

FENIS CASTLE and COGNE, GRAN PARADISO PARK 15 JUNE

Meeting at 08:15 Hone – Bard and departure to Fenis. Arrival at the castle and meet your guide for the visit. Unlike the other castles built for military and defence purposes Fénis castle is not situated on the top of a promontory, but rather on a small knoll. In contrast with the defence structure, its function was only to be the prestigious seat of the Challant family.

The castle's many towers, which display surprising architectural harmony, were added by Aimone of Challant towards the middle of the 14th century to the existing turret, which had already been the residence of Viscount Gottfried II in the previous century. The castle belonged to the Fénis branch of the lords of Challant until 1716, when it was sold to Count Baldassarre Castellar of Saluzzo Paesana. There followed a period in which the castle's prestigious function was dropped and it was turned into a rural dwelling: the ground-floor rooms were turned into stables, while the first floor was used a barn. It was purchased by Alfredo d'Andrade in 1895, who started restoration works that were completed by Mesturino. Today, the castle is owned by the Regional Council, which has earmarked it as the Valdostan museum of furniture.

It has a pentagonal layout; the corners have round towers, with the exception of the south-west corner, which has a massive tower and the southern corner with a square-plan tower. The keep is enclosed in a double perimeter wall, with watchtowers linked by a walkway. Access to the castle is gained via a square tower, which had a portcullis protecting the hallway in case of attack. The inner courtyard has a semicircular staircase and wooden balcony, and is decorated with exquisite frescoes featuring Saint George killing the dragon and a group of wisemen and prophets, holding scrolls on which you can see proverbs and moral maxims in ancient French, while the eastern wall features the Annunciation of Saint Christopher. These can be attributed to a painter close to the school of Jaquerio and date back to around 1425-30. On the ground floor it is possible to visit the weaponry, the dining room, the pantry, kitchen, study and tax-collector's office. Worthy of note on the first floor are the chapel with a reception hall and the counts' rooms.

At the end of the visit transfer to Cogne for visiting. Cogne is situated at 1.534 metres, at the heart of the Gran Paradiso Park, of which it is considered the "capital". Ancient land of Salassi and important iron mining centre, it boasts a rich historical, cultural and traditional past and loves to recount it and relive it through feasts, exhibitions and meetings. Coming up the road from the central valley, you are instantly hit by the incredible width of the Sant'Orso Meadow, green and gently waving in summer, a perfect, pure white in winter. The basin, protected by thick forests, at the convergence of the tributary valleys, is very large with unique sun exposure. Between the vast, bright Sant'Orso Meadow and the nordic forests of conifers and birch trees, Cogne is one of the towns reigning supreme in Valle d'Aosta cross-country skiing. The long cross-country slopes wind under the peaks of the Grivola and the Gran Paradiso for more than 70km, some of which are illuminated. International competitions are held here like the Gran Paradiso March that winds around a 45km ring.

These views, however, can be enjoyed without skis, walking along the footpaths that flank the slopes or on horse drawn sleigh excursions, that bring a fairytale feel to the snow.

On the slopes of Montzeuc, there is also room for descent with some averagely difficult slopes, while on the Sant'Orso Meadow, a perfect school camp is organised for children. For the more dynamic, Alpine skiing and ice climbing: lovers of this sport come to the more than 130 waterfalls in Lillaz and Valnontey.

The Paradisia botanical garden is inside the oldest National Park in Italy and is worth mentioning. The garden is home to more than 1000 species found on our mountains and other mountainous groups from around the world, with two botanical itineraries, a rock exhibition, a collection of lichen and a butterfly garden.