

108. Steve Sustad starting Pitch 7 of *El Cardonal* (XS). (*Pat Littlejohn*)

looked nice from below but turned out to be nasty and crumbling – the rock had taken a sudden turn for the worse, as basalt can. After struggling for a while I realised I could swing right to reach a big wind-eroded scoop which had been invisible from below – now the way was clear to the top of the tier, above which loomed the final 50m wall.

We were now three quarters of the way up the face so the desire to finish it properly up the final tier was strong, even though the terrace below it promised an escape of sorts. There was a possible line straight ahead but after 15m it was blocked by a rotten overhang, and to press on into XS territory at this point would have ruined a potentially fine route. Luckily, a groove 20m to the right turned out to have better rock and better gear than had been apparent from below. It led past an overhang to an amazing 'bell' of rock formed where wind erosion had hollowed out material behind the hard outer layer of basalt. By striking it with a karabiner you could play different notes in different places. I took cover in a cave stance while Steve dealt with the final pitch and soon we were on the great shelf where the cliff terminates, enjoying a breeze and views of the peak and the island's interior. The result of our efforts was *El Cardonal*, a 13-pitch route that was sustained but nowhere too hard, definitely a worthy objective for people wanting to experience a long, adventurous trad climb on Gran Canaria.

At the present time (and provided the well-meaning but misguided bolting zealots don't destroy all the traditional climbing) Gran Canaria offers a fascinating mix of different types of climbing and is a good venue to enjoy both styles in the depths of winter. I know it's tempting just to throw a bunch of quick draws in a bag and jump on a plane, but taking trad gear gives you the 'freedom of the hills' and a more varied trip, and I think we all know which routes will be the most memorable.

MARTIN GILLIE

Alpine Climbing in The Mountains of Cogne



109. The ENE ridge of La Grivola from near the Balzola hut. (*Jonathan Halliday*)

The mountains of Cogne appear to have been forgotten by British alpinists. Apart from the Gran Paradiso, the highest peak, which is well known for being amongst the easiest of the 4000m peaks to climb, few British climbers could name any mountains in the area. However, there are more than 20 peaks between 3500m and 4000m that offer fine alpine



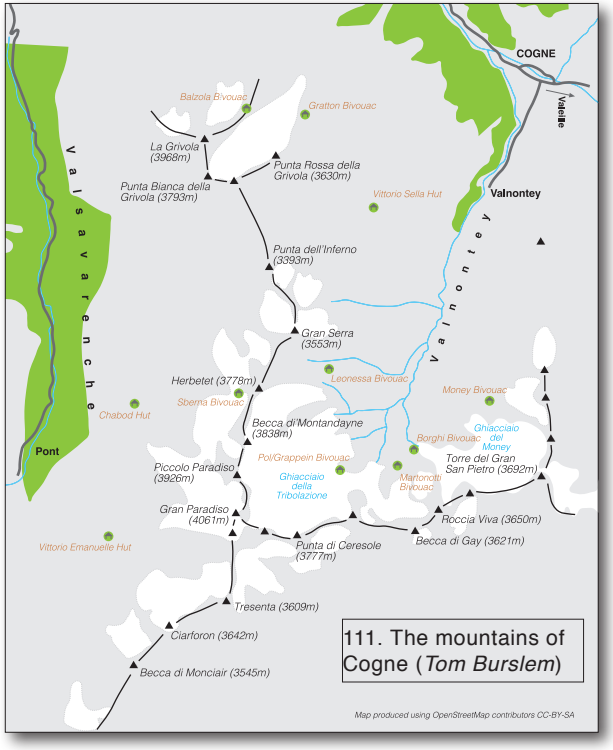
110. L-R: Torre del Gran San Pietro, Roccia Viva and Becca di Gay. The two couloirs leading to the summit of Becca di Gay are clearly visible. (*Tom Burslem*)

routes mostly at the classic Facile-Difficile grades. The most recent guide in English to these peaks was published in the 1960s and even the Italian definitive guide is 30 years old. Although there are some recent selected guides in Italian, up-to-date information on the alpine routes in English has not been readily available for some time. This article aims to bring the area to the attention of British alpinists again by describing the history and geography of the area, and by giving current descriptions of routes to the main peaks.

The Cogne peaks lie to the south-east of Mont Blanc in the Aosta valley region of Italy. On the main alpine ridge they form the most substantial group of peaks between the Little St Bernard Pass and the Mediterranean. Most of the main summits lie on two ridges that run roughly north-south and drain into several of the tributaries of the Dora, the main river in the Aosta valley. For their height the peaks are heavily glaciated, for example, the Glacier de la Tribulation on the north-east flank of the Gran Paradiso covers more than 4km^2. Consequently, although some smaller glaciers (and the snow-cover on some faces) are retreating rapidly, most climbs still require glacier crossings and have a full 'alpine feel' to them. There are a variety of rock types in the area with gneiss being found most widely on the main peaks. This varies in quality and perhaps as a result most rock routes follow ridges rather than faces or buttresses, with obvious exceptions being the rock climbs on the Becca di Moncorve.

In contrast to the recent lack of interest, British climbers were very active

in the exploration of the mountains with only two of the main peaks (Roccia Viva and Becca di Gay) being first ascended by local climbers. Surprisingly, given its seriousness and the amenable nature of some other peaks, La Grivola was the first of the main peaks to be climbed in 1859 by Ormsby and party, after a near miss by Tuckett a month earlier. The Gran Paradiso



111. The mountains of Cogne (*Tom Burslem*)

followed in 1860 after which there was relatively little activity until Yeld and the ubiquitous Coolidge arrived in the 1870s. Between them this pair climbed dozens of routes in the period 1878-1900 and also published a climbers' guide to the area. Mummery too was active during this period during which the Cogne mountains seem to have been regarded almost as highly as the Zermatt and Chamonix peaks. Mallory climbed around Cogne in 1911 but since then the mountains have been largely forgotten by British mountaineers.

The Aosta valley has a very distinctive culture, having over centuries been pulled between Italian and French influences – as recently as the 1940s there was a significant chance of it being annexed by France. Its inhabitants are therefore generally bilingual in French and Italian and have a strong sense of regional identity. From the mountaineer's perspective this can occasionally lead to confusion because all the peaks have at least two names that are not always similar. But this is completely offset by the

hugely welcoming and relaxed attitude to visitors, and also by the excellent and distinctive food and wine that is widely available, including in all the manned huts.

The area has long been noted for its scenery and wildlife. The kings of Savoy (later Italy) were the first to appreciate these aspects and acquired the entire area as a private hunting ground. Although early climbers were required as a consequence to keep out of the way of the King's hunting trips, this did result in certain advantages; for example Coolidge noted in 1898 that the 'The telegraph is no longer reserved for the King's use'! For modern visitors the most obvious benefits of the King's former ownership are the mule paths, originally constructed for hunting, that lead to around hut level in most areas; and the prevalence of *stambeccos* (ibex) that were once threatened with extinction in the Alps but preserved within the King's land. In the 1920s the King gave the land to the Italian nation and it has been the Gran Paradiso National Park ever since.

CLIMBING NOTES

The following notes are designed to be used with the *Excusionista* 1:25000 maps of the area that are widely available locally and also from specialist retailers in Britain. However it is hoped that the sketch map on p145 will provide enough detail for planning. The *Excursionista* maps are much superior to all other maps of the area but show names in French. This contrasts with the locally, more widely used, Italian names. In these notes the names of the main peaks are given in both languages as Italian/French. For other features just the French names are used, in line with the maps.

The peaks are normally accessed from the valley of Cogne (in which there is a town of the same name) or from Valsavarenche. Approaches to some peaks are also possible from the Valle dell' Orco in Piemonte but the author has no first-hand information. Cogne itself is a substantial town with shops, banks, hotels etc. The Cogne valley has several tributary valleys, most notably Valnontey containing a small village of the same name with two campsites and a shop, and the uninhabited but scenic Valeille. Valsavarenche has several villages and campsites along its length. The small village of Pont at its head has a shop and campsite. All the villages in the area are well served by reliable and cheap public transport, with Aosta being the hub for most services.

Accommodation for climbers is provided by three wardened huts and numerous bivouac huts. All the manned huts are very comfortable. However, two primarily serve the normal route to Gran Paradiso while the third (Vittorio Sella) serves just a few alpine routes. Consequently most climbs are started from bivouac huts. These vary in size from 4 to 12 bunks and all have mattresses and blankets. Generally parties will have bivouac huts to themselves or will share with just a few others. They thus offer a happy medium between overcrowded, manned huts and the effort of lugging bivouac equipment on the approaches to climbs.



112. The North ridge and NE face of Gran Paradiso taken from the Piccolo Paradiso. (*Tom Burslem*)

Huts

Vittorio Emanuele II 'VE' Hut (2734m, 150+ bunks, 2hrs) The largest manned hut in the area and the usual base for Gran Paradiso, La Tresenta and Ciarforon. Well run and with a choice of 4 bed 'cabins' or dormitory accommodation. Easily reached up the well signposted mule track from Pont in the Valsavarenche.

Chabod Hut (2710m, 85 bunks, 2½hrs) An alternative, probably more comfortable, base for the Gran Paradiso and also well-placed for Herbetet. Approached via a well maintained mule track that leaves Valsavarenche at point 1829.

Vittorio Sella 'VS' Hut (2579m, 143 bunks, 2½hrs) More of a hamlet than a hut. It consists of several buildings formerly used as a hunting lodge by Italian kings. It has a separate bar and a resident cat. Well-known for its excellent food, particularly at lunch. Approach from Valnontey by the well marked track that leaves the village from behind the alpine gardens.

Leonessa Hut (2910m, 12 bunks, 4hrs) A large bivouac hut well placed for Herbetet. From Valnontey follow the main valley path to a bridge near point 1845. Cross this and continue on the old mule track which doubles back on itself at point 2060 before ascending to the national park Herbetet lodge at point 2441 in a series of easy zigzags. Above, a rougher path leads up Vallon de l'Herbetet. At about 2850m this crosses the stream and paint flashes lead over rough ground to the hut. Water is available about 10min behind (south) the hut.

Pol/Grappein bivouacs (3183m, 12 bunks total, PD-, 4½-5hrs from Valnontey) Two huts, old and new, splendidly placed on a rocky prow

overlooking Valnontey. Where the approach to the Leonessa hut doubles back, continue directly up the valley. After 300m fork right (sign) and follow a faint, steep path up the moraines at the head of the valley. At about 2300m the path traverses several small streams horizontally (bridges in place) before continuing very steeply up a moraine crest to a rock buttress. Gain this by use of staples and chains and continue on traces of path to a cave. Above the cave turn sharp right and climb the edge of a boulder-filled gully to exit rightwards at the top (chains). Scree and rubble lead to a rocky shelf ascending right to left across the rock buttress above. Take this shelf to the extreme left edge of the buttress. A traverse line then leads almost horizontally back right across the buttress (occasional paint marks then chains). The huts are now visible and can be reached either by climbing easily straight up the buttress to the glacier which is crossed (crevasses) or by crossing a wide gully and ascending the rock buttress directly beneath the Pol hut, steep but easy.

Money Hut (2872m, 8 bunks, 3½hrs) Situated on a rocky eyrie with superb views of much of the range. From Valnontey follow the main valley path to about 1km south of the hamlet of Vermiana where there is a sign-posted path to the left. Take this which climbs steeply to the picturesque Money pastures. At point 2340m take the left fork and follow a faint path (paint flashes, cairns) that leads up the moraine to below the rock spur on which the hut stands. At about 2700m the path traverses left to a rock step (chains) and the hut. Water is available from the stream behind the hut.

Gratton Hut (3198m, 9 places, 5hrs) Located on Col Pousset this is a possible starting point for La Grivola and also the trekking peak of Pointe Rousse. Start from either Cogne or Cretaz and reach Pousset Dessus by any of many possible routes through the forest on well-marked paths. The route then continues directly to the hut with a steeper rocky section near the col. If there is little snow it may be necessary to descend some distance from the hut for water.

Balzola Hut (3475m, 4 places maximum, 6½hrs from Cogne) A very small, remote and old hut in a wild location on Col de Clochettes. It serves the ENE ridge of La Grivola. From the Gratton hut, traverse horizontally from the col at 3198m on the west flank of the ridge for about 150m. Cairns and paint flashes lead down to chains and the glacier. The last few metres of descent are awkward, even with the chains, and a rope is recommended. Cross the glacier and reach the rubble slope below the Col de Clochettes. This is very loose but easy. It is probably best to reach the ridge slightly left of the col and then follow the crest to the hut, which is located slightly right of the col and not easily visible from below. Water may not be readily available in dry conditions.

Other bivouac huts in the area include the Borghi and Martonotti huts that serve Roccia Viva and Becca di Gay, the Antoldi hut in the Valeille and the Sberna hut on the Valsavarenche side of Herbetet. There is also a new hut on the Valsavarenche side of La Grivola but no first-hand details are available.



113. Herbetet from near the Leonessa hut. The S ridge is the left-hand skyline of the sunlit peak, the East ridge faces the camera and the NNE ridge is the right-hand skyline. (*Stuart Campbell*)

ROUTES

Gran Paradiso/ Mont-Grand Paradis (4061m)

The most famous peak in the area with a variety of worthwhile routes.

Normal route from Valsavarenche (F+, short steps of II on summit rocks). This very straightforward route from the Vittorio Emanuele II hut up the Glacier de Laveciau is clear from the map and details are readily available elsewhere. There is normally a trench all the way up the glacier that is followed by dozens daily. It is also possible to approach from the Chabod hut up the other branch of the glacier.

Normal route from Valnontey (PD+, steps of II/III). This is a much superior alternative to the Valsavaranche normal route. From the Pol huts traverse the Glacier de la Tribulation south then west to the foot of a snow ramp (near point 3625). Ascend the ramp south to reach Col de l'Abeille (2½hrs) From the col older descriptions recommend climbing to Fenêtre du Mont Roc direct but this has never looked in any way appealing (steep, loose and threatened by cornices) to the author, who has always climbed the couloir between the twin peaks of Mont Roc, directly above Col de l'Abeille. The couloir can be taken direct or a steeper section avoided by steeping out right and climbing the left bank for a few metres. From the top of the couloir, the Glacier de Laveciau is easily reached and the Valsavarenche normal route followed for a few minutes. (2hrs, 4½hrs)

North-west Face (D –.) A classic and objectively safe face route. Best

approached from the Chabod hut from where the route is clearly visible. About 55° and 400m from the bergshrund.

Cresta Gastaldi/Crête Gastaldi (AD-, III-) An alternative approach to Col d'Alpe. Start as the Valnontey normal route but keep following the glacier south to reach the col at point 3688 (1½-2hrs). Follow the ridge west from the col over various towers and pinnacles to Col de l'Abeille (2hrs), where the Valnontey normal route is rejoined. The initial steep section from point 3688 is best taken right, then back left to the crest. (III-, 2hrs). It is possible to lengthen this route at the same grade by including other peaks on the southern edge of Glacier de la Tribulation, with the full circuit from Tête-de-Valnontey giving the most satisfying traverse.



114. The view from the Pol hut. (*Tom Burslem*)

East Face (AD) The line of the first ascent from the Cogne side, a very bold undertaking for the time (1869). In earlier descriptions the face is described as threatened by séracs but these are no longer apparent. Instead a 45-50° snow/ice slope leads almost to the summit from a narrow section low on the face. The approach is that for the Valnontey normal route until point 3625.

Gran-Piccolo Traverse (AD+) A superb, long and varied ridge route. From the summit follow the N ridge to Col du Mont Petit Paradis. This is mostly a fine narrow snow arête but with a couple of rock steps – a short abseil may be useful. From the col ascend the rock ridge (step of III+) to gain the snow slope leading to Mont-Petit-Paradis (2hrs). From its summit a series of rock towers (some named) form a section of almost horizontal ridge before a snow descent leads to Col di Montandayne. Climb or turn the towers according to taste (mostly II, 3hrs) At the col the traverse can be abandoned by descending the north-west flank (this may be icy). Better is to continue to the Becca di Montandayne. From the col this is gained by following the ridge for a short distance before being forced out on to a ledge line on the right flank. Follow this briefly before a fine crack (sustained, steep III) allows the crest to be regained near the summit. A short descent from the summit leads to the top of a snowy couloir leading to the Glacier de Tsasset which can be followed to reach the Leonessa bivouac hut (3hrs). This itinerary in reverse is clearly possible, as is a further extension to include Pointe de l'Herbetet by its south ridge – this would result in a truly huge day, first completed by Captain Percy Farrar's party in 1898.

Herbetet/Pointe de l'Herbetet (3778m)

A classic horn peak with several worthwhile ridges.

North-North-East Ridge (PD+, II+) The normal and easiest route. From the Leonessa hut follow the north edge of the Glacier de l'Herbetet to the foot of a couloir descending from the southernmost of the two Cols de l'Herbetet. Gain the col by some horribly loose mud/scree slopes, thankfully quite short – abseil possible in descent. Once the ridge is gained it is followed on or near the crest on mostly good rock (II+) until it merges with a snow/ice field on the N face. Climb this until the rocks forming the flank of the north-west ridge are reached and then briefly followed (II) to the summit. In descent it is important not to follow the north-west ridge for long but to start descending its flank shortly after leaving the summit in order to gain the snowfield. This is obvious in good visibility but not in mist (4-5hrs).

East Ridge (AD, III) Highly recommended, particularly in combination with the NNE ridge. From the Leonessa hut take the Glacier de l'Herbetet to reach the ridge at a shallow col just west of point 3272 – the final slope to the col may be icy. Perhaps due to glacier change, gaining the ridge from here now requires a steep rock step to be climbed. This is best done by stepping left (looking up the ridge) about 15m on to the Glacier de Tsasset glacier and then climbing a groove line on the south flank of the ridge (20m, sustained III). Once on the ridge follow it mostly easily turning any obstacles on the right. Near the top some harder sections (II/III) are best taken near the crest (4½-5½hrs).

South Ridge (AD+) An apparently fine rocky ridge from Col Bonney but no first-hand information. The Col can be reached from either the Leonessa or Sberna huts.

La Gran Serra/Grand-Serre/Gran Sertz (3553m)

An easy training peak and excellent viewpoint with the comfortable Vittorio Sella hut at the base of the normal route.

South Flank (F+/PD-) From the VS hut cross the stream via the bridge behind the hut and almost immediately leave the main traverse path to the Leonessa hut to start climbing steeply towards the Glacier du Lauson (faint path in places). Cross the glacier towards a steep snow/rock transition that leads to the higher Glacier Grande Vallon. Ascending the transition further left is less steep but may be bare loose rock in dry conditions in which case steeper snow to the right is preferred. Cross the Glacier Grande Vallon to directly below the summit rocks that are ascended to the summit (II-).

La Grivola/Mont Grivola (3968m)

A serious but superb and isolated peak. A 'nearly 4000er'. It is often

approached via the Gratton hut and Glacier du Trazo although starting from the Vittorio Sella hut is also possible.

South-East Face (PD+) The normal route but not particularly appealing because of loose rock. Probably the most reliable descent route. Looked at from Glacier du Trazo the face has a series of ribs running upwards. The route uses two of these to climb the face, crossing between them at about one-third height and exiting on to the easier upper section of the *ENE Ridge.* From the Glacier du Trazo reach the foot of the rib running to just left of the summit. Climb this from 150m before a vague rising traverse crosses the couloir on the right and allows the next rib to be gained. Climb this to the upper section of the *ENE ridge*. In descent paint flashes indicate the point at which the *ENE ridge* should be left.

ENE Ridge (AD, III or IV) An excellent ridge route on mostly sound rock, approached from either the Gratton or Balzola huts. From the Balzola hut follow the ridge more or less on the crest to the summit. There are numerous towers and pinnacles to negotiate on the way (steps of III). A large green tower that overhangs slightly is the first major obstacle. A traverse line leads right under the foot of this to a left-slanting snowy couloir that allows the crest to be regained. Somewhat higher there is a steep red tower. Either climb this via its front face to an exit leftward (IV, piton), or turn it to the left (III) on poorer rock. It will be helpful to abseil into at least two of the notches on the ridge (4-6hrs).

Other routes appear to be seldom used today. The classic north ridge (AD+) looks very fine viewed from the Balzola hut but approaches are awkward. The options are a long ascent from the Gran Nomenon Chalets or a committing descent from the Balzola hut to the Glacier du Mont Grivola. These approaches would also allow the north-west face (D) to be gained. From the south and Valsavarenche the mountain can be climbed from Col du Mont Grivola by a complicated route (AD), mostly on the south-east face in order to avoid the steep and loose steps on the south ridge.

Torre del Gran San Pietro/Tour du Grand Saint Pierre (3691m)

The highest point on the ridge forming the east flank of Valnontey. It is an excellent viewpoint. Approaches from Valnontey are described below but it is also possible to approach from Valeille and the Antoldi bivouac hut. Note, however, that the traverse between these two valleys over Coupe de Money is probably best avoided because of the loose ground on the Valeille side of the col – the Col de Money is a better option.

SW Ridge (AD-) From the Money bivouac descend the short step on the access path before making a rising traverse (loose rubble) towards point 3053 and the Glacier Coupe de Money. Traverse this at around 3200m close under the end of Cote Paganini to reach Glacier du Money before heading south to reach Col de Money (2hrs). From the col follow the ridge with interest over a variety of snow and rock peaks, generally on the crest, until the final gap below the summit pyramid. Traverse right (south-west)



115. The North face of the Ciarforon from the Vittorio Emanuele hut. (*Louis Wallace*)

almost horizontally from the gap for about 70m before ascending directly (crux) to the summit (III, 2hrs, 4-4½hrs).

N Ridge (PD+) Follow the *SW Ridge* route until beyond the end of Cote Paganini. Then cross the glacier south-east and ascend the couloir leading to the col at 3558m. This requires good snow. From the col ascend the ridge on the crest (III) to the summit. A line slightly left (south-east) of the crest is easier but very loose in places (3½hrs).

Full Traverse of the Apostoli Peaks (AD) A full traverse, either from the Col de Money to Tour de Saint Ours (3610m), or the reverse, is the most fulfilling route on the mountain. Tour de Saint Ours is climbed or descended via its steep NW flank, which can be icy. Saint Ours is a local saint.

Ciarforon (3642m)

The characteristic dome-shaped peak clearly visible from the Vittorio Emanuele hut. It has two summits, one rock, one snow, with a frozen lake between them.

NE Ridge (PD+) From the VE hut cross the stream and follow moraine path east-south-east to reach the Moncorve glacier. Cross this south-east to point 3347 on the ridge, slightly above the col between Ciarforon and La Tresenta. Follow the ridge mostly on the crest and then slightly on the left to a steepening; traverse horizontally right to reach the right side of the crest and then snow slopes which are followed to the summits (3-3½hrs).

N Face (AD/D-) A good alternative to, the NE face of the Gran Paradiso. Reduced snow and ice cover has changed this face considerably with the

ice bulge visible in older photographs now replaced by a continuous band of rock at about two-thirds height. This band is loose and may become problematic if the snow cover continues to reduce. The line is very obvious from the VE hut. Difficulties are likely to vary with snow conditions.

The *NW ridge* is reputedly a fine climb (III+) in its upper sections but the lower section above point 2935 is dangerously loose. It is perhaps best approached in good snow cover from the lower portion of the N face.

Other Peaks

La Tresenta is a good training peak easily accessed from the VE hut. A traverse is possible. The Becca di Gay and Roccia Viva are difficult to access from the Valnontey side but offer two couloirs (L-hand, R-hand), a N face and ridge routes accessed from objectively threatened approaches. The Becca di Monciar is well seen and easily approached from the VE hut. The W ridge is PD and the N face AD+.

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