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# TREKKING ITALY'S GRANDE TRAVERSATA DELLE ALPI

GTA: Through the Italian Alps  
from the Swiss border to the Mediterranean



David Jordan

# **ITALY'S GRANDE TRAVERSATA DELLE ALPI**

**GTA: THROUGH THE ITALIAN ALPS  
FROM THE SWISS BORDER TO THE MEDITERRANEAN**

**By David Jordan**

**CICERONE**

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Front cover: Military barracks below Lago Valasco (Stage 43)

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## Mountain safety

Every mountain walk has its dangers, and those described in this guidebook are no exception. All who walk or climb in the mountains should recognise this and take responsibility for themselves and their companions along the way. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this guide was correct when it went to press, but, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, they cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person using this book.

### International distress signal (*emergency only*)

Six blasts on a whistle (and flashes with a torch after dark) spaced evenly for one minute, followed by a minute's pause. Repeat until an answer is received. The response is three signals per minute followed by a minute's pause.

**Helicopter rescue:** use the following signals to communicate with a helicopter:

Help needed:  
raise both arms  
above head to  
form a 'Y'



Help not needed:  
raise one arm  
above head, extend  
other arm downward



**Emergency telephone numbers:** if telephoning from the UK, the dialling code is: *Italy:* 0039. Carabinieri: tel 0165 84 22 25; Emergency Services: tel 118

**Weather reports:** *Italy:* tel 0165 44 113

**Mountain rescue can be very expensive – be adequately insured.**

## ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	From	To	Distance (km)	Time (hr/min)	Ascent (m)	Descent (m)	High Point (m)	Low Point (m)	Page
1	Nufenen Pass	Rifugio Margaroli	17.5	7hr	970	1275	2583	1815	37
2	Rifugio Margaroli	Alpe Devero	13.75	5hr	470	1010	2599	1631	42
3	Alpe Devero	Alpe Veglia	13	5hr 30min	955	835	2461	1631	49
4	Alpe Veglia	Varzo	18.75	7hr 45min	820	2035	2179	568	53
5	Varzo	Rifugio San Bernardo	16	7hr	1755	655	2252	568	58
6	Rifugio San Bernardo	Alpe Choggio	16	6hr 45min	1055	1200	2327	1497	62
7	Alpe Choggio	Molini	18.75	7hr 15min	985	1985	1550	485	67
8	Molini	Campello Monti	15.75	7hr 15min	1820	990	2037	485	72
9	Campello Monti	Rifugio Alpe Baranca	18.75	8hr 30min	1635	1345	1924	1036	77
10	Rifugio Alpe Baranca	Carcoforo	8.5	4hr	655	950	2239	1304	83
11	Carcoforo	Rima	9.5	4hr 45min	1055	925	2351	1304	87
12	Rima	Rifugio Valle Vogna	15.25	6hr 45min	1220	1270	2324	1112	90
13	Rifugio Valle Vogna	Rifugio Rivetti	14.5	6hr	1250	435	2493	1380	97
14	Rifugio Rivetti	S. San Giovanni	14.5	6hr 15min	600	1755	2201	895	101
15	S. San Giovanni	S. di Oropa	7.25	3hr 30min	590	465	1622	1020	106
16	S. di Oropa	Trovinasse	18	7hr 45min	1450	1180	2318	1180	110
17	Trovinasse	Quincinetto	7	2hr 45min	10	1145	1435	289	116
18	Quincinetto	Fondo	17.5	8hr 30min	1975	1195	2045	295	122
19	Fondo	Piamprato	11.75	5hr 45min	1345	865	2372	1062	127

Stage	From	To	Distance (km)	Time (hr/min)	Ascent (m)	Descent (m)	High Point (m)	Low Point (m)	Page
20	Piamprato	Ronco Canavese	16.5	8hr	1475	2090	2578	946	131
21	Ronco Canavese	Talosio	10	4hr 45min	1180	905	2050	889	136
22	Talosio	San Lorenzo	13	6hr 30min	1370	1545	2175	1042	140
23	San Lorenzo	Ceresole Reale	26	10hr 45min	1935	1465	2011	826	144
24	Ceresole Reale	Pialpetta	12.5	6hr	1115	1550	2641	1050	150
25	Pialpetta	Balme	15	6hr 45min	1605	1195	2498	1050	154
26	Balme	Usseglio	11.5	6hr 30min	1175	1400	2445	1277	157
27	Usseglio	Il Trucco	23	8hr 30min	1430	985	2546	1277	162
28	Il Trucco	Susa	7	2hr 45min	5	1210	1706	494	167
29	Susa	Alpe Togliè	11.75	5hr	1140	85	1564	494	171
30	Alpe Togliè	Usseaux	15.5	6hr 45min	1245	1355	2595	1404	174
31	Usseaux	Balsiglia	19	7hr 45min	1360	1430	2708	1370	179
32	Balsiglia	Chigo di Prali	16	6hr 15min	845	765	1705	1150	184
33	Chigo di Prali	Villanova	19	8hr	1210	1425	2451	1231	188
34	Villanova	Rifugio Barbara Lowrie	12.5	5hr 45min	1175	655	2373	1231	192
35	Rifugio Barbara Lowrie	Rifugio Quintino Sella	14	6hr 30min	1440	560	2650	1753	196
36	Rifugio Quintino Sella	Castello	11	4hr	190	1240	2764	1583	201
37	Castello	Rifugio Meleze	14.75	6hr	1040	825	2284	1590	209
38	Rifugio Meleze	Chiappera	15.25	6hr 15min	1000	1160	2804	1622	213

Stage	From	To	Distance (km)	Time (hr/min)	Ascent (m)	Descent (m)	High Point (m)	Low Point (m)	Page
39	Chiappera	Rifugio della Gardetta	17	7hr	1245	555	2437	1622	218
40	Rifugio della Gardetta	Sambuco	19.5	7hr	480	1645	2535	1280	222
41	Sambuco	Strepeis	11	5hr 30min	1140	1035	2243	1132	226
42	Strepeis	Rifugio Malinvern	21.25	9hr	1830	1300	2600	1273	230
43	Rifugio Malinvern	Terme di Valdieri	13.5	5hr 30min	745	1180	2520	1368	235
44	Terme di Valdieri	Rifugio Genova-Figari	14	6hr 15min	1255	635	2538	1368	239
45	Rifugio Genova-Figari	San Giacomo	11.25	4hr 30min	465	1240	2463	1225	244
46	San Giacomo	Trinita	11	4hr 45min	730	865	1572	1001	247
47	Trinita	Palanfrè	10.5	5hr	1105	810	2203	1091	251
48	Palanfrè	Limonetto	10.5	4hr 45min	865	970	2274	1294	254
49	Limonetto	Rifugio Garelli	23.5	9hr 15min	1710	1030	2220	1294	258
50	Rifugio Garelli	Upega	16.25	7hr	1130	1805	2228	1280	262
51	Upega	Monesi di Triora	9	3hr 45min	430	345	1627	1280	267
52	Monesi di Triora	Colle Melosa	20	7hr 45min	1275	1120	2150	1310	270
53	Colle Melosa	Rifugio Gola di Gouta	16.25	7hr	910	1230	1847	1173	275
54	Rifugio Gola di Gouta	Rifugio Alta Via	16.5	5hr 45min	265	955	1213	548	279
55	Rifugio Alta Via	Ventimiglia	12.5	4hr	160	690	548	0	283

Griespass on the Swiss-Italian border (Stage 1)





## INTRODUCTION



*Well-maintained tracks make easy walking (Stage 9)*

There is no doubt that this is one of the great alpine treks. Just over 800km, around 60,000m of ascent and descent, trekking across Italy from the Swiss border in the high alps, all the way to the sea, where you can walk no further. The aficionado of mountaineering peaks will appreciate passing Monte Rosa, Rocciamelone, Rocca la Meja, Monviso and the epic spires of the Argentera. In the course of this great journey, you will pass through no less than five unique alpine regions; the Lepontine Alps, the Pennine Alps, the Graian Alps, the Cottian Alps and the Maritime Alps.

Yet none of these facts will form the memories you are most likely to treasure from this journey. These will

be drawn from the smaller things. The things that make the GTA a unique trek, fundamentally different from the multitude of other great trekking opportunities that you could choose in the alps. When I ask other people about their experience of the western alps they talk about the Ecrins, the Vanoise or perhaps even the Queyvas regions on the French side of the alps. Few seem genuinely aware of the great diversity and opportunity among the mountains on the Italian side of the watershed that forms the border. Among these mountains life has gone on, quietly, in much the same way as it always has. There are not the big ski resorts, no large hotels, no great promotional campaigns luring in visitors,

no commercialisation of culture selling replicas hastily assembled abroad. It is just, quieter.

This is the difference. The Italian side of the alpine chain is just a little bit wilder. A bit less managed. There is a sense that things here are as they always have been, perhaps as they should be. High among the great peaks, prehistoric-looking ibex clash horns, the sound echoing clear across the stillness. Light-footed chamois skip across great slopes of scree. Below in alpine meadows, lop-eared Biellese sheep cluster together, and moving among them, almost hidden, the larger outline of the fierce Maremma sheepdogs, the age-old protection against the all but invisible wolves that still range vast distances through these mountains. The practice of transhumance still sets the rhythm of the seasons here. Great flocks are herded far from valley homes, exploiting alpine meadows as snow recedes. Herders, moving with their flocks, live an unenviably hard existence, bedding down in the most basic *alpe* huts, roofed with great slabs of stone. Tradition is strong here, and with it a sense of history that does more to define the present than in most of our lives.

Travelling through these mountains day after day somehow requires the visitor to be more than just that. Nothing is packaged, presented, translated or sold, at least metaphorically speaking. There is less in terms of the industry of tourism, supporting

the traveller and making life easier. Yet that absence is what makes the journey so much more enriching. You need to become a part of the story, to engage with people and the landscape in a way that you don't in so many places, where you remain merely an outsider.

It is a bold start when devising a walking route to title it a Grand Traverse, and yet nothing less would truly capture the essence of this route. The route's founders recognised this. It really is a grand and wonderful journey of exploration and discovery. Indeed, I will be quite surprised at anyone who undertakes this adventure and doesn't fall just a little bit in love with the region, its places, history and people.

#### THE GTA ROUTE

Devised in the 1970s, the Italian GTA route was inspired to some extent by the success of the French equivalent, which connects Lake Geneva with the coast at Nice, although most now know it only as the southern part of the longer GR5 route. Originally devised to run south to north, the GTA began at Viozene, near Ormea and ended at the unremarkable Molini di Calasca, a route of approximately 633km. The project was as much an economic one as it was a celebration of the mountains. Undoubtedly negotiations were necessary with local and regional groups over the choice of route, and inevitably therefore who or



where benefitted, and where was left out. Rather than a single, clear route, this led to a network of paths, variants and options. While this may be great for exploring an area, in some ways it did little more than add the label of the GTA to existing paths.

After the initial enthusiasm ebbed away, many of the routes were less maintained, and with little promotion the route could have been lost. Its continued existence we owe undoubtedly to the renowned German professor of cultural geography, Werner Bätzing, who has researched the area over several decades and whose two-volume German-language guide books, now in their 8th edition, are unquestionably the definitive work. In the intervening time other authors have also published guides in Italian and German. The first English-language

guide was published by Cicerone in 2005 and written by Gillian Price. I am indebted to both for trusting me with this re-write. A lot has changed however. The route has been extended, most now recognise the GTA as being border to sea, and most also now walk north to south. There is something about starting high in the mountains on a border, and walking south until stopped by the sea. There is still inconsistency, too. A prominent Italian guide has the route bypassing the northern border and finishing at Lake Maggiore. The German-language guides tend to still include a number of variant options. What I have sought to do in this guide is to provide a single continuous route, using what I believe to be the most recognised route from end to end. This is not to discourage venturing off the route,





*The beautiful Parco Naturale Valsesia (Stage 8)*

indeed I positively encourage it, but to ensure that those with limited time and resources have a clear reference point from which to plan their journey.

On many maps still, while much of the route appears clear, GTA markings can be found in several areas, some far apart and not necessarily connecting sections in the way that you might expect. This is particularly true of the stages in the north (Stages 4–6), south of Susa (Stages 30–34) and around Valle Maira (Stages 38–44). The same happens with regard to markings on the ground. It is important to be aware of this and refer to the guide when needed.

An introduction to this route cannot be made without an acknowledgement to the CAI; the Italian Alpine Club, whose earlier members devised

the beginnings of what this route has become, and whose current members and volunteers undertake the regular work of keeping the path identifiable in places where the lush spring and summer vegetation and wildflowers would otherwise disguise it in weeks.

#### THE SECTIONS AND STAGES

Presented as three sections, north, central and south, the route can be broken down and walked in several trips if that is your preference. The section ends have been chosen to ensure transport in or out of a section is straightforward and details have been given in each section introduction. The sections correspond closely to the areas covered by the newly available 1:25,000 scale map booklets published by National Geographic, making these the easiest

choice of mapping to carry. You could also choose to break the route into two sections, in which case Susa is almost exactly 400 kilometres from either end, and with excellent facilities and transport connections this is an obvious choice. For those with the time and resources, undertaking a single continuous ‘thru-hike’, the section ends are a great place to resupply, take stock, get laundry done and so on. Whatever your approach, the journey is a deeply rewarding experience.

The stages are not necessarily intended to be walked as days. Many are an ideal length, and most have been chosen to connect with limited available accommodation. However, everyone is an individual, we all walk at a different pace and want different things from our day. Some stages can be combined, and some

longer ones you may want to break into two. Accommodation options listed include those available part-way through a stage, and some not far off the route as well as those which correspond with a stage end. Stages don’t therefore need to be followed precisely. Indeed, some great accommodation options lie within a stage.

The northern section is divided into 17 stages, the central and southern sections 19 stages. Both the latter sections are about 280km while the first is closer to 240km. Both the north and south sections are very similar in terms of overall climb and fall with around 17,000m of ascent and 19,000m of descent. The central section has a little more with ascent being over 23,000m and descent just under 22,000m. In all this amounts to around 345 hours of walking.

*The peaks of Monte Rosa loom large beyond the iron cross of Colle d’Egua (Stage 10)*



From Zurich Station, take the train south, it's just 2hr directly to Airolo. Booking can be made via SBB, the Swiss National transport provider. Downloading the app for booking and e-tickets is simple and highly recommended.

Ristorante Hotel delle Alpi opposite Airolo station is convenient for an overnight stay if required. Hotel Des Alpes, via Stazione no. 3 – 6780 Airolo CH Ticino, info@hoteldesalpes-airolo.ch, +41 (0) 91 869 1722.

From Airolo, take the post bus (111) to Nufenen Passhöhe. Buses run four times a day. Tickets can be purchased on the bus, in advance from the *tabac* and newsagent at Airolo Station or via the SBB app.

If you wish to be walking before the first bus up to the pass in the morning, you can travel up the previous afternoon, alighting from the bus one stop earlier at Alpe di Cruina and walking in via the Val Corno where hut accommodation is available at Capanna Corno Gries (2338m). Continuing up Val Corno the following morning, the path will transect with the main route part-way between Nufenen Pass and the Italian–Swiss border at Griespass.

#### From Quincinetto

Quincinetto no longer has a railway station, so take bus 265 from Largo Europa (opposite the petrol station) to Pont Saint Martin. Bus tickets can be purchased in advance from the stationary shop round the corner on Via Stazione. From there the train to Milan Central takes around 2hr 20min, or to Turin (Porta Nuova) around 1hr 10min.

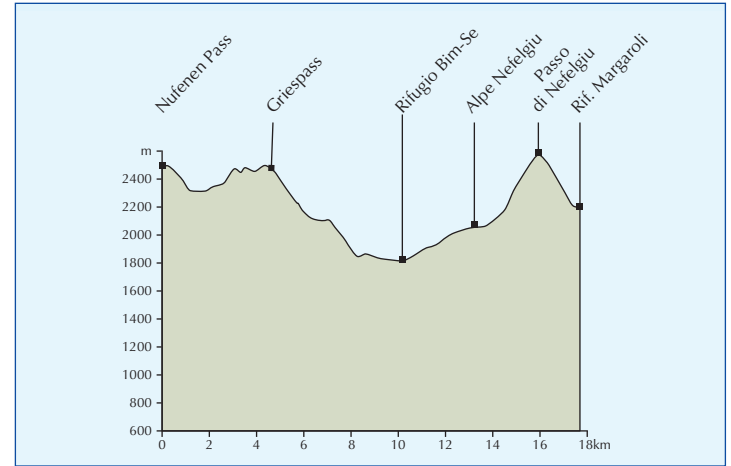
## STAGE 1

### *Nufenen Pass to Rifugio Margaroli*

<b>Start</b>	Nufenen Pass (2478m)
<b>Finish</b>	Rifugio Margaroli (2194m)
<b>Distance</b>	17.5km
<b>Ascent</b>	970m
<b>Descent</b>	1275m
<b>Time</b>	7hr

Standing at Nufenen Pass the whole adventure is ahead of you. From here you will walk until you can walk no more when you reach the Mediterranean Sea at Ventimiglia. Whether you do that in a continuous 'thru-hike', or as a 'section-hiker' in stages, the experience is no less rewarding. The initial stage sees you cross to the Italian–Swiss border at Griespass, then descend, steeply at times, interspersed by restful and inviting meadow strolls alongside bubbling brooks where the temptation is to linger. Passing the turquoise Lago di Morasco, you have an option to descend into Riale for a visit, supplies or rest, before commencing the gradual climb to the first big pass of the route at Passo di Nefelgiu. The descent from here just takes a little care as sections are prone to erosion along the *torrente* that descends into Lago di Vannino, where the hospitality of Rifugio Margaroli awaits the weary trekker.

Leaving **Nufenen Passhöhe** (2478m), cross the car park from the restaurant and climb the small knoll to the right of an old hut, to gain a view of the Gries Glacier and the reservoir in front. Descend ahead, following the small path down to the lower road corner and junction with the reservoir service road. Ascend the service road south, to a side track left to shortcut a road hairpin. Take this and when you reach the next section of road cross and ascend track steps to reach a hut at the base of the wind turbines. From here a red/white trail marking shows your path climbing to the left of the hut. Continue to the left of the dam high on a narrow path around the reservoir.



Follow this ahead as the Val Corno track joins on your left and continue on a clear path to Griespass.

Descending from the **Griespass** (2487m), take the trail south (route G00 and marked Via Alpina). It is

*Standing at Griespass, with 800km of mountains ahead*



sufficiently steep that the path makes good use of switchbacks before traversing south-west, across the head of the valley and two tributary streams of the Rio Gries. Then turn south-east for around 2km, joining the track that leads from Alpe Bettelmatt.

#### BATTELMATTHORN SUMMIT 3044M

In good weather only, a tempting side excursion from Griespass can be taken to summit the 3044m Battelmatthorn for views west across the Griesgletscher. Leave the pass south-west, then south before a side trail west, just before a high point at 2674m leads to the summit. Returning to the junction, turn S once more, over the high point and descend towards Rifugio Citta di Busto 2480m, then north-east to re-join the GTA at Alpe Bettematt.

One of the delights of this journey is the variety of cheeses found on route, unique to the individual valleys or farms. One such is the **Bettelmatt**, with the name believed to date from the 13th century, a semi-cooked cheese made from raw whole cow's milk from Italian brown cows and seasoned for a minimum of 2 months. The aroma of this cheese is closely linked to the mix of herbs and flowers, including the Mutellina herb, characteristic of these pastures.

Follow the track south-east for 0.5km then fork right, on a marked path before crossing to the south side of the Rio Gries at the waterfall. After descending a series of switchbacks, the path levels momentarily then crossing a small stone bridge, the path broadens and climbs gently to the service road and joins a vehicle track once again beyond a hut, continuing south-east along the shore of **Lago di Morasco**.

Unless you plan to go into Riale (1731m) turn right, south and cross over the reservoir wall then left uphill and keep left at the first junction, past a concrete structure marked with a red and white trail blaze. Continue to follow the track up gravelly switchbacks, and along a level stretch with views back across Lago di Morasco.



*Griesee dam with  
Gries Glacier beyond*

After a further brief climb the path broadens, reaching a well-marked track junction beside a large pile of quarried stone blocks. Turn right here signed to Lago di Vannino. Passing a small abandoned tunnel on your right, ignore further track junctions and keep ahead on this broad easy-to-follow track.

As you climb now towards Passo di Nefelgiu keep south-west as far as **Alpe Nefelgiu**. Crossing behind the huts and then across the stream, ensure you keep to the north-west bank initially, then the marked route on the ground meanders back and forth across the remains of the stream once up at scree level. Climbing steadily across boulders and scree reach **Passo di Nefelgiu** (2583m). Continue ahead descending steadily along the right flank of the valley through an area prone to erosion and landslides. If you need water, collect it at scree level as anything below is heavily cattle grazed. Multiple markings are confusing but keep right for least problems with erosion. As you descend, over your right shoulder the Punta del Ghiacciaio di Ban (2975m) looms large, while ahead the 2903m peak of Punta del Forno is no

more than a promontory on a ridge that rises to the NE, capped by the snow-topped peak of Punta d'Arbola Ofenhorn (3235m). Almost between the Lakes the trail turns SE once more for around 1km to **Alpe Vannino** and **Rifugio Margaroli** (2194m).

**FACILITIES INFORMATION FOR STAGE 1**

**Accommodation**

Rifugio Citta di Busto, dormitory, Località Piano dei Camosci, Formazza (VB), +39 (0)324 63092

Rifugio BIM-SE, mixed rooms, SS659, 28863 Formazza, (VB), +39 339 5959 3393

Rifugio Margaroli, Località Vannino, 28863 Formazza (VB), +39 (0)324 63155, +39 327 019 7444

**Amenities**

Basic shop and a good restaurant in Riale.

**Transport**

There are no public transport options on route. However, exit from Riale is possible if a ride or taxi can be found to Valdo, where the Comazzibus number 4 runs, four times a day, to Domodossola and onward connections by train.

**STAGE 2**

*Rifugio Margaroli to Alpe Devero*

<b>Start</b>	Rifugio Margaroli (2194m)
<b>Finish</b>	Alpe Devero (1631m)
<b>Distance</b>	13.75km
<b>Ascent</b>	470m
<b>Descent</b>	1010m
<b>Time</b>	5hr

A straightforward climb from the Rifugio, followed by a long and mostly gentle descent through the high valley pasture of Alpe Forne Inferiore and onward, descending via a *mulattiera* into a gorgeous lower valley to the picturesque hamlet of Crampiolo where refreshments and local produce can be purchased. From there it is a pleasant stroll to the plain of Alpe Devero.

From **Rifugio Margaroli** retrace your steps a short way to take the path (marked G99, in common with the Via Alpina and the Sentiero Italia) around the far side of **Lago di Vannino**. The path climbs gradually above and away from the lake shore to meet the *torrente* below **Alpe Curzalma** (2279m), where you cross an ingenious bridge made from old pipes. Bear left here initially and follow the red/white trail blazes over rock and scree, contouring gradually west below Punta della Scatta (2720m) then climbing to the pass and **Bivacco E. Conti** at Scatta Minoia (2599m).

Leaving the pass follow the contour right before switchbacks guide you down and past Lago della Satta (2435m). Proceed past a *baita* or hut on your left and cross

