



Snowshoeing in France's Mercantour National Park

By Lisa Abdolian

Recently I heard a French teenager decline an invitation to hang out with friends over the weekend because she was going hiking with her family. As I braced myself for the teen-typical eye roll and sarcastic remark about “family time,” I realized that she was actually excited about wandering through the woods with her parents.

It reminded me of one of the things I like most about France – the harmony between man and nature and the great respect people have for the landscape. The country's peaks and valleys aren't just for those in their physical prime; they are for



families with children of all ages, the elderly who have spent the equivalent of years roaming the woods and for true athletes who enjoy the challenge of an adventure.

Extremely well marked walking paths, called France Grandes Randonnées (GR), criss-cross the country, providing 37,282 miles of meandering trails that highlight the most remarkable aspects of an area. Winter, spring, summer and fall, the paths take visitors through the country's national and regional parks, into intimate medieval mountain villages, past grazing cattle, to breathtaking coastal views, past cheese farms and small wineries.

The paths unravel the history of the landscape and its people and reveal unique local traditions. Even on the highest mountain range walkers will find strings of refuges that allow them to rest in the evening with a shower, a good meal, a comfortable bed and an occasional sing-a-long.



Nowhere is this enthusiasm for nature more apparent than in France's youngest national park. Mercantour National Park encompasses more than 800 square miles of mountainous land. It has 373 miles of marked footpaths, 28 villages and a wide range of trails for snowshoers. The park is divided into two zones: the peripheral, which contains the villages, and the core, which is strictly nature's arena. The core can only be reached by foot, which makes it a peaceful place to wander, especially when blanketed in snow.

The elegance of the park is in its simplicity: water cascading down an 800-meter wall; an Ibex grazing on a rocky outcrop and an entire village turning up for a pistou soup dinner on festival day.

Tourism is so low-key that the 25-year-old park just north of the French Riviera is still relatively unknown. Park officials are content to let the masses cluster on the beaches of the Cote d'Azur. Tourism here is geared toward those who want an authentic mountain experience.

The park's curators say the goal is to create a "harmonious blend of protection, discovery, local development and respect of the traditional activities."

This effort more than anything enables visitors to experience a sense of evolution as they leave the perched villages on the park's perimeter, pass through Mediterranean forests, moving past olive trees, hearty firs and finally glacial lakes and mountain peaks nearly 10,000 feet high. Visitors can explore the detritus of long lost civilizations and not so long ago wars.

The variety of terrain is one of the hallmarks of the park and within a few miles the vivid hues of the French Riviera are replaced with Alpine splendor. This



unique environment has left the park with nearly half of all the plant species in France, including 40 endemic to the park.

Walkers can choose from wooded paths that wind around mountains and provide peeks of the sea far below; stark, wind-swept, above-tree level jaunts that lead to colorful aqua and deep blue glacial lakes; and trails with babbling streams and



gently rolling hills.

Italy

reciprocated

France's effort to

preserve the land

and created a park

around the

Argentera Massif,

which borders

Mercantour. As a

result, several bird and mammal species have been successfully reintroduced to the region. A walk in the park at any time of the year is far more likely to yield views of animals than of other people.

It is an excellent place for snowshoers to spend some time. Not only is it easily accessible for those coming from abroad – it is an hour from Nice's international airport – but its location also allows vacationers to enjoy both the mountains and the Mediterranean. Visitors can spend a few days enjoying the sights and culinary delights of the French Riviera before heading off to the mountains for some rugged snowshoeing, or visa versa.

The park offers trails that appeal to every taste and skill level. Those who want to combine the solitude of backcountry walks with the active nightlife of a ski resort have several spots to choose from. People who prefer to sit back and savor the day's adventure in the same quiet wilderness that they enjoyed during their walks have even more places to explore. The season begins in late December and lasts until April or May.

Animals

Like in all parks, there are a number of bird species that populate Mercantour year-round, including Rock Ptarmigan, Nutcrackers, Golden Eagles and rare Bearded



Vultures.

Additionally, though, even in the heart of winter, local guides can find Ibex (Bouquetin in French), Chamois (mountain antelope), Mouflon (mountain goats) or the occasional stoat, ermine or wild boar. In March and April, playful Alpine Marmots (prairie dogs) emerge from hibernation and tumble around the hillsides, whistling piercing warnings to each other whenever humans are nearby.

Less visible are wolves (loup in French). Reintroduced in Italy, between 30 and 55 wolves now live in the park. Despite the controversy surrounding them, wolves are not a threat to man. In fact, wolves are so timid that you may happen upon their tracks, but it is extremely rare to spot one in the wilderness. Guides follow the trail of the playful creatures and provide fascinating details about their activities, but it is far more likely that they will watch you than you them.



Those interested in wolves shouldn't miss the Alpha Scenoparc de Saint-Martin Vésubie, an education center dedicated to wolves. Through films and presentations, the Alpha center explains some of the issues that have emerged since wolves returned to the area. It is a fairly unbiased portrayal of



the pros and cons of the reintroduction and provides a great introduction to the mythology of wolves. The center also has several wooded paths that allow snowshoers to travel from lookout to lookout, spying on a pack of eight wolves that live in the compound. The center is open every day from 10 a.m. to 5:30 a.m., but is closed from mid-December through January.

This extremely secluded area of the Vésubie Valley (Le Boréon) is almost exclusively dedicated to snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. It makes a good base

for people who want to walk all day, eat a hearty meal and fall into bed at night. By secluded, I mean there are two hotels, a very rugged gite (think cosy dormitory-style hostel for snowshoers who are up at daybreak and return at dusk) and a mountain refuge (similar to the gite) to choose from. Good meals are served at each place: family style at the gite and in front of a fireplace in the very quaint Hotel Le Boréon, which has stunning views from its front porch and its rooms. Snowshoers walk to the rhythm of mountain streams, through valleys, past waterfalls and probably some Ibex and Chamois. The ultimate reward is the stunning views of surrounding mountains and forested valleys below.



The Park



Mercantour National Park can be approached from seven different valleys, each of which have a different character and provide a different experience for visitors.

Depending on your idea of a vacation, you can enter from a quiet valley with few other winter visitors or a more popular area with ski-resort style nightlife.

Best of all are the blue skies, mild temperatures and the 320 days of sunshine a year.

Experts who are physically fit and confident about their abilities can spend days in the mountains making the estimated six-hour walk from refuge to refuge. However, it is advisable to hire a local guide if you want to try more strenuous mountain



paths. Hiring a guide will help you identify trail markers and hazards unique to the area and will ensure you return from your mountain getaway safely. It's also a great

way to learn about the flora and fauna and to walk through the most stunning parts of the park in the time you have.

La Vésubie



With about 20 miles of marked trails and dozens of more treks known by local guides, Saint Martin Vésubie is a prime base location. It is a beautiful one-hour drive from Nice (add another 30-minutes if you are not used to narrow, winding roads or if you like to stop and take in the scenery) and is nicknamed the “Suisse Niçoise” or the Switzerland of Nice.

A drive through the valley takes visitors past breathtaking scenery: rugged, 800-meter iron-gray mountain walls streaked with rust and dotted with scrub; colorful perched villages; crystal clear mountain streams; larch forests and snow-capped mountains. I have taken the road through the valley at least a dozen times and I have yet to make it through without at least one “wow” slipping past my lips.

The formerly fortified medieval mountain village is quaint and welcoming, if not a little sleepy in the winter. Small shops line the narrow cobblestone streets and a mountain stream actually runs down the center of one of the main streets.



There are enough hotels, B&Bs, refuges and comfortable gites (French guest farmhouses) in the valley to manage a warm bed and a hearty Provençal meal any time of the year. Additionally, it's a delight to wake with an eye-opening café crème, accompanied by a mouth-watering croissant or pastry and to ponder the day's walk at a local café. Make sure you stock up on local specialties, such as hard-crustured fresh bread and Tommes cheese, for a mid-walk snack.

Vésubie village also has the advantage of housing a Gendarmerie Mountain Rescue center and a Mercantour Park information center that has reports about

weather conditions and dangerous areas. There are also gear shops for those who forgot to pack an essential item. Unfortunately not much English is spoken, so a bit of French is helpful.



I like Vésubie because it is centrally located, unexploited and has a variety of snowshoeing trails that are safe and exciting. Snowshoers can make the village a base and can explore a number of areas nearby, such as Le Boréon and Merveilles. Alternatively, there are several small villages nearby that offer nice accommodations.

Native English-speaking guides and gîte owners Mel Jones and Liz Lord have a lovely place in Berthemont les Bains called La Zourcière. With six acres of land and a wrap-around porch with views of surrounding hills and forests, it is a restful place to stay. They are accommodating, collaborate with native guides in the valley and are happy to share their knowledge about the area and its numerous trails. Responsible Travel recommends them, hailing their commitment to the environment and their efforts toward effective economic development.

Most hikes in Vésubie begin with an incline, so don't be deterred by the initial upward climb – you'll be rewarded with paths of rolling hills and spectacular views. Keep in mind that this area is extremely quiet in the winter. Those looking for an active nightlife should choose another base or wait until they return to the coast.



La Roya and La Bévéra



The valleys of La Roya and Bévéra are simply magical. Located in the southeastern part of Mercantour, they have some of the park's most stunning scenery and are gateways to the Vallée des Merveilles (valley of marvels).

Picture evergreens bowing to the snow, brilliant larch forests, dramatic carved valleys with rushing rivers, ancient arched stone bridges and villages perched precariously at the edge of cliffs. Every bend in the road provides a pleasant surprise: a white mist hanging just below a mountain peak, a fascinating terraced farm or a beautiful village with an array of whimsical trompe-l'œil (3-D images designed to "fool the eyes") – all set off by a clear blue sky.

The Vallée des Merveilles is famous for the more than 37,000 Bronze Age rock engravings that are grouped around 9,423-foot high Mont Bégo. The carvings date from between 1500 and 1850 B.C. and were done by a group that considered Bégo and the jagged, odd-shaped rocks around it a sacred site.

While most of the gravures are covered in snow in the winter, the mystical feel of the land is perhaps even stronger in the magnificent solitude of winter. After a few days walking through the valleys and larch forests, past deep blue and



brilliant green glacial lakes that reflect the startlingly blue sky and rocky mountains, you will understand why the shepherds and gatherers of so long ago worshiped at the base of Mont Bégo. It is truly a spiritual experience.

Tende, Saorge or Castérino are excellent bases for Merveilles. They all have the feel of ancient mountain towns, but each has a distinct charm. Tende, which was a

part of Italy until a peace accord in 1947, has an Italian flavor with gray and mauve tiled roofs, a colorful clock tower and terraced landscape. It is the location of the excellent Merveilles Museum and is the most practical base. Saorge has five-story



houses dating back to the 15th century, a monastery with a magnificent trompe-l'œil and wonderful views of the Roya Valley. Tiny Castérino has huge flat valleys and about 12 miles of trails.

Please note that for the protection of the gravures, poles are prohibited in the restricted zone of Merveilles.

La Tinée

Isola 2000

For the energized feel of an all-out winter sports arena within easy reach of Nice, no place in the park beats Isola 2000. Isola 2000 has it all – snowshoeing, skiing, heli-skiing, ski Jöring (picture water skiing, but with a horse instead of a boat and snow instead of water), snowmobiling, an ice race track for cars, a skating rink, sleigh rides, a movie theater, bars, night clubs, discos and restaurants. Despite all this, the resort never seems too crowded or too hurried – except during school holidays.

It is an ideal base for families because there are engaging activities for people of all ages. Parents can easily slip away for long walks in the park while children are in ski school. It's rare to spot many four-legged animals, but there are several excellent snowshoe trails. On a clear day you may even catch a glimpse of the Mediterranean far below.



Circled by 15 summits 1,500 to 3,200 feet high, the ski center is about 10 miles away from its namesake, the picture-perfect

village of Isola. The small village is well worth a visit for its unique architecture and the many colorful trompe-l'œil.



Alternatively, 10 miles north is the lovely, quiet, Saint Etienne de Tinée, a bright traditional village surrounded by high mountains. It's here that you'll find a Mercantour information center for this region. Nearby, Auron offers snowshoeing trails, paraskiing trips, snow scooter rentals, dog-sleigh rides, a skating rink, a gym and babysitting services.

Le Cians/Le Var

One of my don't-miss picks for this part of France is the Cians Gorge. There are plenty of beautiful canyons carved into the Cote d'Azur's backcountry, but only Cians has blood-red walls that seem to stretch forever. There are miles of beautiful trails and lots of old villages perched precariously on mountainsides – some seem super-glued to the edge.



Valberg is the region's largest village and offers lots of winter activities. Here you'll find downhill and cross-country ski runs, nature walks, ice-skating and, for the truly adventurous, ski jumping. There is a Mercantour information center and terrain that includes rolling hills, valleys that stretch to the mountains' edges and numerous mountain peaks. There are a number of gites in the surrounding area, many with English-speaking owners and tour guides.

French friends of mine recommend the gite La Fripouniere in nearby Roubion. Founded around 800 B.C., the village is perched like an eagle's nest on a mountainside. It's at the edge of Mercantour, about 10 minutes from Valberg, and

contains the ruins of a 12th century feudal castle and four towers. The village has stunning views down to the Tinée valley.

The drive to Roubion takes you through Gorges de Cians, past an interesting waterfall that bored a hole in a rock and through a series of tunnels. The gite rents



snowshoes and has information on walking trails. However, what my friends like most about this gite is the food. I have learned that when a Frenchman raves about food, it is unlikely you will be disappointed; my friends couldn't resist calling the owners after they had left for some recipes.

Le Ubaye

On the northern edge of the park, this U-shaped valley has towering mountains, jagged rock formations and a stark beauty.

Barcelonnette is a lovely Italian border village located at the northern most part of Provence. Its long, colorful pedestrian streets are guarded at each end by towering snow-covered mountains. Large squares are abundant here and the village's location is betrayed by hints of Italian and Swiss influences.

The village is near three alpine ski areas, Pra-Loup, Sauze and Sainte Anne; two cross-country ski areas, Larche and Saint Paul, and has miles of walking paths.

There's a park office in town with a list of safe trails and local guides.

The most unusual aspect of Barcelonnette is its strong connection to Mexico, most visible in a string of Mexican-style villas. Between 1821 and 1930 thousands of residents emigrated to Mexico searching for a way out of the oppressing poverty that had engulfed the region. The





success of three brothers, who opened a textile business in Mexico, resulted in an abundance of locals following in their footsteps. About 5,000 Barcelonnettes spent time in Mexico – an astonishing number considering about 8,000 reside in the entire Ubaye valley. Many successful entrepreneurs later returned and built houses in the

tradition of the country that provided their fortunes.

Le Verdon

Val d’Allos

Lower key than Isola 2000 but just as active, is the ski resort of Val d’Allos, in the northwest section of the park. The drive takes you through Grasse, the perfume capital of southern France, and winds above and then below high, calcareous canyons. Europe’s deepest river



canyon, nicknamed the “Grand Canyon of France” is not far off track and is a possible overnight stop if the drive becomes too much for a single day. The sight of the turquoise Verdon river snaking through the canyon is marvelous.

In addition to downhill runs, Val d’Allos has more than 62 miles of wide cross-country paths and three trails dedicated exclusively to snowshoers. Local guides can bring snowshoers into the central part of the park and, if conditions are right, to lac d’Allos, the highest lake in the park. Solo walks this deep into the park are prohibited once snow covers the ground – the 9,000 foot “montagne de l’Avalanche” explains why.

Val d’Allos has three distinct levels, each layered into surrounding mountains and connected by ski lifts. Val d’Allos 1400 is the charming old village with an



abundance of ancient fountains and old buildings. It has cobblestone streets and small A-frames and chalets for rent. This is the place I'd recommend for snowshoers who want to enjoy the quiet charm of a rustic mountain village. Those who yearn for a ski resort should head up to Val d'Allos 1500 or Val

d'Allos 1800. The tourist office's approved snowshoeing trails are located on 1400 and 1800 and take you through larch forests and along stark mountaintops.

Additionally, there are several excellent paths for snowshoers in nearby towns. Val d'Allos is sometimes difficult to reach from Nice and it is wise to consult with tourist information before beginning the trip. Allow three to four hours from Nice.

Logistics

Snowshoes are rented in most areas, although you may have to call them "raquettes," (pronounced racket) to be understood. All of the areas mentioned in this article can be reached in the winter, but weather can be unpredictable and roads can be closed. Check conditions before you leave the coastal area. If one road is closed, don't fret; dozens more are open and will lead you to the park.



Ask for snow chains for your rental car and get advice on the best roads to take to your destination. It is possible to reach some of the more popular areas by bus or train. A bus departs from Nice for Isola 2000 every day in the winter. The enchanting train des Merveilles leaves Nice every morning and stops at several prime spots, including Sospel, Tende and Saorge before continuing to Italy. It makes the

return trip every evening. The train ride passes beautiful scenery and is a great day trip from Nice.

It is extremely helpful to learn some French phrases before arriving. People in this region are friendly and helpful – but not everyone is fluent in English. A few



phrases and a lot of smiles and handshakes will take you a long way. The effort is well worth it – there aren't many places where you can spend the morning marveling at the cobalt and turquoise Mediterranean Sea and the afternoon walking past 10,000-foot

mountains and glacial lakes.

While the snowshoeing is great and the scenery breathtaking, I think what visitors will remember most about their trip is the spirit of a place and a people that seems suspended in time. The hustle of the 24/7 culture will seem foreign after a few days in Mercantour and even a favorite restaurant back home may seem brash after being received like long-lost family members by gite owners who insist you try their specialty dessert.

It's a place where there is always time for a polite hello and friendly conversation. And it's a lifestyle that emphasizes simple pleasures: a good bottle of wine, a leisurely stroll in the mountains and an evening in front of a roaring fire. The magic of Mercantour lingers long after the visit ends.



Here's a Mercantour Park list of English-speaking guides. All are certified, have passed a test and know the park very well. Some specify areas of interest as noted.

Vésubie

Christian Lorenzetti: c.lorenzetti@free.fr or christian.lorenzetti@neuf.fr; tel. 04 93 95 22 58 or 06 22 08 63 93 (cell); tales and legends of the wolf and mountains.

Franck Rainaut: franck.rainaut@wanadoo.fr or cheminsdaltitude@wanadoo; 04 93 89 74 99 or 06 08 03 82 62 (cell).

Roya

Ronan Souquet: ronan.souquet@laposte.net, tel. 04 93 79 31 15.

Richard Petitjean: rcpetitjean@wanadoo.fr (with the tourism office); tel. 04 93 07 13 19.

Tinée

Pierre-Alain Garrigues: pag.vtt@wanadoo.fr; tel. 06 73 27 07 73 or 06 73 27 07 73 (cell); on the trail of the elusive wolf.

Aurélie Castellana: tel: 06 07 24 26 92 or 06 07 24 26 92.

Var

Eric Pelliati: pelliati@infonie.fr; tel. 04 93 05 17 59; kayaking, popular traditions, flora and fauna, rural settlement and mines, on the trail of the elusive wolf.

Jean-Michel Goux: jm.goux@wanadoo.fr; tel. 04 94 47 54 40, 04 94 47 54 40 or 06 73 27 02 82 (cell); cultural and human inheritance, geology and mines, on the trail of the elusive wolf; <http://balades-randos.chez.tiscali.fr>.

Frédéric Durand: tel. 04 94 28 64 96 or 06 74 08 80 94 (cell); geology, orientation and nature photography.

Frédéric Allaria: fredallaria@orange.fr or guides.oeroc@free.fr; tel. 04 93 02 32 15 or 06 80 90 38 15 (cell); archery.

Ubaye



Michel Tent: tel. 04 92 81 35 06 or 06 85 92 80 22 (cell); management and protection, the animation of nature, on the trail of the elusive wolf.

Gil Streichert: rios.canyon@wanadoo.fr; tel. 04 92 85 54 68; fauna and ethnology; www.canyonsud-alp.com.

Here are some good websites (Some pages are in French, try translation page <http://babelfish.altavista.com>. You can translate entire web pages, paragraphs or



phrases. Sometimes the translation is excellent, sometimes it's rough.)

Winter is "hiver" in French.

Mercantour Park page on snowshoeing (Raquettes, often translated as Racket in English, actually means snowshoes)

http://www.randoxygene.org/pge/rando_rn/faune.php?rubrique=4&zone=1. This site has suggested snowshoe trails in Tinee, Cians and Vesubie (see Haut Pays in French, Highlands in English on left side of page). The site is in French but is translated pretty well by Babelfish. If you cut and paste the web address into Babelfish you can surf the site in English. E-mail: mercantour@wanadoo.fr

Club Alpine Français: www.cafnice.org. The club, based in Nice, manages and takes reservations for the park's winter refuges (cabins deep in the mountains). They may also provide information on walks from refuge to refuge. It will take an expert snowshoer about six hours to walk from one to another—don't attempt this alone. E-mail: info@cafnice.org, tel: 33 049 362-5999, fax: 04 93 92 09 55

Saint Martin Vesubie: <http://www.saintmartinvesubie.fr/>

Tende: <http://www.tendemerveilles.com/>

Museum of Merveilles: <http://www.museedesmerveilles.com/>

Isola 2000: <http://www.isola2000.com/hiver/station.htm>. **Saint Etienne de Tinée**
/Auron: <http://www.auron.com/index2.php?lg=&s=1>

Valberg: <http://www.valberg.com/>; information about walks in the park from
Valberg: mercantour.haut-VAr-cians@espacesnaturels.fr

Barcelonnette: <http://www.barcelonnette.com/>

Sauze: <http://www.sauze.com/>

Pra-Loup: <http://www.praloup.com/>

Val d'Allos: <http://www.valdallos.com/>

**Tips from Mel Jones, an adventure guide and gite owner in the Vésubie
Valley (www.space-between.co.uk):**

General Notes:

Safety – As in all mountain areas in winter, avalanche and quickly changing weather conditions present a danger. For protection:

1. Always travel in a group of three or more.
2. Make sure that each member of the group is wearing an avalanche transceiver, and knows how to use it.
3. Verify that at least one member of the group is well versed in group management if you plan to cross steep and avalanche-prone ground. Footpaths and markers are mostly obliterated, so at least one member of the group should also be well versed in the techniques of navigation in white out conditions.
4. Always check the weather forecast before departure.
5. Always carry the correct clothing for winter outings in the mountains.
6. Always carry sufficient survival kits to cover the group in the event of an emergency – this includes spare food and drink.

7. Always check avalanche conditions with the local guide office before departure.
8. Access by road – always carry spare tires and snow chains. Some of the roads in the area are kept open, but there will always be patches that are only negotiable with snow tires or chains, and there is always the risk of snowfall while out on the mountain.

Maps – The best maps to use for the following walks are the IGN Top 25 Series. Two maps at scale 1:25000 cover the area: Map No 3741OT – Vallee de la Vésubie, and Map No 3641ET – Moyen Tinee.



GR – French for Grand Randonee, and a long distance footpath. The two most popular passing through the area are the GR5 and the GR52. The former starts on the North coast of Holland and finishes in Nice; the latter is localized in the Alpes Maritimes, and start in St Dalmas Valdeblore, crosses all the high cols in the area and finishes in Menton on the Mediterranean coast.

Rating System:

Easy – For beginners, with no steep ground to cover, and no avalanche risk. 3 to 4 hours duration.

Moderate – For people of average fitness, with no technical difficulty, but may have small sections of steep ground. Avalanche risk – small. 4 to 6 hours duration.

Strenuous – A good degree of fitness is required due to distance and height gain. Technical difficulty as for Moderate. Avalanche risk – small. More than 6 hours duration.

Very Strenuous – A high degree of fitness required due to distance and height gain. Technical difficulty as for Moderate. Avalanche risk – small. More than 8 to 10 hours duration.



With Difficulties added on to any of the above – Previous experience advised in the use of snowshoes on steep ground, with a higher degree of avalanche risk on some of the slopes to be crossed. Group management and search and rescue knowledge also advisable. This may add 1 to 2 hours onto the day.

Walks:

Times, height gains (in meters) and footpath markers of the main sections are given in parentheses.

Grade: Easy

Drive up to Le Boréon, as for the Les Adus Circuit, and park just before the left hand turn over the bridge to Mollières. From here, snowshoe up the D198, which is used as a part of a cross-country ski complex. Go as far as the Vacherie du Boréon (1 hour) (150m). From the Vacherie, go back to marker 419 and turn east to meet the GR52 and marker 380. Follow the GR52 back to the start at marker 381 (2 hours). It's also possible to visit the Alpha wolf center, about 15 minutes away.

Les Adus Circuit Grade: Moderate.

From St Martin Vésubie, follow the D89 (signposted La Boréon). Continue past the lake at La Boreon, and just opposite the welcome centre for “Alpha,” the wolf sanctuary, turn left over the small bridge, signposted Mollières. Follow the single-track road as far as it is open and free of snow, and then park.

Start snowshoeing at the Parking de Salese – follow the GR52 to Col de Salese (1.5 hours) (350m). From the Col de Salese (marker 436), follow the west ridge up towards Les Adus and onto Lac des Adus and the refuge just beyond (marker 395, 1.5 hours, 200m). Continue to marker 396, and take the left fork at this point to start the descent back into the Salese valley (1.5 hours).

Note: The footpath after marker 396 is not easy to discern after a heavy snowfall with no other shoe marks to follow, so be careful to choose the correct descent gully.

Les Adus Circuit Option Grade: Moderate with difficulties.

From marker 437, continue southwest and contour around under the flanks of Caire Archas to Col de la Vallette des Adus (marker 394, 1 hour, 150m). This slope can be prone to avalanches under certain conditions. From the col, descend directly back down the valley to the refuge (marker 395, 1 hour) and descend back to the Salese valley as above.



Lacs des Millefontes Grade: Strenuous

From St Martin Vésubie, follow the D2565 over Colmiane and into Valdebllore. At the point where the road meets marker 80, turn off the main road and follow the single-track road as far as it is open (this varies with snow conditions). Snowshoe up the track as far as marker 81 to join the GR52. Climb up along the GR52 via Col de Veillos (2 hours, 500m) as far as Col du Barn (2 hours, 260m). Return by descending back as far as Lac Rond, and as a small detour, cut across country to Lac Petit, then track back along the lakeside and contour back south to meet the GR52 at Col de Veillos (2 hours). Return down along the GR52.

Lac des Millefontes Option. Grade: Very Strenuous with difficulties.

From Col de Veillos, follow the GR52 until a small cabin is seen to the east of the track (marked “Cab”). Turn east at this point and contour around and up to Lac d’en Veillos (1.5 hours, 300m). The section just below the lake is steep—make sure that you enter the hanging valley where the lake sits at its northern flank. From the lake, ascend to the ridge above and to the east; then head south along the ridge to the summit of Mont Petoumier (1.5 hour, 270m). Return the same way as the ascent via Col de Veillos.

Lac des Prals Circuit Grade: Strenuous with difficulties

From St Martin Vésubie, follow the D94 (signposted La Madone de Fenestre). Follow this to marker 350 – the road is impassable past this point in December, January and February. From here, ascend up the slope to marker 362, and then up the Vallon des Prals to marker 364 (3 hours, 500m). From here, contour up in a northeasterly direction under the slopes of Cime Paranova to attain the plateau of Lacs de Prals (spot height 2298m, 1.5 hours, 150m). This section requires care due to the risk of avalanche. From the plateau, navigate around the lakes, and then northwest to Baisse



des Cinq Lacs (1.5 hours, 100m). Descend to the Vacherie de la Madone, and follow the road to Marker 355, and then contour west back to marker 350 (2 hours).

Notes: