

# A bakers' dozen in Val d'Ayas or ESTC tours Champoluc

The village of Champoluc lies at the northern end of Val d'Ayas, a deep fissure that penetrates Italy's north western alps until it meets the flanks of Monte Rosa, the 4634 meter massif that dominates this and the adjacent valleys of Gressoney and Val Sesia.

ESTC members have previously skied in the area, most notably completing a hut-to-hut circuit of the massif from Zermatt a decade ago. Subsequent visits have been based in Champoluc for a mix of piste, off-piste and touring.

On 28 January thirteen ESTCers converged on le Petit Tournalin, a comfortable and friendly family-run hotel in Champoluc. We had variously flown from Edinburgh or travelled from other parts of the Alps; we were all collected by taxis either from Milan- Malpensa or, in Dougie's case, from the railway station in Aosta. The transport was arranged by Simon Brown of Ski Champoluc, who also arranged our accommodation.

Ski Monterosa is the extensive lift system that covers the three valleys. Critically for ski tourers, the lifts give access to some high altitude touring, particularly from the cable car that reaches Punta Indren at 2975 meters. But there is also good touring to be had in gentler terrain at lower altitudes without recourse to the lift system.



Our group's aspirations and experience were varied. Some had brought piste skis only and were not disappointed by the varied and sometimes challenging but well-groomed and empty pistes; three of the group honoured the club's roots by insisting on telemarking; two were - gasp - snowboarders, while the remainder used alpine touring kit.

Once the commitment has been made to a ski holiday in a particular location, there's not much point in checking the snow conditions in advance of getting there. So it was with some dismay on our first day that we realized that there had been no significant snowfall for a number of weeks.

The higher routes that we had intended to tour were either rutted and hard, or the snow had given way to bare rock. Nevertheless we found some rewarding routes; any limitations were not so much due to the state of the snow but to our own rate of progress. Vallone di Nana is a particular gem which ascends westerly from the village of Saint Jacques through what in summer is alpine pasture until eventually reaching the col di Nana from which it might be possible to descend westward into Val Tournanche and the Cervinia skiing area. Not that our ambitions stretched that far; we were content to skin to a height of 2274 meters where we enjoyed our packed lunch and then descended through the rather heavy spring snow back to Saint Jacques. Here we repaired to a charming café/bar from which we were eventually prised away by Simon Brown in his Land Rover.



Another day, with lift assistance, we skinned up to the Orestes refuge at 2600 meters in a wide bowl beneath (Punta Indren?). Nick was so taken with the hut from a previous time that he booked a week there, following his Champoluc sojourn.



Despite the lack of recent snowfall, on our last day we found untracked powder snow *en-route* to the Col du Perrin. Sadly, our skiing skills did not do justice to the snow. More practice in powder is called for.

Verdict? A successful trip on several levels and not a word of complaint.