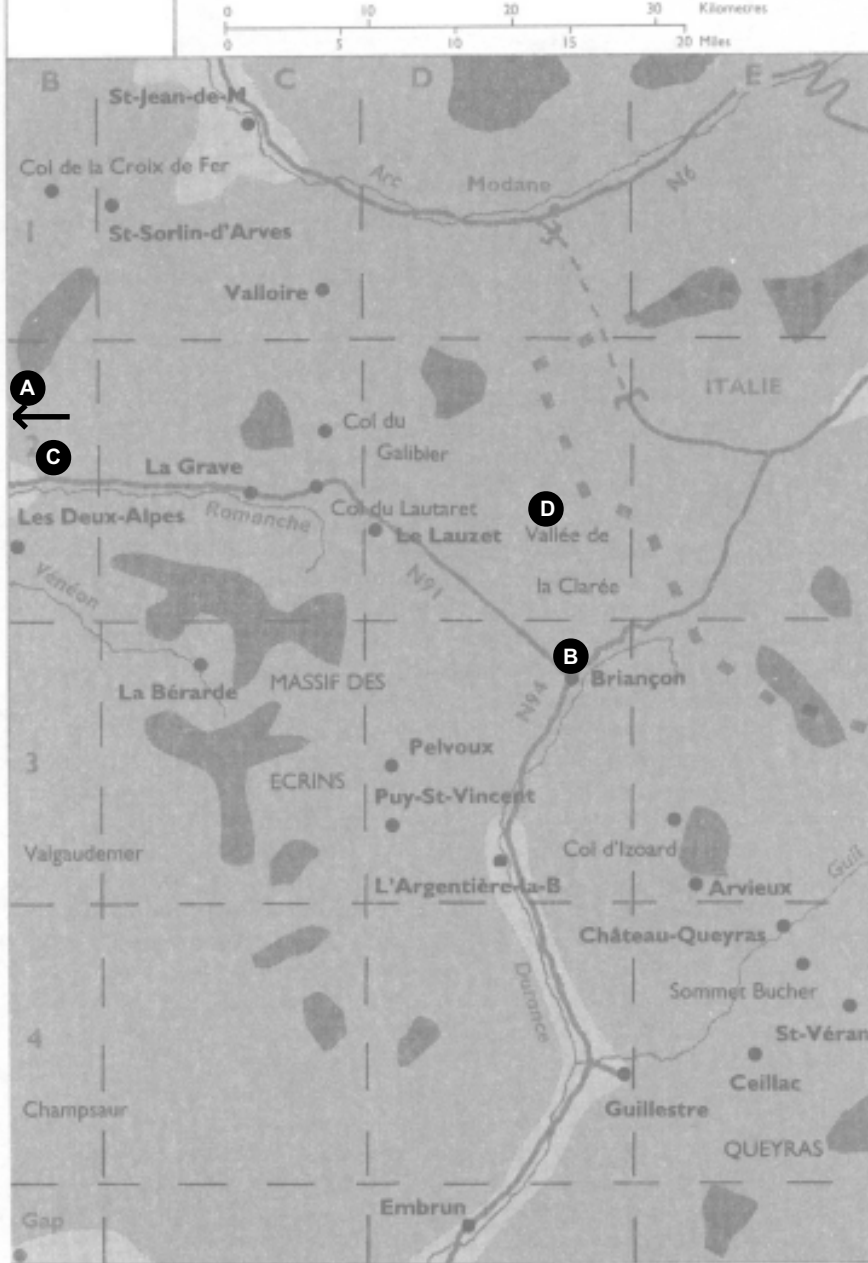


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Ecrins and Queyras: wild flowers, sundials and herb soup.  
*Sous le ciel du Viso*. Highest commune. Cascade le la Pisse.  
 (Refer also to *Ecrins & Queyras and Corps* on website.)



Over the years I have had the good fortune to explore most of the terrain on the tiny map to the left. Tiny indeed; but what majestic countryside: gigantic mountains and glaciers, dozens of entrancing valleys, endless dead-end roads, numerous man-made sites, cascades galore and much else besides. I wonder if I shall ever be able to say that I've seen all the mountainous *pays* in the ever-changing landscape. (Also see website's updated *Ecrins & Queyras* and *Corps*.)

In the list above I missed out, deliberately, one of Nature's most alluring legacies to the area: her incomparable display of wild flowers. In previous decades I have crossed the terrain in early spring, high summer, and the autumn. Some years ago I was there in late June, during a magical few days which left me utterly spellbound.

One morning I started early, leaving our overnight hotel, on the left edge of the map, before 7.00 a.m. The **Romanche** Valley (B2) was nothing special: the lake behind the Barrage du Chambon was an ugly eye-sore (as is **Les Deux-Alpes**). The mighty Cascade de la Pisse was in full flow but that sight soon paled as I drove through **La Grave** (C2) and caught sight of the **Massif des Ecrins**, France's second highest mountain *chaîne*. I didn't stop: east of the village, at the end of the tunnel, I turned sharp right and snaked upwards through Les Terrasses and on towards Le Chazelet. I stopped at the Oratoire du Chazelet and climbed 300 metres to the viewing table, 1834m high.

The time was 8.00 a.m. The sky was crystal clear, a retina-searing blue. The sun, still low, was to my left. The mountain wall above me seemed so close that you instinctively reached out to touch the glistening glaciers, shimmering snowfields and the summits of black needles. If you want to access the remote whiteness then *téléphériques* take you from La Grave to a height of 3200 m on La Meije (itself 3983 m). I was more than satisfied; in the 15 minutes I spent soaking in the wondrous panorama I had the viewing table to myself. My plan to visit La Grave's 15th-century Church of Notre Dame and 17th-century Chapelle des Pénitents was put aside. The weather was superb, so I decided to make the most of my good fortune.

Half an hour later I stopped again, this time on the green pastures below the western end of the **Col du Lautaret** (C2). The 'green' pastures were in fact hiding, within the lush grass, literally millions of wild flowers. I stood on one spot and, without moving my feet an inch, was able to count over 50 varieties, some of them orchids. The Lautaret is influenced by both Atlantic and Mediterranean climates and is bordered, on the southern side, by the crystalline Ecrins and, to the north, by the various sedimentary rocks of the Galibier *massif*. As a result of this climatic and geological mixture the flora, in both variety and quantity, is unique. More than 1,500 of the 4,000 plus species found in France are on these high (2000 m) Alpine slopes.

My luck came in oversized bundles on that June day. The world-renowned Jardin Alpin on the Col du Lautaret (2058 m) had opened the previous day (25 June to 9 Sept: 10.30 to 18.30). Within the small grounds Alpine plants from all over the

world prosper. The garden lies in the subalpine zone (i.e. in the upper part of the forest vegetation which reaches 2350 m in the region). The severity of the climate, particularly in winter, has long been known throughout Europe. Indeed Capt. Scott and his team spent time on the col in March 1908, preparing for their ill-fated expedition to the South Pole. There's a memorial to the explorer at the top of the garden. The site is exhilarating – with the enormous Glacier de l'Homme, on the eastern flanks of La Meije, almost appearing to be sliding out of the sky towards the *jardin*.

The **Col du Galibier** (C2) was also clear of clouds – for me the first time ever. On the ascent I became blasé about the orchids I spotted: – *nigritelle brunette*, *moucheron* and *globuleux* were just three of the varieties. At the 2646m summit the mountain panorama was a rejuvenating tonic: to the far north the humpbacked Mont Blanc *massif*; across the road the Massif des Ecrins (with the Barre des Ecrins a striking skyscraper); and, far to the south-east, Mont Viso (F4) poked its head above the **Queyras** Regional Park. On the northern descent of the Galibier I stopped again, just below the scree where the pastures begin, to revel at the many species of gentians, pasque flowers, tiny trollious, various anemones and numerous other varieties.

My detour to **Valloire** (C1) could almost have been an anti-climax. But I was determined not to miss the Baroque Eglise de Notre-Dame de l'Assomption, one of the few in the Alps where the doors are open all the time (not for lunch!). Built in the middle 11th century, the modest stone exterior hides an unbelievable interior where every inch is richly decorated in one form or other: frescoes, paintings, carvings, figures, gilt, ornate nave and ceilings, a stunning rose window – and all this with the organ being played in the background. What on earth had I done to deserve such rewards? (I repeated all the above in mid-July 2000: again superb weather but too late for wild flowers to be at their best.)

At this stage of the chapter I am feeling embarrassed. I have still got much to tell you about and, without exception, everything that follows has to be described in the same vein. Take, for example, the Vénéon Valley which runs, south of La Meije, to a dead-end barrier at **La Bélarde** (C3), bang-up against the Barre des Ecrins (4102 m). This is the ultimate three-star valley, unspoilt and laden down with scenic fruits. The road is best described as one which is akin to entering the jaws of a gigantic whale: as you ascend you lose count of the 10,000 ft-high peaks, to either side of the valley. Start the run from just west of B2.

The River **Vénéon** is the first visual blow, both in colour and volume. There's plenty of white water: no wonder then that between the Lanchâtra lake (B2) and the river below St-Christophe (B3), you are likely to spot rafters and canoeists paddling downstream. The flora and fauna, too, is captivating: lilies, everlasting sweet peas, tiny pinks and several species of wild roses, some of which I had not seen before in the Alps; butterflies everywhere and, at the top end of the valley, I spotted two marmots and several birds of prey. The many cascades were in full

spate; the descent by car and the long walk to the Cascade de la Lavey (using the two bridges which cross the Vénéon and Muande) was worth the effort. Last, but not least, the startling mountains: summits of needles, molars, pyramids, jagged saw edges, snowfields, glaciers and huge 'waterfalls' of shining rock faces, thousands of feet high. What a wonderland: Nature at her supreme best.

In the top left-hand corner of the map, to the south of **St-Jean-de-Maurienne** (C1: in the hateful **Arc** Valley), is yet another startling corner of mountain Disneyland. Follow the road up the Vallée de l'Arvan (C1) – deep gorges with, above them, vast sheets of rock, cut into slices and slabs; tar black and slate grey in the lower reaches and, higher up, lighter shades of glowing stone. All the way up the climb one is aware of three looming teeth on the southern horizon, almost a compass bearing landmark but, in reality, Les Aiguilles d'Arves.

The Baroque church at **St-Sorlin-d'Arves** (C1) keeps its doors firmly shut but do note the scores of memorials on the exterior walls, all made from tiny individual beads. As you climb the **Col de la Croix de Fer** (B1) the slopes resemble a massive rock garden of wild flowers. On the western side of the col the extensive pastures are green but, on closer inspection, they reveal myriad wild flowers.

Have you read *A Wild Herb Soup* (Victor Gollancz paperback) by a redoubtable French lady, Emilie Carles. The author spent most of her life (1900-1979) in the high mountains around **Briançon**, the highest *ville* in Europe (D3). The book, based on her remarkable life, is a revealing insight into the hardships suffered by the mountain people of the Briançonnais in the early decades of the 20th century.

You cannot fail to admire her ferocious courage, iron integrity, and fiery opinions. You'll agree with many of the latter; but, occasionally, you'll perhaps even despise some of her more contentious observations. One of the least contentious disagreements I have with Madame Carles is her opinion that the **Vénéon** Valley (B2) has been 'plundered and sacked by promoters.' How absurd: where on earth could she have been thinking about? Perhaps she saw **Les Deux-Alpes** (B2) which has a heartstopping panorama of Venosc and the river far below (from the viewpoint behind the Chalet Mounier hotel)?

I respect Madame Carles enormously because as Bernard Pivot said: "She was one hell of a woman." In the latter part of her life she discovered, as all independent free-thinkers do, that you must go for the jugular in any battle of wits with all forms of bureaucracy. Agreed?

There's not enough space here to go into the details of her book. But I'll refer to some of the more remote geographical locations which, during her teaching spells in the mountains, played such an important part in recounting the hard life that country folk endured. She taught in many tiny hamlets and villages. Locate **Le Lauzet** (C2/D2), just below the Col du Lautaret: the place is harsh even now, on a perfect summer's day. Remember what I said about Capt. Scott and severe winters? Imagine, then, her spell as a teacher here 70 years ago. Next, find La Monta (E3):

in the higher reaches of the **Guil** Valley, the hamlet, today, is a collection of ruined stones, destroyed by the vengeful Germans in 1945 in their typical murderous ways (you can spot the ruins just north of the church and chalet). And two more villages: Le Casset (D2), below Le Lauzet; and **Puy-St-Vincent** (D3), both of which bear little resemblance today to the locations Emilie described 70 years ago.

Much of the book recounts her upbringing and latter days in the **Vallée de la Clarée** (D2). She was born in Val-des-Près (D2/D3). While I would never agree with her that the valley is ‘the most beautiful in the world’, nevertheless, I am with her all the way for the battle she fought to save *la vallée*. The heart of Val remains the same (note the sun clock, built in her time, 1920). The river and woods are the best aspects; next come the differing shaped rocks, of varying hues. Seek out, too, the many chapels at Névache (D2), marked on the map; and the wall paintings at the two churches in Plampinet with its super riverside setting. *En route* admire the great fortress at **Briançon** (D3), one of Vauban’s cunning military creations. He left his mark throughout France.

Let me now devote some space to the Queyras, a delectable enclave of mountains south-east of Briançon. Access this remote, wild fastness by the only open-all-the-year-road, the D902 from **Guillestre** (D4). The narrow road passes through tunnels, high above the Guil; later, the road is much easier and wider in the Combe du Queyras. But, whatever you do, don’t fail to detour up the D60 to **Ceillac** (E4). The Cristillan torrent is a furious flow. In the initial climb there are no less than 18 hairpins; at one spot the river races through a tunnel and the adjacent road cuts through a small gorge. That’s a unique oddity.

Ceillac is a mix of old and new and narrow lanes. The Vallon du Mélezet ends in a magnificent *cirque* but the real reason for asking you to make this *déviaton* is the Cascade de la Pisse (that name again), halfway up the valley. I reckon this among my favourite waterfalls anywhere: several hundred feet high, the cascade’s most unusual feature is that almost for the entire fall the water is 10 feet or so inside the rock face. Even in July the cascade is a thrilling spectacle.

Your first sight of **Château-Queyras** (E4), shortly after passing the Resistance memorial, is imposing enough. Built originally in the 14th century, the most significant strengthening of the strategic fortifications were put in place 300 years ago by that man again, Vauban. Follow the routes I now suggest and you will see the perched castle from every conceivable angle (open June to September: 9.00 to 19.00). First, the 11 km climb to the **Sommet Bucher** (E4). Every inch of the way the narrow road passes through dense woods and past wild flowers. At the top there’s a 300 m walk to a *table d’orientation* (in two parts) and a refuge. The view is truly panoramic: a 360-degree circular wall of mountains. Far below is **St-Véran** (E4), Europe’s highest *commune*. The only sounds are bees, the wind and bird song. The road is narrow and roughish; but the rewards are heavenly. The cherries on top of the cream are the wild flowers at the summit.

The climb from the Guil, east of Château-Queyras, to St-Véran is easy as pie. Over 6500 ft above sea-level, the village is noted for ancient timber chalets. I was also impressed by the simple church and its stained glass windows; the fine wood sculptures for sale at a couple of chalet-shops; the huge stone tiles atop many a chalet; and the interiors of two ancient houses which took you back to an *autrefois*. One caveat: there’s a long climb from the car park to the village proper.

One unusual aspect of the Queyras villages is the number of wall sundials, of varying types. There are reckoned to be 15 in St-Véran alone (I could only count eight); five in Château-Queyras; four in remote Meyriès, above the latter; and four in **Arvieux** (E3).

Finally, your last long dead-end drive in the Queyras has to be the Guil Valley (east of E3/E4), as far as you can go by car. Park at the isolated rock, the size of a large house, and at least do the 10 minute walk to the Petit Belvédère du Mont Viso, where you win your first sight of this wondrous giant of a mountain, just across the border in Italy. Time will dictate how far you can walk up the spectacular valley, climbing ever closer to Viso. But do try to walk the 30-minute Sentier Ecologique du Pré-Michel which starts at the Petit Belvédère: the information centre at the car park explains all and a great booklet, *Sous le ciel du Viso*, provides more detail on why this superb valley is so rich in flora and fauna. (The Po is the cause of the humid micro-climate.)

Leave the Queyras by the mighty **Col d’Izoard** (E3), 2360 m high. At the summit you cross terrain which must be akin to the landscape on Mars: an orange and grey planet of needles and landslides and mammoth smooth, almost vertical, ‘snowfields’ of stones and rock. The map tags this startling geological world as Casse Déserte.

What else is there to see? Spare time for the cathedral at **Embrun** (south of D4); the old part of the town sits contentedly on a rock table. Further north, another Vauban fortress, Mont-Dauphin (D4), also has a huge rock sideboard below the castle’s walls. Leave the N94 at **L’Argentière-la-Bessée** (D3) and head north-west. Dull and boring to start, with only wall sundials of any interest in the villages but, pass through **Pelvoux** (D3) and Les Claux and, immediately after the tunnel, the run becomes exciting – through woods, dappled with shade, to Ailefroide (C3). Then the road scrabbles up through trees to another dead-end of lofty rock faces and needles, cascades, glaciers and the highest peaks in the Ecrins *massif*. Allow time for the not-too-demanding walk north from the car park at the Pré de Madame Carle.

I have yet to visit the **Champsaur** (B4) and **Valgaudemmer** (B3/C3) valleys north of **Gap** (south of B4). The former is the higher reaches of the Drac Noir and Blanc; the latter has many waterfalls. As I said: there’s so much to explore. (**Important:** see website’s *Corps* for a mass of extra details!)