

ALPINE POINTS OF VIEW

a collection of images of the Alps

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ALPS UPON ALPS

In the south-east corner of Switzerland, not far from the Italian border and 700 metres above the valley bed, the abrupt slope suddenly eases to a shelf of pasture, not level but rolling with hillocks and hollows, in one of which a pool mirrors distant peaks and glacial curtains. Up there above the chestnut woods, beyond roads and villages, beyond the reach of electricity and piped water, a handful of men and women spend their summers grazing cattle and making cheese in one of a row of timber-and-stone buildings snug against the next steep rise.

I've known this alp for almost 40 years. Many's the time I've puffed my way up the seemingly never-ending path that battles among clumps of wild raspberry and rosebay willowherb, and emerged from woodland at last to crest the final bluff with more than a smile of relief at the familiar vista spread before me.

I was there again a few weeks ago, at the tail end of a long, dry summer, to be confronted by a parade of ragged spire and shrinking icefield, pushed unbelievably high out of valleys whose depth could only be guessed. It shook me, as it always shakes me, with surprise – the surprise of the familiar that caught my breath and briefly moistened an eye.

Across the arterial valley that pushes into Italy, a tributary glen cuts into the wall of mountains directly opposite the alp of which I write, so that one's gaze penetrates right to its head. From shadow to sunshine, and from sub-tropical ferns and forest brushed with Lombardy's breath, that tributary leads the eye to abrupt granite fence-posts, slabs and snow-trimmed peaks – some of which carry the Italian border, while others divide one Swiss valley from another. There are blades of rock up there like bayonet spikes; stiletto spires and smooth-walled cirques tower over

moraines formed by glaciers that no longer exist. On one of those moraines there's a mountain hut of the Swiss Alpine Club; another stands on a shelf of rock gained by a path of unrelenting steepness – the two being linked by as exciting a four-hour trek as you could possibly wish to tread.

All that was a backdrop, though; something on which to focus my gaze as, sprawling on the grass of the alp, I breathed the fragrance of sun-dried vegetation, strained my ears to the myriad sounds that townsfolk imagine to be silence, soaked up the view and reckoned – not for the first time this summer – that I'd found heaven.

Heaven in a View

To those of us who are drawn year by year to the mountains, who spend our winters reliving yesterday's scenes and anticipating tomorrow's, there really can be what seems like heaven in a view.

Long before our time John Ruskin, that Victorian arbiter of natural beauty who wandered the Alps during much of the Golden Age and became one of its most influential troubadours, claimed that mountains were 'the beginning and end of all natural scenery'. Were that all he had to say on the subject, we who are also smitten might applaud his opinion. But then we discover that, despite his great love of the Alps, in a fit of ill-judged discrimination he dismissed much that the mountains have to offer. 'All the best views of hills', he wrote, 'are at the bottom of them'.

At the bottom of them?

On the other hand some find satisfaction only in dramatic scenes of vertical rock or narrow crests of ice, and rejoice in the gymnastics that

bought them that view. Exciting though they certainly are, to my mind summit or ridge-top views often lack one essential – the contrast of colour, tone and texture. True, the rock sometimes wears a palette of lichen; ice can fold into turquoise shadow; while snowfields soften blue or take on the blush of sunrise and sunset. But the basic ingredients are missing.

To make the view complete, to bring heaven to earth, so to speak, my preference is for a mid-mountain vantage point. Neither valley bed nor lofty summit, but somewhere in between, this point allows you to gauge both height and depth, to appreciate meadow and glacier, stand of pine and bare rockface; to look up and down in a single glance and absorb the best of both worlds. In short, alps upon the Alps.

The Overcrowded Alps

The Alpine chain rewards with innumerable magnificent viewpoints. From the rocky, tarn-spattered Maritime Alps above Nice to the Julians of Slovenia, the lover of fine scenery is spoilt for choice, and for two centuries and more Europe's premier mountain range has created dreams in the minds of all who turn to the high places for inspiration or adventure, and then answered those dreams in full measure.

That is one of its problems. The Alps have been too successful, too fulfilling, too scenically rewarding. Alpine tourism, which includes climbers, walkers and trekkers, as well as skiers and package tourists who arrive by the coachload, has for a long time been a major source of revenue whose influence can be partly blamed for changing and reshaping the Alpine environment – rarely, if ever, for the long-term good. The Victorian epithet 'The Playground of Europe' has never been more apt than it is today. But the tarmac of that playground, and its mechanical adornments, threaten to destroy the natural beauty that is its most appealing feature.

Not surprisingly, there are those who, having taken their fill, complain that the Alps are now finished, that they're overcrowded and tamed, that mass tourism has destroyed their original charm. Long ago Martin Conway, the distinguished mountaineer, art critic, writer and explorer, acknowledged such a gloomy attitude when he wrote that 'each generation makes of the world more or less the kind of place they dream it should be; and each when its day is done is often in a mood to regret the work of its own hands and to praise the conditions that obtained when it was young'.

Whilst admitting the concentration of skiers among specific resorts in winter, dozens of honeypot regions also attract climber, walker, trekker and general tourist in huge numbers during the relatively short mountain summer, effectively crowding the Alps from season to season. Yet this is a generalized view, a myopic misconception that's neither novel nor new.

Agreed, one would not expect to find solitude in Chamonix, Zermatt, Grindelwald or Selva; yet there is another side to the Alps, with no shortage of stunningly beautiful massifs where it's still possible to spend weeks of high summer in virtual seclusion. There are villages, populated year-round, whose only way of approach is along an ancient mule-track two hours' walk from the nearest road. Others snug among the mountains see no more than a handful of stray visitors from one summer to the next. There are alp hamlets untouched by modern technology, and scores of untrekked semi-wilderness areas in the very heart of Europe for those prepared to shun fashion and study the map.

Decades of Alpine wandering have opened my eyes to many of these special places and taught me that even in the most popular regions, at the height of summer, it's still possible to spend hours alone in the most

THE SOUTH-WEST ALPS

On their way to climb in the Dauphiné Alps in the early summer of 1864, Whymper, Moore and Horace Walker, together with their guides Almer and Croz, chose a point among the Aiguilles de la Saussaz north of La Grave from which to study the mountains they were about to visit. ‘The view was one of the most gorgeous I ever saw’, wrote Moore in *The Alps in 1864*, and then went on to enumerate the main features in that panorama. Of particular interest was La Meije, ‘one of the finest walls of mingled crag and glacier in the Alps’. He noted that from this view the mountain had no distinct summit but a crown of many pinnacles. ‘From the very top of the western peak’, he continued, ‘the ridge falls in a tremendous precipice to a remarkable narrow gap, beyond which it rises less steeply to the long shattered crest of the Râteau.’ West of the Râteau lay the Col de la Lauze with ‘the Glacier du Mont de Lans, which stretched away from it to the right for miles, a vast level field of névé. At the far end of this glacier, but some distance beyond it, a crowd of fine peaks were seen, of whose names, even, we were ignorant.’

This stupendous panorama is on show to trekkers following the Tour de l’Oisans across the high pastureland of the Plateau de Paris on the stage that leads from Bourg d’Oisans to La Grave, while a full-frontal view of La Meije is seen from the slopes above La Grave, where the string of hamlets known as the Hameau de Valfroide offers the first signs of habitation when coming down from the Aiguilles de la Saussaz. From here, as from several other vantage points above the Vallée de la Romanche, La Meije looks truly formidable and casts its personality over a wide area.

That same mountain is equally impressive when viewed from the south, on the approach through the Vallon des Etançons from La Bérarde.

As you draw closer to it, its southern face presents what seems to be a vertical wall, softened hardly at all by a mere fragment of glacier trapped high up, but with a napkin of ice at its foot, between wall and fan of scree. The wall is 800 metres high, measured from the Etançons glacier to the summit of the Grand Pic at 3982 metres, an awesome piece of mountain architecture which blocks the head of a wild, enchanted valley.

The Vallon des Etançons is a truly splendid valley, although surprisingly Whymper described it (in *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*) as ‘a howling wilderness, the abomination of desolation ... suggestive of chaos, but of little else’. Moore agreed: ‘There was no end to it, and we became more savage at every step, unanimously agreeing that no power on earth would induce us to walk up or down this particular valley again.’

Then he relented. ‘The scenery’, he confessed, ‘is, nevertheless ... of the highest order of rugged grandeur.’ But such could be said to describe virtually the whole of the Massif des Écrins, for this is one of the gems of the South-West Alps.

Parks to Protect the Mountains

It may come as a surprise to discover that large areas of the South-West Alps are among the least developed in the whole Alpine chain, despite the fact that both mountaineering and skiing activities have some of their most important centres here. But there’s a world of difference between bustling Chamonix, Courmayeur or Val d’Isère and the huddled *communes* of the Écrins, Cottian or Maritime Alps, and there are marked contrasts of scale and visual drama between the Mont Blanc range and, say, the intimate cirques and chaotic high valleys of the

Mercantour. Yet it is this degree of diversity that invests the Alps with much of its appeal.

Breaking out of the Mediterranean behind Monaco and Nice, the Alps push north for almost 250 kilometres before arcing eastward across the head of Italy. At first, in the south, France bears the lion's share of the mountains, with a series of massifs building towards the Italian frontier, beyond which they fall sharply to the Piedmont plain and the River Po.

These South-West Alps contain the greatest collection of national parks in the whole Alpine chain: Mercantour, Écrins, Vanoise and the neighbouring Gran Paradiso in Italy, not to mention the Parc Regional du Queyras overlooked by Monte Viso on the Franco-Italian border. Each park has its own identity, its own unique form of scenic grandeur and geographic dimension, and together they have managed to restrict the spread of insensitive development which was threatening to destroy the intrinsic beauty of the French Alps.

For it is somewhat ironic that France, with its wonderful heritage of traditional mountain villages that grace valley and hillside alike, should so abuse parts of the Alps by creating a rash of purpose-built ski resorts that represent, if nothing else, a form of architectural vandalism and apparent disregard for landscape harmony. The 'white gold' of the ski industry has much to answer for, but fortunately the establishment of national and regional parks has managed to limit further damaging, large-scale mechanical intrusion in selected areas, and put a seal of protection on a comparatively untamed mountain environment and its wildlife.

The Maritime Alps

At the southernmost end of the chain rise the Maritime Alps, a large part of which enjoys the protection of the Parc National du Mercantour, the

newest and probably least known of any national park in France. Characterized by deep, pine-clad valleys, high pastures, craggy ridges and dozens of small lakes, the Maritime Alps spread both sides of the international frontier. Though glacier-free, and without any summit reaching 3500 metres, the region is nonetheless full of wild charm – the stony upper valleys being among the roughest and most desolate of any in the Alps – with its highest peak located less than 50 kilometres from the coast.

The vegetation in the lower valleys is almost sub-tropical, and the climate generous to outdoor activity. Orange-roofed Provençal villages, with all the simple charm of the south, crowd abrupt conical hills on the way to the mountains, while below Mont Bégo in the Vallée des Merveilles, tens of thousands of Bronze Age rock carvings are to be found in a landscape cluttered with boulder-choked hollows and jade-green tarns, which attract a regular stream of visitors and make this the busiest of the valleys in the Mercantour national park. Elsewhere the rugged, confused topography of the Maritime Alps creates a truly challenging country for mountain treks, scrambles and rock climbs well away from public scrutiny.

Dauphiné Alps

Comprising the Cottian Alps, Queyras, Écrins and Vercors, the mountains of Dauphiné cover a large, complex area north of the Maritime Alps. The first of these groups, the Cottian Alps, includes the Parc Regional du Queyras, a mostly green, gentle upland district that bulges into Italy, along whose border the loftiest summits are gathered. With no major centre, and avoiding any serious ski development, this is an isolated, unspoilt region that favours the walker, scrambler and trekker,

THE CENTRAL ALPS

There's a valley wedged deep within the Lepontine Alps, cramped between granite walls that threaten to block out the sky, where lush green woods of beech, linden and chestnut trees edge stream and meadow. In this valley a small grey village appears to have grown out of the soil on a far-distant day of rain and sunshine, rather than to owe its existence to architects and builders. It's not much of a village, size-wise; just a collection of weathered dwellings and a few granaries at its fringe. Flat stone slabs overlap on rooftops, one blending against another in a huddled maze whose symmetry is broken only by the tall, thin tower of its church.

Behind the village a waterfall pours in a solitary spout from a strip of rock bordered by trees, its lip suggestive of a hanging valley hidden from view. Up there, somewhere out of sight, a forgotten stream feeds that cascade.

That hanging valley, like so many valleys in the Lepontines, is barely trod by the visitor in search of exercise and what Octavia Hill called 'the healing gift of space'. It's semi-deserted, littered towards its head by the ruins of an abandoned farm or two, whose time-smoothed stones are being swallowed by a rampant vegetation. The stream runs clear as glass to one side. Born among tarns a thousand metres up in the bald grey mountains, it sprays diamonds to the sun, but rests in green pools lower down among boulders big as houses.

Walking in that hidden valley is to experience the Alps of the first mountaineers. There are no flag-flying restaurants to heal a thirst with cold beer, no signposts or waymarks, no mountain hut serviced by helicopter. Nothing but raw nature and a wilderness of stone.

Other Lepontine valleys seduce with their promise of seclusion. I've bathed in their pools and, lying out afterwards, have been visited by butterflies that landed on sun-warmed arms and chests. I've climbed above lakes to traverse cols untouched by the waymarker's brush, and made circuits of snow-free massifs as rugged and trackless as on the day of their genesis.

Far to the north of the Lepontines, over many a long day's hike across mountains that wear glaciers, among limestone ranges unknown to the pages of tourist brochures and adventure magazines, and where villages have yet to become resorts, more valleys, alp hamlets and bristling crags in the very heart of Switzerland remain to be 'discovered'.

The Central Alps, as far as this selection of photographs is concerned, include all the mountains of Switzerland (apart from the pre-Alpine range of the Jura), the Italian flank of the Pennine, Lepontine and Bernina Alps, and Austrian borderlands of the Rätikon and Silvretta Alps. Though they may claim some of the most dramatic scenery and best-known mountains, with several of the busiest, most sophisticated and best equipped resorts in all Europe, it only takes a little planning to find a barely touched wonderland far from the gathering crowds.

The Pennine Alps

For those who seek what may be termed the quintessential Alps, much of the Pennine chain has a continued appeal that not even a century and a half of devotion has begun to erode. Since a fair daub of snow and ice appears to claim importance in the scenic scheme of things, it's no surprise that the mountains of canton Valais and its Italian counterpart are

among the most appealing of all. Consider their pedigree: Matterhorn, Monte Rosa, Ober Gabelhorn, Weisshorn, Dom, Dent Blanche and Grand Combin, to name but a few. Their snowfields gleam far off, while their glaciers tumble and swirl and stretch out above green pastures to dramatic effect.

Running eastward from Col Ferret to the Simplon pass, the Pennine chain contains Europe's greatest collection of 4000 metre peaks west of the Caucasus. Most of these carry the Swiss-Italian frontier along a watershed of ice and snow interrupted by summits of striking individuality. From that crest transverse ridges push roughly north and south, from which outlying peaks project their own personality. Between them tongues of ice drain into long valleys; those to the north spill into the Rhône, while those on the Italian slope make complex journeys down to the Po.

A few of the valleys have been at the forefront of Alpine tourism since the mid-19th century, which saw the drama of mountaineering's Golden Age take place here. Others developed more slowly, while some (a handful) assume a welcome reluctance to change. Compare, for example, the upper Mattertal around Zermatt with the 'lost world' appeal of the Turtmanntal nearby or the apparent indifference to tourism experienced in the Arolla stem of Val d'Hérens. Visit the inner recesses of Val de Bagnes, tributary glens of the Saastal, or the upper Val Ferret under the frontiers of Switzerland and Italy, and you'll find a sense of remoteness unknown to those for whom the Matterhorn is the only mountain to see.

Of course, that huge arc of 4000 metre peaks that stretches either side of the Matterhorn is uncontestedly one of the greatest sights of the Alpine chain, but other valleys enjoy scenes of extraordinary grandeur too, yet have never become one of the major tourist hot-spots. I think of

the Val d'Anniviers, whose upper reaches are dwarfed by Weisshorn, Zinal Rothorn, Ober Gabelhorn, Dent Blanche and Grand Cornier. From some of the trails that creep beneath them, cross neighbouring hillsides or labour up intervening spurs, those mountains take on a Himalayan scale. With such a formidable backdrop, the walking potential is vast – mostly strenuous, maybe, but so very rewarding.

The Lepontine Alps

Also known as the Alps of Ticino, after the pear-shaped canton that projects south of the watershed into Lombardy, the mountains and secretive upper valleys of the Lepontines remain little-known to all but the aficionado. By contrast the sparkling lakeside resorts of Lugano and Locarno with their palm trees and neat formal gardens have about them an air of the Riviera.

The great Victorian mountain explorer D.W. Freshfield wrote about the district in rapturous terms, but few British writers since have been drawn to it (half a century ago J. Hubert Walker was an exception). There are no outstanding peaks with famous names, no test-piece climbs nor renowned multi-day treks, but as Walker pointed out, 'there is no single district of the whole Alpine chain better suited to a continuous walking-tour from valley to valley, from glen to glen, and there is scarcely a mountain in it whose summit cannot be reached by a rough uphill walk' (*Walking in the Alps*).

Monte Leone, rising above the Simplon pass, is the first and highest at 3553 metres. But although several others have undoubted appeal, it's not so much individual mountains that attract as the quality of the landscape in general – the tangled glens, unsophisticated villages, rocky high plateaux gemmed with lakes, remote alps, the ruins that tell of long-

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From the Maritime Alps behind Nice to the sun-washed Julians of Slovenia, the Alpine chain is one of the most scenically diverse and exciting ranges on earth. With glacier and snowfield, meadow, scree and rockface, its subtle beauty is revealed in a variety of landscape features, while peaks such as Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau are mountains of which dreams are made and ambitions forged.

This collection of photographs, taken from Alpine trails, proves that the best of the Alps are not the sole preserve of the climber. The winding trails followed by walkers and trekkers lead to countless vantage points that unfold scenes of heart-stopping splendour.

Alpine addict, writer and photographer Kev Reynolds has selected a hundred of his favourite photographs, chosen from four decades of exploration in every corner of the chain. For some readers his stunning photographs and evocative text will reawaken old memories of Alpine panoramas; for others they will inspire new dreams only waiting to be fulfilled.



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