged him to save himself, he refused fearlessly, and sat waiting for the assault of the adversary troops. He was awarded the gold medal with this motivation: "Attacked by 20-25,000 enemies, he resisted strenuously for six long hours and with the heroic sacrifice of his life and almost his entire detachment, he caused the enemy enormous losses and contributed effectively to delaying its advance".

Vittorio Bersezio is an outstanding name among Piedmont authors. He was a journalist, writer and Member of Parliament. Born in 1828, he died in 1900, he fought in the first war of independence. In 1865 he founded the *Gazzetta Piemontese*, which later became the daily newspaper "La Stampa". He wrote about forty novels. The Treccani encyclopedia describes him as the author of both "intricate, mysterious adventures and simple love stories". Among his plays in dialect is "*Le miserie d' monsú Travet*" written in 1863, the story of a scrupulous government clerk who rebels when his dignity is questioned.

The life of the third famous personality of local tradition is surrounded by an aura of legend. Charles de Gontaut, duke of Biron in Dordogna (1562-1602), locally known as *Birùn*, is the tragic hero of an ancient song reenacted in Peveragno during the mardigras. It was probably imported by the emigrants from Peveragno who went to Lyon and Marseilles for the cocoon market.

*Birùn*, a marshal of France, was valorous and handsome. During the Gallo-Hispanic wars he earned the friendship of the king. Later, accused of felony, he was executed.

The ballad, recited and sung by the Compagnia del Birùn, a local association, tells that he refused a pardon because *unda a i è pa'd faiansa a i è pa'd pardun* (where there is no blame, there can be no pardon). When the executioner started to blindfold him before the execution he ordered the man not to touch him except with his sword (Info: [www.compagniadelperun.it](http://www.compagniadelperun.it)).

## New music with the *Gai Saber*

This group of Occitan musicians is from Peveragno. They hold concerts in the four corners of Occitania. They have fans in Italy and Europe, and specialized magazines praise them.

Their music certainly does not ignore their origin, they use the languedoc in their songs; their protectionism, however, stops here. The musicians of *Gai Saber* believe that the tradition, left to itself and reproduced faithfully, is sterile and does not develop, so they do their best to betray it without ever offending.

*Occitania que t'en vas* is the title of the lead song of their cd *La fàbrica occitana* issued in 2007, in which they narrate the dreams of their people, *un poble mesquià e bastard*, hymn to the inhabitants of this part of the world that history has turned into a cross-bred mixture of Ligurians, Celts and Romans, Visigoths, Arabs and Jews, Italian and French ... A people that in the mixture, and in spite of the persecution and ostracism of the national states, has succeeded in preserving its language identity.

Many instruments of Occitan tradition are used in the group (*semitons* accordion, *fiFre*, hurdy-gurdy, *chabreta*, harp, *tamborin* and *galobet*) as well as contemporary sounds with the drums, electric guitar and electronic elements. The repertoire combines traditional themes and social invective, troubadour lyrics, dance tunes, pop songs and religious melodies, in a kaleidoscope of Mediterranean rhythms, street-dance, drum'n'bass and Latin impressions. Thanks to the *Gai Saber* and dozens of other musical groups now active in the Occitan valleys, music has become an important aggregating element, a source of creativity and propagation of the languedoc language and culture. Today the musical groups are among the finest ambassadors of Occitania in the world (Info: Associazione Culturale *Gai Saber* - via del Gavotto, 6 - 12026 Peveragno - [www.gaisaber.it](http://www.gaisaber.it) - [info@gaisaber.it](mailto:info@gaisaber.it)).





## Kyè valleys

The area includes the towns of **Roccaforte Mondovì** with Prea, Rastello and Baracco, **Villanova Mondovì** in its mountain outreaches, the two **Frabose**, Sottana and Soprana, with **Miroglio** in val Maudagna and the village of **Fontane** in Val Corsaglia.

This zone, with its rather complex orography, was the site of small settlements established as early as the Neolithic Age, which left evidence in the form of smooth green stone blades.

The name comes from “*kyé*” which means “I”, perhaps deriving from the Latin *quid + ego* and similar to the Occitan forms “*ieu*” or “*iu*”. The abandonment of the villages has affected language conservation, which was studied for the first time at the end of the Sixties, and maintained by associations such as the “*Artusin*” of Roccaforte and Villanova Mondovì and “*E Kyè*” of Fontane. This latter group published a grammar of the *kyé* dialect and is an important center of ethno-linguistic documentation.

To preserve the traditions there is also the custom of creating living Nativities, that show the alpine trades of long ago. The tradition of craftsmanship is very strong, including wood carving, pottery, wrought iron and “*filet*”. The sign of a return to the mountains is the reappearance in the higher fields of buckwheat, a fundamental ingredient for the typical local polenta.

These valleys, and some of the towns like Frabosa Soprana, have been known for decades for intensive winter and summer tourism, especially from Liguria. Other points of interest for tourists are the **Bossea** grottoes in val Corsaglia, which will soon become, with the Eco-Museum of Marble in Frabosa Soprana, one of the key points of an unusual tourist offering based on the geology of the area.



## Partisan itinerary

Organized by the Historic Institute of the Resistance in Cuneo, this itinerary connects the places, buildings, chapels and mountain passes that from September 1943 to April 1945 were the zone of action of the partisan movement. It touches the villages that gave hospitality to the partisan groups. It evokes the retreat of the soldiers of Captain Cosa from the val Pesio in the spring of 1944, the massacre of Pellone above Miroglio, the first skirmishes with the enemy of Enrico Martini Mauri's group in December 1943 in Val Maudagna.

The tour visits the sites of the independent groups of the "Rinnovamento" movement in the Ellero and Corsaglia valleys: **Prea**, the center of operations of the Valle Ellero Brigade in the summer of 1944, and **Rastello**, site of the headquarters of the 3rd Alps Division. It goes to **Baracco**, operations base of the Allied Mission, then to **Fontane**, refuge in February 1944 of the group led by Ignazio Vian. In the town of **Villanova Mondovì** it visits the sanctuary of Santa Lucia that gave asylum to the rebels and housed the clandestine press of the newspaper "Rinascita d'Italia" (Rebirth of Italy).

**Roccaforte Mondovì - Parish Church of San Maurizio**



## “Holed” mountains and other trades of long ago

Karst phenomena, grottoes and gulfs make the mountain group formed by the Cima delle Saline, the **Mondolé**, the **Mongioie** and Pizzo d’Ormea, an extraordinary speleological zone that, with the nearby mountain complex of Marguereis, is one of the most extensive in Europe, with hundreds of kilometers of galleries already explored. The waters of the Ellero, the Maudagna and the Corsaglia spring from these mountains.

The area also offers grottoes accessible to tourists, open to the public and not reserved solely for the specialists. The Dossi Grotto at **Villanova M.vi**, consists of a sequence of corridors and open areas with colorful concretions and shadings. Traces of cave-bear claws can be seen in the **Caudano** grotto in val Maudagna. In the winter, the difference in temperature between the inside and the outside creates stalactites and columns of ice with a fascinating play of colors and reflections. A particularity of this grotto is the small underground nativity that is set up there at Christmas. But the queen of the grottoes of the Kyé valleys is without a doubt **Bossea** in val Corsaglia, in the municipality of Frabosa Soprana, open to the public since 1874. It is the only active grotto and is in full development in the Italian speleological scene, rich in water, with a perennial river and the remains of cave-bears. Bossea is a scientific research site at the international level.

A visit during the Christmas season to these more isolated valleys will reveal interesting nativities, like the one at **Prea**, that winds its way through the narrow medieval streets around the parish church, and the one at **Pianvignale**. Both are an opportunity to rediscover the trades of long ago: we can see the tools of the *früciau*, the herdsman in charge of the dairy, the *ciarbunè*, or charcoal makers, and the muleteers with the *fuèt* (whip), that carried the charcoal down to the valley, and the woodcutters, the *füsere* (spindles) and *vindu* (yarn winders) for spinning hemp, the copper *pìrò* (cauldrons) for laundry with the ashes, the *cumandin* and *sapìn*, tools used by the woodman to drag the logs.

## The art of Giovanni Mazzucco

Among the fine examples of medieval painting, we find the frescoes painted by Giovanni Mazzucco, an artist of the second half of the 15th century in the Mondovì area. His biography is uncertain. In 1475 he sent his son Domenico to the workshop of Roux a painter in Aix-en-Provence, an event that alludes to relations also between artists from these southern Occitan valleys and the Provençal region. As a painter, Mazzucco worked often at Dominican sites, sign of a close relationship with the clientele of this monastic order. His pictorial language is clearly expressionist and is characterized by smiling, innocent faces. At **Roccaforte Mondovì** in the Parish Church of San Maurizio, a Madonna del Latte from 1486 is attributed to him; he painted cheerful scenes of farm life marginally dealing with religious themes at the Cascinale dei Frati in the Bertini farmstead and in the chapel of the former Dominican convent of Peveragno in 1487, where the signature of "Mazuchi" is still legible.

Other works definitely attributed to him, corresponding to the mature stage of his art, are found in an area that spreads to the surrounding valleys and nearby plain: the cycle at the oratory of San Sepolcro in Piozzo from 1481, the Virgin between Sts. Peter and Anthony Abbot in the chapel of Saint Peter in Roncaglia at Bene Vagienna from 1485, the cycle of San Bernardo in Castelletto Stura from 1488. In 1491 he painted episodes in the life of the Virgin in the sanctuary of Brichetto at Morozzo, which are particularly impressive for their gentle ingenuity with its vaguely Giottesque inspiration. Among the youthful works attributed to Mazzucco is the Virgin in the sanctuary of Pasco at **Villanova Mondovì**, the Virgin with the Infant of the Madonna di Guarene, the frescoes of the Madonna della Neve at Pian della Gatta, those of the nave and the inside of the façade of San Fiorenzo at Bastia Mondovì and the Crucifixion in the ancient sacristy of the parish church of Niella Tanaro.

## Civilization and tastes of the Alps

To freeze the memory of the past, various museums form a network in the lands of the Kyè: the Cesare Vinaj Ethnographic Museum, founded in 1981 and located in the village of Fontane-Serra at **Frabosa Soprana**, is dedicated to the first linguistic scholar of the Val Corsaglia. The museum illustrates various themes: the coal-cellar, hemp, the cultivation of chestnuts, haying, the woods, the kitchen, with the possibility of studying the individual topics more in depth in the many monographic publications edited directly by the museum.

The Museum of the Mountain at Miroglio in **Frabosa Sottana** offers a view of the daily life of a time in the past, the hard work in the fields and woods. The interaction between man and animals is emphasized, the manual dexterity of the shoemaker, we are shown the press for walnut oil, the weighing systems and equipment for processing hemp.

In the nearby Val Casotto, at Serra di **Pamparato**, the Museum of the Traditions and Customs of the Mountain Folk is located in a former 17th century convent, that still preserves its floors in stone and coffered ceilings. We can visit a kitchen from long ago, a classroom, and view the steps in processing hemp and linen (Info: <http://musei.provincia.cuneo.it/>). In the **Ormea** area there is the Ethnographic Museum of the Upper Tanaro Valley, a faithful reconstruction of scenes of work and daily life on the farm.

In these valleys the chestnut nourished generations of mountain families and was a staple in the diet of the rural population. It heated the farmhouses, furnished tannin for industrial uses and leaves for the livestock.

Chestnuts were a possible alternative to grain, as a prevalently popular food, in consideration of its easy availability. Later the high nutritional value earned them the name of “bread of the poor” because it gave the most impoverished farmers energy and proteins. The chestnuts were roasted or boiled in water or milk, eaten with milk or wine as soups; ground to prepare mush, purée, fritters and soups.

They are still an important product of local agriculture and have obtained the IGP (Indicazione Geografica Protetta – protected geographical indication) label. Many fairs and events in the autumn are linked in particular to white chestnuts, used for the flour that serves for many recipes.

An element that so extensively characterizes the life of the valleys' inhabitants could not fail to receive the attention of its own museum: the Ecomuseum of the Chestnut occupies three sites: Monastero di Vasco, Fontane di Frabosa Soprana, and Serra di Pamparato. At **Monastero di Vasco** it is housed at the Crusà, a religious building since deconsecrated and recently renovated. In the space in front of the museum it is possible to admire several varieties of chestnut and a few species of underbrush such as raspberries, blueberries and blackberries. At Serra di **Pamparato** the presentation centers around the extraction and use of tannin in the ancient factories, an early example of industrialization in the alpine valleys. The location is in the Museum of the Traditions and Customs of the Mountain Folk. Finally, at **Fontane** a path through the chestnut grove leads toward Case Ubbè, where it is possible to view different types of traditional drying systems for chestnuts, observe the man-environment relationship in the drywall construction and terraced design of the alpine architecture. Almost synonymous with the mountain, known for their fragrance and particular flavors, are the summer pasture cheeses. In the Kyè valleys, by ancient tradition, toward the end of September, the herdsmen descended from the high pastures bringing large wheels of Raschera, to sell at the fairs and markets. Mountain Raschera is made from the milk of cows grazing at altitudes of over 900 meters. It is a semifat cheese, aged for a minimum of thirty days. Its fragrance and aroma are characterized by the aging in "saddles", pits dug directly into the earth. Over the years, the fairs of Raschera and summer pasture cheese held at **Frabosa Soprana** and **Ormea** in August and September have become very popular.

Another product, that with the potato has marked the life of this land, is buckwheat, introduced at the time of the Saracen raids at the end of the first millennium. It is sown in spring and harvested at the end of summer and therefore also ripens above 1000 meters. The buckwheat grains or *furmentin*, are ground into meal and ideally used in polenta. Every autumn in **Pamparato** there is a Buckwheat Fair, while the buckwheat polenta festivals are held in **Garessio**, at **Ormea** and in the village of **Barchi** where the polenta is prepared according to the traditional recipe based on potatoes, buckwheat and wheat flour, whole milk with cream, leeks and dried mushrooms.



## The Briga area

When in 1947 Italy and France signed the Peace Treaty, the Briga area, first extending on both sides of the mountains, was divided between the two countries along the crest: in Val Roya, Tenda becomes French like Briga the main town, that takes the name of *La Brigue*. Italy was left with the villages of Piaggia, Upega and Carnino, that form the municipality of Briga Alta, in the province of Cuneo, while the village of Realdo was aggregated with the municipality of Triora, in the province of Imperia.

The Saccarello (2200 m) is the mother of the mountains of these harsh, wild lands with the splendid Navette forest, a vast expanse of larches and white firs carpeting the slopes of Mounts Bertand and Missun, above the village of **Upega** at the head of Val Tanaro.

In the local dialect it is possible to detect Provençal and Ligurian influences. The words of the land, the family and the herds are surely Occitan, as historically sheep-farming was the most widespread activity among the people. The people of Briga mixed with the nearby French populations of Provence during pilgrimages to the sanctuary of Laghet, at La Turbie, and to the Virgin of Fontano (*Nôtre Dame des Fontaines*), near *La Brigue*, called the Sistine Chapel of the Alps for the frescoes by Giovanni Canavesio of Pinerolo, painted in 1492. Alongside Canavesio, we can admire the frescoes of Giovanni Baleison of Val Stura, in memory of a time when painters climbed the mountains carrying their paints and brushes in their knapsacks.

## A sanctuary of the Neolithic age

The great wonder of these sites are the forty thousand cave drawings of **Mount Bego** (2872 m), that date back to prehistoric times. They were first discovered in 1897 by the British botanist and archeologist Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918). There are horned creatures, plows, daggers, sun wheels, maps, animals and anthropomorphic figures. To learn more about this extraordinary district of cave art, a visit to the plaster casts on view at the Civic Museum of Cuneo and the *Musée des Merveilles* of Tenda is an excellent excursion.

On the slopes of the Bego, at Casterino (a district of **Tenda**), Bicknell built a *chalet* workshop, which can be visited only from the outside. Bicknell used it for his research. The comforts were reduced to the minimum, the accommodations spartan, the only light that of the sun. Clarence himself decorated the rooms, painting flowers, figures of cave art and scrolls with sentences in Esperanto.

**Madonna della Neve at Briga Alta in the Upega district**





## Forests and archaic villages

The **Navette Forest**, with the military road running through it toward Tenda in Val Roya and Limone in Val Vermenagna, probably owes its name to the imposing larches used for ship construction. Many trails run along the crests, where the view ranges across the Ligurian and Maritime Alps all the way to the sea. The forest is now qualified as a Site of Community Interest (SCI) for its environmental characteristics, but even at the time of Napoleon, in the *“Statistique des provinces de Savone, d’Oneille, d’Acqui”*, it was said to contain 300,200 larches and 23,700 firs.

The territory of the upper Tanaro basin preserves some interesting examples of material culture: villages built along slopes, made of stone and sometimes



arranged in rows or, in the case of **Viozene**, terraced on several stories with rows of balconies on the façades. In rare cases, for example at **Carnino**, the roofs are still thatched in rye straw, as most of the houses once were. For centuries the main activity was raising Brigasca sheep: in the winter the flocks migrated toward Liguria, often down to the coastal towns. The place names here refer to the salt and oil routes, Passo e Cima delle Saline (Salt-mine Pass and Peak), Pian dell’Olio (Oil Flats)...

Two sundials are preserved at Viozene, one painted on the “priest’s house”, the other on the façade of the church of San Bartolomeo.

There is a legend about Pian Ballaur (2603 m), between **Upega** and Carnino, where according to tradition witches gathered for sabbat. A shepherd’s little daughter, waiting for her father to come down from the pasture, decided to walk up to meet him but was kidnapped by the “*masche*” who carried her off to Pian Ballaur to participate in a demoniac dance. Several days later she was found in a haystack, her feet dyed green from having danced so long on the grass.

## Paradise for spelunkers and botanists

As we look westward, between Italy and France, from the crest of the Rocca dell'Abisso (2755 m) our gaze is attracted by the imposing limestone wall of the Marguareis (2651 m). In this zone the Ligurian Alps are composed of powerful layers of rocks (limestone and dolomite) that, since they are somewhat soluble in water, have developed immense networks of underground passageways.

Many different karst systems are known: those of the Marguareis, of the Carsene with the source of the Pis, the Pesio, the Mirauda, the Masche, the Mongioie, and some of the most important caves in Italy, such as the **Piaggiabella** system with 13 entrances and about 40 km of development. In general, these are grottoes with a vertical movement at the beginning, and are therefore accessible only to expert spelunkers who have their base camp at Capanna Morgantini, a mountain refuge at 2219 m altitude. The majestic exterior signs of the karst action are clearly visible: sink holes, furrowed fields, wells, karst springs. One of the most impressive is a site known as **Vene del Tanaro**. Starting from Viozene, passing through the lower Carnino, the nature path climbs to Colla di Carnino (1597 m) and continues to the karst spring, over which a sturdy Tibetan bridge has been installed.

In these valleys not far from the sea, yet immersed in a typical mountain landscape, the British botanist discovered a rare flora, including the *Rhaponticum scariosum bicknelli* that bears his name, a gigantic composite more than a meter and half high, with large heads similar to artichoke flowers. It only grows in four places in the world, all in the Ligurian Alps: on the south side of Mount Fronti, on Mount Toraggio, at Salse di Mendatica, north of Monesi and in the Carnino valley. In his notebooks Bicknell drew the *Saxifraga florulenta* that requires 15-20 years to accumulate the substances necessary to bloom, after which, having ensured its reproduction, it dies. He was the first to discover the *Sempervivum calcareum* in Italy, a species endemic to the southwestern Alps, that can be observed near Capanna Morgantini. In the limestone gravel pits we can also observe the *Berardia subacaulis*, a veteran species that goes back to the period of formation of the Alps.

## Addresses

*For general information on the area, the location of historical sites and works of art, protected zones, excursions, cuisine, accommodations, and to receive illustrative material:*

### **A.T.L. (Azienda Turistica Locale) del Cuneese - Valli Alpine e Città d'Arte**

Via Vittorio Amedeo II, 8 A - 12100 Cuneo - tel. +39.0171.690217 - fax +39.0171.602773  
www.cuneoholiday.com - www.autunnocongusto.com - info@cuneoholiday.com

### **GAL "Terre Occitane" - Valli Po, Varaita, Maira, Grana, Stura**

Via Cappuccini, 29 - 12023 Caraglio (Cn) - tel. +39.0171.610325 - fax +39.0171.817981  
www.tradizioneterreoccitane.com - info@tradizioneterreoccitane.com

### **Comunità Montana Valli Po, Bronda e Infernotto**

Via Santa Croce, 4 - 12034 Paesana - tel. +39.0175.94273 - fax +39.0175.987082  
**Tourist board:** tel. +39.0175.94273 - www.vallipo.cn.it - info@vallipo.cn.it

### **Comunità Montana Valle Varaita**

Piazza Marconi, 5 - 12020 Frassinò - tel. +39.0175.970611 - fax +39.0175.970650  
www.vallevaraita.cn.it - info@vallevaraita.cn.it

### **Comunità Montana Valle Maira**

Via Torretta, 9 - 12029 San Damiano Macra - tel. +39.0171.900061 - fax +39.0171.900161  
www.vallemaira.cn.it - info@vallemaira.cn.it  
**Tourist board:** Dronero - tel. +39.0171.917080 - fax +39.0171.909784 - iatvallemaira@virgilio.it

### **Comunità Montana Valle Grana**

Via San Paolo, 3 - 12023 Caraglio - tel. +39.0171.619492 - fax +39.0171.618290  
www.vallegrana.it - info@vallegrana.it

### **Comunità Montana Valle Stura di Demonte**

Via Divisione Cuneense, 5 - 12014 Demonte - tel. +39.0171.955555 - fax +39.0171.955055  
www.vallestura.cn.it - segreteria@vallestura.cn.it

### **Comunità Montana Valli Gesso e Vermenagna**

Piazza Regina Margherita, 27 - 12017 Robilante - tel. +39.0171.78240 - fax +39.0171.78604  
www.cmgvp.org - cmgvp@reteunitaria.piemonte.it

### **Comunità Montana Bisalta**

Via Madonna dei Boschi, 76 - 12016 Peveragno - tel. +39.0171.339957 - fax +39.0171.338229  
cmbisalta@ruparpiemonte.it

### **Comunità Montana Valli Monregalesi**

Via Mondovì Piazza, 1/d - 12080 Vicoforte - tel. +39.0174.563307 - fax +39.0174.569465  
www.vallimonregalesi.it - turistico@vallimonregalesi.it

### **Comunità Montana Valli Mongia Cevetta e Langa Cebana**

Via Case Rosse, 1 - Reg. San Bernardino - 12073 Ceva - tel. +39.0174.705600 - fax +39.0174.705645  
www.vallinrete.org - cm.ceva@reteunitaria.piemonte.it

### **Comunità Montana Alta Val Tanaro**

Via del Santuario, 2 - 12075 Garessio - tel. +39.0174.806721 - fax +39.0174.803714  
www.cmaltavaltanaro.it - cmaltavaltanaro@reteunitaria.piemonte.it

*For information about the Occitan culture, language and literature, popular tradition, movies, books and magazines:*

**Espaci Occitan** - Via Val Maira, 19 - 12025 Dronero - tel. +39.0171.904075/904158  
www.espaci-occitan.org - segreteria@espaci-occitan.org

**Chambra d'òc** - Strada Arnaud Daniel, 18 - 12020 Roccabruna  
tel. +39.0171.918971 - +39.328.3129801 - www.chambradoc.it - chambradoc@chambradoc.it

**Coumboscuro Centre Prouvençal**  
Sancto Lucio de Coumboscuro - 12020 Monterosso Grana - tel. / fax +39.0171.98707  
www.coumboscuro.org - info@coumboscuro.org

**Associazione Lou Soulestrelh** - Via Roma, 27 - 12020 Sampeyre

**Associazione Culturale La Cevitou** - Frazione San Pietro, 89 - 12020 Monterosso Grana  
tel. / fax +39.0171.988102 - www.lacevitou.it

**Internet website of the Occitan Valleys of Piedmont:** www.ghironda.com

*For information about the sites and places of Occitan culture, museums, art exhibitions, cultural events, festivals:*

**Associazione Marcovaldo** - Via Cappuccini, 29 - 12023 Caraglio  
tel. +39.0171.618260 - fax +39.0171.610735 - www.marcovaldo.it - info@marcovaldo.it

**Province of Cuneo** - Theme website on museums: <http://musei.provincia.cuneo.it>

**Laboratorio Ecomusei** - Via Nizza, 18 - 10125 Torino - tel. +39.011.4323845  
www.ecomusei.net - ecomusei.piemonte@regione.piemonte.it

**Atlante delle feste del Piemonte:** [www.atlantefestepiemonte.it](http://www.atlantefestepiemonte.it)

*For information about parks and natural reserves:*

**Parco Naturale Alpi Marittime** - Piazza Regina Elena, 30 - 12010 Valdieri - tel. +39.0171.97397  
www.parcoalpimarittime.it - info@parcoalpimarittime.it

**Ente di Gestione dei Parchi e delle Riserve Naturali Cuneesi**  
Via S. Anna, 34 - 12013 Chiusa Pesio - tel. +39.0171.734021  
www.parks.it/parchi.cuneesi - parcopesio@ruparpiemonte.it

**Parco del Po Cuneese** - Via Griselda, 8 - 12037 Saluzzo - tel. +39.0175.46505  
www.parcodelpocn.it - info@parcodelpocn.it

**Parco Fluviale Gesso e Stura** - Piazza Torino, 1 - 12100 Cuneo - tel. +39.0171.444501  
www.parcofluviale.cuneo.it - parcofluviale@comune.cuneo.it

**Website for parks, reserves and protected areas in Italy:** [www.parks.it](http://www.parks.it)

**Websites of the Piedmont Region on parks, protected areas and the Piedmont Parks magazine:**  
[www.regione.piemonte.it/parchi](http://www.regione.piemonte.it/parchi) - [www.piemonteparchiweb.it](http://www.piemonteparchiweb.it)

*Most of the Municipalities mentioned in the guide have their own websites with theme sections.*



**A.T.L. Azienda Turistica Locale del Cuneese**

Via Vittorio Amedeo II, 8 A - 12100 Cuneo  
Tel. +39.0171.690217 - fax +39.0171.602773

info@cuneoholiday.com - [www.cuneoholiday.com](http://www.cuneoholiday.com) - [www.autunnocongusto.com](http://www.autunnocongusto.com)

**INFORMATION AND HOTEL RESERVATIONS**

CONITOURS - CUNEO

TEL. +39.0171.698749 - FAX +39.0171.435728 - info@cuneohotel.it

CONSORZIO ALTA VAL TANARO TURISMO - GARESSIO

TEL. +39.347.9156791 - FAX +39.0174.81981 - info@altavaltanaroturismo.it

CONSORZIO TURISTICO ALPI DEL MARE - VICOFORTE M.VI

TEL. +39.0174.569016 - FAX +39.0174.565928 - info@mongioie-leader.it

IN TERRE DI GRANDA - CUNEO

TEL. +39.0171.67575 - FAX +39.0171.649728 - staff@interredigranda.com

TERRE DI EMOZIONI - MONDOVÌ / FRABOSA SOTTANA

TEL./FAX +39.0174.44343 - info@terrediemozioni.com

TURGRANDA / BLUPIEMONTE - CUNEO

TEL. +39.0171.697668 - FAX +39.0171.699224 - info@turgranda.com

V.A.L. BED & BREAKFAST - CUNEO

TEL. +39.0171.437220 - +39.347.7730489 - info@val-bb.it