ALPES MARITIMES

By RICHARD AYRTON

(Seven illustrations: nos. 79–85)

'Alpes Maritimes' is the name of a *département* (to use the French term) situated in the south-east part of France. It is roughly comparable to the English word 'county' or the Swiss term 'canton'. This *département* was formed in 1860, out of the county of Nice, to which were added the districts of Grasse (formerly in the *département* of Var) and of Mentone (purchased from the Prince of of Monaco). The population is around 600,000. It is bounded on the north-east by Italy, on the south by the Mediterranean and on the west by the *département* of Var and Basses Alpes. The area is about 1,450 square miles. It is composed mainly of the valleys of the Var and its affluents, the Tinée and Vésubie. Most of it is mountainous, wild and rugged country.

So far as mountaineering is concerned, there are two important centres:

(*a*) Saint Martin-Vésubie (on the French side).

(*b*) Terme di Valdieri (on the Italian side).

In the writer's opinion, a good introduction to the Alpes Maritimes range of mountains is by commencing from Saint Martin-Vésubie.

Dr. Vincent Paschetta, who is the President of the Alpes Maritimes section of the C.A.F., has been indefatigable in his efforts to make known the beauty of these mountains. With this object in view he has published three maps in colour (1:50,000). Map No. 1—Vésubie—is indispensable for the climber. It can be obtained at the publishers, Gérard & Barrère, 17 Rue de l'Ancienne Comédie, Paris VIe; telephone DAN–55.17; or from the Nice section of the C.A.F. (address below). In addition, Dr. Paschetta, in collaboration with M. Jean-Marie Morisset, the young local French mountain guide (who lives in the heart of the range at Saint Dalmas de Valdeblore), has just published a new guide to the Alpes Maritimes. It also can be obtained from the Nice section of the C.A.F. M. Morisset, besides having been responsible in the main for the technical details of nearly all the routes, has written an appendix giving details of twenty-five routes, with diagrams, all graded above the 4th degree with passages of the 5th and 6th degrees. I have climbed with Morisset, and can very highly recommend him. He is expert in both free and artificial climbing, and has done practically all the classical as well as the more difficult routes in the French and Italian sections of the Alpes Maritimes.

The latter half of June or early July is a delightful time to visit this range. Being so near to the Mediterranean, which can easily be seen from the summits on clear days, the mountains are in condition early in the season, particularly as they rarely exceed 3,200 m. At this time of the year there are few tourists and still fewer climbers. It is an ideal area for pre-summer training, i.e. a 'warm-up' for more serious ventures.

In addition, when the weather is bad elsewhere, for example at Chamonix or in the Dauphiné, one is almost sure to find good weather here. In the late spring or early summer the country is a riot of colour—flowers in full bloom, particularly rhododendrons. The district is noted for the different varieties of aromatic plants, and one is constantly surrounded by the exotic scent of lavender, thyme and rosemary. As previously mentioned, the range is partly in France and partly in Italy. It was first explored in the nineteenth century. The real climbing period began in 1878 (and this should interest members of the A.C.) with the arrival of D. W. Freshfield and his French guide, François Dévouassoud. He desired to climb the Argentera in the Italian section, but ascended in error the couloir that bears his name and thus made the first ascent of the Cima di Nasta. The following year, 1879, W. A. B. Coolidge came to the range with the Almers and climbed the four summits of the Argentera, and descended to Entracque and thence to Madone de Fenestre, where he climbed the Gelas and the Clapier, descending its East face.

So far as the French part is concerned, it has already been said that a good centre to start from is Saint Martin-Vésubie (964 m.). It is sixty kilometres north of Nice on the Digne road. It is situated in the centre of the Haute Vésubie range, at the junction of the Boréon and Fenestre valleys. It has several small but good hotels, shops and restaurants. In the vicinity are splendid camping sites. The keys of the local French alpine huts can be obtained at Saint Martin-Vésubie. (There are two or three guides.) Saint Martin-Vésubie has retained its beauty and charm, as it is off the beaten track and the hinterland is remote and rugged. Climbers and walkers should be equipped with the recently published guide-book entitled *Guide Paschetta des Alpes Maritimes*, Éditions du Club Alpin Français, 15 Avenue de la Victoire, Nice. The volume required is No. 2, *Randonnées et Alpinisme*, Part (*b*) entitled 'Saint Martin-Vésubie'.

In addition to the classical routes, some fairly easy, there is Morisset's appendix with the more difficult routes. From Saint Martin-Vésubie, one can start by going to Madone de Fenestre, twelve kilometres away. Here there is a large C.A.F. hut with a resident hut-keeper. The summits to be climbed from there are:

Gelas (3,143 m.); Mont Colomb (2,816 m.); Cayre de la Madone

(2,532 m.); Mont Ponset (2,825 m.); the Neiglier (2,786 m.), with the adjacent Pointe André (2,679 m.) on its West ridge.

A traverse of the West and East ridges of the Pointe André, finishing with the ascent of the Neiglier by its West ridge, is to be recommended as one of the classic excursions. More difficult routes are:

North face of the Petit Cayre de la Madone;
North-west ridge of the Petit Cayre de la Madone;
West ridge of Mont Ponset;
North face of Mont Ponset;
East face of Mont Ponset;
East face of the Cayre Colomb.

These six climbs are graded 4th degree or higher.

The second centre of interest is le Boréon (1,473 m.), eight kilometres from Saint Martin-Vésubie, on the road to La Colmiane. Here there are two possibilities: (*a*) Cougourde, (*b*) Vallon des Erps for the Cayre des Erps and the Pelago.

(*a*) *Cougourde*

A new hut, and it is most comfortable, was built in September, 1964, to serve this region, called Refuge de Cougourde (2,090 m.). There is room for thirty-two persons, and one finds wood stove, buta-gas cooker, and abundant water near by. To get to it one goes from le Boréon up to the Vacherie de Boréon (1,629 m.), $2\frac{1}{2}$ km. up the small path, and from the Vacherie it is a further $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours. From this hut one can climb the Cougourde (four summits). Its ridge marks the French/Italian frontier. The highest point is summit No. 1 (2,921 m.), and is in Italy. The other three summits are 2,912, 2,904 and 2,890 m. respectively and are in France. A traverse of the four summits is to be recommended, commencing with the fourth summit. However, for those who aspire to more difficult routes, the following are suggested:

North ridge direct of the third summit (in appendix, no. E.C. 9);
West-north-west spur of the fourth summit direct (in appendix, no. E.C. 10);
Fourth summit direct (in appendix, no. E.C. 11);
South-west ridge of the fourth summit (in appendix, no. E.C. 12);
South ridge (Spigolo) of the fourth summit (in appendix, no. E.C. 13);
South face (Paroi Jaune, or Yellow Face) of the fourth summit (in appendix, no. E.C. 14).

(*b*) *Vallon des Erps*

Cayre des Erps, North-west ridge (in appendix, no. E.C. 6);
Cayre des Erps, West face (in appendix, no. E.C. 7);
Cayre des Erps, South-west Pillar (in appendix, no. E.C. 8).

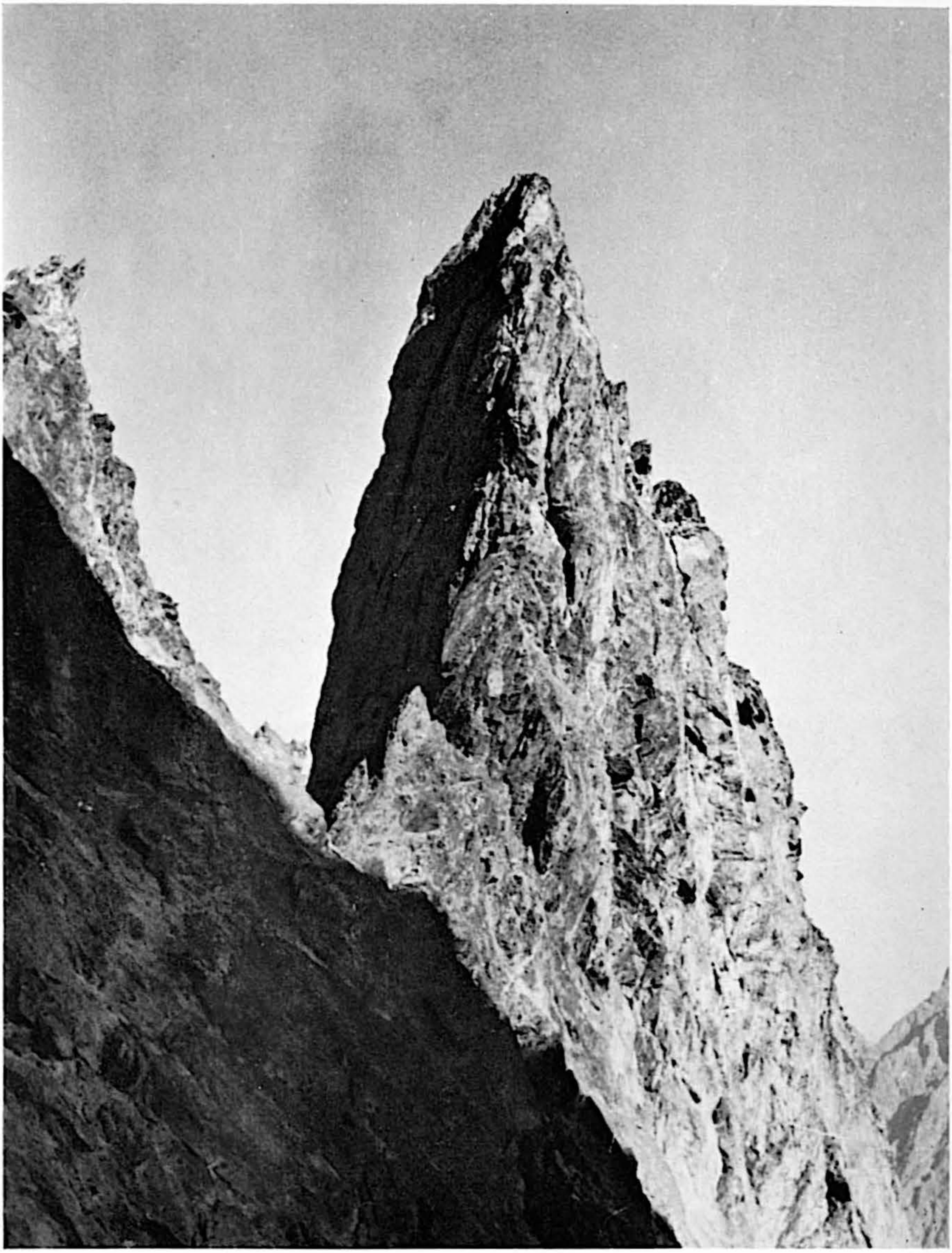


Photo: J–M. Morisset]

CORNO STELLA, SPIGOLO SOUTH-EAST. NORTH FACE IN PROFILE ON RIGHT.

(No. 79)

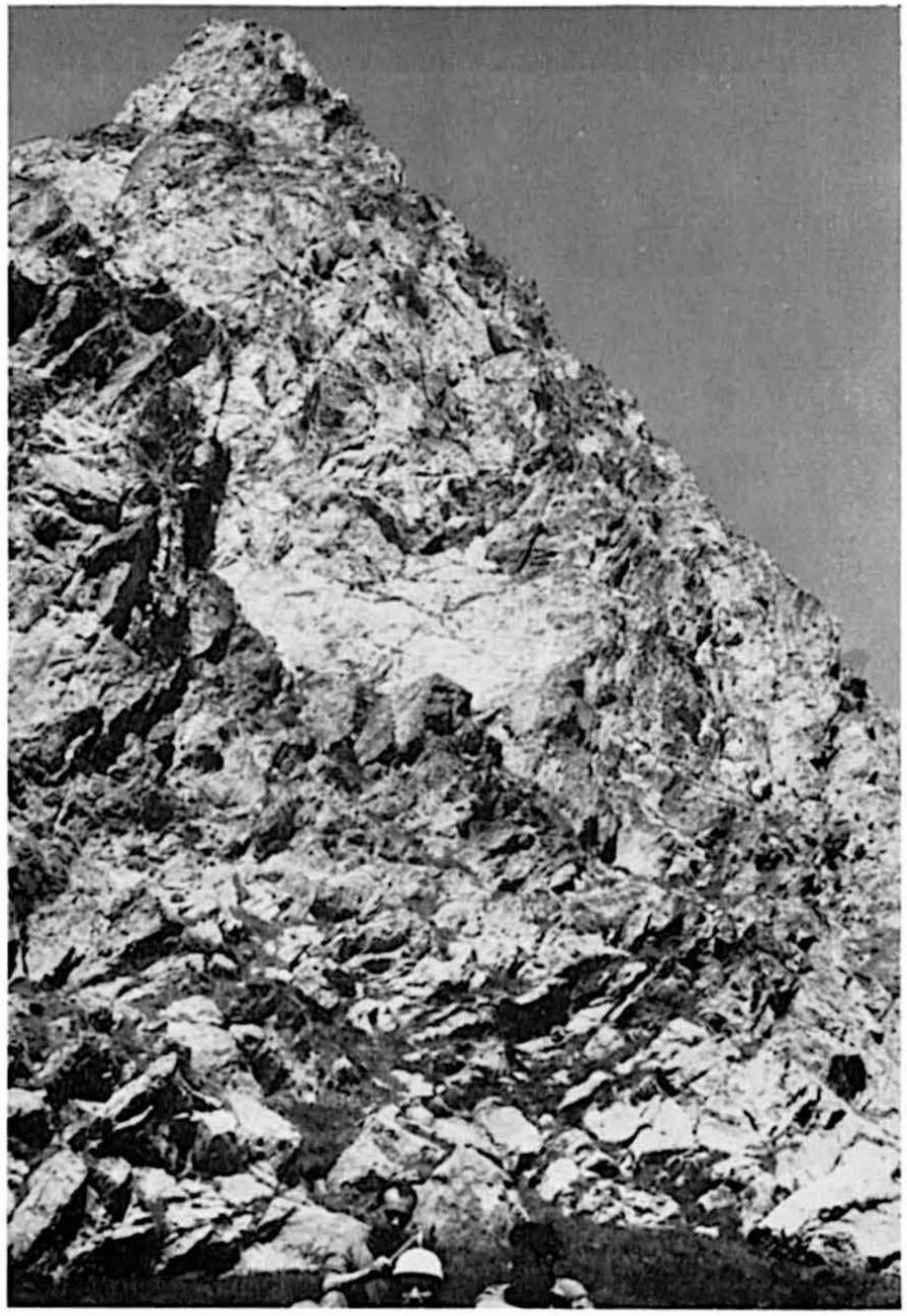


Photo: J–M. Morisset]

CAYRE COLOMB, EAST FACE.

(No. 80)

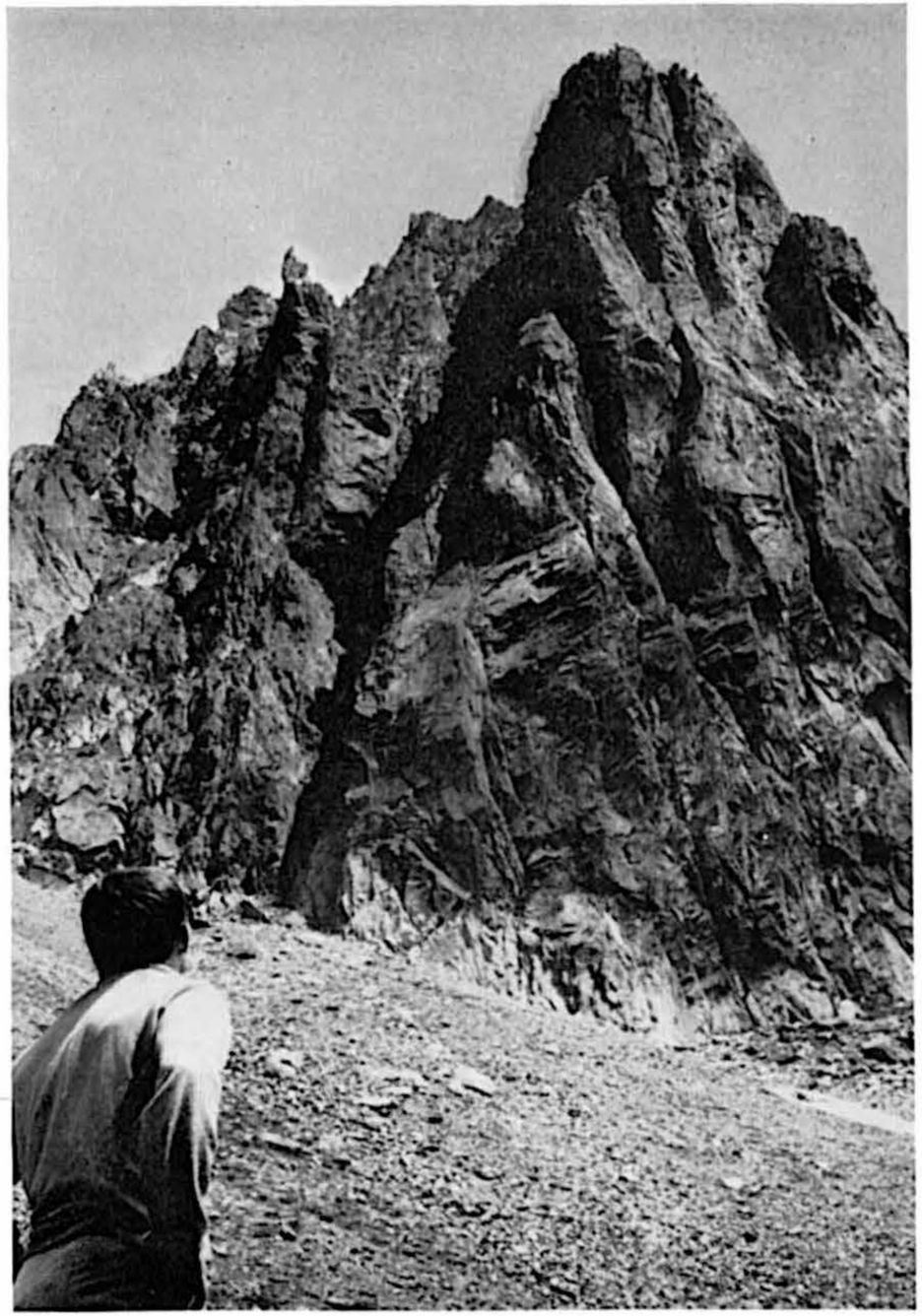


Photo: J–M. Morisset]

CAYRE DES ERPS, NORTH-WEST RIDGE.

(No. 81)

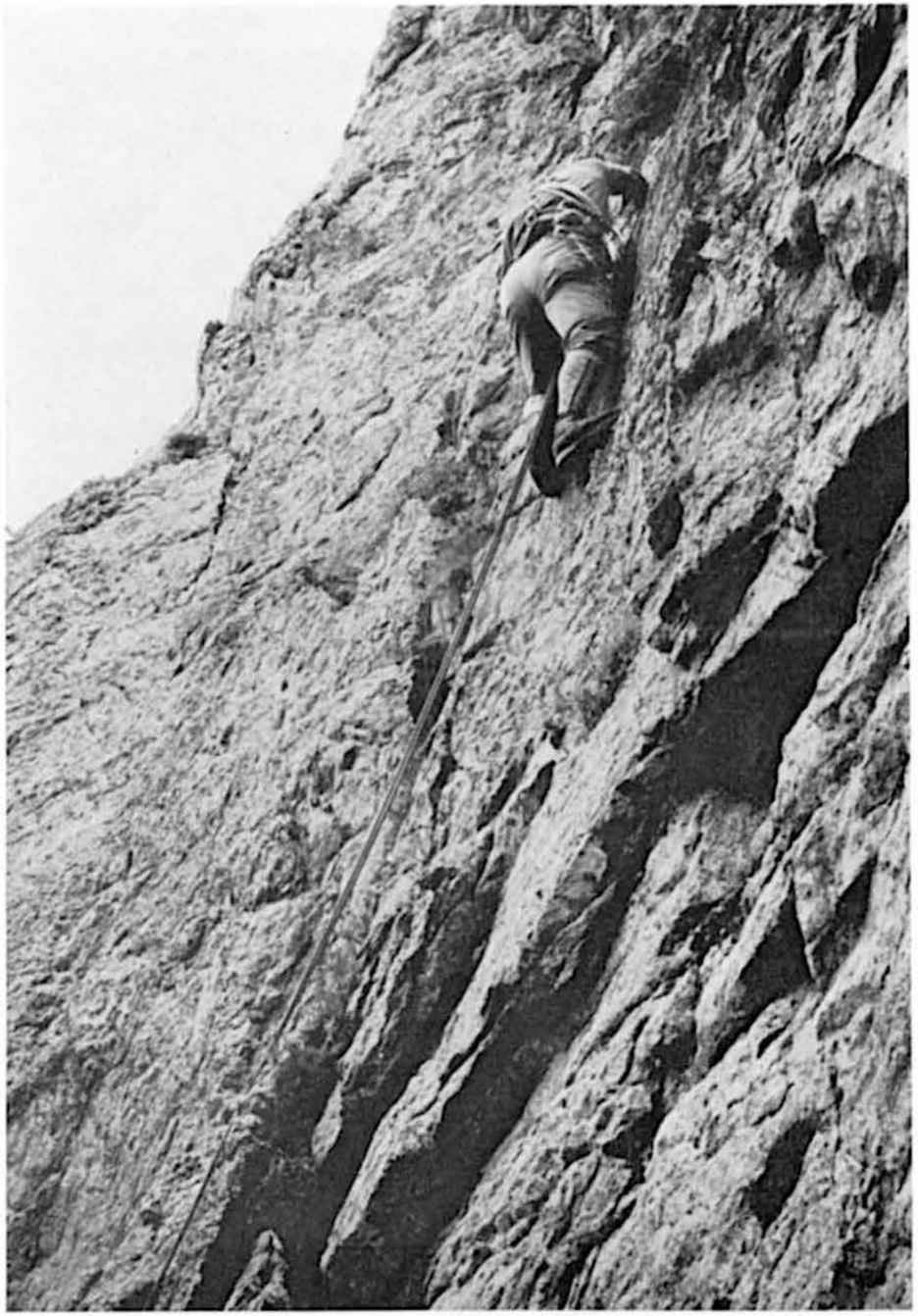


Photo: J–M. Morisset]

On the East face of the Cayre Colomb.

(No. 82)

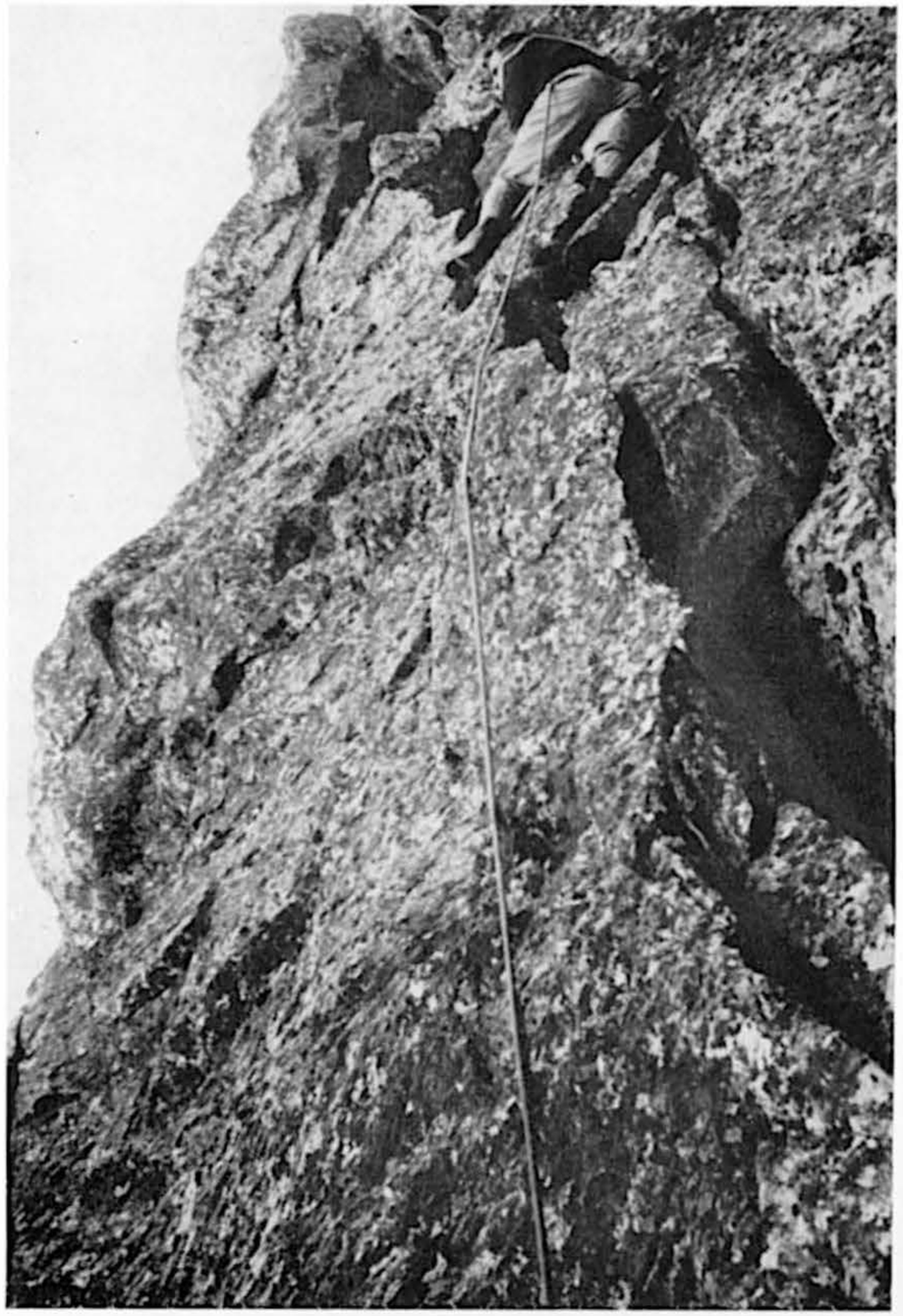


Photo: J–M. Morisset]

On the North-west ridge of the Cayre des Erps.

(No. 83)

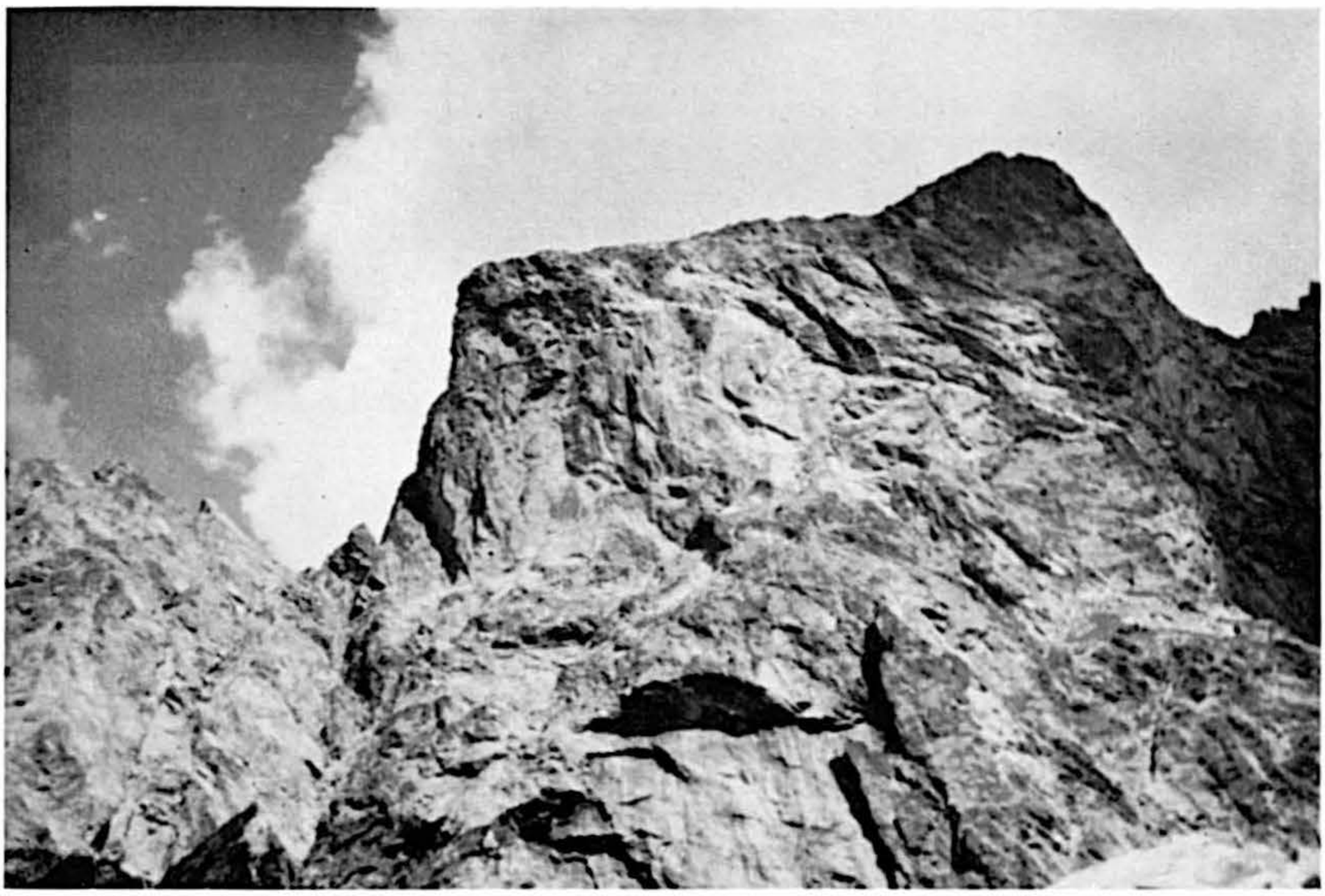


Photo: J-M. Morisset]

CORNO STELLA, SOUTH FACE.

(No. 84)



Photo: J-M. Morisset]

POINTE ANDRÉ.

(No. 85)

These climbs are above the 4th degree and are for trained and experienced climbers. The routes are detailed with accompanying diagrams in the guide-book recently published, referred to above.

I should like to mention here that there are two climbing schools (*écoles d'escalade*) in the region. Here are the details:

1. *Haut Boréon.* 8 km. from Saint Martin-Vésubie on the road to the Col de Salèse, a twenty-minute drive by car. Passages from the 2nd to 6th degree. Height of routes from 15 to 30 m. The rock is gneiss.

2. *Valdeblore.* On the Route Nationale between La Colmiane and Saint Dalmas de Valdeblore, 2 km. from Saint Dalmas and 6 km. from La Bolline; 9 km. from Saint Martin-Vésubie. The height of the routes varies from 10 to 50 m. The rock is limestone (calcaire). Both these climbing schools are fully equipped, i.e. pitoned, and it is expressly forbidden to remove any of the existing pitons or other equipment.

Italian Section

So far as climbs in the Italian section are concerned, the most important centre is Terme di Valdieri (1,368 m.). It is situated in the Gesso valley (Italy). It is a spa renowned for its radioactive mud baths, which people take as a cure for rheumatism. By road from Nice up the Col de Tenda it is 145 km. At Terme there is a small hotel called Albergo Turismo (fifteen beds), quite comfortable. One can obtain food here for excursions, as well as the keys of the following huts (from the proprietor, Signor Piero Ghigo, an Italian mountain guide): 1. Genova; 2. Questa; 3. Bozano.

There are three other huts, viz.: 4. Morelli; 5. Remondino; 6. Varrone, the keys of which are to be had at Saint Anna, 4 to 5 km. from Terme di Valdieri. For those who desire to pass from the French to the Italian section on foot, the route is from le Boréon over the Col de Cérise (2,543 m.). This takes three hours up and then $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours down to Terme di Valdieri. Full details are given in the guide-book, p. 129.

So far as the climbing is concerned, I suggest:

Argentera Group

1. Cima di Nasta (3,108 m.) (*a*) by the North face (first climbed by D. W. Freshfield, September 27, 1878); (*b*) by the Spigolo de la Nasta; (*c*) by the West spur of the North-west summit.

2. L'Argentera. This mountain has three principal itineraries. The easiest route to the highest summit (there are four in all) is from the Morelli hut to the North summit (route 527). The highest summit is, however, the South Peak, which one reaches from the Remondino

hut (route 525). The easiest climb on the West face is the couloir Gunther (route 528*b*) from the Bozano hut.

3. Corno Stella. The normal route is quoted 'D'. All descents are by rappel (there are four to be made). There are a number of quite difficult routes up this famous mountain. Some of them require artificial means. I list a selection of them:

North face direct (first climbed in 1962), rated E.D.
South face direct (first climbed in 1960), rated E.D.
Spigolo North-west, dièdre route, rated T.D. sup.
Route Cavalieri to the lower summit.
South wall of the lower summit (Route Campia), rated T.D.
Spigolo South-east, rated T.D.

The Alpes Maritimes offer a great variety of routes, from easy to very hard—i.e. from the 2nd degree to the 6th degree. For non-climbers there are splendid walks and excursions to be made. But these are to be found more in the French part, as there is more snow on the Italian side; and the mountains there are more severe, and the weather too. Therefore, for those who desire to climb in the Italian section, an ice-axe and crampons are necessary until, say, the end of July. Although the weather is usually fine, it is liable to change with great rapidity during the spring and autumn; hence one should be equipped with warm clothing which is usually taken for high alpine regions. A pair of étriers for more difficult routes should be taken as well as some pitons and wooden wedges.

Addresses

C.A.F., Nice Section, 15 Avenue de la Victoire, Nice (for Paschetta guide-book).

Gérard & Barrère, 17 Rue de l'Ancienne Comédie, Paris VIe (for maps).

Jean-Marie Morisset, French Mountain Guide, Saint Dalmas de Valdeblore, La Colmiane (A.M.). Telephone: 514 Saint Dalmas de Valdeblore.

There is an Italian guide-book for the Italian section only. It is called the *Guide Pastine*, and can be obtained from Signor Ghigo, proprietor of the Albergo Turismo at Terme di Valdieri. It is in Italian and was published in 1964.

The Paschetta guide-books and maps are obtainable in England from Thomas J. Gaston, Bookseller, 13/14 Bishop's Court, Chancery Lane, London, W.C.2.