

In Terra de Romagne

Alan Heppenstall

'The Gran Sasso?—you'd be wasting your time.' We were sitting in the Torino hut one day during a typical bad season when the weather never becomes fine for more than a few hours at a time. We were discussing plans, and as the Dolomites had already proved abortive I had proposed a solution almost of desperation—to visit a mysterious group of limestone peaks about which I had heard vaguely, the Gran Sasso d'Italia, lying 500 miles away to the south, just east of Rome. I plucked up courage to ask an Italian sitting next to us if he knew anything about these mountains. Smilingly he shook his head: 'Il Gran Sasso? No, lì non c'è gran ché!' Nothing much there was the verdict. In those days I knew little of the 'stratification' of Italy: you don't admit the existence of anything's where you yourself live. Enthusiasm waned, however: 500 miles was a long way to go on what might be a wild goose chase, and the idea lapsed. The Gran Sasso remained a mystery.

Chance had it that in September 1969 I was sent by my company to do a three-year tour of duty in Rome. I drove out in the space of an ordinary weekend. Climbing was far from my thoughts, let alone exploring unknown ranges. But gradually as the settling-in process advanced my interest in mountains returned. Clearly the first stage was to make contact with the local branch of the CAI, so I looked up the address and went along one Friday night. This was evidently correct because the place was swarming with typical climbing types, dressed much as the species does all over the world. I must have looked quite out of place in my smart office suit! Still, when it came to light that I had a car and had done a few routes considered 'sesto grado', that was enough: weekend outings were ensured as often as I wanted them. I was monstrously unfit, but a trip to the Gran Sasso was arranged for the following Sunday.

That trip was a disaster. I remember we left Rome at 5am on a Sunday morning in mid-October: even at that hour with the sun just rising, the temperature was already in the 70s. By contrast it was freezing hard as we swung up the chair lift and plodded up the path to the foot of our climb. The sun came out as we roped up and it immediately became stifling. We were doing a short route on a minor rock pinnacle, graded V inf, but with lack of sleep, general unfitness and the blazing sun I found it desperate (it was probably about medium VS in retrospect). The moment the sun disappeared the temperature rocketed down again, and as I shivered my way down the chair lift to the car-park (needless to say I was totally unprepared for freezing temperatures, having misjudged, or just forgotten, the height of these mountains) I wondered if that was the last I would see of the 'mysterious' Gran Sasso. Next day I developed a severe chill which put me out of action for a week.

Luckily not long after that it snowed, so it was possible to leave the high



Map 4 The major mountain groups of Italy

* Denotes outcrops on which climbing has been recorded

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| 1) Monte Argentario | 2) Monte Morra |
| 3) Monte Leano | 4) Gaeta sea-cliffs |
| 5) Capri | |

mountains alone and climb on the outcrops near the city of Rome. After the new year, outcrop climbing was interspersed with ski-ing trips to higher levels, and with these and some walking expeditions I began to acquire a better knowledge of the geography of the Central Apennines.

The highest mountains in the Apennines occur in an area E and NE of Rome. There are perhaps six main groups: the Ernici (with Monte Viglio the biggest summit), the Monte Velino group, the mountains of the Abruzzi national park, the Maiella, the Vettore/Gorzano group, and of course the Gran Sasso itself, which at the summit of Corno Grande reaches 2912 m above sea-level. This summit has the distinction of being the highest peak in the Apennines, and with the exception of Mount Etna, the highest in Italy outside the Alps. Indeed, its height compares favourably with many of the Dolomites, being similar to the Catinaccio and Brenta, and only slightly lower than the Lavaredo peaks. Unlike the Dolomites there are none of the glistening spires of rock leaping up from grassy meadows hereabouts; instead much of the Apennines is little more than a limestone Sahara, rolling mountain shapes with their sides eroded into steep gorges and dry hanging valleys. In winter they are snow-covered and featureless, and in summer they are parched by the sun. The flanks are often wooded up to a height of about 2000 m, and where the trees have succeeded in keeping their hold vegetation flourishes: but elsewhere the over-exuberant efforts of the local peasants have taken their toll. Only thorn bushes and occasional shrubs grow on the stony slopes, and of course the ubiquitous olives. In spring with the melting of the snow, grass and flowers flourish, but these do not long survive the hot sun of the midsummer months.

Surprisingly the Apennines are quite thickly populated, on account of the many hill villages dotted over the area. These are nearly always built on hill-tops and can be extremely backward: oxen pull carts up the main streets and women dressed in black carry bundles on their heads as they must have done for centuries. Occasionally a village is devastated by an earthquake and the inhabitants are forced to leave, but otherwise they continue to eke a living out of the poor soil.

56 *The Campo Felice* This and next photo: A. Heppenstall



A strange feature of the mountain groups in this part of Italy are the high-level plateaux, called in Italian *campi*. Quite unexpectedly, after crossing a mountain pass, you will discover a flat grassy expanse only just below your level, and often extending for miles. The mountains form a rim round the edge, and often it is not obvious where there is an outflow for water, if any. Not that the water needs any outflow in this limestone country; it normally filters through the bedrock to reappear as a village spring, and it is rare to find a valley with a stream in it. Centuries ago the Central Apennines had more water and lakes. In Roman times the huge basin under Monte Velino where the town of Avezzano now stands was a lake, giving life and fertility to the nearby hills. Because it was unhealthy and malaria-ridden the Romans drained it—an incredible feat involving the boring of a tunnel through the mountains surrounding the basin to allow the water to flow out into the river Liri. This operation must have had the effect of drying out the whole region, leaving it in its present arid state.

The biggest and most startling *campo* is Campo Imperatore, situated in the Gran Sasso group itself at a height of over 1500 m. It is oblong in shape and enclosed by a rim of mountains, one side of which is the main ridge of the Gran Sasso. At one end, on the rim, stands the Campo Imperatore hotel, the normal starting point for ascending Corno Grande from the s and for reaching the climbing on the E face of the peak. It is also a winter sports centre, with a number of ski runs down into the basin of Campo Imperatore and tows back out again. In spite of these, the *campo* is a serious place in winter once off the beaten track: remote and inescapable, in a blizzard it assumes the qualities of an Arctic plateau.

Apart from the excellent walking and ski-touring which all the areas offer, there are a number of cliffs dotted around the lesser groups which have received attention. Reports of the first ascents of the routes (few have had more than one!) read more like scripts of horror films than mountaineering accounts: one gathers that the routes were only completed because the protagonists considered other ways out of the situations encountered to be still less inviting!

Luckily the Gran Sasso, which offers by far the biggest scope, is less hair-raising (although it is still true to say that some of the routes contain rock as bad as any on which I have climbed). The bulk of the climbing occurs on the twin peaks of Corno Grande and Corno Piccolo. To understand the topography of this area it must be remembered that these two peaks are not actually on the watershed of the Gran Sasso but slightly to the N of it. Monte Aquila on the main ridge is connected with Corno Grande by a col, ending against the steep rocky face of its w summit; the ridge then splits, one branch going NNW by way of the Sella dei Due Corni to Corno Piccolo, and the other NE over the other three summits of Corno Grande (Torrione Cambi, the Central summit and the E summit). Between the two ridges, nestling in a bay just below the w summit, is the glacier of the Calderoni; this is the only permanent snow in the Central Apennines and provides a straightforward route to the summit of Corno Grande. Below the glacier a desolate rocky basin opens out, enclosed on one side by the fine E face of Corno Piccolo and on the other by the immense slabs which border the NE face of Corno Grande. In this basin the CAI, Rome

and even occasionally genuine rock! Somewhere lost in this maze is a butterfly-shaped piece of yellow rock: this is the *farfalla*, actually a 240-m overhanging cliff which so far has waited in vain for the assaults of the technicians with their ironmongery.

Apart from the two or three routes scaling the 'big wall' from the valley floor, climbing is restricted to the upper parts where more continuous rock is found. The E face, below the E and Central summits, is more easily accessible, as a footpath, equipped at several points with fixed ropes and ladders, traverses across from the Sella di Corno Grande to end at a bivouac box perched high above the valley on a ledge below the Central summit.

The summer after my disastrous trip to the Gran Sasso I did a route on this face, leading up to the summit of Torrione Cambi, and traversed the ridge to the w summit. The following May I went back to do my first Grade VI in the Gran Sasso, the *direttissima* leading up the E face of the w summit: it was quite early and the slopes all round were snow-covered. The first two pitches of VI led up a flared crack system which marked the boundary between the main cliff and a buttress of considerable decrepitude, which seemed quite likely to part company with the mountain at any moment. The whole structure seemed distinctly shaky (actually it is quite normal for this type of limestone), and I was not encouraged by the discovery that a good kick aimed at random dislodged the whole surface of the rock for several square inches and sent it splintering down into the depths. After a few pitches this initial steep section gave on to slabs, smooth, but sounder, reminiscent of the back of an elephant. My main impression of this route, and others like it, was the great difficulty of arranging protection, since neither the rotten cracks nor the slabs offered much scope for pegs.

In summer 1970 I went with my (then) fiancée to attempt one of the routes on the upper part of the *paretone*—the left-hand of three pillars, all of which have been climbed though one still awaits a second ascent. It was an awe-inspiring experience. We started from the Franchetti hut at the crack of dawn and climbed almost to the top of the E summit, at which point a gully revealed itself leading down into the heart of the *paretone*. We had to descend this gully to reach the base of the pillars where our route lay. It was generally easy-angled and easy enough not to have to rope up, but every now and again progress was interrupted by steeper steps involving traversing here and there, and often we were puzzled as to the whereabouts of the best line of descent. The walls on our right got bigger and bigger, and I soon began to realise we had embarked on a major exploit. The loneliness was oppressive: black clouds came up and swirled around the buttresses, seeming to cut off our retreat upwards.

It was 10am when at last we identified our pillar, 600 m of Grade V, only done perhaps five or six times to date, and leading up into ominous black clouds that were still gathering—500 m of descent for 600 m of re-ascent! I was sure we were in for a storm, and did not fancy an epic in that place. So a new idea took shape. Why not descend the whole face, taking the opportunity of studying the *farfalla* at close quarters on the way? There was theoretically

a route all the way, and it was only a question of reading the guide carefully (in reverse!) to find it. So we set off again and soon traversed out of the gully on to a series of terraces. A salvo of falling stones speeded us on our way. We followed the terraces across and down until suddenly there was the *farfalla*, its yellow wings rearing towards the sky, poised as if to leap on its prey. Below it we had to negotiate an evil expanse of debris-covered slabs, all of 120 m across, which the guide-book, in typical blasé fashion, mentioned were shattered 'due to being continually bombarded by rock-fall from the *farfalla*'. We edged our way across apprehensively and reached the other side with heartfelt relief. Now we had below us a huge grass-field, which several hundred feet lower ended above another series of rock steps. We had to hit this off just right in order to find the way through the rocks to a col below, at which point we would be out of difficulty. The key seemed to be to keep right, cross a subsidiary gully, traverse the next buttress and join a series of easy grassy chimneys beyond leading to the col. It took some time to find a way into the gully, and eventually we had to abseil down a bank of vertical earth, which did at least tie up with the guide-book description. Now an alarmingly steep grass slope led up round the corner: we clambered across precariously, thinking of the cliffs below. Then at last—joy! the crucial series of chimney/dièdres became obvious and there were even traces here of earlier parties. From the col we still had around 600 m of an easy grassy couloir to descend: we slithered down, begrudging only the long re-ascent to the Franchetti hut that awaited us.

The soundest rock on the Gran Sasso, which is as good as any limestone I know, is that found on Corno Piccolo; this factor, combined with the easier access, makes this peak the most popular climbing ground in the Apennines. There are basically three climbing areas: the shoulders, the E face overlooking the Franchetti hut, and the 'Fiamme di Pietra' (flames of rock), a cluster of pinnacles sitting astride the ridge alongside the Sella dei Due Corni and including Campanile Livia, the scene of my October epic, and its twin, Punta dei Due, which boasts a fine, hard route put up by Gervasutti in the 1930s.

The E face of Corno Piccolo is perhaps the finest piece of pure rock in the Gran Sasso. In its continual right-hand half it is 300 m high and contains three excellent routes (with others further left) and scope for new hard developments. Apart from an attempt at a new route which fizzled out after three hours of strenuous and insecure pegging, I climbed all three existing routes, the Crepa, the Crepa Buttress and another further over, known merely as the right-hand route. The Crepa Buttress is thought to be the hardest free route in the Gran Sasso at present, and still enjoys a considerable, though exaggerated, reputation. In PAs, on a fine but reasonably cool day, none of the pitches seemed particularly hard: even a certain notorious short wall, scene I was told of more than one peel, was no more daunting, say, than the last pitch of Unknown Gully in the Avon Gorge, and it did have the odd protection peg!

Apart from Corno Grande and Corno Piccolo, the Gran Sasso has the occasional other offering of interest to the climber. Two peaks to the w, Pizzo d'Intermesoli and Pizzo Cefalone have rock faces on which climbs have been recorded, the former presenting to the NE a whole valley wall which appears



57 *Crepa
Buttress*

58 *The Apuan Alps*
Photo: Italian
Government
Tourist Office

almost as intricate as the *paretone*. There is one other face, surpassing all in notoriety, the gruesome N face of Monte Camicia, at the E end of the chain. This presents 1300 m of near-vertical rottenness, up which four parties to date are known to have clawed their way. Though a route description of the first ascent is published, no subsequent party has managed to adhere to it, each preferring to make its own way up the mouldering slabs. Perhaps these change year by year, like a shifting glacier!

The Gran Sasso also provides fine mountain walking for those who for one reason or another prefer not to venture on to its rock walls. It is possible to traverse from hut to hut, and the group has many interesting ridges, giving good scrambling in summer or winter. The traverse of the whole of the Gran Sasso chain is a fine expedition, normally taking three days, and recently this has been combined with the Maiella to the SE, providing an even longer trek.

The Gran Sasso, and the other groups near it, have become easily accessible by the construction of a new *autostrada* linking Rome with Avezzano and L'Aquila, the two main centres for exploring the area. The L'Aquila branch is at present being extended through a tunnel which is being hacked right under the Gran Sasso range to take the *autostrada* to the Adriatic coast: this will make the NE side more accessible, but at no small cost!



I have dwelt on the Gran Sasso at some length because it is the area which provides the best all-round mountaineering, though for general mountain interest it is neither better nor worse than the other Central Apennine groups. But on one or two occasions I was lucky enough to branch further afield and see some totally different areas.

West of Florence, where the main chain of the Apennines sweeps round close to the Italian Riviera coast, and just E of the port of La Spezia, is a group of limestone peaks known as the Apuan Alps. Their height above sea level is relatively low (less than 2000 m) and they are fairly small in area. Interest from the climbing point of view focuses on one of the peaks, Pizzo d'Uccello, which has a fine N face almost 900 m in height. This was climbed several decades ago by Nino Oppio, and though the route has lost much of its original reputation, it remains a testing exercise if only because of its length. It was the objective of periodic incursions on the part of climbers from Rome, and the week-end after I did the Crepa Buttress I joined one of these trips. We spent the night in a delightful village called Equi Terme, which looked as if it had come straight from Roman times with its cobbled pathways—I hesitate to call them streets—and tiny, doorless stone houses. We rose at 4am and drove up the valley below Pizzo d'Uccello to where the track gave out in quarry workings. Above us the valley became lost in huge ramparts of curving limestone slabs,

sweeping up from the edges until they joined in a single wall leading up the summit of Pizzo d'Uccello. We walked up on grass and moraine debris and started to climb. I was leading the last rope (three in all), and my main memories are of incredible tugs-of-war as my two 9-mm ropes dragged heavily across the slabs; long unprotected run-outs with poor belays and few runners, and above all the sustained nature of the climbing. Insecurity was something I had grown used to in the Apennines, but that combined with the rope drag and the length of the route began to make me quite worried. Fresh problems were added when we reached the final chimneys: these were the technical crux with pitches of V sup, but above all they formed a perfect channel for anything dislodged from above (and there was plenty of that!). One person was almost knocked off his stance by a sizeable rock, and this was taken as a signal to join up as a rope of six (I did not wield enough authority, nor feel sufficient enthusiasm for the climb to abstain from this motion!). The last two pitches to the summit made me wonder why the whole mountain did not fall down—then at 6pm we were on top.

The descent was like an excursion into oblivion. We just succeeded in getting off the exposed ridge section by nightfall, and dived into a wilderness of steep meadows and pitch-black forests. We seemed totally lost, but managed to steer in the right direction. The stars came out and twinkled faintly. Paths appeared and disappeared, criss-crossing our line of descent: some of them we tried to follow, but they all traversed the hillside instead of descending it, and buried themselves in undergrowth. Mostly we slid on our backs down the grass, said to be infested by vipers during the day, or swung from tree to tree. It seemed interminable, but at last a gleam from below announced the road: it was deep in a cutting there and it took another twenty minutes to reach it. It was 2am. My last memory of the Apuan Alps is of sitting bemused on a rock swallowing pineapple chunks from a tin while someone retrieved the car: it was muggy and warm and the air was alive with the gleam of fireflies. A six-hour drive would see us back to Rome at 8 o'clock on the Monday morning: an hour for a bath and to change, and into the office!

No stay in Italy would be complete without an excursion into the 'deep south', by which I mean roughly the area from Naples southwards. This is a fascinating region, rarely discovered by most tourists except perhaps for the more popular coastal towns. Connoisseurs of mountains might be struck by the presence of two volcanoes—Vesuvius and Etna—both of which, however, are equipped with roads and chair lifts and are readily accessible. Apart from these the landscape consists of one mountain ridge after another, excepting in the 'heel' which is mainly flat. Barren limestone plateaux, such as Monte Accellica and the Cilento near Salerno, give way to the lush sandstone mountains of the Sila further down the Calabrian peninsula. This whole area has now become accessible due to the (virtual) completion of the Salerno-Reggio Calabria motorway, which takes a high route down through the mountains of the 'toe'. Itself a tourist attraction with its tunnels and sky-searing viaducts, it takes four lanes of traffic through 250 miles of rugged terrain.

Climbing possibilities exist in the s, but apart from a little sea-cliff climbing

on the island of Capri, only one area appears to have been looked at, the Alburni group, just s of and inland from Salerno. This is a limestone plateau, tree-covered, with an escarpment of cliffs to the N. These reach 300 m in places. Two or three remote hill-villages hug the foot of the escarpment and from these ancient mule-tracks lead up the slopes of chestnut and olive groves and zig-zag through the rock buttresses to reach the plateau above. There is one route here, a 180-m Grade V put up by the CAI, Rome, during an Easter meet, and endless possibilities.



59 *Limestone crags in the Alburni range* Photo: A. Heppenstall

We visited the Alburni twice, once at Easter and once early in November. We stayed in a so-called 'motel' just below the main village, Postiglione: this establishment was run by a curious character called Joe, who had emigrated to the United States from this village early in his life, and returned at the age of 70 to put his savings into this doubtful enterprise. It was a bleak, windswept spot on a shoulder of the mountain, and both times we went there lashed by rain and a cutting E wind. The tops of the Alburni were white with snow and we had to restrict our activities to walking up various paths to the plateau. In the village the inhabitants, dressed in the inevitable black, sat in the square or in their open doorways and watched us go by in silence. Did they wonder who we were or what we were doing? Needless to say, caution is needed by climbers

here: rescue services are non-existent and the villagers could not be relied upon to take any action in an emergency. Probably climbing should not be undertaken except if a party of five or six is there together. Nevertheless the area is one of great charm and character, more reminiscent of the Middle Ages than the twentieth century, and mountain-walkers would be rewarded at the right time of year (May–June) by fine walks across the plateau. Climbers too could satisfy their desire for uncharted rock, though it is doubtful if their efforts would ever achieve lasting fame!

I left Italy with a sense of nostalgia and a desire to return and see more of these curious mountain areas. Not to do hard routes, though these are no doubt there to be done, but just to explore, to visit remote areas, to tread the weird *campi*, to follow the rocky skeletons of the limestone ridges, and last, though not least, to be able to settle comfortably into a mountain *osteria* at the end of the day to drink local red wine and eat spaghetti and spicy sausages cooked over cinders in the hearth. When all is said and done, Italy retains all its better-known attractions—the beaches, the sun, the history, the culture and the excellent food and wine.

Guide-books

Three guide-books published by the CAI cover the Apuan Alps and Central Apennines:

- 1 *Alpi Apuane*
- 2 *Gran Sasso d'Italia*
- 3 *Apennino Centrale*

There are in addition numerous articles, available from the Rome Section of the CAI, on the Alburni, the Rome outcrops and Monte Accellica.