Above and Below the Snow-line

Days in the Alpi Apuane

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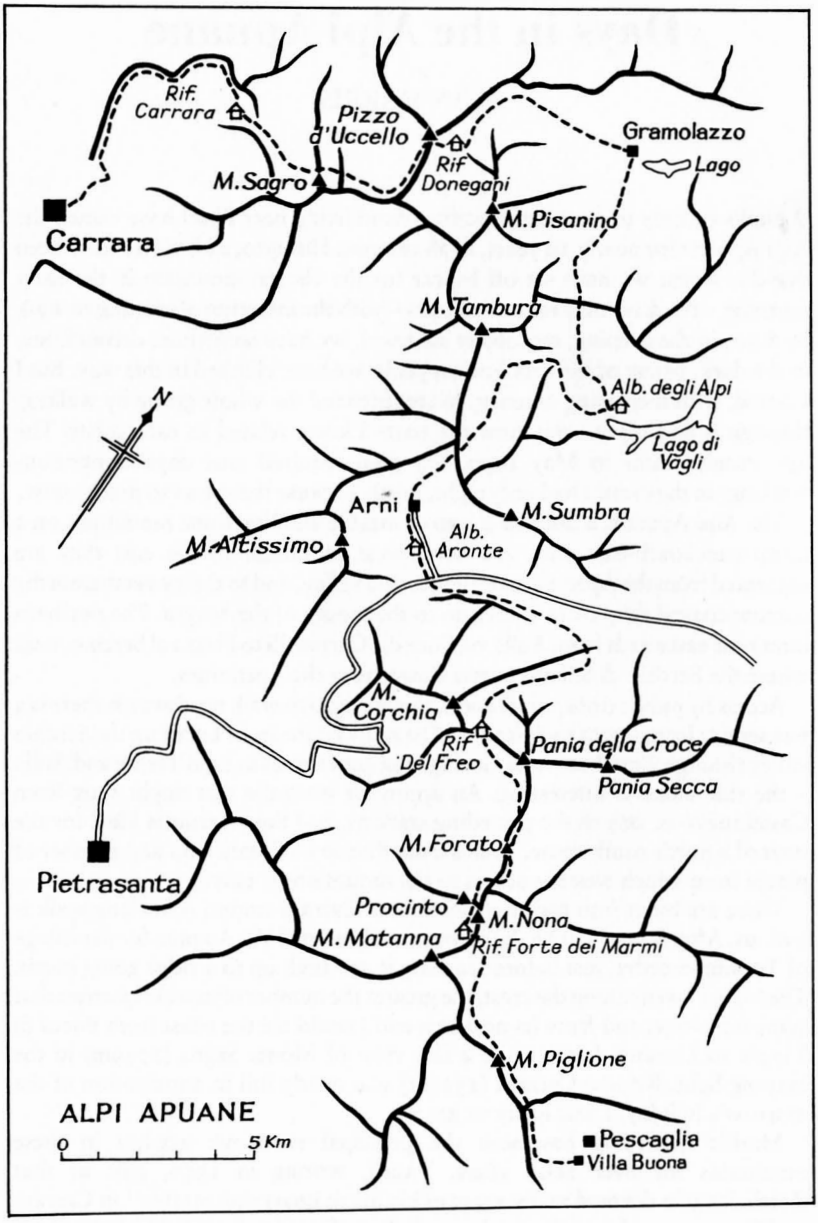
Thanks entirely to a mountaineering friend living near Pisa I have visited the Alpi Apuane for nearly 20 years, in all seasons. Hitherto, all but two have been one-day visits: we have set off by car for the chosen mountain in the early morning – the drive may take two hours – with the intention of starting to walk by 8.30; in the evening, our object achieved, we have sometimes driven home in the dark. Many of the best-known peaks we have climbed in this way. But I wanted, with increasing urgency, to comprehend the whole group by walking through it and discovering how the parts I knew related to each other. The opportunity came in May 1990. My plan required nine days' continuous walking: in the event I had only eight, partly because there was so much snow.

The Alpi Apuane, a discrete group of marble and limestone mountains on a north-west/south-east axis, are north-west of Lucca. In the east they are separated from the Apennines by the Serchio valley, and to their west there is the narrow coastal strip from Viareggio to the mouth of the Magra. The northern limit runs eastwards from Aulla via Foce dei Carpinelli to Piazza al Serchio, near where the Serchio di Sillano comes down from the Apennines.

Access by public transport is good. If one wants to walk northwards there is a bus service from Lucca to Pescaglia. The railway line from Lucca up the Serchio valley through Castelnuovo di Garfagnana goes across to Equi Terme and Aulla – the ride alone is interesting. An approach from the east might start from Castelnuovo or one of the preceding stations, and Equi Terme is ideal for the start of a north-south route. Trains from Pisa to La Spezia stop at a number of places from which western access to the mountains is easy.

There are buses into the busy town from Carrara station – the long walk is tedious. After lunch I left by the appropriately named Via Apuana for the village of Torano in order, just before reaching it, to climb up to a ridge going north. The higher I went along the crest, the greater the number of marble quarries that came into view, and from its northern end I could see the coast from Bocca di Magra to Livorno. Later I had a fine view of Monte Sagro (1749m) in the evening light. Rifugio Carrara (1320m) was nearly full in anticipation of the morrow's holiday. I was lucky to get in.

Marble quarrying has been the principal economic activity in these mountains for over 2000 years. Vasari, writing in 1550, tells us that 'Michelangelo devoted many years of his life to quarrying marble'[1] in Carrara and Seravezza, a few miles to the south-east. Douglas Freshfield wrote of the imminent supercession by railways of the haulage teams of oxen about which Charles Dickens had been so indignant.[2] Now, over 100 years later, there is little trace of that railway system. The tracks have become roads and lorries bring the blocks (sometimes 20 tons each) down to the marble working towns


Rif. Carrara
Pizzo d'Uccello
Rif. Donegani
Gramolazzo
Lago
M. Sagro
M. Pisanino
Carrara
M. Tambura
Alb. degli Alpi
Lago di Vagli
N
Arni
M. Sumbra
M. Altissimo
Alb. Aronte
M. Corchia
Rif. Del Freo
Pania della Croce
Pania Secca
M. Forato
Pietrasanta
Procinto
M. Nona
M. Matanna
Rif. Forte dei Marmi
M. Piglione
ALPI APUANE
0
5 Km
Pescaglia
Villa Buona

of the coastal strip. Today the incredible labour of building roads, cutting the marble and transporting it to places where it can be worked has been much reduced by the use of bulldozers, huge cranes and articulated lorries. In the process, of course, ever greater caverns are gouged in the sides of valleys, and mountain tops are levelled. Quarrying is a dangerous occupation: on average one man is killed each month (1989).

On May Day I set out eastwards for the Faneletto Pass (1430m). Quarries were much in evidence at first, though nobody was working. From the pass onwards, the path was mostly snow-covered. At Foce di Rasori my route went north past Capanna Garnerone – an unmanned hut with 18 bed spaces – towards Pizzo d'Uccello, before turning east again up to Foce di Giovo (1496m), my highest point that day. The descent through more snow led to a maze of quarries and then to Rifugio Donegani (1150m), my stop for the night. I had seen spring gentians for the first time in these mountains, and heard running water, also rare, from the melting snow (the snow-line was at about 1000m). The lower trees, mostly beech and chestnut, were showing their new leaves; the higher ones were still bare.

Rifugio Donegani, which has 70 beds, can be reached by car and was swarming with people at the end of the day; but I was the only night-stopper. It is a convenient first stop on the way southwards from Equi Terme in a day which could include an ascent of Pizzo d'Uccello (1781m) by the normal route,[3] and it is also the hut from which to climb Monte Pisanino (1946m), the highest mountain in the Alpi Apuane. In November 1989, after an early drive from Pisa, two of us had completed in nine hours an anti-clockwise circuit of Pizzo d'Uccello which had left me exhausted. It is a long, rough walk. Once we had reached the ridge from the hut, the route continued with a 550m *via ferrata* descent into the southern end of the Solco d'Equi below the mountain's N face, which offers the finest climbing cliffs in the whole area.

The snow gave the cirque south of the hut a marvellous alpine aspect. There was also a lot of it in the two passes I had planned to cross, Foce di Cardeto (1680m) and Passo della Focolaccia (1650m), but the hut guardian strongly advised me not to attempt that route. I would be alone, without an ice-axe; nobody else would be going that way for days. The guardian implied, though was tactful enough not to say so, that I was too old to be let loose in such circumstances! Besides, I had promised wife and friends not to do anything unwise, so – although I had seen the snow from the train – my being without an ice-axe was deliberate. Discretion won and I opted for a low route through the villages of Gramolazzo and Gorfigliano – hardly mountaineering, but all new to me. I was particularly regretful because my planned route eastwards from Passo della Focolaccia (where quarrying has shattered the pass) would have enabled me to renew my acquaintance with Tambura (1890m), where I had once had an enjoyable winter climb.

The Serchio di Gramolazzo, now refreshed with snow melt, runs in the valley just below the Donegani hut, so I decided to follow that rather than walk down the road. Four dogs from the hut followed me, ignoring all my exhortations to return home. The stream entered a gorge which soon became impassable without wading. Unlike the dogs, I was not in a wading mode, so I turned aside

and found my way up to the road. By then the valley was thickly wooded – indeed, one of my discoveries that week was the extensive forest cover over the lower slopes of the mountains. Soon I found a path down to the stream again and all the way into Gramolazzo.

I reported the dogs to the *carabinieri*, who were neither interested nor helpful. They said I should have shouted at the dogs, thrown stones at them, beaten them, and almost made me feel that it was my fault that the dogs had come with me! At the garage I found the driver of one of the huge lorries which carry marble. I hoped he might offer to take the dogs back to the *rifugio*, past which he would be going that afternoon. He agreed to tell the guardian that the dogs were last seen in Gramolazzo.

Although I was carrying food I believe in having 'real' meals whenever possible, so I had a reasonably-priced lunch in the Mini Hotel, the only place open. The dogs had waited for me outside, much to the amusement of the men in the bar, including my lorry driver. After 15 minutes along the road a bus stopped for me, and I escaped the dogs at last. The driver gave me a free ride – tickets should be bought in advance! – to the road junction south of Gorfigliano, which saved me 2.5km of road walking. Here, at an altitude as low as 600m, there were occasional patches of snow. A serpentine road climbed through woods, with junctions to quarries, and took me south-east to Giovo and then south to Campocatino (1002m), a deserted and ruined village where some restoration had begun; here I picked up the path by which I would have descended from my high-level route. At Vagli di Sotto, at the southern end of Lago di Vagli, I learned that the only hotel, Albergo degli Alpi, was 2km back the way I had come (its façade is anonymous). All this had taken nine hours, so I was ready for the hot shower, excellent dinner and comfortable bed which were eventually made available. I was the only guest.

Monte Sumbra (1764m), due south, glowed in the evening sun and all around the spring leaves and flowers gave a fresh look to everything. My first low-level walk in the Alpi Apuane had been very pleasant. (The Pisan section of CAI has a *castagnata*, chestnut festival, each autumn. In 1975 it was held close enough to Sumbra to allow the three of us[4] to climb the mountain in the morning and descend in time to share lunch with other members and their families. We had country sausages, polenta, roast chestnuts and red wine in the open air to the accompaniment of alpine songs.)

On Thursday morning, after crossing the west end of Lago di Vagli, an artificial lake, I walked west to the mountains and then south for the climb to Passo di Sella. Working quarries were much in evidence high up the mountainside (I had heard a workers' bus leave from the hotel at 4.30am), with occasional explosions, the noise of reversing trucks, machinery and cutting wires, and spoil being tipped down the mountainside. All this was left behind at the head of the valley, when the path up through woods became increasingly obscured by snow. For the last hour up to the pass (1500m) the snow was half a metre deep, yet on its broad windswept north side there were thousands of crocuses breaking free of it. There were cuckoos everywhere that week, and chiffchaffs occasionally.

Immediate signs of more quarries were to be seen on the south side. The path

joined a quarry road from which snow had been removed recently by a tracked vehicle, leaving an unpleasant muddy mess, and lower down I overtook the snow-plough responsible – obviously the highest quarry had been isolated since the snowfall two weeks earlier. The steep-sided valley of Torrente Turrite Secca led through Arni to the hamlet of Campagrina where I was welcomed immediately into Albergo Aronte. This is the only point at which it is possible, thanks to tunnels, to cross the Alpi Apuane by road: buses run from here north-east to Castelnuovo di Garfagnana and south to Pietrasanta.

On my fifth day I walked eastwards – a short distance by road and then paths for the rest of the way. There were splendid sunlit views of the south side of Sumbra completely unspoiled by any quarrying. Then I turned southwards towards Foce di Mosceta, the broad gap between two mountain groups. Walking up through woods to the tree-line was very pleasant and I was so surprised by a pretty stream that I stopped by it for my elevenses – Italian breakfasts are not sustaining.

I reached Rifugio del Freo (1180m) in under four hours, only to find it unmanned, contrary to information in the guidebook.[5] Its door opened into an entrance hall equipped with a table, four wooden beds (two of them suspended from the ceiling by chains) and four old blankets. As I had planned a nightstop there, I stayed and hoped that no one else would arrive. I had enough food and water for 24 hours.

After lunch I climbed Monte Corchia (1677m), which is west of the hut and seems unexciting from there, though from the south-west it has a rugged grandeur. There was scarcely a trace of snow. The fairly new Bivacco Lusa lies just below the summit – a marvellous site. It has space for six people but, alas, no blankets: I was not carrying a sleeping-bag, otherwise I would have slept there. (Corchia covers the deepest and most extensive subterranean karst system in Italy, which explains why the bivouac was provided by a group of speleologists.) It was a warm, sunny day with a light breeze, altogether delightful, and the views all round were splendid. There were more spring gentians, easily my favourite mountain flower, and the only sound was of birds. I started down the north-west slope from the summit only to find a quarry below me – the last one I was to see. As I wanted most of all to savour the quiet, I returned by the way I had come.

'If there is one hill in Italy which provokes and challenges ascent, it is the Pania,' wrote Freshfield.[6] The Pania della Croce (1859m) lies east of Rifugio del Freo, which I left next morning unladen and with a stout stick. My belongings were left in the hut with a note saying where I had gone and that I would be back by noon. I had the mountain to myself! The three of us had climbed it in 1972, but I had no recollection of our route: that comes of leaving the navigation to someone else. It was a fine, cold morning, and for the only time that week hat and gloves were necessary. Some heather was in bloom on the lower slopes which became more rocky. Snow, mostly crisp underfoot, soon covered the route, and I was glad of my stick, but the summit ridge was almost clear.

The Pania is a landmark from Genova to Firenze, Elba to Corsica. On a fine day, therefore, its central position commands extensive views of the Arno valley, the Maremma, Tuscan archipelago, Gulf of Spezia and Alpi Marittime.

That Saturday was not such a day, although the sun was shining; the southern end of the Cinque Terre was visible and I thought I could discern Pisa and Livorno. I was content with just being there and with tracing my route through the mountains.

Freshfield again: 'For its prominence, isolation and shapeliness the Pania claims ever the first place in our minds when we remember the Apuan Alps.'[7] After 40 minutes of splendid isolation I started back. About a third of the way down I passed the first people coming up. Meanwhile the hut had been opened for the weekend, so I stayed to use its excellent facilities and have a hot meal.

I took the direct route to Foce di Valli and then south along the ridge to Monte Forato (1223m). The latter is well known for the huge natural arch between its north and south summits which can be seen from a great distance by those approaching from the south-west. As was to be expected, I was not the only one there. Thence I descended to Foce di Petrosciana (961m), an important pass (still only for pedestrians, though a road has been projected – I hope it comes to nothing) between east and west in the north–south line of these mountains. A contour path round Monte Procinto brought me to Rifugio Forte dei Marmi (865m). There were over 30 of us for dinner and perhaps half that number stayed overnight.

My plan for Sunday had assumed no load-carrying (a rest day) and included an ascent of Procinto (1177m) by way of the *via ferrata*. In 1974 the three of us had climbed it by this route, but we had seen nothing. The mountain was enveloped in cloud when we arrived. It was raining as we roped up, reached the top, descended and walked back towards the village where our car was parked – all without our having any idea of what it looked like. Suddenly the cloud lifted: we looked back and my wife and I were amazed to see what we had climbed! Procinto is an astonishing mountain: a huge vertically-sided block separated at its base from the west wall of Monte Nona (1297m) by less than a metre.

By the time I had finished breakfast the hut was full of people festooned with ironmongery and helmets, all with designs on the many climbs on these mountains, so I sought quieter paths. I walked southwards, then up round the south end of Monte Matanna to a ridge going west to the summit (1317m). It was cloudy and the tops were obscured from time to time – a welcome change – and I could hear distant flocks of sheep. After going north along the summit ridge, from which there were fine views, I turned down to Rifugio Albergo Alta Matanna (1030m). It can be reached by road from the Serchio valley, so was crowded with visitors. Both bar and *salumeria* were doing good business; I bought half a locally-made *pecorino* cheese to take home.

Then I wandered north to Foce delle Porchette, turned west and was soon on the previous day's route to Procinto, only this time I clambered up to Foce del Procinto (1000m), the narrow gap between the walls of the two mountains. Over the gap there is a small wooden bridge to Procinto, which I crossed to make a clockwise circuit of the mountain's wooded waist. Most of the climbers had finished for the day and were relaxing in the evening sun, coiling ropes and chatting. All traces of bad weather, including some thunder, had vanished. By 7.15pm all the weekend visitors had gone, leaving only three guests for the night.

On my last morning a short ascent to Callare Matanna (1139m), the watershed, brought me to the highest point of the day – henceforth it would be downhill all the way. I had overslept, so at 8am I was an hour late starting the south-easterly 'walk-out' towards Lucca. From the N flank of Monte Piglione, where the route goes eastwards for 4km, I had my last extensive views of Sumbra and the Pania group. At Groppa, a hamlet where the route crosses a road before turning south, I failed to find the onward path. Hours later (it seemed), after much circuitous walking mostly through forest, I reached the village of Villa Buona and below it, at a bus stop, the valley road south of Pescaglia. Two people were waiting for a bus to Lucca which was due in 20 minutes – amazing luck! The bus took 50 minutes to reach Lucca – another free ride! But be prepared, for bus inspectors don't like people without tickets.

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MAPS

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