

# TOURING, ITALIAN STYLE

Ski touring, minus scratchy blankets, in Italy's Valle Maira. Bellissima!

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If you've got the ski touring bug but aren't keen on scratchy blankets, this place might be just the job. It's in Italy, for a start; I shouldn't have to explain why that's good. Not many have heard of it; ditto. It's a valley of endless, frequently snowy mountains but no ski lifts; that's good. And it shares a border with France; that could cut both ways, but for now I'm putting it in the plus column. In fact, the region transcends modern national boundaries – it's part of Occitania, which extends west through to France's Atlantic coast and pre-dates most of the lines on a current atlas by about 1,000 years. To get there, go south from Turin and when you're half way to Italy's Ligurian coast, hang a right.

I'm heading to the valley with photo-Penny and our seven-foot-high ski buddy Simon to meet guide Simone Greci. This is not confusing at all, since Simone has an 'e' on the end of his name, is not a giant and is charmingly Italian. He will be showing us not just the valley's skiing, but the linguistic, culinary and cultural traces of Occitania. If you thought you'd come for a story of snow, spiky peaks and epic descents, sharpen up – there will be a Fall Line quiz on Occitan history and language, with a fun-packed starter section on the valley's geology and fauna. I don't care how keen you are about making turns – if you come to Valle Maira you've got to embrace more than just the snow.

But back to skiing-related factors. There's plenty of wonderful accommodation here, thanks to the regeneration of Valle Maira's side valleys, which makes the area perfect for day touring. Countless abandoned, crumbling hamlets have been rebuilt in recent years, often not just as farms but as lodgings of the best kind, where the components of your breakfast and dinner – honey, gnocchi, cured meats and slices of creamy lard – originate just a few metres from where you're staying, as do many of the ski tours.

### LUXE HUTS AND POINTY PEAKS

We make our first base in a former barracks, Campo Base, built into a hillside above the perfect stone houses of the village of Chiappera. There's a cosy dining room, kitchen, comfy rooms, small dorms and epic showers. I've a feeling it's gone up a couple of notches since the Italian infantry stayed here, and Simon – an expert in these matters, having once driven a tank – confirms my thoughts.

For our first outing we trundle a couple of kilometres downhill by car, then skin towards forest, catching final views over our shoulders of the extraordinary shark-fin of Rocca Provenzale. Simone assures us it's an easy enough climb in summer – almost a walk: "Bellissima!" Has he gone raving mad? I make a mental note not to trust a single thing he says to me in the days to come, especially where my survival might be involved.



Lodgings range from simple refuge-style former army barracks to renovated village houses run as boutique hotels

We short-cut the broad zigzags of an old military track to pass through a high alp, complete with a well-named spring 'Pausa' – a logical spot for a break – before climbing sharply to traverse the slopes leading to the Passo della Cavalla.

Our final push is via rocky ridge to the summit of 2,701m Monte Soubeyran, a proper pointy peak. Since we're smack on the border, there's much of France to view to the west, and just below us are rusty brown skeins of barbed wire, and even well-camouflaged pill boxes and gun emplacements. France's Maginot Line reached right down through the Alps and was opposed by Italy's 'Alpine Wall'. Meanwhile, to the east, we have an overview of the entire Valle Maira – possibly part of Simone's plan in coming here for our first day. It's clear we need four years, not four days, to fully explore. It's vast, with wave after wave of mountains.

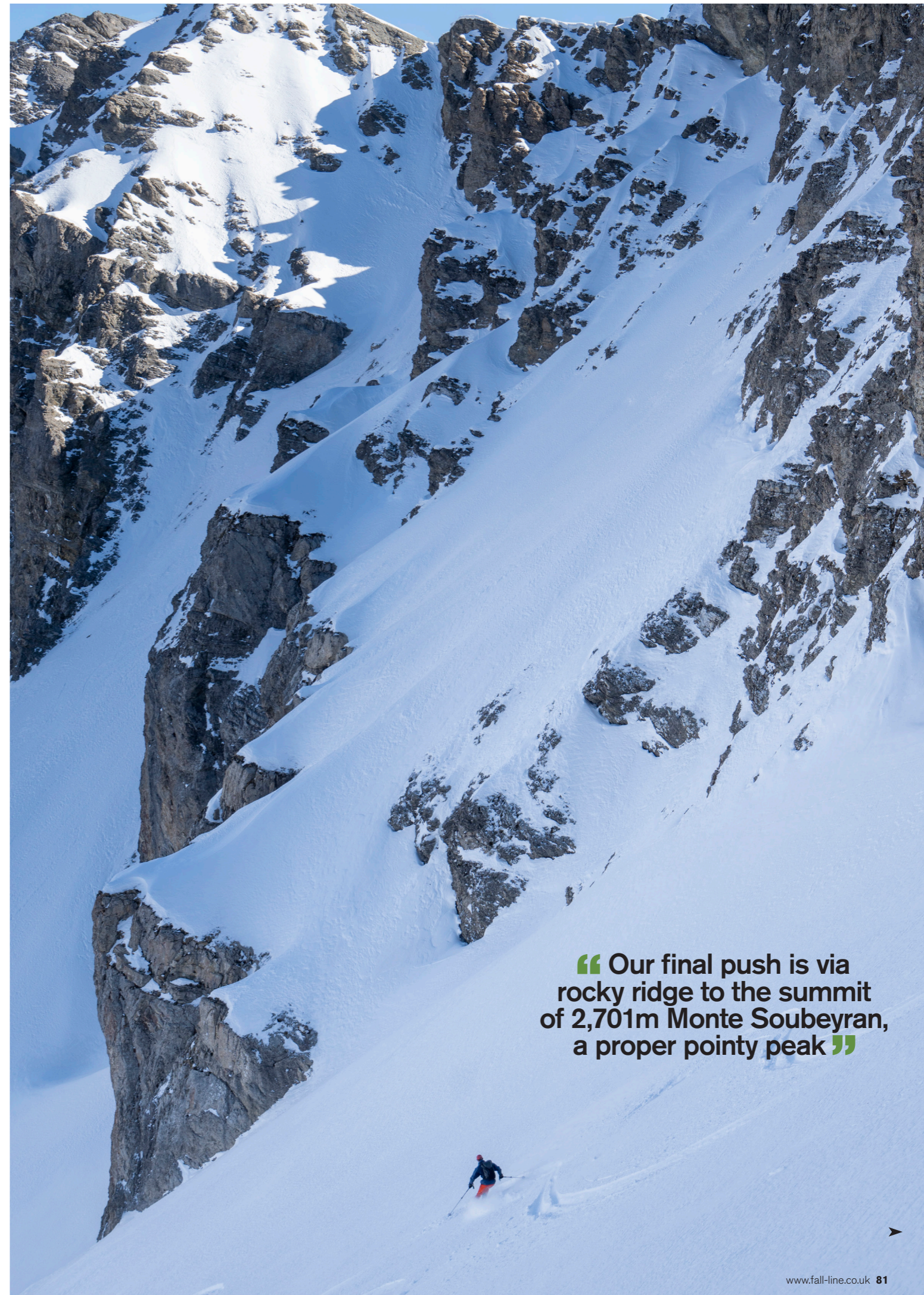
Our descent is much better than a simple retrace: a series of steep spring snow turns into France, then a tough little climb to a col for a steeper, longer north-facing pitch back into the Valle Maira, to intersect with the route of our climb. From here it becomes character building all the way back to the car – there's no two ways, snow conditions are not what they should be, but that goes for the whole of Europe this year, so we're not complaining.

Back at base, Simone introduces us to the valley's 'guidebooks': labours of love by photographer and mountaineer Bruno Rosaro who, over 20 years ago, put Valle Maira on the map with *Charamaio Mai en Val Maira* and *Esquiar en Val Maira*. They're too big to carry up the hills each day, but are just what we need to help us decide what to do next. Simone simplifies things, suggesting we ignore the entire northern half of the valley to concentrate on the more varied southern half.

### A ZEN-LIKE JOURNEY

Day two starts well, from Chialvetta – the kind of village tourists drive for miles to visit in summer: frescoes on old stone walls, an interesting looking church and real-live people living here despite being, in practical terms, about as far from civilisation as if you'd moved to the moon.

We boot through cobbled streets and alleys, then climb a rocky walled path beside fields. The skinning starts alongside a stream, up through forest and onto the lower slopes of a wide rocky valley. It would be hard to identify the precise point where the way changed from – in Simone-English – 'Easy peasy, lemon squeezy', to something unpronounceable (and probably unrepeatably) in Italian. But it's fair to say that it gets quite steep as you negotiate a choke point, after which you might think you're nearly there.



“ Our final push is via rocky ridge to the summit of 2,701m Monte Soubeyran, a proper pointy peak ”





Except that you're not. And where normally you'd be kidding yourself that it will all be worth it, today not even the keenest slush-skier could convince themselves that going back down will be anything other than a challenge.

But, of course, there's the view. Though 2,882m Auto Vallonasso is high, nearby peaks over 3,000m put things into perspective. And we can see intriguing potential onward ways, though today is so warm that simply getting back down the way we came will probably be enough. It is.

Our remaining couple of days are the tiramisu after the ossobuco: a mellow exploration of Valle Maira's famous tree skiing. Even with less than perfect snow, the way up is a zen-like journey, punctuated by vistas of this south eastern end of the valley: rolling and wooded though huge and wild.

The higher ground around Punta la Piovosa and the col above Lago Nero beneath the bleak north face of the 2,830m Rocca la Meja give some of our best skiing: transformed snow and rolling terrain, gullies and steeper pitches through well-spaced trees. And our lodgings for the final night – the Brieis Relais Alpine – are a fairytale, in an old village that has been converted into a multi-building hotel, with hot tubs under the stars, as well as a restaurant that needs revisiting.

**What better way to explore this valley of endless, frequently snowy mountains... Bellissima!**

It's so distracting that Simon leaves his skins on his skis overnight, neatly transferring most of the glue to his ski bases, which stick solid in descent on any slope less than 45°. He is not happy. To paraphrase P. G. Wodehouse, Simon with a grievance is seldom to be confused with a ray of sunshine, though the rest of us are well entertained, especially by his final attempt to remove the glue: schussing with as much speed as he can muster, from snow onto tarmac. It's a base grind of sorts, though I was hoping for more sparks.

We really need to return to Valle Maira, with new skis, one of Bruno's books and more snow, for a rematch with Simone. There is so much more to explore. *Fall Line*

## ESSENTIALS

### ✈ TRAVEL

The nearest major airport is Turin (Easyjet from £18); transfers by public transport (train and bus) into the valley via Cuneo take around 3hrs 45mins.

### 🏠 STAY

At the head of the valley, Rifugio Campo Base ([campobaseacceglio.it](http://campobaseacceglio.it)) offers simple dorm or double room accommodation with hut ambience and a great kitchen from €55 per person per night, half-board. Brieis ([brieis.it](http://brieis.it)) is in a spectacular location from which to explore the east end of the valley, staying in a renovated hamlet, with excellent restaurant and outdoor hot tubs (and spa) overlooking the valley. From €135 for two per nights, B&B.

### 🎿 SKI

Simone Greci has a nose for the best conditions and is bookable via [simone@globalmountain.it](mailto:simone@globalmountain.it). An advanced four-day ski touring course costs €295 per person (based on group of four), [globalmountain.it](http://globalmountain.it). For general info see: [vallemaira.org](http://vallemaira.org)

