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Introductie:



As the name suggests, the Maritime Alps are related to the sea. Where the Mediterranean strays north and Italy merges into France, waves caress the sun-drenched Riviera seafront fringed with deck chairs and umbrellas. Not many holidaymakers glance away from the mesmerising sea yet, a mere 50km from those beaches, a forbidding barrier of light-grey mountains looms on the horizon. With summits soaring to over 3000m above sea level, the marvellous Maritime Alps straddle the Franco–Italian border for 190km, and form the exciting westernmost realm of the mighty Alpine chain.

This is a region of striking contrasts. Quaint picture-book villages, crafted in stone, perch on wooded slopes in herb-scented foothills, with dramatic backdrops of jagged rocky massifs that seem to dissolve in the mists and cloud that form as warm air rises from the sea and encounters cooler inland currents. Thick woods provide cover for silent wolves that flit through unseen, attracted by the abundance of prey – roe deer, chamois and ibex in healthy herds, heritage of 19th-century game reserves that were once the playground of Italy's royal family. Higher up, scores of beautiful lakes glitter like gems in cirques – the rocky bowls scooped out of the granite-schist core by the action of vast glaciers that once shrouded the region.

The Maritime Alps are shared by France and Italy, and both countries have wisely set up protected areas which work closely together. On the southern side the Parc National du Mercantour was established in 1979, France's youngest Alpine park. The name came from the eponymous summit, long believed to be the highest in the range, although in fact that honour goes to the 3297m Argentera, on the northern Italian side. This is where the Parco Naturale delle Alpi Marittime was instituted in 1995, including within its boundaries an 1855 royal game reserve. Combined, the two parks cover an impressive 1700km².

Of greatest interest to walkers is the estimated 600km (373 miles) of mapped and marked pathways. These are the heritage of ancient routes crisscrossing the Alps, trodden by prehistoric herders, then by Hannibal, Julius Caesar and Charlemagne. The soldiers and pilgrims tramping over the forbidding cols were joined by traders from Provence and the Mediterranean coast, on a quest for markets for salt and olive oil, and traders from landlocked Piemonte and the Po plain with wool and skins to sell. A time of especially fierce competition in commerce, the 1400s saw a multitude of new routes constructed across the Maritimes, and a constant traffic of heavily-laden mules.

Perfectly graded bridleways were the order of the day in the 1800s, to serve Italy's king and his hunting parties. Many were reinforced by the army during the fascist period, to serve the unbelievable number (130!) of fortifications erected on almost every pass between the Italy and France. Half dug into mountainsides, most are still standing. During the course of this guidebook lots of these intriguing trails and strategic cols are visited, each with a fascinating tale to tell.

The history of the border in this area is interesting in its own right. Italian unification came in 1860, as did a treaty whereby Nice and its surrounds were transferred to France in recognition of Napoleon's support for Italy against Austria. However, exceptions were granted for upper swathes of the Roya, Vésubie and Tinée valleys, which formed part of the Italian royal hunting reserve. When the Italian monarchy was abolished by referendum at the close of the Second World War, the border shifted to the watershed crests, where it remains today.