

VAL CLAREE

18TH TO 25TH FEBRUARY

Author: Mark Serby

The Vallee de la Claree provided us with a perfect week of hut to hut touring. The scenic valley is just north of Briancon and west of Montgenevre on the Italian border; from the summits on the south side of the valley (where we spent most of our time skiing predominantly north facing slopes) we peered down into Serre Chevalier and across to the Ecrins. The road stops half way up the valley and there are no chair lifts within 20 kms; this is an unspoilt corner of the Alps. We were blessed with fine clear weather and sufficient snow to find mostly pitches of powder or spring snow with only a few variable descents – this is ski touring after all! The huts were without exception warm and welcoming and seemed to compete to feed (and water) us better than the last. In all of the Visitor's Books we were the first to leave comments in English.

We met in a small gite in Nevache, Le Creux Des Souches, for our first evening and got to know each other and explain our plans for the week. Most of us already knew each other or had skied before with our guide, Andy Perkins, and we quickly gelled into a harmonious group who enjoyed each other's company throughout the week.

On our first day we left the village skinning up the valley road (D3011) before turning off north after an hour to follow the trail through woods up to the Chalets de Buffere. We had a light lunch and left our overnight kit in the dormitories before setting out for our afternoon goal, an unnamed point on the Buffere Cristol watershed. On the way up Andy had us dig a snow pit to inspect the layers of snow and think about the avalanche risk which was 2 throughout the week, enough to merit a degree of caution. On the way down we found three good pitches of powder and finished our run to the hut with some fine tree skiing.

The following day we took a different route to the summit of the Echaillon (2589m) and skied down to the Valle Cristol to the east where we stopped by the lake for lunch. We skinned back up towards the Porte de Cristol and then crossed the ridge and skied under the north face of the Grande Area in order to come back into our valley. At the top we looked down into Serre Chevalier and were surrounded by wire and temporary gun emplacements from the second war. The snow on the way down was patchy, but Andy went out of his way to find the best of it and we arrived back at the Chalets Buffere with time for some transceiver training.

Day three saw us move on to the Refuge du Chardonnet. We skinned up the Crete de Baude (2571m) where we battled with a strong wind before skiing down to the hut for lunch. In the afternoon most of the party ascended the Col de Roche Noire, with a couple of us staying back with "daythreeitis". The Roche Noire is a classic ascent with good snow back to the hut.

We were on the move again heading west from the Chardonnet before turning due north up to the Crete de la Casse Blanche (2914m); the way up was a kick-turners paradise (!?) with 36 turns in total. And for those who wanted more we carried on up steep slopes to the ridge just below the Tete de la Cassille. A suitable way down was hard to find so we scrambled along the arrete before Andy set up

a belay to rope us down the Combe du Lac Rouge to safer ground at the bottom where we could ski off for lunch by the eponymous lake. We arrived at the Refuge de Laval tired after a long day.

On the fifth day we found lots of outstanding spring snow. We set out to the west for a tour of the Crete de Moutouze. It was the warmest day and after an early lunch at the lake we skinned up behind the Crete de Moutouze and popped out onto a field of near perfect spring snow. Andy had timed it perfectly; we were heading down at midday with several pitches of spring snow which carried us down the 650m to the Refuge. We picked up our overnight gear, headed down the valley floor for about five kilometres before heading up through the woods on the north side of the valley to the beautiful Refuge de Ricou.

From this Refuge de Ricou, and on our last evening in the mountains, we looked south across the valley to the areas where we had spent the past few days and could retrace our journey in a perfect sunset. The following morning we headed north east from the hut and climbed 800m to the Lac Blanc which gave us access on the far side to the Val Vallon and a ski down to the valley road. We finished the tour in classic ski touring fashion, skiing and walking down a track beside a tributary river in perfect sunshine. We hit the valley road, mercifully still with snow on it, and headed back down to Nevache.

We had a great tour with fine weather, outstanding huts, a beautiful and quiet valley and great company. What are you waiting for?

Party: Andy Perkins (guide), Charlie Cope, Ricky Mak, Russell Price, Mark Serby, Tom Thorne, Anne Winther.