

Part Six of the Alpine Arc: Valgrisenche-Bardonecchia

Friday 16th March 2018. This time we flew to Turin with Mark and Phil from Gatwick. Negotiating the complex travel arrangements to Turin Porta Susa (Train to Dora Nova, followed by a walk across a main road to a bus stop, then bus to Porta Susa, then train to Ivrea and another train to Aosta and finally bus to Pre St Didier. We finally found the hotel after walking round the town centre for 10 minutes, dumped the bags and went to find food, beer and dinner. The weather forecast was poor for the next few days, and our original plan of skiing from La Thuile to La Rosiere, and staying in Sainte Foy Tarentaise before skinning over the Col Des Mines to the Rifugio Bezzi was highly unlikely. Instead Oscar had come up with a plan to start from Valgrisenche a bit further along the Aosta Valley than La Thuile and skin up the valley from Bonne to the refuge. Phil sorted out a courier to take out bags back to Turin at the end of the trip from the hotel, and we met up with Doug when he arrived by bus from Milan in the hotel restaurant around 8:30. Some nice wine (Torette and Mayolet – two grapes I'd not heard of before), and we retired to bed.



Day 1. Saturday 17th March 2018 At 7:05 the following morning we donned ski boots, packed up any non-touring kit into suitcases and left them at the hotel labelled for the courier. After a brief breakfast a taxi picked us up to take us to Valgrisenche. About 45 minutes later we pulled into a very snowy village with one bar. Phil had had a text from home late the previous evening, and called home after we got out of the taxi. It was not good news – Jenny had been admitted to hospital, and needed an operation the

following day, which could be very serious. Phil had to go home. Just as Oscar's car pulled up we called the taxi back and when it arrived, we put Phil back into the taxi to take him to the airport. Once again, we were down to three plus Oscar. The plan was to spend the day with a warm up by skinning up to Il Sigaro while the weather was poor – lightly snowing. It's an area that Oscar guides round regularly, including heli-skiing, and while the choppers would not be flying today, Oscar thought that a brisk skin up and then ski down to the hotel in Bonne would be a perfect start to the week. He led us off towards the Beauregard dam along the left (east) side of the valley along a flat track which was easy going with skins on, gradually opening up to a steep drop off on the right hand side and warning signs about unexploded mines. We eventually reached the top of the old dam, which was taken down in the 1950s with a view across the valley to Bonne. After a kilometre or so, we turned up the hill and started skinning up through the trees on a clearly laid out track past snowed in farmhouses, and cow barns. As we gained altitude we broke through the treeline into snow covered meadows, and eventually up to the high alpine terrain. By this time, about two and a half hours and 700m vertical Doug and I were starting to feel the burn and were dropping behind Oscar and Mark, who seemed to have no trouble. As we continued across a high Alpine area there was an indication of sun that might break through the clouds, but it kept hidden as we reached the top of the col at 2775m, nearly 1200m above Valgrisenche. Mark and Oscar kept going another 50m vertical to reach the top, but I was exhausted. Another group had gone past us about half an hour earlier, and two of them, Quebecois, living in Geneva, were also stopped



at the col. After taking the skins off, layering up to stay warm, swapping glasses for goggles, and grabbing a quick bite of a chocolate bar, Oscar returned from the summit. By this time Doug had made it up to the col too, and by the time he had de-skinned, and prepped for going down, Mark and the other guide and his client had made it down from the summit too. We linked up with the other group to descend through fresh untracked powder on a gentle descent down towards the trees. Oscar and the other guide were keen to link up with a track that would descend straight down to the dam, without having to pole along side the lake at the bottom, and we spent a good twenty minutes tacking through trees trying to find the line, but eventually gave up and traversed across to the original track. This brought us out about a km along the lake, and so we poled (hard work again) along to the dam. Once above the dam we skied through the bushes (or into them in my case) to the dam itself, where it became clear



we were a good 75m vertical below the hotel. The boot up to Bonne from the dam was just about the last energy I had left, particularly as it was almost 4pm by the time I got to the road. I lay on the snow for five minutes almost asleep while Doug came up behind me. Remembering that my cold poles still had some rum in them I gave Doug and Mark a draught on the pole then took one myself – never has cold rum tasted better. We reached the hotel just after 4pm, and collapsed into the bar for a hot tea (well, beer for Mark). After 20mins recovery, we took the gear up, dried off the skins and took the luxury of a shower. The hotel is a base for heli-skiing and had few other clients as the weather was stopping the helicopter from flying, but we had a great meal of soup, pasta, veal and chocolate cake

with a bottle of local red wine (Fumin).

Day 2. Sunday 18st March 2017

A reasonably early start was needed the following day, so after breakfast at 7:30, we settled up put the skins on and walked 100m up the road to the start of the track up the west side of the valley. A large group of young people were already there at 8am (Italian Alpine Club), and we followed them for about half a mile until they stopped to look for their route. Oscar had us go straight on



and we continued the slow climb up about 200m vertical for about 2km at which point Oscar suggested we took off the skins and poled. As I was more comfortable Nordic skiing with skins on he was OK with that, and for the next couple of hundred metres Doug and I both were cross country skiing. Eventually Oscar yelled for Doug to take off his skins, and when I asked should I he said "it's up to you". So I kept the skins on. Until I realised 50m down the track when Mark went shooting past me, that we were now going seriously down not up as we entered an open meadow with fresh untracked powder. I took my skins off, and took eight or nine great arcing turns through fresh snow and onto a bridge across the river on the valley floor. Behind us was a large cliff and half way up as a large male Ibex perched on a tiny ledge and a fox at the bottom of the cliff watching us. Having dropped down 150m to the valley floor we then started the gradual 450m vertical skin up to the Rifugio Bezzi. The weather was clearing and the skin up was beautiful with no one else around, making fresh tracks up the valley. We passed underneath the Col Des Mines, where we were supposed to ski down from La Rosiere, and up to the Rifugio Bezzi, arriving there about 12:30 after a 4 hour skin. After the previous day it was a welcome easy day, but still deserving of a

beer. Bezzi had been damaged the previous season by a huge avalanche that had come down from the other side of the valley and taken out a wall, which had now been repaired, but the windows were still boarded up. A fire was going and the guardian had some soup on for us, but the refuge was cold.



We were the only people staying there, so Doug got his own room leaving the snorers (me and Mark) to share a room. Doug's feet were starting to blister from his boots rubbing, and Mark, though happy with his boots had a hotspot. The hut had one tiny area where 3G coverage could be found, and we heard from Phil that Jenny had undergone surgery and was recovering. A very satisfying meal of minestrone soup, pasta with tomato sauce (cooked perfectly) and beef shank was accompanied by another local wine (Torette again), and an early night.

Day 3. Monday 19th March 2018 The weather had finally cleared but Oscar was keen to get to the Col de Bassac Deré that links the Valgrisenche with the Val Di Rhêmes valleys be-

fore the sun had got to the snow, as it could be a slide risk later in the afternoon. We therefore got up at 4:30am for a 5:00am breakfast of cereal and bread and jam that the guardian had laid out for us. He was up to provide tea and coffee too, and get the fire going to try and shake off the cold, but we were well wrapped up when we left the hut at 6:00am with skins on in the dark, and started by torchlight up the Ghiacciaio di Glaietta glacier towards the Col. After a fairly flat start the climb became pretty consistent and as the sun came up we could see the full magnificence of the valley, with high peaks both sides, rugged cliffs and lots of wildlife tracks – chamois, ibex, fox and hare tracks



but no skitracks at all. Oscar

broke tracks through virgin snow as we climbed the 750m vertical, 2km long glacier. We reached the col at 9:00 with the sun coming over the top to reveal a pristine valley on the other side. No human signs at all, and a 300m vertical descent in 50cm of fresh powder. The snow conditions were perfect with no sun damage at all, as Oscar started down. Doug, who had come up last followed him, to our surprise at how quickly he had got himself ready. Until we realised he had forgotten to take his skins off, and he quickly planted face in the powder on his first turn. I then set off along a line 5m to the left of Oscars and go 10 perfect turns in down to where Oscar was before being told off for going too far from

his tracks. Doug and Mark came down close to the proper line, and we then took the next stage, three times as long and not quite as steep down to the Lago Goletta at the base of the col. This was superb, champagne style powder, early enough in the morn-

ing to still be perfect after the previous night's snowfall. Putting the skins on we then made the short, 60m skin up over the pass that drops into the Val Di Rhêmes valley



proper, and then traversed through increasingly sticky snow across a steep slope that dropped us down into the valley. As I came along behind Oscar I set off a small slide down the edge of the slope underneath the cliff edge, reminding us that the avalanche danger was still considerable and we had to be careful. We then coasted down towards the Rifugio Benevolo. Just before the hut, the track passes over a bridge, and we stopped to wait for Doug, who had had a face first snow encounter with the crusty stuff and then walked/skated the last bit to the hut itself, arriving in time for coffee at 10:30. We were delighted to see a proper espresso machine at the hut, and a very welcoming and friendly guardian. The hut was much warmer than Bezzi, nicely made up, and quiet when we got there. However, it was heavily booked, and we knew it would be busy later on. After tea, unpacking, drying out skins,

and sorting out boots, wet clothes, etc, we had to make a choice. Go out and do an-

other 600m vertical skin and get some powder, or take a long lunch a nap and a recover. Oscar took the former, the rest of us the latter, so an outstanding spaghetti with garlic, olive oil and pepper accompanied by ham and cheese with bread washed down with a bottle of Torrette, and we headed for an afternoon nap and recovery. Later on, Oscar came back grinning to high heaven having found incredible powder on the north side



of the valley, and

we probably had missed a trick, but being fresh for tomorrow was also important. Before Dinner one of the other groups arrived with Stefano, the guide who took me on my second aborted Haute Route. Very much enjoyed catching up with him, and he was keen to hear about the tour, and the huts we'd visited on the way. After dinner we again headed to be early, for a sharp start at 7am the next day.

Day 4. Tuesday 20th March 2018.

The sky was clear at 6 the following morning as we had breakfast – good granola for the first time and really decent coffee, the Benevolo hut really is one of the nicest huts we have found on the tour – it even had showers! We started at 8:00 and skinned up towards the Punta da Galisia peak overlooking the Col de Bassagne. The snow was perfect, and there was one group that had left the hut before us up ahead making tracks. However, after about half an

hour, Oscar felt they were taking the long way round and tracked up the left hand side of the gorge through which flows the river that goes down the Val di Rhemes. This is



quite steep dropping off to the right, but allows a more direct access, across the meadow and up towards Galisia. After skinning up a number of switchbacks, we realised that Doug had dropped quite a way behind. We stopped to wait for him, and Oscar wanted to know if we were keen to go for the peak, or just go to the Col de Bassagne, before we ski down to Val D'Isere. While Mark and I were keen Doug was really struggling, and didn't want to go for the peak, so we took the safer option, and reached the Col after a 700m vertical ascent in 2½ hours. After taking off skins, and layering back up (both fleeces, hat and neck gator, cos at 3100m it as cold), we skied down fresh

untracked powder into the Glacier de Bassagne which is the source of the Isere. The snow was perfect powder at the top, not particularly deep, but really easy to ski. However, as the aspect changed, we got crust, then breakable crust, then soft, then ice, and all sorts of different conditions all the way down to the Refuge de Prariond, a hut at the very edge of the Val D'Isere ski area, which was just being dug out by the



guardians and their friends. From there we poled across the meadow (very short due to the speed we took going on to it), and then down to la Fornet through the Gorge du Malpasset, where we saw chamois chewing on grass just above the ski run. Arriving at La Fornet we bought lit passes for two days in Val D'Isere and took the cable car up, the bubble up, a chair up and then skied down into Val for lunch. By the time we got there, food needed to be functional rather than good, and a burger and a beer at Quicksilver did the job. Back in



contact with the rest of the world, we learned that Jenny was recovering well from her op back home, so we felt we could start sending Phil pictures of the trip. After lunch we needed to work out where to head off the following day, so we spent the afternoon exploring Val D'Isere, including a fabulous off piste powder run off the back side of the Borsat lift into the Col de Fresse, and finishing with a fantastic high speed slalom run down the Olympic run to the village. Oscar dragged us to Le Pub for a beer or three and then we caught the bus to La Daille where our hotel host picked us up to stay at Le Serrac, a small 2* hotel in La Reculaz between Tignes and Val. We had a lovely dinner, with possibly too much wine in the hotel and crashed.

Day 5. Wednesday 21st March 2018

A later start due to not being able to get going until the lifts opened at 8:45 meant we could sleep off a little bit of the previous night's alcohol. We took the funicular up from La Daille at 8:45 sharp then skied down to the Grand Pre chairlift, which was a cold lift up to the base of the Rocher du Charvet. From there the Pointe de Sana is an imposing sight, the ridge clearly visible in the crisp light. We skied into the Col du Pre and

traversed as far as possible keeping as much height as we could until we reached the valley below the Glacier des Barmes de l'Ours.

We then put skins on, delayed, and started skinning up to, and across the glacier. After an hour or so, we were on the glacier, an hour later at the Col de Barmes de l'Ours and then, with my hang-over finally fading, kicked on for an hour up the ascent of the Pointe Sana.

This last 400m was hard work, with Oscar and Mark disappearing from view towards the end. Suddenly we turned a corner and Oscar was standing there off his skis, and taking pictures at the summit, and we were there. A total of a 1000m vertical by lunchtime, and then we could descend. There



were no tracks down the right hand side of the peak, but it was good quality virgin snow, and we took it one after the other in one go down to the Col. Well, Oscar, Mark and I did.

Doug found a patch of crust and face planted but caught us up covered in snow, as we traversed to the Col. One of his boots was tilted much further forwards than normal, and was going to need some attention when we next stopped. From there we could look down into the vallon fleuri de la Rocheure, the heart of the Parc National de Vanois, true backcountry with not a track in sight. Oscar led us down into the valley with nice long arcing turns down to the Refuge de la Femma for lunch. This lovely refuge, built in the 1960s, had recently been refurbished and the guardian prepared a robust spaghetti bolognese for us while we dried off after the exertions of the ascent. As we were waiting for it, Doug tried to work out what was wrong with his



boots. It turned out the lower part had flipped outside the upper part, but with an Allen Key and screwdriver provided by the hut Oscar managed to fix it – for now. Doug had had so many blisters every year with these boots, this was the final straw, and they were going in the bin at the end of the tour. After lunch we started the long traverse to the Refuge Plan du Lac. After a km or so of poling, we put skins on and cross country skied along the side of the valley past the commune of Pierre Blanche, which is a summer only hamlet. The houses were almost completely buried and once past it and over the small hill behind we could see a building that I took to be the Refuge. We'd been going for two hours after lunch at this stage, but it wasn't to be. We skied up and past the house, the Chapelle St Barthelemy, which was built in 1637 and then pressed on along a series of posts placed in the snow to find the hut. It



was beginning to get dark as we finally suddenly came over a lip and found four people with shovel, digging out the refuge.

The guardians, Guillame and Juliette had arrived with family and friends by helicopter that morning and had been digging out the hut which was completely buried on the north side. The chimneys had smoke coming out of them, but also had to be dug out before a fire could be lit, and the descent into the hut was like entering an igloo from the top.



Surprisingly, inside was cosy with two roaring fires going in the stoves. Guillame, Juliette, Guillame's brother and their friends were busy getting the hut prepared, with the children (around 11 years old) pitching in sometimes, and playing games at others. We were tired, in need of tea and food, and were grateful for a great cup of tea and a can of beer each. Dinner was packet soup, and then an amazing lasagne, followed by almond cake that the children had made.

The bedrooms were still icy cold (4.5°C), but huddled under thick duvets we were toasty warm and I slept (and snored) like a log.

Thursday 22nd March 2018

The following morning, clear and sunny, we got up at 6:30 for a 7:00 breakfast. Mark, Oscar and I then took off to climb the peak behind the hut, the Rochers de Lanserlia. This imposing buttress has two or three couloirs cutting through them that both Oscar and I were keen to try. We set off at 8:00 to climb the 460m to the top with the express intention of being the first to ski the couloirs. With just the three of us, Oscar was determined to push us a little, and set a pace which, while I kept up with for about



45 minutes, I just could not keep up, and started to drop back. Mark was right with him as he reached the top after 1hr 20, but I was five minutes behind and panting hard. Oscar seemed a little surprised when I asked him which couloir we were going down, as I was still breathing hard, but after taking some pictures we skied to the entrance of the second couloir – about 35° and 10m wide, it cuts through the buttress for 300m vertically. Oscar, as guide, took it first, with me following once he was out of slide risk. It was 30cm of light fresh powder, perfect pitch, and long (20 turns plus) to the bottom of the rock, then another 150m vertical of open less steep untracked powder down to the hut. We were

back at the hut by 9:15, for a coffee and then set off with Doug on skins across the lake below the hut to reach the edge of the plateau.

Once across the flat plain, we took the skins off and traversed to the commune of La Chaviere where the road runs in summer, and started the descent through the forest to Termignon. The descent through the trees was fun until we reached the stream at the bottom and realised we'd have to skin up the other side after we had jumped over the stream. Doug didn't quite make it over, but Oscar caught him as he fell back and stopped him taking a very cold bath. A short, 40m climb on skins brought us back to the track, and from there we skied down the road to the village of Termignon, where the snow stopped. A short walk from there to the base of the ski lifts, and we stopped for lunch. To get to ValFrejus, our next hotel we had to take a taxi, and after a very good lunch of ham, cheese bread and salad (with, for some reason, chips?) we travelled the 16km or so to Valfrejus and the Gite des Tavernes. This is more of a hostel with lots of people coming through for the night, and a few speed flyers staying there. ValFrejus is where speed flying started (think hang-gliding on skis but with a very small parachute instead), and has a school for it there. We had a late dinner of sausage and polenta due to the late arrival of a group of ski tourers, and crashed.



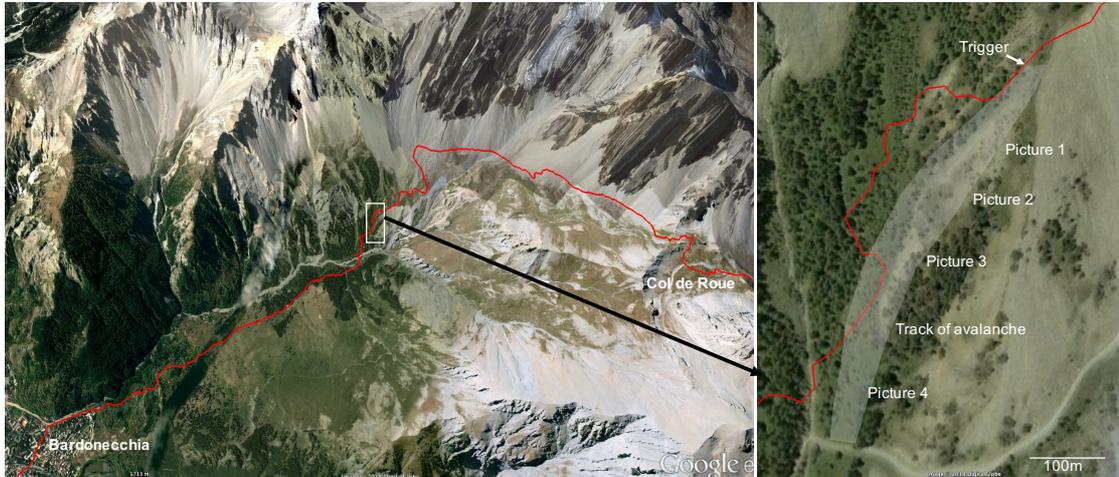
Friday 23rd March 2018

We woke to find it snowing, against all expectations, weather forecasts, and the radar! The lifts in Valfrejus open at 9am so we had a late start, leaving the hotel at 8:30. We bought Randonee tickets (only valid for one lift up), then took the very fancy new gondola and chair up to the top. The top was clear, and the fog in the valley covered most of Val Frejus, but there was cloud blowing in and the visibility was going from clear to flat every few seconds. From the top, we skied down on piste into Le Lavoir area of Valfrejus and then traversed left across the valley to the base of the val de Roue. Putting our skins on in the fog, we then started up the valley towards the set of four different cols at the top – each one leading into a different valley. Without much visibility, Oscar had to make sure we were heading for the right one, and with no tracks to follow he made a couple more stops than normal, leading to a fairly easy skin up the 400m or so vertical to the top. As we reached the basin below the cols, the weather cleared, and we could see all four cols. Oscar picked the third from the left, (the Col de Roue) and we tracked across and up to it, reaching the top around 11:00. From here it could be seen that the other side was an empty, long valley leading down to Bardonecchia, with no other tracks ahead of us.

The effects of the wind were obvious however. The whole valley had windpacked and wind-damaged snow in it, and the avalanche danger was going to be considerable. With skins off we traversed across the windblown snow keeping as far as possible from the steep snow loaded slopes above and to our right, and eventually started turning on a shallow area of alternating breakable crust

and windblown ridges. Oscar was keen to keep a distance between all of us, and wound his way across the valley, scouting out for safe areas. As we reached the treeline, the valley dropped off and the main route down was a 30 degree wide snow loaded slope that Oscar did not like the look of. Although it was hard packed on top, from the wind, he was cautious and took us across the top, and onto the ridge on the side.

From here we could gain entrance to the forest across the top of a small



gully and Oscar led the way telling us to keep our distance and be really careful. I watched him ski across the top of the gully, and into the forest, from where he started making turns down through the trees. I then took two turns on the ridge and followed his tracks into the forest. As I turned to go in, I heard a thump behind me and turned to see a 4ft deep cut in the snow spreading the entire width of the gully (maybe 20m wide), followed by a whoosh as the whole side of the gully started to disintegrate. The avalanche started to pick up speed going down to my left and behind me, and I yelled "Avalanche" at Oscar who was ahead and to my right as loud as I could.

From where I was standing there was no danger, but I was concerned that Doug or Mark coming behind might be caught up, but Mark quickly appeared over the top of the ridge above where it had cut. I yelled at him to be careful, and he scooted across behind me as we watched the mass of snow and ice slide all the way to the bottom of



the valley, breaking trees, and burying bushes as it went. We then followed Oscar down through the trees on the right once Doug had appeared behind us, and then down to the base of the avalanche. Doug's comment that this was quite a fresh one as he skied across the debris, indicated that he had missed seeing it, and didn't know how close we were to being caught by it. Oscar called it in to the mountain rescue service once we were certain that there were no other tracks so

that they weren't investigating it, and we continued through the valley path (a short walk up on skis included) down to the commune of Les Granges. The path wound down through the trees and past a number of hamlets until it finished in Bardonecchia. We put skis on the backpacks and started down the road to the train station, coming across a set of dumpsters. Doug took the opportunity to change into slippers and ceremoniously dumped his ski boots in the plastic recycling bin. A 15 minute walk to the train station brought us there just in time to catch the Turin train,



after 136 km of skiing (and 16 in a taxi!), and 5300m vertical ascent on skins. A fantastic tour finished off in Turin with a fabulous meal on the Casa Inghillera opposite Porta Susa train station. Looking forward to the next leg, from Bardonecchia into the Queyras national park.

Valgrisenche – Bardonecchia vis the Gran Paradiso and Vanoise National Parks

